Just Hit Send: An Analysis of Activist Themed Email Forwards

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Abstract
This paper examines feminist identities and relationships to online activism. "Cyberjunk" feeds a need for activism in busy women's lives and allows a construction of identity for themselves/ourselves as feminist activists without having to put a body, or perhaps more importantly, valuable time on the line.

Résumé
Cet article examine les identités féministes et les relations d'activisme en ligne. "LeCyberjunk" nourrit un besoin d'activisme dans la vie de femmes occupées et permet une construction d'identité pour elles-mêmes/nous-mêmes comme activistes féministes sans avoir à y attacher un corps, ou peut-être surtout, de mettre en jeu du temps précieux.

"Urgent! Please forward to everyone you know." Any email message in my inbox with this subject-line creates only feelings of frustration that I have "another one" and of anger that someone else has ignored my pleas to stop sending me forwards. Why do people continue to spread emails to protect me from whoever is lurking in my car, to tell me about the dangers of household products or to let me in on some heart warming story that happened (they swear) to their friend's cousin's neighbors' best friend? McCaughey and Ayers (2003) describe these forwards as "spam" that serve no purpose. Kome (1999) defines rolling petitions and other email forwards as "viruses" that take up bandwidth as well as users' time and energy. Yet they keep appearing in my inbox, forwarded by well-meaning friends and colleagues, usually without any personal message included. My interest in exploring these particular pieces of cyberjunk is not to critique intelligent, well-organized Internet activism or even the people forwarding these emails, but to explore the relationships we have to activism, the medium of email, and more broadly, cyberspace that makes forwarding bogus messages seem reasonable and even practical in the moment we hit send. By examining the content and genre of activist-minded but problematic Internet forwards I explore not only the construction of feminist identity(ies) through online activism, but why our relationship with technologies and our own busy lives promote simply hitting send.

Activism and Cyberspace
Cyberspace or online space has been hailed as a haven for feminist activist activity (McCulley and Patterson 1996; Plant 1997) and in true binary form is also

represented as a masculinized space where feminist-minded individuals must combat patriarchal discourses and origin stories (Millar 1998; Wajcman 2004). Plant envisioned the Internet as a new frontier where women could make their mark. She saw cyberspace as open space where old patriarchal rules would not necessarily apply. Loader (1998) and Millar (1998) both caution, however, that the Internet carries with it societal discourses around patriarchy and power as well as inclusion and exclusion. The complication of public and private space provided by cyberspace, according to McCulley and Patterson (1996), results in women reaching the public domain of political activism from the private space of the home. The collapsing of public and private through cyberspace creates its own complexities in terms of work, leisure and identity, as well as activism.

The usefulness of cyberspace as a place to seek out like-minded people and disseminate information is touched on by multiple authors who see the Internet as both a useful space to disseminate information and as a dumping ground for junk emails (Becker 2000; Gurak and Logie 2003; Hocks and Balsamo 2003; Lebert 2003; May 2006; Radin 2006). Email saves both mailing and paper costs that are particularly important in developing countries where paper costs remain high (Lebert 2003). Information can be distributed both cheaply and quickly (Gurak and Logie 2003) and cyberspace plays host to numerous communities including online support groups (Radin 2006).

However, Internet activism or cyberactivism as described by McCaughey and Patterson and Ayers has limitations. These scholars ask how online activism can compare to the traditional approach to activism where activists literally put their "body on the line." While speaking/writing online may be a political activity does it compare to physically taking up space in the name of a particular issue? Gurak and Logie (2003) also argue that online activism (particularly petitions and emails) is less

credible than paper petitions because they are anonymous and more susceptible to hacking, spoofing and co-option. Lebert (2003) also argues that online emails do not carry the same physical weight or space of faxes or handwritten letters and tend to be simply deleted by the intended recipient. Kome (1999) points out that rolling petitions, or petitions that encourage participants to sign their name and then forward the petition to all of their friends, are completely discounted politically and in the business world. May (2006) agrees that the Internet is a useful place to spread information but it does not replace handwritten letters or meetings f-to-f (face-to-face).

