Trans Cultures Online

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While national networks connections transgender groups long predated digital communications, the transgender movement as we encounter it today would have been impossible without the advent of the internet (Stryker, 2017). Compared to earlier print and analog formats, digital communications offered three distinct advantages: limited exposure to gatekeepers, increased speed, and increased geographic reach. Much predigital transgender communication came through postal mail, which could pass through a variety of "gatekeepers," from postal workers to other individuals in the home. Digital communications, in contrast, could be accessed and consumed in the semiprivate of one's home. For geographically or socially isolated individuals, online spaces allow them to safely explore their crossgender interests and desires with other supportive users. Digital publishing also freed authors from the restrictions of mass media formats. Users could post content online that actively reconfigures or resists these dominant narratives of transgender experience.

By 1998, trans activism and the internet had become inextricably intertwined (Whittle, 1998, p. 405). Individuals' homes online have varied across the years, depending on the platform currently *en vogue*: from chat rooms, message boards, and live journal to major social network sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr. However, the reach of these homes is geographically limited, as transgender discourse online has primarily centered North American concerns, with English serving as the digital *lingua franca*. Yet when put together, these sites support a larger transgender worldmaking project, offering a vision of transgender life and history that centers specificity, location, and experimentation (Rawson, 2014). In general, user interest and practices fall under four categories: information seeking, self-representation, social support, and political activism.

Unlike some other self-identifications, transgender individuals come to their identity in response to internal discomfort with their gender assigned at birth. In order to understand these feelings, they seek out more information. Depending on their gender identity, individuals research a variety of topics, from dress and presentation tips, local support groups, and nearby affirming therapists and medical professionals to more academic writing on gender theory. While some of this information comes from nonprofit organizations, much more of it is produced by transgender individuals themselves. These include blog posts, vlogs (video blogs), and information websites such as Transgender Map (https://www.transgendermap.com) and Hudson's FTM Resource Guide (http://www.ftmguide.org). In these spaces, the transgender individual acts as an "expert," passing on information from their own personal archive of knowledge to both transgender and non-transgender viewers (Raun, 2016). For these experts, making sure

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their audience can find high-quality information to address their questions is key. These practices fit within a longer practice of sharing "trans lore," the living archive of practical knowledge on managing clinicians, medical professionals, and other information necessary for everyday survival (Cavalcante, 2018).

Besides information access, self-representation was the second most revolutionary change brought by the internet. The internet's rise accompanied a wider shift from primarily consumptive to participatory cultures, where individuals act as not only consumers, but producers themselves. Digital platforms, especially social network sites such as Twitter, Tumblr, and Instagram, greatly increased users' power to post and share content that engaged with—and in some cases rejected outright—mainstream media and cultural narratives. For transgender individuals, mainstream media representation often fails to represent their lived experiences, either because they rely on generalizations, such as the "born in the wrong body" narrative, or reinforce uncomfortable or negative stereotypes about transgender people. Particularly in the pre-internet 1980s and 1990s, televised representations of transgender individuals were often limited to documentaries or talk shows, which emphasized the presumed "deception" inherent to transition. Alternately, transgender audiences sought out media that, while not explicitly transgender-related, allowed room for a transgender reading.

In both cases, transgender individuals were unlikely to encounter affirmative self-representation like they do online. Transgender users offer online a variety of self narratives, experimenting with genre, and defying the mass media emphasis on "negative" stories. Finding such affirming representations narratives is particularly important for transgender youth of color. Media produced vary based on user preference and platform affordances: some prefer to make video blogs, or vlogs, to post on YouTube, some users primarily share visual content via Instagram, while others focus on writing content shared on sites like Reddit or Tumblr. Content is cross-posted and duplicated across users' different platform presences: for example, YouTube vlogs or Instagram selfies are shared on Tumblr or Twitter where they can gain an even wider audience.

Yet such media production represents not only new innovations, but also extensions of preexisting practices. Photography and visual representation, particularly as a mode of self-documentation, have long been central to transgender practices (Prosser, 1998). Digital photography, as well as the ability to easily share photographs online, transformed this practice from a largely private act to a public-facing method for building social connection. While photographs by others risks reminding the viewer of one's prior identity, photographs taken by the transgender individual claims the journey of transition as personal and unique—an ongoing process cataloged through the eye of the individual experiencing it (Prosser, 1998). Transgender users regularly share photographs online, from daily selfies to themed events and hashtags, such as the International Transgender Day of Visibility or the #GirlsLikeUs hashtag. Through #GirlsLikeUs, transgender women—and transgender women of color in particular—create a networked counterpublic from which they can advocate to wider publics.

