Empathic Cyberactivism: The Potential of Hyperconnected Social Media Networks and Empathic Virtual Reality for Feminism

DOI 10.18422/61-05

by Penelope Kemekenidou

The rise of misogyny on social networks feels both devastating and endless. Whether one believes that misogyny has risen to a new level, or that it has simply become more visible through the internet, one thing is clear: with the ubiquity and accessibility of 'immortal' online information, harassment and discrimination, shared via hyperconnected social media networks, can be taken to a new, much more visible level. Hyperconnectivity enables sexism to multiply on the web – but it can also be the solution to fight it. In the context of activism, hyperconnectivity can be a major force to combat inequality—given that this hyperconnectivity is linked to empathy and not aggression. If this is the case, I argue, new technologies, for example virtual reality, open up new spaces of empathetic interaction.

1 With regards to feminist discourse, social media networks have significant implications due to phenomena such as online harassment, bullying, or sexist policies. The rise of misogyny especially on social networks feels both devastating and endless. Whether one believes that misogyny has risen to a new level, or that it has simply become more visible through the internet, one thing is clear: with the ubiquity and accessibility of "immortal" online information, harassment and discrimination can be taken to a new, much more visible level. Kelly Oliver describes in her essay "Rape as Spectator Sport and Creepshot Entertainment: Social Media and the Valorization of Lack of Consent" how rape videos and creepshot entertainment can perpetuate rape and harassment interminably, thus sometimes being even more damaging than the crime itself. Girls are filmed while unconscious, and the pictures are shared around like trophies. If one declares oneself female on the internet, it is highly likely to experience harassment even if it is just in form of comment threads, chats and the blogosphere.

2 In light of these facts, the internet can often seem like a heterosexual male-dominated space, within which feminism (and other movements) has to constantly fight for recognition. To a great extent, this is true. The internet, and other new internet-based technologies, allow sexism to find new ways of expression. Physician and social scientist Nicolas A. Christakis and James H. Fowler, a social scientist and researcher in the field of social networks, state in *Connected: The Surprising Power of Our Social Networks and How They Shape Our Lives* that "the recent surge in mobile phones, the Internet, and social network sites has shifted our ability to stay in touch with one another into overdrive, causing us to become hyperconnected" (275). Sadly, this hyperconnectivity creates also new possibilities to harm victims, and these threats have to be taken seriously.

3 In this context, the internet seems to be the new battleground in which feminism has to fight patriarchy: women are always struggling for a place in the public sphere, and this has now extended to cyberspace. One example which will be briefly discussed in this context is Hollaback!, a page which enables women to fight back by "attacking" their harassers, by making their information public. Pages like Hollaback! may be an understandable development, but are, as will be discussed, nonetheless a problematic one.

4 In this essay, I will argue that another possibility, apart from the aggressive reclaiming of space for cyberfeminism lies in empathic hyperconnectivity. If the internet can be seen as a web of human connections, rather than isolated battlefields, change can happen without using force, or dubious methods. The same hyperconnectivity which enables sexism to multiply on the web can also be the solution to fight it. In the context of activism, hyperconnectivity can be a major force to combat inequality —given that this hyperconnectivity is linked to empathy and not aggression. Jeremy Rifkin argues in the

The Emphatic Civilization that we are approaching, in a highly interconnected world, a state of global empathy. In the context of feminism, social media networks thus create a new possibility to inform, but also to call people to action. New technologies like virtual reality enable us to create empathy more efficiently than ever before.

5 The first section of this essay will thus focus on recent examples of successful feminist online campaigns which succeeded due to empathic hyperconnectivity. Prime examples of this are recently highly successful hashtag campaigns which broke the silence about domestic violence, rape, or abortion, like #WhyIStayed, #FBRape, or #StandWithPP—a hashtag campaign which caused the Susan G. Komen Foundation in 2012 to reverse its decision to withdraw funding from Planned Parenthood. Through hashtags, marginalized voices can speak up, and trending hashtags can have strong effects on larger discourses in the media and even politics. The chosen examples show that a peaceful, connected mass of people can alter political decisions, and demonstrate the power of reassurance, showing that shared experiences can change a discourse for the better. Women have often been silenced, and their experiences ignored or doubted; hyperconnectivity has the power to change that. The examples discussed here focus on hyperconnectivity through a mainstream social media network. As will be shown, this offers a unique opportunity for change, since it is in these networks that different race, class, or gender groups can come together.

