

FAN / SERVICE

reanimating fandom online
practices by embodying
feminist server approaches

Eleni Fili

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GLOSSARY / TERMS

body; In the scope of this thesis, body is not used as in “group” or “collection”, but as the materiality of the self. The embodiment of the self, alongside the socially encoded meanings imposed upon it (such as gender, sexuality and race) that can only be understood through specific spatial, temporal and cultural contexts.

cisgender; The antonym of transgender. It refers to people whose gender identity corresponds to their sex assigned at birth.

fan- ; (prefix) relating to, or made by a fan

fandom; a group of fans actively participating in fan activities; such as meet-ups, or the creation of fanworks

queer/fem; Queerfem is usually used as a shortened form of “queer-feminist”, but for the scope of this research, I have decided to re-contextualize this term, adding a slash in-between, to refer to both women, queer¹ people and the intersection of the two. Therefore, queer/fem gives a name to the Venn diagram of two overlapping circles, one female and one queer, that represents the vast majority of transformative fans. I do not intend to coin a new universally unifying term, as in most contexts grouping queer people and cisgender heterosexual women together creates an unreasonably big and diverse crowd, and doing so might lead to overgeneralizations. However, through the fandom lens, I believe that the two groups share practices, spaces, interests and goals while being the targets of exclusionary and dismissive behaviors in broader fandom spaces. Transformative practices such as slash fiction² allow cisgender

1. Umbrella term that covers people who have non-normative gender and sexuality identities

2. Stories that focus on romantic or sexual relationships between same-sex characters.

heterosexual women to experiment with queer readings and transgressive retellings of the the source material alongside queer fans, while often reconsidering their gender and sexuality identities in the process.

server; A computer, oftentimes with connection to the internet, meant to route processes and services. It can take the form of a laptop, a raspberry pi, a phone (*Verdeil and van der Woerd*), a microcontroller-turrt-charm hanging from a keychain (*Cactinomy, 2026*) and be hosted in any place; a bedroom, a library, a shoebox. The internet is a network of interconnected servers, that function as nodes. (*Snelting, 2018*)

/ (slash); In fandom, the slash poses as the absolute signifier for connection. It is used to express a romantic or sexual relationship between two characters in fanworks; for example, *Kirk/Spock*. Even in the use of the term queer/fem, a slash is there to represent either and both. When I'm discussing Cartesianism, the slash represents a definite split, signifying a binary distinction between two terms. It can connect or separate, like a bridge or a wall. A symbol of infrastructure.

INTRODUCTION

This thesis is a piece of autoethnography— a media fan looking into her own community, informed by her newfound knowledge of feminist servers. My intention is to look into how transformative fandom is practiced on the Internet, figure out why the digital spaces fans inhabit are insufficient to facilitate their needs and propose alternative, emancipating approaches to prompt and inspire new online spaces made by fans, meant for fans.

My identity as a fan started forming when I was a little girl. My first obsession was the adventures of a boy wizard, whom I shall not name.³ They were the first novels I read and the story that ignited my love for reading. I would borrow the books from my older cousin, who was my point of reference for all new book and movie releases, since I was too young to be in the loop. At my dad's place, I would rush my homework so that we could spend the whole evening playing the video games together. I distinctively remember the day after watching the movie adaptation of the third book— I was around six years old, still in kindergarten and buzzing with excitement from last night's experience. I wanted to talk to someone about it, share my excitement, but my friends had no clue what I was babbling about.

Before having access to the internet, it seemed like no one around shared the same passion I had for losing myself in these stories and their characters. However, in the late 00s, around the halfway mark between the dawn of online fandom practices and now, I discovered fan forums, early youtube fanvideos and the infinite amount of fanart posted on Deviantart⁴. It was a life-

3. This research is inspired by and dedicated to my community, a large part of which are fans who identify as transgender. The writer of the series is an active, harmful bigot towards the trans community, so for ethical reasons, I decided to respect my trans friends and refrain from giving the writer or their work any further promotion.