Beyond self-representation, several ongoing efforts use digital publishing to document and recover transgender histories. Several different, regionally focused oral history projects are available online. The NYC Trans Oral History Project (https://www.nyctransoralhistory.org) preserves and shares oral histories of New York City-based transgender individuals. Working in conjunction with the New York Public Library, the project currently holds over 100 histories. The Tretter Transgender Oral History Project (http://trettertransoralhistory.umn.edu), held within the University of Minnesota's Jean-Nickolaus Tretter Collection, primarily focuses on activists based in the American Midwest. Lastly, the Digital Transgender Archive (https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net) serves as an online hub for digitized primary documents related to transgender history. In an environment that has historically excluded transgender voices, projects like these allow many different users to create and be a part of history (Rawson, 2014).

These acts of self-representation can also serve as sites of, or requests for, social support. While pre-internet many transgender individuals participated in weekly support groups or social organizations, post-internet most individuals will instead find their social support online (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011). The availability of online platforms is especially important for those living in rural areas and/or who lack offline social support, for whom attending meetings or staying in contact via postal mail was prohibitively difficult.

Users discuss and post on a variety of topics online, such as daily experiences with recognition or erasure, dealing with resistant friends or family members, or their own struggles with gender dysphoria and self-acceptance. Such sharing can become the foundation for individual friendships, as users build connection through mutual commenting, liking, and other social practices. Just having access to others' posts can be a valuable site of social support for those uncomfortable posting online. For transgender YouTube vloggers, for example, sharing their stories becomes a therapeutic act in and of itself (Raun, 2016). Given the high cost and limited insurance coverage for different forms of gender confirmation surgery, transgender individuals have increasingly turned to crowdfunding sites such as GoFundMe, IndieGoGo, and YouCaring to raise funds to cover surgery. In their appeals, fundraisers and their allies often locate these procedures within the transgender person's larger life narrative in order to highlight surgery's importance.

Internet access also transformed transgender political activism in the mid-1990s. Prior to this period, the movement had seen a wave of new transgender organizations, many replicating the early gay rights movement's civil rights approach. In pre-internet times many groups tackled a broad range of functions, from providing basic information, sponsoring support groups, and political advocacy. Once individuals could get most of their basic information online, organizations limited their focus to only one of these functions, either advocacy or support. It also drastically reduced groups' overhead costs, as they no longer needed to maintain physical office space or send out costly mailers. Instead, intragroup communication as well as public-facing information dissemination could be done almost entirely via e-mail. E-mail's rapid speed also allowed information to reach further and faster than ever before. With e-mail, national activist groups could respond to recent events within hours instead of days. Following news of Brandon Teena's murder in 1993, transgender activist organization Transsexual

Menace quickly organized several vigils and protests, all via their electronic mailing list (Whittle, 1998).

Most importantly, individuals who could not participate in direct action protests—either due to geographic location or discomfort being publicly visible as a transgender person—could get involved and organize online. Online organizing allowed activists, in some cases, to develop a coherent, national-level agenda on which individuals could act (Stryker, 2017). For example, when the Human Rights Campaign Fund (HRCF, now more commonly known as the HRC) supported a non-transgender-inclusive version of the Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA) in 1995, the volume of e-mails from transgender individuals all over the United States decrying the move crashed the HRCF's e-mail server, leading to a four-hour meeting where the HRCF's then-president committed a transgender-inclusive ENDA (Whittle, 1998).

Though the number of organizations has shrunk since the late 1990s, these tactics continue to be used. More recently, users can express their support for LGBTQ political causes in a variety of ways, from badges, themed image filters, profile pictures, or use of hashtags like #Free_CeCe, which drew attention to the imprisonment of African American transgender woman CeCe McDonald. Not unlike the mailing lists of the 1990s, hashtags allow many dispersed individuals to rapidly communicate and participate in political activism. In CeCe McDonald's case, activist energy was devoted to both awareness raising and in-person protests, all of which was largely coordinated via digital and social media. Once engaged through media alerts and online organizing, supporters participated in more traditional activist efforts, such as fax bombing and call-in campaigns.