6 The second section of this paper will give an outlook on new possibilities to create and distribute empathy in our hyperconnected social media networks. It will explore the newly-developing opportunities that technology provides to create empathy, which can then again be distributed through social media networks. Through the example of virtual reality, the concept of empathy will be discussed in more detail, and it will be shown that letting people feel something can sometimes create change more effectively than the mere presentation of facts. Hyperconnectivity can therefore be used to to change society for the better – but it has to be emphasized that its existence is not in itself the solution, as the Hollaback! example shows. Neither does new technology also automatically equal positive social change – but social change through hyperconnectivity and new technology is possible, if it is linked to empathy.

7 In 2000, a survey of the so-called gender divide in internet usage concluded that “for the first time the number of U.S. women online equaled that of their male counterparts. A year later, it was reported that U.S. women even outpaced men in online participation. However, it should not be surprising that globally the percentage of women online remains very low” (Everett 1). Dr. Susan Berridge and communication scientist Laura Portwood-Stacer point out that in 2012, women and black Americans dominate social networks: “76 percent of women who are online use social media […] and blacks are 29 percent of online adults who use Twitter, more than any other racial group […] Black women use Twitter more than any other demographic group.” (Williams 343). It is evidently not the case that women do not have an online presence. Rather, as in reality, their voices are dominated by a patriarchal system against which they must constantly struggle.

8 In *Social Media: A Critical Introduction* , Christian Fuchs offers a concise overview of the concept of Jürgen Habermas’ theory of the public sphere and the feminist critique following it. Habermas defines events and occasions as public “when they are open to all, in contrast to closed or exclusive affairs.” Fuchs elaborates that for Habermas, “the concept of the public is related to the notion of the common that is associated with ideas like gemeinschaft, community, the common use of resources like a marketplace or a fountain, and communal organization” (181). Some important dimensions of the public sphere are for example the formation of public opinion, and the stipulation that all citizens have access to these places. But he also concludes that there are certain preconditions to participation in the public sphere: with regards to Habermas’ theory, he refers to wage laborers who are excluded through these preconditions (181).

9 The feminist critique, according to Fuchs, points out that Habermas’ theory of the public sphere excludes women, gay men, lesbians, and non-white ethnic groups. The public sphere is the sphere of white, heterosexual men, in contrast to the private sphere, which has been seen as the domain of women.

Fuchs points out that Habermas agreed later on that his work in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, first published in 1962, had indeed neglected women and other groups (Fuchs 182). The feminist critique suggests that, due to this exclusion, it would be more effective to fight oppression in "multiple subaltern counter-publics […] than in one unified sphere" (Fuchs 182). As Fuchs points out:

> The danger of pluralistic publics without unity is, however, that they will in social struggle focus on mere reformist identity politics without challenging the whole, which negatively affects the lives of all subordinated groups, and that in an egalitarian society common communication media are needed for guaranteeing cohesion and solidarity and a strong democracy. Postmodernists and post-Marxists are so much occupied with stressing difference that they do not realize that difference can become repressive if it turns into a plurality without unity. (182)

10 Social media networks become a space which can be occupied, either by one group or the other. Seeing the internet as a battleground in this way can be important. One compelling example is Hollaback! The creators of this website fought back against sexual harassment and violence by giving power back to women. The tagline for the website is "If you can't slap him, snap him." The idea is to take photos of harassers and upload them to the site, building a network or map of dangerous places, and also a platform for public shaming; the page enables women to fight back by exposing offenders. Jesse Daniels comments in *Rethinking Cyberfeminism(s): Race, Gender, and Embodiment* that "this ingenious use of technology is emblematic of an array of new expression of feminist practices called 'cyberfeminism.'" (1).