4. Online platform for artwork sharing

changing revelation. Fandom has been accompanying me ever since.

5. Fans of korean pop
bands

6. Fans of the Beatles

I was asked time and time again who my audience is, to define what I have grown to know so well, yet found trouble tracing the outlines of. Fandom can take on a million different faces depending on who you ask; my coworker instinctively thinks of football fans, some friends of K-pop stans ⁵, while google brings up crowds of Beatlemaniaics.⁶To me, fandom is my love for stories; books, TV series and movies; an ever-growing collection of narratives, connected through my thread of adoration. On my cheap laptop and one bar of borrowed connection from the neighbors, I found my community online— people who shared the same passion and love for their own, similar patchworks of interests. For the moment, let's refer to this community as media fandom.

I begin my research by looking into the roots of media fandom as the predecessor of the newer term “transformative fandom”. I argue that the predominantly queer/fem demographic of transformative fandom does not fit the image of what constitutes the “true fan”. Therefore, queer/fem fans are constantly belittled, scrutinized and pathologized. In the second chapter, I focus on networking technologies, looking into the myth of virtual disembodiment through two different lenses; Megan Boler's new virtual cartesianism and Donna Haraway's cyborg theory. I argue that queer/fem people, and in extension transformative fandom, expose their identities online in hopes of finding each other. In the third chapter, I explain how this vulnerability greatly influences their online experience, since virtual societies re-establish existing societal biases. Many platforms have seemed like safe spaces for transformative fandoms, but after multiple platform “purges” and “deaths”, it seems like no space is sufficient to truly facilitate fandom practices. In the fourth chapter, I introduce feminist servers and look for inspiration in their ways of building community around their own infrastructures and networks. Finally, in the fifth chapter, I present how the feminist teachings I compiled have influenced my own project— an online fandom radio station.

CHAPTER ONE

Who? What? How? / Media Fandom

Media fandom used to describe a very specific group, the female science fiction fans, and was born out of the first explicit fandom divide. Media scholar Henry Jenkins (1992) recounts this historic divide in his book *Textual Poachers*. Ever since the 1930s, science fiction readers, a male-dominated demographic, had been forming a dedicated community with established modes of communication amongst themselves and the male writers—some sort of an unofficial brotherhood. Science fiction fans were an important part of the textual producers' creative process. They provided a great source of user criticism for published stories, so catering to them was a priority. (Jenkins, 1992) The feedback loop between writers and fans placed great power on the hands of fandom.

When female fans started showing interest in Star Trek⁷, the barriers of entrance into the sci-fi brotherhood were impenetrable and resistant to change. (Jenkins, 1992) Their newfound interest in science fiction media were seen as trivial and lowbrow, while the small numbers they made up were insignificant and couldn't sustain network television series or blockbuster movies. They were deemed as intruders to the status quo. (Jenkins, 1992) As a reaction, female fans went on to develop an alternative fan culture which was more open to women and queer people, within which queer/fem fans were welcome to participate without the need to interact with male fans; they build networks of trust and support, exchanged

7. American science fiction media franchise, which begun in the 60's

fanzines, hosted meet-ups and discussed fandom through phone calls. Thus, the first clear distinction of science fiction fandom was introduced; the male-dominated literary fandom versus the newly conceived media fandom. (*Jenkins, 1992*)