Hawthorne (1999) and Scott-Dixon (1999), however, complicate the virtual/real binary by arguing that information and identity construction in virtual space cannot help but affect the real, particularly in the case of activism, and cyberspace provides both a means and an audience for critical dialogue. They argue that political identities forged online spill over into real space in interesting and immeasurable ways. Analyzing virtual and real space as opposing binaries with no impact on each other is overly simplistic and ignores the influence one domain has on the other. However, cyberspace cannot be interpreted as neutral or unproblematic space. Recognizing that the Internet is laden with patriarchal discourses and a patriarchal origin story opens up interesting questions about the discursive construction of identity.

The Study
METHODOLOGY
About six months ago my frustration that activist-minded but often bogus emails continued to arrive almost daily gave way to curiosity. Why were intelligent, often self-identifying feminist women and men (academics, teachers, health care professionals, graduate students, stay-at-home parents) continuing to perpetuate these online tales? I began collecting all the activist emails that appeared in my four email accounts (37)

and categorizing them into three areas: activist activities, feel good/guilt narratives and hoaxes. Researching the validity of these emails lead me to hoaxbusters.org, a site that debunks the many versions of stories circulating online, where I identified 30 more examples of emails that I either remembered passing through my multiple inboxes or were variations of emails I was already including in the study. In total, I have done a textual analysis of 67 emails that are activist-based to try and determine what motivates people to forward them, what need they serve and what, if any, effect they have on activist movements. Drawing on the history of qualitative content analysis (Krippendorff 1980) I coded the emails to common themes and paid particular attention to references to activism and gender. Once the emails were coded according to themes the same three broad categories emerged: activist activities, feel good/guilt narratives and hoaxes. I looked at the emails discursively within the three categories and attempted to determine why these emails continue to grip us to the extent that they remain an active part of Internet discourse. I chose to examine the emails discursively once I categorized them textually because I wanted to explore the underlying meanings and commonalities between the emails even as the actual texts varied.

ACTIVIST ACTIVITIES

The general activism category includes everything from emails urging the support of troops (both Canadian and American), to complaints (and calls for ambiguous action) about multiculturalism. Information on upcoming f-to-f protests, meetings and rallies that are occasionally local but more often geographically distant and widely distributed as "information" also fit into this category. While perhaps the most useful and action-oriented of the activist material I am including in this study, the problem with these email forwards is that information is forwarded to entire networks, spread across vast geographic locations.

While the spread of information can be useful as outlined above, activism that contains offline components such as f-to-f meetings or protests are often distributed far wider than the intended audience. Even genuine protest and activist material (as opposed to the hoaxes I will discuss in a later section) becomes spam when sent over too far a geographic distance. Once sent out, these forwards also can take on a life of their own where they continue to circulate long after an event has passed.

I have also included online and rolling petitions under the umbrella of general activism. These petitions were a common product of the early Internet and remain a less frequent forward than attempts to both disseminate information and lobby support for a cause. They continue to be sent out and forwarded on by well-meaning people believing they are participating in activist activities, but, as outlined earlier by Kome (1999), remain an ineffective political and activist tool. The four in this study focus on wait times for medical treatment, cruelty to animals, parental rights and lobbying for a Nobel prize award. However, because they are in the format of rolling petitions, the only purpose they serve is to perhaps raise awareness for future offline activity. The online site, petitionsite.com, is designed to create online petitions through a website and these are more effective than rolling petitions (Gurak and Logie 2003), but according to May remain less effective than petitions that contain original signatures. Online petitions also do not take up physical space in the way hand collected ones do and according to May (2006) are not viewed politically or in the business world as serious petitions.

The final area that I have included is information-based emails that are intended to raise awareness and support for a particular cause. They contain a gimmick, a joke or photos to support the argument for change. One example of this category is a virtual marathon, where the cartoon image is of a woman walking around the world for breast cancer. By forwarding her to a new

city, you spread the word about the dangers of breast cancer and "keep her going." The "support the troops" narratives, along with "God and country" prayers, are often accompanied by photos of troops serving overseas. They are accompanied by either guilt (passing these on is the least you can do) or, in the style of the old-fashioned chain letter, promises of luck if you pass on the email and dire warnings if you "break the chain." While these forwards do spread information and raise awareness, they may or may not be vetted for accuracy and can take on a life of their own in the frequency and duration of circulation. There is also a fine line between activist or information emails and what I have entitled "feel good/guilt narratives" that disguise themselves as activism or information but carry incredibly conservative religious-based meanings.