11 Carrie A. Rentschler points out in *Rape Culture and the Feminist Politics of Social Media* that while Hollaback! and other social media responses to rape culture may enable "young women and girls to share their stories of harassment and assault, they also create a culture of support and response that may enhance site visitors' own capacities for responding, and for reporting sexual assaults" (76). These responses can be seen under these circumstances as inspiring and strong, as they stand for an active and forceful feminism which aims to reclaim space on the internet.

12 Taking this argument into consideration, the reasons for Hollaback!'s creation may be understandable, but it also points to the dangers of connectivity: The website allows users to upload pictures of, or information about street harassers, so women can be more aware and proactive. It also empowers victims by giving them an opportunity for revenge, allowing them to publicly shame harassers. This may be understandable from an emotional point of view, but by posting information about the harasser, it also violates the rights of the individual, and therefore offers an opportunity to abuse the system. The narrative that women lie and men are innocent, is probably the first idea coming to mind to argue against this procedure. But apart from that myth which has long been used to silence the experiences of women, it has still to be taken into consideration that this system indeed can be abused. Hollaback! plays directly into discussions of the internet and privacy, and the constant surveillance through the internet that hyperconnectivity offers. It has to be pointed out that this form of empowerment also offers opportunities for the abuse of this power: If we condemn, for reasons of privacy, taking pictures of women against their will to post them on the internet, we must also be careful not to unquestioningly support online accusations of supposed harassers. Even if it seems unfair to compare these two, the violent procedure in both cases has to be acknowledged and is vital for an ethical discussion.

13 Taken this into consideration, Hollaback! has an impact on the people who use it, but that impact is also limited to those people. It is evident that the success of programs and websites is necessarily linked to the number of people who are using them. To use Hollaback!, people have to access the website which will be—however successful—always isolated in its own community. To explore the potential of hyperconnectivity, mainstream social media networks thus offer much better examples, since they connect a large amount of people while offering a broader range of interest groups. The most popular ones, like Twitter or Facebook, also offer an opportunity for people to address others in a more

spontaneous way, as they are not limited to certain topics or interests. News travels faster through a wider range of people, almost regardless of age, race, class, or gender. This is essential for empathic activism: the success and effectiveness of it relies on the idea that a mass group, which is initially not related to a topic, can also be affected by such actions.

14 Hyperconnectivity as discussed here, therefore works best in mainstream social media networks – consisting of a wider spectrum of people. Christakis and Fowler argue that "our interconnection is not only a natural and necessary part of our lives, but also a force for good. Just as brains can do things that no single neuron can do, so can social networks do things that no single person can do" (xii). In *Connected*, they claim that we are living in a hyperconnected world, which is primarily connected through social networks. Social networks are "superorganisms" in which empathy, as well as shared experiences, create a web which is capable of doing more than just one human being being. These human superorganisms "grow and evolve" and "all sorts of things flow and move within them" (xii). In this context, social media networks are one prime example of hyperconnectivity. Through the internet, our outreach multiplies to a myriad of new possibilities.

15 Twitter is one of today's most popular social media networks. Briefly explained, a Twitter account consists of the followers one has, and the people one chooses to follow. Through these choices, one's feed is filled with messages and pictures from those accounts. Messages from outside of this network can only be accessed by actively clicking on an account, or if someone in one's own feed "retweets" a message from his or her own feed, which means echoing it, so that it then appears once more. But probably the most vital part of Twitter are the hashtags. These can be used to search for a topic, or to connect existing ones, but more importantly, they can "trend": if a hashtag is used by a large number of people, it appears as a trending hashtag on a chart, so that even people who are not familiar with it can see it. Twitter also sends notifications about these trends; it is a vital part of the Twitter community to be informed of everything that's trending. Twitter is therefore on a positive note, a democratic network: If people are talking about the same thing, it becomes important to everyone. Each voice counts, and everyone can tweet as many times as they want with a hashtag. People on Twitter are thus hyperconnected at a very fast pace. In seconds a hashtag can unite people who probably, in other ways, have nothing else in common, since hashtags ignore the number of connections people have between them, their interests, or other factors. While for example Facebook generally only lets users see two connections beyond their actual friends, Twitter unites all people through these tags, regardless of other factors. Trending hashtags in open communities can therefore also affect people who are otherwise not primarily interested in, or connected to certain topics. Social media networks are thus a unique opportunity to emotionally affect people who are not one's primary audience.