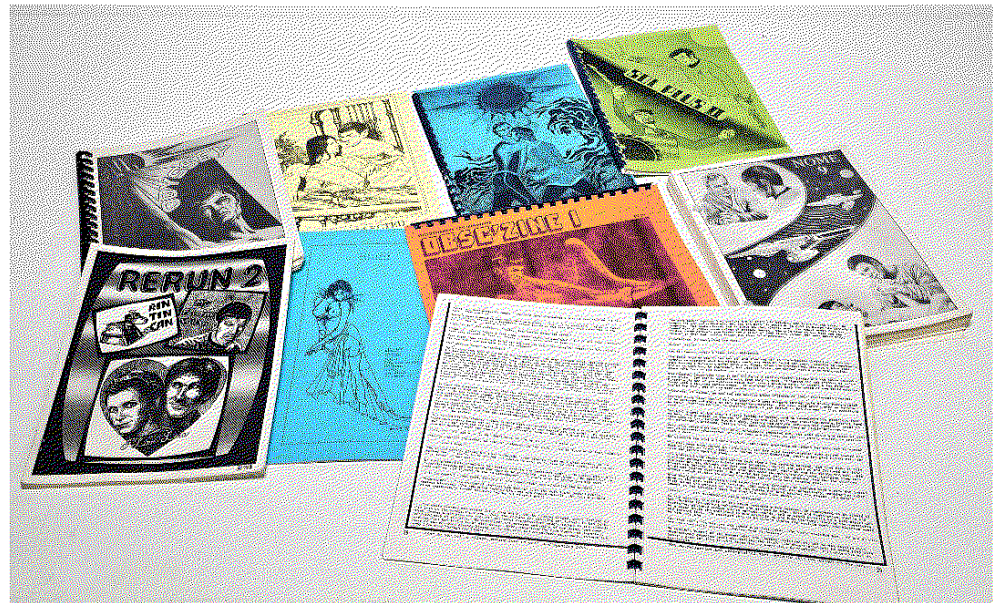


fig. 1. old Star Trek zines

The name “media fandom”, despite its roots, is no longer strictly tied to the science fiction genre. It is rather an umbrella term that covers countless groups of dedicated fans of media, including the once-segregated literature group. Even though some media fans prefer to remain committed to a single story, the majority use their devotion to a book or series as a gateway to a broader fan community, an intertextual network of fans of books, films, series and other popular material. (*Jenkins, 1992*) However, a new divide has emerged.

Affirmational / Transformative

8. Online journaling platform, a fork of LiveJournal.

In 2009, on a Dreamwidth⁸ post, user *obsession_inc* proposed the definitions for two aspects of fan practices, the affirmational (or curatorial) and the transformative (or transformational). (*Cobsession_inc, 2009*)

“Affirmational” fandom centers its practice around re-stating the source material, without questioning it. They focus on the technical aspects of canon and gathering information on the characters and how the fictional universe works. Affirmational fans can be found sharing platforms with “The Powers That Be”; the authors, the producers, the showrunners; people that hold creative or legal control over the media product. (‘*The Powers That Be*’, 2025) They are the active reviewers of works and collectors of official merch— they maintain fan wikis and attempt the panels to discuss with the producers. The fact that this group is a male-dominated one comes as no surprise— there is an evident connection to their literary sci-fi predecessors as they share similar practices and privileges.

On the other hand, “transformative” fandom prefers to play around with the source material— to reread and subvert it so as to create new narratives that best fit their purposes and interests. (*Cobsession_inc*, 2009) In an attempt to describe this practice of appropriation, Jenkins (1992) proposes the idea of “poaching” contents of the original text, taking on the role of “active producers and manipulators of meaning”. Current research suggests that transformative fandom is mostly, yet not exclusively comprised of women, and queer people.