The category that I have labeled activist has the clearest connection to activism and what I would consider feminist activism in the study. There is clear encouragement for change, dissemination of information and a push within the forwards for the readers to view the emails as activist activity. The petitions talk about the importance of banding together and the information emails discuss the importance of an informed public. Activism or activist identity(ies) are discursively constructed as both supporting change and spreading information.

FEEL GOOD/GUILT NARRATIVES

The category I have labeled feel good/guilt stories consists of stories circulated to elicit an emotional response in the reader. The six I have included in the study range from pictures of a fetus grabbing a doctor's finger (supposedly during *in utero* surgery), to people helping the poor in their communities without expecting anything in return, to receiving only a warning while speeding even though the police officer's child had been killed by a speeding driver. These stories are intended to pull at the heartstrings and contain

messages to slow down, be generous, treat others with kindness and live life in the moment. They share in common a "true" narrative told either in the first or third person that outlines a particular virtue or strength of character. I have included these stories as activist material because they disseminate information from a particular perspective (often with religious overtones) and promote literature that may not be forwarded in another form. For example, two of the stories are anti-abortion or rights of the fetus stories even though abortion is not explicitly mentioned within the narratives (the emails speak of the importance of life from conception on but do not directly mention abortion). Two of the other stories are religious conversion stories couched in contact with a child in crisis. Forwarding (and at some point creating) these stories allows a conservative message to circulate under the guise of a sweet and perhaps uplifting story.

The guilt stories also tap into an emotional response that we are not "doing enough" in society. Through neglect, self-absorption or simple busyness, we miss an opportunity to make a real difference. In many of these stories the first person "I" helps grudgingly until the end of the story when he/she finds out the "true" nature of the story. Then the "I" narrating the story is both guilty because he/she did not embrace the situation more fully and grateful to have shared in the experience at all. Being kind to a child dying of cancer without knowing, or helping a child whom you then find out is an orphan, are examples of this kind of story designed to make the reader more conscious and aware of how his/her actions affect others. While these stories are often viewed as simple feel good or improve our humanity stories, in reality all six that I examined contain at least one religious reference (conversion narratives, "natural" faith of children or unwavering faith in difficult circumstances). Far from being tales simply designed to "brighten your day" or "make you think" as they are often titled, these stories act as religious propaganda in

the guise of a "true" story.

While not the most popular category of feel good-based emails, examining joke emails making fun of activist emails gave me interesting insight into the medium. The three joke emails I included in this study all parody activist-based emails. The existence and forwarding of these joke emails point to both the cynicism on the part of readers to the forwards and the way these email forwards are ingrained in Internet culture.

The relationship to activism present in the feel good/guilt category is admittedly more tenuous; however, running through the emails are themes of changing the world for the better or making society a better place. The stories contain morals or life lessons that are supposed to change people's outlook on life. The instruction to send the forward on or spread the word means the sender can buy into changing the world simply through hitting send.

HOAXES

Hoaxes are the most common Internet forward sent to my mailbox in the name of activism. Under the category of hoaxes I have included caution/fear stories, medical information warnings, personal information or tracking techniques, and general hoaxes targeting specific products or individuals. The online site, hoaxbusters.org, outlines the falsity of many of the forwards outlined in this category, but the content of these emails is both interesting and alarming. By far the largest section of emails I receive within this category are cautionary fear forwards aimed at women and girls.

