editorial

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Popular discourses about new media from Twitter to the internet remain imbued with assumptions about the liberatory potential of technology. While avoiding the tendency to veer between cyberenthusiasm and technophobia, this issue of *Feminist Review* tries to situate the profound transformations in media communications of the last two decades through looking at specific intersections of gender, diaspora, ethnicity and sexuality in media practices. In what ways is the digital transformation of communications contributing to the reducing of inequalities? Conversely, in what ways do 'new media' actually reproduce existing hierarchies?

A key issue that emerges from the articles we have selected for this volume is the politics of location. The sense of proximity and immediacy generated by digital media – whether it be from social networking to watching news online to reading blogs – can work to elide differences in lived realities and to disguise the ways in which knowledge is being produced. Meanwhile, feminist activists and scholars remain committed to exploring imaginative ways in which the net, and other media, can and do provide opportunities for resistance, connection and community building.

Some early cyberfeminist theory presented an utopian vision of the internet as a medium where new subjectivities could be formed and gender definitions over-turned as Sadie Plant proposed in the mid-1990s: '... the Net has become the leading zone in which old identifications collapse. Genders can be bent and the time-space co-ordinates tend to get lost'. Drawing on Irigaray, Plant extolled the internet as particularly conducive to women and to feminism because of its lack of central organization and its networked structures, 'the virtuality with which the not-quite-ones have always felt in touch', and hailed 'the imminent impossibility – and even irrelevance – of distinguishing between virtual and actual reality' (Plant, 1996: 268). This approach tended to downplay the ways in which the medium remained embedded in wider social and economic power structures and the fact that online and offline worlds, identities and possibilities are inextricably intertwined. Such a vision also sidesteps the material inequalities, which mean that digital media are still only widely accessible to a minority of the world's population, and that, as women are among the poorest of that population, their access is even more limited.¹

As Sonia Puente and Antonio García Jiménez note in their article in this issue, 'Inhabiting or Occupying the Web? Virtual Communities and Feminist

¹ Less than a third of the world's population are internet users,

Cyberactivism in Online Spanish Feminist Theory and Praxis', more recent feminist theorists have drawn productively on and reworked Donna Haraway's notion of the gendered cyborg (Haraway, 1985, 1991) and advocated a feminist online praxis that provides 'theoretical and practical tools by which differently situated women can simultaneously acknowledge their diverse positions and work across national, ethnic, racial and gender lines'. Puente then goes on to discuss how Spanish feminist web portals are working towards this aim, and are building communities, making concrete as well as querying the fragmented, fluid figure of the 'netiana' evoked, following Rosi Braidotti (1994, 2006), by Spanish cyberfeminist, Remedios Zafra.

In a different context, Anthea Taylor's article analyses how single women in the United States are positively redefining the meaning of singleness through blogging. Taylor's analysis shows how the blogosphere can productively deploy 'discursive tactics commonly associated with feminism's second-wave – women's consciousness-raising, identity politics ... using so-called "new" media for what is now problematically believed to be "old" (feminist) politics'. Koen Leurs and Sandra Ponzanesi extend the study of girl culture, which has often focused on white, middle class girls, to look at how a diasporic community in the Netherlands – young, Moroccan-Dutch women – adapt the conventions of Instant Messaging, such as display names, to articulate different senses of belonging and create a dedicated space for identity formation.

In these ways, the internet and social media provide an important means to connect to many across distance, the public and the private, to question dominant discourses on gender and to foster the sense of collectivity to which feminism aspires. At the same time, the fact that the space offered by networked communications is an ambivalent one where what is written is far from transparent is highlighted by the recent case of the 'Gay Girl in Damascus' blog. The desire to inhabit the place of the Other by those with socio-cultural power may result in placing those very 'Others' in jeopardy. The internet affords online play through the separation of body from speech allowing the virtual crossing of gender, cultural and sexual boundaries and apparently freeing the subject from bodily/social constraints. The question of whose freedom may be enhanced and whose may be curtailed by such play are thrown into relief by the 'Gay Girl' story. Begun in February 2010, this blog purported to be by a lesbian, half Syrian and half American, based in Syria. Under the name 'Amina Araf', the author wrote about 'her' social life, relationships and 'role' in the growing anti-government protest until it was then reported by her 'cousin' that she had been kidnapped by security forces.²

Some time later, in June 2011, it emerged that 'Amina' was a fictional character and her blog was actually the work of a 40-year-old, married American man, Tom MacMaster, who was studying for a PhD in Edinburgh. MacMaster had also stolen the identity of a real woman – Jelena Lecic – whose photos he had found online

<http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>, last accessed 11 July 2011.

² <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/jun/13/syrian-lesbian-blogger-tom-macmaster>, last accessed 11 July 2011.