16 One example of the effectiveness of hyperconnectivity for feminism is #StandwithPP. This hashtag trended when Komen, a famous breast cancer charity, decided to stop funding Planned Parenthood. While Planned Parenthood offers cancer screenings to poor women, the organization is mostly famous for offering abortions – although this might seem bizarre, considering the fact that PP spends only 2% of its funds on them. When it was revealed that Komen planned to withdraw funding over the latter issue, the hashtag #StandwithPP went viral. This case shows how essential social media networks have become for feminist issues: as will be discussed, in this scenario not only did the community react via social media networks, but the opposition also used them to defend itself. A case study from Vanderbilt University from 2013, conducted by Timothy Alford et al., states:

> [S]ocial media erupted with individuals and organizations expressing support for both Komen and Planned Parenthood. But a majority of the (louder) voices stood in Planned Parenthood's corner. The hashtags #StandwithPP and #PlannedParenthoodSavedMe quickly circulated with the appeal for donors to support Planned Parenthood in light of Komen's decision (8).

17 The study analyzes the impact social media had on this case, and documents the individual steps until the reverse of the decision. In addition to individuals and organizations in social media networks, celebrities reacted as well, and rallied for Planned Parenthood. As the study reports, then New York City mayor and billionaire Michael Bloomberg even pledged to match up to $250,000 in support of Planned Parenthood". More interestingly, "some Komen affiliates even took to Facebook and Twitter to express their disagreement with the national office's decision and their intention to keep funding the local chapters of Planned Parenthood" (Alford 8).

18 As a follow-up, on February 1st, the Komen founder and Chief Executive Officer Nancy Brinker released a statement defending herself via the organization's website and also through Facebook. This was Komen's first official statement on the matter, noticeably through a social media network. On February 2nd, Karen Handel, Komen's Senior Vice-President of Public Policy, also reacted via Twitter, retweeting the following message: "Just like a pro-abortion group to turn a cancer org's decision into a political bomb to throw. Cry me a freaking river." The tweet was deleted after a short while, but the damage had already been done: a screenshot was captured and posted, as the study defines it, on the "left-leaning political blog" MoveOn.org, which elicited over 600 comments"(8).

19 After this scandal, Brinker released a statement on February 3rd, stating that the Susan G. Komen Foundation had reversed its decision. But the reversal of the decision was not the only success: Planned Parenthood had received over three million dollars in donations from 70,000 donors, almost three times the amount the organization received from Komen grants in the previous year. Planned Parenthood's Facebook "likes" and Twitter followers increased by thousands. The study emphasizes that "in contrast, Komen, an organization accustomed to accumulating accolades and messages of support, was drowning in criticism" (10).

20 Planned Parenthood acknowledged the key role social media networks had played in this case: President Cecile Richards stated "I absolutely believe the exposure on Facebook and Twitter really drove a lot of coverage by mainstream media." The emotional solidarity, displayed through the hashtag, as well as the speed, volume and intensity of the responses is probably what took Komen by surprise, and let them reverse a big financial decision. Richards stated: "I've never seen anything catch fire [like this.]" (9).