Hashtag campaigns have also used the tools of self-representation, particularly selfies, as part of coordinated protest efforts. Following increasing legislative efforts to require transgender individuals to use restrooms matching their sex assigned at birth, transgender individuals began sharing restroom selfies tagged #occupotty and #WeJustNeedToPee to highlight the discriminatory intent of such efforts. This and similar campaigns combine embodied action (the embodied individual occupying space) with platform affordances in order to draw attention to the quotidian effects of discriminatory legislation.

Beyond responsive protest, digital publishing has increased opportunities to extend transgender users' collective memory of historic events. One such project was Remembering Our Dead, a website first created in 1998 by Gwendolyn Ann Smith in response to the murder of transgender woman Rita Hester. Frustrated by the lack of accurate, accessible mass media coverage of violence against transgender individuals, Smith created the site as a way to make this information available to a wider audience. Though the Remembering Our Dead project is no longer active, its legacy lives on in two different projects: the annual Transgender Day of Remembrance (often shortened to TDoR), held on November 20, and the Trans Murder Monitoring (TMM) project (www.transrespect.org). Both projects chronicle transgender murders, but with different foci: while the TDoR focuses on murders within the United States, the TMM contextualizes them within larger global transgender-related human rights issues. Both Remembering Our

Dead and TMM make space for trans lives to be counted and valued, as well as drawing attention to the impact of anti-transgender discrimination (Rawson, 2014).

At a more individual level, social network platforms' persistence has also allowed transgender users, as well as friends, followers, and bystanders to actively document their ongoing struggles with exclusion and discrimination. In 2011, a video recording of two teenagers assaulting a transgender woman outside a restroom in a McDonalds outside Baltimore, MD, was posted to several video platforms, including YouTube and WorldStar HipHop. In response to the incident and surrounding media attention, several protests were organized, and multiple Maryland jurisdictions updated their hate crime statutes to include protections related to gender identity. In other cases, the user's digital profile extends well beyond their daily interactions. Following her 2014 suicide, transgender teen Leelah Alcorn's Tumblr page, and the final note she left there in particular, served as a rallying cry drawing attention to the adverse impacts of "conversion therapy" and wider transgender suicide rates.

Despite all that these platforms enable, it is important to note that platform affordances can also limit transgender users' representational possibilities. On commercial platforms, transgender content has always occupied a precarious position due to its proximity to erotic or other restricted topics. On CompuServe Information Service (CIS), the transgender-specific area was located within the age-restricted "Human Sexuality Forum." Prior to 1994, AOL prohibited the use of "transvestite" and "transsexual" in public chat names, effectively banning any public space devoted to discussing transgender issues. This rule was eventually overturned, but only after years of direct user advocacy. This process was repeated in 2018, when Tumblr—a platform popular with queer and transgender youth—announced they were no longer allowing users to post "adult" content, including "female-presenting nipples." However, the contextual nature of "adult" content, as well as Tumblr's reliance on automated content filtering, paired with content moderators, puts transgender users at risk of being filtered out of existence.

The issues Tumblr users faced immediately following Tumblr's policy change highlights how difficult it can be for binarily oriented technical systems to account for the variability of transgender individuals' lived experience. In most cases, systems require their experiences to be "translated" to fit within binary technical systems (Johnson, 2015). Facebook's "real name" policy framed users' chosen names as acts of inauthentic representation, in contrast to their supposedly authentic real name—even if that name reflects a gender with which they do not identify. Facebook's 2014 addition of multiple gender identity options gave Facebook users increased agency, but it generated little change at the database level—user gender states were still classified as male, female, or undefined. For while user agency increased, Facebook's increased reliance on targeted advertising revenue necessitates binary gender classifications (Bivens, 2017). A similar disconnect between social use and technical translations is embedded within Tumblr's tagging systems. While folksonomy tagging give users increased agency to self-identity using a variety of terminology, tagging's overemphasis on linguistic markers can flatten individual variance of identity at the database level (Dame, 2016). Changes at the user interface level do not always reflect changes within the technical system itself. Nevertheless, digital communications have had an undeniable impact on transgender life.

SEE ALSO: LGBTQI Online; Trans Identity in the Media

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Further Reading

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