While not all cautionary/fear stories are aimed at girls or women, the majority in perpetual circulation have women as the focus. These emails range in description and details but the tone and intended audience remain constant. The emails describe a situation of near violence where the woman or girl escapes abduction, assault or implied violence and is now either writing or having someone else write to warn other women/girls. The stories claim "truth"

or authority by being written in the first person "I" or are claimed to be written by an authority figure (a police officer, family friend or occasionally a reporter). The stories begin with a woman/girl being approached in a public space under the guise of being sold something or helping someone else and who then escapes only because of the last minute intervention on the part of a kind stranger or through intuition or a "bad feeling" (often described in the stories as the voice of God). The public spaces in the forwards I examined include public washrooms at the mall, parking lots, gas stations, universities and various Internet sites and chatrooms. The near/almost perpetrators can be disguised as police, courier delivery people, security guards, old women seeking help, other apparent victims, perfume salespeople and truck rental drivers. The story contains either a conversion narrative (now I know God is present) or a declaration of deep and ongoing faith on the part of the saved woman/girl.

The connection among these stories is that they are all designed to scare women and to limit their mobility in public and occasionally private spaces. In addition, many of these emails encourage the recipient to forward them to men as well as women to ensure that men send them to all of the women in their lives. Not only are women told to be afraid to venture out in public or cyberspace, but the men who love them should be afraid on their behalf.

To follow all of the suggestions / guidelines / instructions that are attached to these stories and designed to keep women/girls "safe" would require not only extreme vigilance in all public and many private spaces, but automatic suspicion of all service people and authority figures who are male. From a prevention of violence perspective women are "warned" to take responsibility for their own safety and the underlying message may be that women are responsible for violence if they are not as vigilant as the emails instruct.

The connection to religious

protection or "the voice of God" is also an interesting component of fear/caution narratives. In particular, the first person narrators often write about a feeling or warning that told them the situation was not right or not what it appeared, and they attribute this feeling to God protecting them. Not only is a religious feeling credited for saving these women, but also they must be "good women" for God to have intervened as opposed to all of the "bad women" to whom violence generally happens in society. In addition to limiting women's mobility through fear tactics, these forwards perpetuate the good girl/bad girl binary that construct some women in society as "deserving" violence.

Other caution/fear stories that circulate include fear of the malicious spread of HIV/AIDS through planted dirty needles, warnings of product tampering and stories targeting particular brands or celebrities (the rumored Oprah and Tommy Hilfiger scuffle are a good example). While these forwards are not as uniform as the caution/fear narrative aimed at women, they still promote a culture of mistrust, fear and "othering" among the people who read them and then hit send.

The product hoaxes (Febreze kills small dogs was popular for a while) not only act as scare tactics, but also can actually affect the marketing and sales of products. Companies cannot compete with rumor and personal narratives of dogs being cut down in their prime. Questionable or secret medical information (often claiming to be from a rogue doctor out to tell the "truth") is at best another scare tactic and at worst dangerous when forwarded as medical or scientific "truth."

Overall, hoaxes circulate because people read them and believe at least enough of the story to decide not to take a chance by ignoring them. While the majority of them are based on fear, they can provide an interesting way to target a company or individual. While not exactly activism, these forwards are disguised as activism inasmuch as they address issues of violence against women, personal security, racism and other "causes." However, because the emails are hoaxes and widely circulated, the credibility for genuine email activism becomes questionable. The texts of the forwards work to discursively construct the emails as activist material through messages that imply that the world can be changed simply through the act of spreading the story. For example, in the case of the majority of the emails in this category, violence against women can be stopped simply by the act of hitting send. The individual action of forwarding the message is constructed as an activist action.

Discussion

The email forwards I have reviewed for this study are a far stretch from what I would generally view as feminist activism(s). While they contain information relevant to what I would consider feminist activisms (violence against women, women's health, security issues, political causes, anti-racism messages) many contain not only inaccuracies, but also underlying tones of conservative and often religious thought (anti-abortion narratives, direct intervention by God in people's lives, miracle narratives). Yet they continue to appear in my mailbox, sent on by women and men who self-identify as sympathetic to feminist issues and causes. Again I am left with the same questions - what purpose do they serve and why do we continue to hit send?