21 Another example of the effectiveness of hyperconnectivity is the hashtag campaign #WhyIStayed. This example shows how effectively social media networks can work to reach out to women to address taboo topics.
In September 2014, the website TMZ released footage of the Baltimore Ravens' former running-back Ray Rice punching his then-fiancée (now wife), Janay Palmer, in the face. Journalist Nicole Akoukou Thompson states in her online article about the case that:

> [T]he already fierce blow sent Janay Rice's head into the elevator wall, knocking her out. The assault, which took place on an elevator in an Atlantic City casino, has shone light on the dark issue of domestic violence, but it has also drawn attention to the reasons why victims of domestic violence, like Janay Rice, remain in abusive relationships, defined as "the willful intimidation, physical assault, battery, sexual assault and/or other abusive behavior perpetrated by an intimate partner against another."

22 After the footage was released, the hashtags #WhyIStayed and #WhyILeft began trending. These hashtags encouraged women to speak up about why they stayed in abusive relationships, and made visible how many women had suffered the same fate. The hashtags were used by different nationalities and age groups, connecting otherwise unrelated people by affirming their experiences. The connections made in this case were largely not lasting ones. The people did not primarily speak out to follow new people on twitter, or to make people follow their accounts. They simply expressed their feelings, either by describing their own experiences, or by commenting and showing support for those who did. This

exchange of experiences led to a heated discussion in the media about the ubiquity of domestic violence. But more importantly, the hashtag campaign enabled women to feel empowered to talk about their experiences, rather than being ashamed of them. They dared to speak out, mostly through the support of anonymous strangers, who also shared their stories to others – without knowing who they would reach. The most important factor here was to feel support, and to provide it to others, all within cyberspace.

23 For feminism, the issue of undermining women's experiences is one vital aspect of the oppression of women. Oppression often works through silencing or shaming victims – if people do not talk about an issue, social change is rarely possible. Women have often been told that their experiences do not matter; that what they feel is wrong, or not the rule, a procedure often described as the "ghosting" of experiences. In contrast, twitter hashtags are a potent weapon in reaffirming female experience, and also a way to re-address otherwise silenced topics. Rentschler refers to the blogpost "I Have a Theory," by the feminist Jessica Valenti from 17 October 2013, in which she

> 24 surmises that most young women in the US learn more about rape culture on Tumblr and other places online than they do in school. Several tweets and reblogs answer back that young women first learn of the term on Facebook and elsewhere, suggesting that online sites can serve as a key source of feminist education and activist terminology beyond the classroom (Rentschler 67).

25 Empathic hyperconnectivity in social media networks can enable people to share experiences regardless of their race, class or gender, and offer a way to reach out to audiences which were formerly more difficult to reach.

26 The advantage of the immediacy of hashtags in social media networks, is also part of why they are so dangerous. For a campaign, the fact that everything can reach you anytime in social media networks, is vital for its success. Our feeds are thus full of content that we can control only to a limited amount, but which still affect us. When we talk about the effectiveness of empathy trough social media networks, we necessarily have to talk about the possibility to spread emotions in general through them, consequently, also negative ones. The proof of the effectiveness of emotional contagion through virtual worlds, is very well documented through various studies on the negative effects of social media:

27 The things we share on social networks—our statements, posted content and opinions—affect others, either in a good or a bad way. In Silicon Valley, this is not a theory, but a well-known fact: Social media networks would be flooded with sexual, violent, and disturbing content if it were not for the armada of people hired to remove this material. Like any other company, a social media network has certain policies which aim to follow existing moral standards and remove content deemed harmful. The interesting aspect of this for the purposes of this essay, is not what material in particular is removed. More pertinent here is the well-known fact that employees who do this job often suffer post-traumatic syndromes comparable to those of active duty military personnel after only a few weeks of work. These jobs are mostly sourced out to cheap-labor countries like the Philippines.