3 [http://
gaymiddleeast.com/
news/
news%20317.htm](http://gaymiddleeast.com/news/news%20317.htm),
last accessed 11 July
2011.

and passed off as those of 'Amina'. While writing his blog, MacMaster was seemingly oblivious or careless of the effect that his flirtation with a queer Middle Eastern identity might have on the real queers and activists of the region and beyond, 14,000 of whom were petitioning for her release. Subsequently, the revelation of the hoax, provides an alibi for those in power to question the authenticity of any other first person accounts of harassment or persecution coming from those *in situ* confronting the daily realities of life under an authoritarian regime. In an angry response to MacMaster queer activists Sami Hamwi and Daniel Nassar point out that the fears about their own activism have been reinforced by 'Amina's' invented kidnapping.³

Sima Shakhsari's article in this volume pertinently stresses the importance of location. She criticizes the assumption by Western journalists that 'the lack of freedom of speech in print media in Iran has attracted the young generation of Iranians, especially women, to the "democratic" world of blogging'. She argues that, in fact, 'many Iranian bloggers live *outside* of Iran, particularly in locations [such as North America and Europe] where "freedom of speech" is assumed to be a right granted to all citizens'. In a discussion of the film, *Blogger Wars* (2005) she incisively analyses how the Iranian diasporic bloggers are interpellated according to gender binaries: 'If the masculine diasporic soldier takes freedom to Iran through his active participation in proper politics (enabled by his freedom of speech in Canada and the internet technologies), the woman blogger finds freedom of expression in writing about sex and telling the truth of her sex in a confessional mode'. Shakhsari's example shows how the seemingly 'authentic' voice of the blogger cannot be read as *unmediated*, – that is, as providing access to a single, transparent truth about a society from which s/he may actually be far removed. Instead, as Shakhsari emphasizes, we need to pay close attention to the position and place from which words are written on the internet, as in any other medium. Diasporic bloggers are part of a 'vibrant transnational Iranian civil society' not merely 'pawns of global capitalism' but at the same time their blogs can be complicit in, or appropriated to, neo-liberal 'narratives of liberation' not least because of their value in the 'war on terror'. Shakhsari notes that the assumption that the internet is *the* locus of political action obscures the fact of 'Iranian women's massive participation in non-governmental organizations that reach out to rural areas – in which the internet is not widely available – [and] challenges the claims about women's lack of agency and voice in Iran ...'.

Iran is the location for one of Kim Longinotto's films, *Divorce Iranian Style* (1998). We interview Longinotto, the acclaimed documentary maker, in this issue and look at how her work is born out of an intimate encounter and collaboration with the women in her films. She rejects simplifying narratives of victimhood and liberation to present many layered stories of resistance to abuse and subjection. Longinotto discusses how her films,

including her recent *Pink Saris* (2010), not only document the agency of women in highly patriarchal societies but how she uses the presence of her camera as a catalyst in situations where women are fighting abuse and confronting the systems and individuals oppressing them. Longinotto's commitment to collaboration and the avoidance of misrepresentation through the long-form documentary interrogates a distanced observationalism and provides complex portraits of women in struggle. The results of this approach form an interesting contrast to the illusions of fast intimacy, instant knowledge and authenticity which online media, in particular, can generate and reminds us that all media texts must be produced and read critically and culturally contextualized if they are to advance the political aims they aspire to.

The articles in the 'non-themed' section of this issue have been selected from Feminist Review's open submissions because of the relevance of their focus on film to the overall theme of 'Media Transformations'.

Lizzie Thynne and Nadjie Al-Ali

authors' biographies

Lizzie Thynne is a senior lecturer in Media and Film at Sussex University, Brighton, UK, where she convenes the MA in Digital Documentary and supervises practice-led PhDs. Her recent work explores documentary ethics in relation to her own practice in a previous film, *Child of Mine* (on lesbian parenting), (*Jump Cut* 53, Spring/Summer 2011, <http://www.ejumpcut.org/home.html>). She is working on a film project, *On the border*, exploring narrative and memory through her Finnish family's experiences during and after the war. She is video director for *Sisterhood and After: an oral history of women's liberation*, a Leverhulme funded project led by Margaretta Jolly, to be housed at the British Library. She completed the film *Playing a Part; the story of Claude Cahun* in 2004, which is currently touring with a major exhibition of the artist's work from the Jeu de Paume to the Art Institute of Chicago. She has written several articles on Cahun and her lifelong lover and collaborator, Marcel Moore (Suzanne Malherbe) including for *Papers of Surrealism* 8, <http://www.surrealismcentre.ac.uk/papersofsurrealism/journal8/index.htm>.

Nadjie Al-Ali is a professor of Gender Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London. Her publications include *What kind of Liberation? Women and the Occupation of Iraq* (University of California Press, 2009, co-authored with Nicola Pratt); *Iraqi Women: Untold Stories from 1948 to the Present* (Zed Books, 2007), and *Women and War in the Middle East*:

Transnational Perspectives (co-edited with Nicola Pratt, Zed Books, 2009), among many other publications about women and gender in the Middle East. Nadjé is a founding member of Act Together: Women's Action for Iraq and a member of the Feminist Review Collective.

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