THE CONSTRUCTION OF FEMINIST/ACTIVIST IDENTITIES

The assertion that feminist identity(ies) are created/constructed through activist activities is contentious, yet has a history within the consciousness-raising roots of the second wave feminist movement. While activism was and is not an exclusive identity marker of feminist identity(ies), activism remains a central component of much feminist work. Consciousness-raising through identifying feminist issues and transforming them into

identity politics was a fundamental building block of second wave feminist thought/work. Activism happened through shared experience, attachment to issues and common identity. However, the strategy of consciousness-raising through appealing to a common identity was challenged by post structuralist thought that questioned the usefulness of identity politics around a central category of "woman." Weedon argues that identity politics and the categories they depend on are only useful when they are strategic and contingent and seen as produced discursively (1997, 176). Taking seriously the post structuralist ideas that the category "woman" is produced discursively and is not universal means the destabilization of activist identities around a unified category or identity. The destabilization of the universal category "woman" as a unifying rallying point has resulted in a cultural shift in how activism is taken up and in how feminist ideas are identified and interpreted. While this shift has affected how we understand both feminism(s) and identity(ies), in this work I am examining the possibility that the discursive nature of these emails may allow for identity attachment that is less fraught than attaching to a more traditional feminist identity.

Looking at the forwards in the study through the lens of the discursive construction of identity(ies) may help explain some of the reasons we continue to hit send. Identifying as feminist activists on the basis of being a "woman" is increasingly difficult, as strategic and contingent coalition building become the basis of feminist activist work and planning. Reaching out to sympathetic and/or like-minded individuals through cyberspace is a quick and easy way to disseminate information with the hope of forging/constructing coalitions. Identity politics and consciousness-raising around the category "woman" have been criticized as essentialist and exclusionary. Coalition building, on the other hand, relies on a broader dissemination of information when activist participation and support cannot be

based on an assumed common identity and must be based on coalitions of sympathetic individuals. While identity and indeed feminist identities are certainly not exclusively based on activist involvement, the destabilization of the category "woman" by post structuralist thought may mean feminists are searching for new attachments with which to define/understand identity(ies). If identity(ies) are understood to be constructed discursively, then the forwarding of these narratives can be seen as simply sending on the text without necessarily attaching any personal identity. The senders may be trying to forge a feminist identity through attaching to the concept of activism, embodied by their unreflexive forwarding of any material that is created using activist discourse. While the category of activism is also discursively constructed, it may be less nebulous than the increasingly fragmented categories of feminist identity(ies). The lack of personal messages on these forwards (simply hitting send) might be read as a lack of attachment to the content of the email on the part of the sender who may be simply choosing to not pass judgement but still forward the material.

THE COLLAPSING/IMPLODING OF
PUBLIC/PRIVATE AND WORK/LEISURE SPACES

Increased Internet usage from home has resulted in a collapsing or redefining of public and private space. Scott-Dixon (2004) demonstrates that complicating this binary are notions of paid and unpaid work, the historical divide of public (work) and private (home) into masculine and feminist spheres, as well as once-public activities, such as banking and bill paying now shifting into the private home by means of the computer. The separation of public/private and work/leisure becomes complicated when mediated through continual connectedness via the home computer. The ever-present demands of work email can intertwine with the pleasure of personal emails and online community interactions. Work/leisure and public/private time can collapse into a single email account that serves both, and a list of

contacts can include online friends, work contacts, family members and colleagues. When a forward arrives with instructions to forward to "everyone on your list," "all your friends," "all your colleagues" or more recently "your networks," simply forwarding it to all of the contacts on an email list can be easier and faster than actually distinguishing between workmates, colleagues, friends and family members. The blurring between public/private and work/leisure combined with our desire to remain in contact may result in simply hitting send.

EXPECTATIONS OF TECHNOLOGIES, TIME AND WHY WE HIT SEND

Interconnected and imbedded in feminist identities and the collapsing of public and private space is a historical relationship to technologies that is particularly gendered. New technologies promise solutions to work/life stress through timesavings. Postman argues that in a technopoly "time, in fact, becomes an adversary over which technology could triumph" (1993, 45). Menzies (2005) discusses how western culture is accelerating and that time has become the enemy for many women. While domestic technologies have not resulted in increased leisure time for women (Millar 1998), the impact of the collapsing of public/private and work/leisure may result in women turning to technologies as a time solution.