28 Adrian Chen, a journalist from Wired magazine, met with a psychologist who consults for two content-moderation firms in the Philippines. She confirmed that "It's like PTSD," and stated "there is a memory trace in their [the workers] mind." She noted that the employees have to pass a large number of psychological tests to determine their mental baseline; they are also "interviewed and counseled regularly to minimize the effect of disturbing images." But she adds that even with the best counseling, workers quit because "they feel desensitized by the hours of pornography they watch each day and no longer want to be intimate with their spouses. Others report a supercharged sex drive." Workers who have seen traumatic material have to deal with it even after they have quit. One worker stated that: "I don't know if I can forget it. I watched that a long time ago, but it's like I just watched it yesterday" (Chen). In another article on this matter for the website Gawker, Chen cites another worker: "Pedophilia,

necrophilia, beheadings, suicides, etcetera," he recalled. "I left [because] I value my mental sanity." These workers are an extreme example showing that the content in our news feed does affect us emotionally.

29 As human beings we are wired to detect emotions, and detecting them in others is one part of empathy. People are therefore prone to emotional contagion. Simply put, this means that we copy emotions that we see in others, whether we want to or not. One example Christakis and Fowler bring up is the following: "Emotions spread from person to person because of two features of human interaction: we are biologically hardwired to mimic others outwardly, and in mimicking their outward displays, we come to adopt their inward states. If your friend feels happy, she smiles, you smile, and in the act of smiling you also become happy" (37). One explanation is the mirror neuron system in our brains; to some degree, we copy everything we see, whether through our actions or emotional responses:

> In one experiment related to emotional contagion, subjects listened to recordings of nonverbal vocal reactions communicating two positive emotions, such as amusement and triumph, and two negative emotions, such as fear and disgust. Investigators monitored the subjects' brains for a response by placing them in a magnetic resonance (MRI) machine. The subjects were told not to react to what they heard. While subjects did not visibly respond to the sounds, the MRI results showed that hearing the cues stimulated parts of the brain that command the corresponding facial expressions. It seems we are always poised to feel what others feel. (Christakis and Fowler 39–40)

30 Emotional contagion is real, and it spreads through the virtual world: Christakis and Fowler refer to a 2006 experiment, a follow-up to the famous Milgram experiment of 1961. The Milgram experiment, briefly explained, included three people: the "teacher," the experimenter and the learner. The experimenter told the teacher to give the learner electric shocks when he answered a question incorrectly, and the voltage was increased with every wrong answer. The true experiment was not about the answers, as the teachers thought, but rather aimed to measure how far the experimenters could persuade the teachers to give the shocks (which did not exist in reality—the learners and experimenters were actors). The experiment tested how far the teachers would follow orders, while the learners pretended to be in pain, screaming and even banged on the walls. 65% of the teachers followed the experiment through to the end.

31 In another version of the experiment conducted in 2006, the learner was replaced by a computer animation, a fact known to the teachers. In this case, twelve out of twenty-three subjects ended the experiment before they had reached the highest voltage, all knowing that they had "saved" a computer animation, and not a human being. Christakis and Fowler conclude that "these experiments illustrate that life online can both emulate and extend real human interactions. People obey deep-seated rules of human interaction even in these unusual circumstances. The sense of incredible realism that many people experience when interacting in virtual worlds with virtual people is known as presence" (260).

32 Emotional contagion is, therefore, even in artificial contexts such as cyberspace, possible. In the context of feminism, social media networks and new technologies thus create a new possibility to inform, and also to motivate people. Put more simply: if we empathize, we mobilize. New aspects of technology can show us new ways to create empathy, and one of them is virtual reality. Michael Madary and Thomas K. Metzinger, who are conducting research in this field, conclude that there is evidence "that behavior while in the virtual environment can have a lasting psychological impact after subjects return to the physical world" (7).

33 An example from 2015 shows how this concept can promote equality concerning gender roles. Lucy Bonner, a graduate graphic design student from the Parsons School of Design, invented a virtual reality game for Oculus Rift, a virtual reality (VR) device. In *Compliment*, she wanted to show men what public sexual harassment feels like. Men often do not understand what could be so unnerving about catcalling

on the streets: “Men will often insist they’re just giving someone a compliment,” as Jack Smith IV explains in an online article for *mic.com* about *Compliment.* Merely explaining why catcalling is unnerving, often does not convince those who do not experience it. In *Compliment*, men can experience catcalling firsthand: “*Compliment* aims to dispel the illusion that being shouted at and objectified while walking down the street is anything but harassment” (Smith IV). Bonner tried to make the game as realistic as possible; she explains that she only used phrases she had heard herself before, such as “Can I have your number? No? No? Why not?” or “Mm, I’m gonna fuck you like an animal” (Smith IV). Players are followed by men in the game, and the player is quite small, enhancing the feeling of weakness or passivity.

34 In a nutshell, the experiment seemed to be successful. One player admitted: “I was diminished, I felt small, and as a result, I felt threatened […] So that’s something I never could have experienced. Even if someone made the most articulate case for why this is a bad thing, I already know that, but now I feel a little more understanding of viscerally why that is.” (Smith IV) In this example, the participant admitted that experiencing the situation helped him to understand more than all of the facts he knew about it.

35 Another study from 2013 showed the positive potential of the psychological impact of immersive VR. Participants took a racial bias test three days before a virtual reality experience, and then immediately afterwards: “In the experiment, subjects were embodied in an avatar with either light skin, dark skin, purple skin, or they were immersed in the virtual world with no body.” For the participants who had shown some form of racial bias in the first test, the experiment seemed to had made a difference: “They found that subjects who were embodied in the dark-skinned avatar showed a decrease in implicit racial bias, at least temporarily” (Madary and Metzinger 7). Although the experiment did not cause a change in the long term and is obviously not a panacea for racism, it offers some insight into how our brains deal with virtual realities and the experiences we make in virtual environments.

36 Virtual reality is but one example of how new technologies can help us to empathize with the oppressed, and developers are experiencing worldwide with different technologies and approaches. For example, in 2015 is Joanna Chin and Bryan Collinsworth’s simulator d.Bot, a program using harassing messages sent from men to women. The program simulates a chat with a heterosexual man, while the participant is in the position of a woman. The creators hope that d.Bot “will help men experience what women experience, both online and in the physical world” (Harihareswara). Both examples work, not with new information, but with an emotional approach. Both examples can also be distributed through the internet, making these experiences accessible to a broader audience.

37 Technology is being used more and more to create empathy in the virtual world. While the understanding that knowledge alone does not necessarily equal behavioral change might seem self-evident today, Rifkin notes that the understanding of empathy as an emotional state is historically speaking, a relatively recent phenomenon:

> We have to remember that as recently as six generations ago, our great-great-grandparents—living circa mid-to-late 1880s—were not encultured to think therapeutically. […] Today, a hundred years after the coming of the age of psychology, young people are thoroughly immersed in therapeutic consciousness and comfortable with thinking about, getting in touch with and analyzing their own innermost feelings, emotions, and thoughts – as well as those of their fellows. (Rifkin 11)

38 As a result, this essay should not serve as a naive vision of empathy and hyperconnectivity as the solution to all our problems. The examples chosen, as well as the analysis focuses on the potential for empathic cyberactivism. Hyperconnectivity is connecting us to more people than ever before, but technological progress does not automatically equal social progress. Empathy is also essential to improve our society, but as with hyperconnectivity, we may have this tool, but it is still up to us to use it. Empathy for others is something that we have to learn, while our judgment is often clouded by privilege.

Rifkin concludes that “the empathic predisposition that is built into our biology is not a fail-safe mechanism that allows us to perfect our humanity. Rather, it is an opportunity to increasingly bond the human race into a single extended family, but it needs to be continually exercised” (614). The examples discussed in this essay hopefully give a promising vision of hyperconnectivity as an opportunity for feminism and cyberactivism to change the world for the better.

Works Cited

Alford, Timothy et al. “The Susan G. Komen Foundation and Their Decisions Regarding Planned Parenthood.” Vanderbilt.edu. PDF. 7 June 2016.

Chen, Adrian. “Inside Facebook’s Outsourced Anti-Porn and Gore Brigade, Where ‘Camel Toes’ are More Offensive Than ‘Crushed Heads.’” *Gawker.com* 16 Feb. 2012. Web. 14 Mar. 2016.