The medium these forwards pass through is itself a technological solution to the "problem" of a time crunch. Email is convenient and instantaneous. Email can be done while multi-tasking and it takes little time and less effort to simply glance at something and hit send. Forwarding questionable emails disguised as activism may simply be easier at the beginning or end of a busy day than carefully reading and sorting through messages for more complex meanings. Women who are attached to identifying as feminist activists may simply be hitting send because time is scarce and hitting send allows them to remain in touch,

involved and engaged with activist themes through technologies without having to put time as well as their bodies on the line.

Tentative Conclusions and Future Research

Feminist identities are connected to activist identities. However, forging one's feminist identity has been complicated by the challenges post structuralist thought has brought to identity-based categories. Perhaps some women may be forging an activist identity not by claiming an essentialist notion of "woman," but by engaging in a broad spectrum of activist activities including Internet forwards. The moment the user decides to hit send there is the enticement of successfully forging/reinventing activist identity(ies) and the fear that failing to hit send will undermine not only that construction of an activist identity but, through the construction, a tenuous link to feminist identity(ies). With the collapse of public/private spaces and work/leisure and creation of email contact lists that are a reflection of social connections, forwarding emails becomes more than participating in social connectedness. It brings fear that one's activist identity is being challenged should the user fail to hit send. These forwards are frequently constructed with "built-in" guilt narratives that enforce a binary of good/bad women embedded within the texts of the forwards that many women simply do not have the time to deconstruct. Those guilt narratives reinforce the overt message of the text, which is to forward this email to everyone you know. This reinforcement is necessary because the messages themselves often contain content that is conservative, religiously-based or misogynist in nature. The messages will only circulate with the incentive of support for an activist identity(ies) and the risk of punishment through guilt.

These motivations to hit send are further complicated by their relationship to feminist activisms. An increased time crunch leaves less time for traditional activist

activities that demand time and commitment. Email forwards are quick, easy and require no real commitment, yet may still make the sender feel she is contributing to a feminist cause. Blurring work and home through multipurpose email accounts may result in a blurring of personal and work interests that may or may not be activist-related. These email forwards contain content that may be appealing to an individual with feminist sympathies (violence against women, breast cancer awareness, protection of children, anti-racism awareness) but that content is couched in a conservative agenda (violence is the responsibility of each individual rather than a social problem, children's faith in God gets them through, racism is individual and not widespread) that may not be immediately apparent unless the reader carefully analyses the message.

      While the email forwards discussed in this study are not the only form of feminist activism conducted through email or online, they have an impact on the effectiveness of online activism. The time, energy, bandwidth and effort consumed in forwarding cyberjunk draws resources away from genuine activism that does have a home in cyberspace. The cyberjunk included in this study also contained alarmingly conservative and anti-feminist themes when examined discursively. If feminist identities are being developed and maintained through the forwarding of this information then what does that mean for feminist identities and activists work? Is the Internet and the medium of email a useful space for activism? In short, I would continue to answer yes. While questionable Internet forwards do take time, effort and energy away from more meaningful activist work, email and cyberspace remain helpful tools for disseminating information and engaging in critical writing and thinking.

      Future work may examine the impact online activism has on face-to-face and online identity(ies) construction. Exploring successful online activist activity(ies) including zines, feminist listserves and activist information websites (rabble.ca, for example) may demonstrate how feminist activists are able to develop and maintain successful online activist coalitions as opposed to simply forwarding the "junk" in their inboxes. Research into these online activities might also further illuminate the impact that questionable email forwards have on both feminist activist identity(ies) and online activist research.

Category	Number	Themes	Action/Impact
Activist Activities	15	rolling petitions; racism; animal cruelty; rights of parents; support troops (American and Canadian); medical causes; language rights; Breast Cancer awareness	rolling petitions; information dissemination; f-to-f meetings; forward requests
Feel good/guilt narratives	10	anti-abortion photos; selfless acts repaid; power of prayer; reaching out to others; jokes	forward requests
Hoaxes	42	safety/scare stories (women and girls primarily); medical warnings; anti-racism stories; information security warnings	forward requests

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