.hen, Adrian. “The Laborers Who Keep Dick Pics and Beheadings Out of Your Facebook Feed.” *Wired.com* 23 Oct. 2014. Web. 14 Mar. 2016.

Christakis, Nicholas A., and James H. Fowler. C*onnected: The Surprising Power of Our Social Networks and How They Shape Our Lives*. New York: Little, Brown, 2009. Print.

Daniels, Jessie. “Rethinking Cyberfeminism(s): Race, Gender, and Embodiment.” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 37.1-2 (2009): 101–124. Muse.jhu.edu. Web. 14 Mar. 2016.

Dolby, Nadine. “Research in Youth Culture and Policy: Current Conditions and Future Directions.” *Social Work and Society: International Online Journal* 6.2 (2008): n. pag. Socwork.net. Web. 20 May 2009.

Everett, Anna. “On Cyberfeminism and Cyberwomanism: High-Tech Mediations of Feminism’s Discontents.” In: “Beyond the Gaze: Recent Approaches to Film.” Eds. Kathleen McHugh and Vivian Sobchak. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 30.1 (2004): 1278–86. Print.

Fuchs, Christian. *Social Media: A Critical Introduction.* London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2014. Print.

Harihareswara, Sumana. “Feminist Tech Demos: Menstruation, Harassment, an Erotic Wearable, and More.” *Geekfeminism.org* 29 Sept. 2015. Web. 14 Mar. 2016.

Mandary, Michael, and Thomas K. Metzinger. “Real Virtuality: A Code of Ethical Conduct. Recommendations for Good Scientific Practice and the Consumers of VR-Technology.“ *Front. Robot.AI 19 Feb. 2016.* Web. 14 Mar. 2016.

Oliver, Kelly. “Rape as Spectator Sport and Creepshot Entertainment: Social Media and the Valorization of Lack of Consent” *American Studies Journal Occasional Paper* 10 (2015): 1–16. Web. 14 Mar. 2016.

Penny, Laurie. *Unspeakable Things: Sex, Lies and Revolution*. New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2014. Print.

Plamper, Jan. *Geschichte und Gefühl: Grundlagen der Emotionsgeschichte*. München: Siedler, 2012. Print.

Rentschler, Carrie A. “Rape Culture and the Feminist Politics of Social Media.” *Girlhood Studies* 7.1 (2014): 65–82. Academia.edu. Web. 14 Mar. 2016.

Rifkin, Jeremy. *The Empathic Civilization: The Race to Global Consciousness in a World in Crisis*. London: Penguin, 2009. Print.

Smith IV, Jack. “Virtual Reality Finally Shows Men What It’s Like to Be Catcalled on the Street.” *Mic.com* 28 Sep. 2015. Web. 26 Mar. 2016.

Thompson, Nicole Akoukou. “#WhyIStayed and #WhyILeft Highlight the Isolated Lives of Domestic

Violence Victims, Domestic Violence Facts and Resources." *Latinpost.com* 17 Sep. 2014. Web. 14 Mar. 2016.

Van Dijck, José. *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media* . New York: Oxford UP, 2013. Print.

Williams, Sherri. "Digital Defense: Black Feminists Resist Violence with Hashtag Activism." *Feminist Media Studies* 15.2 (2015): 341–58. Tandfonline.com. Web. 14 Mar. 2016.

Author

Penelope Kemekenidou is a Ph.D. student in American cultural history at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität in Munich, Germany. Her research focus lies on the importance of empathy for activism, while she is primarily interested in artivism, digital activism and the activist potential of virtual reality. She is also deputy chairman at Gender Equality Media e.V., a charitable organization against sexism in German media.

Suggested Citation

Kemekenidou, Penelope. "Empathic Cyberactivism: The Potential of Hyperconnected Social Media Networks and Empathic Virtual Reality for Feminism." *American Studies Journal* 61 (2016). Web. 15 July 2017. DOI 10.18422/61-05.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported License .