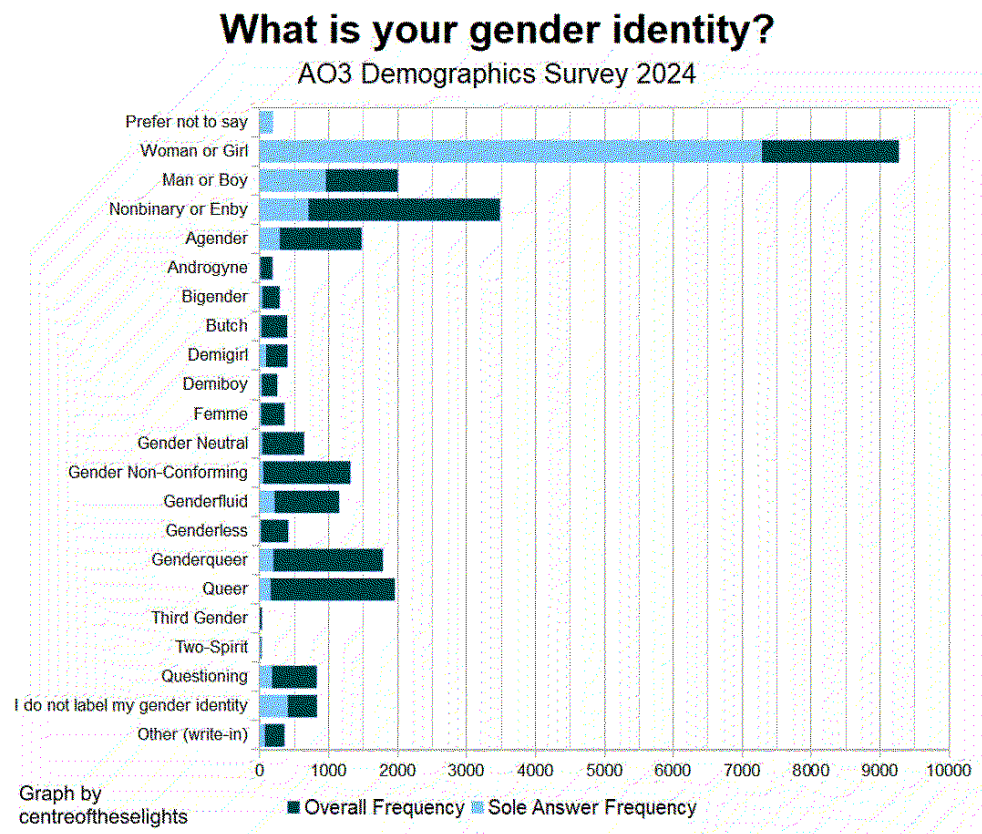


fig. 2. Ao3 graph

9. The largest fan-run, donation-supported archive for fanfiction and other fanworks

The Archive of Our Own⁹ 2024 demographic survey results on the questions of gender and sexuality, showcased that 2.5% of the participants identified as cisgender male and 9% as heterosexual. (*centreoftheselights, 2024*) The explanation for those results can be traced back to the inherent tendency of most media, which is to cater to a male audience, while being funded by and created in a male-dominated industry. It makes sense that queer/fem people turn to transformative practices like creating fanart, writing fanfiction, producing fanvids — using the original material as a suggestion, a starting point to tell their own stories. They actively produce their own creative material, while often doing so in ways that critique the original.

Pandering / Pathologizing

The split of fandom is not as explicit as it once was—transformative fanartists and affirmational collectors can be seen sharing online platforms and neighboring booths in conventions,

while each fan can participate in both affirmational and transformative practices in varying amounts. Instead, the divide is implicitly present in how those two sets of practices are being perceived; that is, through a patriarchal lens.

According to fandom scholar Kristina Busse, (2013) to be considered a “true fan”, one has to be evaluated on their knowledge of facts related to the source material, the size of their fan object collections and how long they have been active in fandom spaces— therefore, fans that follow an affirmational approach to their fannishness, a male-dominated community. Adding to that observation, in their research on race and ethnicity in fandom, scholars Gatson and Reid (2011) argue that the default fanboy is presumably white, middle-class, cisgender male and heterosexual.

Queer/fem bodies cannot fit the prototypical image of a true fan, thus their body is constantly being belittled, scrutinized and policed. Media researcher, Naja Later (2018) argues that transformative fandom is treated as a repugnant group, partly because they are seen as corruptors of the original text. They do not simply consume content, they appropriate the source material to tell new stories. Expressions of adoration shown by fangirls¹⁰ are often seen as signs of dysfunction in the female-coded body and are medicalized as hysteria¹¹, a term historically associated with female oppression. (Later, 2018)

10. The term fangirl in this context is used broadly and includes all queer and female-coded bodies that are treated as minorities online and in fandom.

11. Greek noun, meaning “womb”.

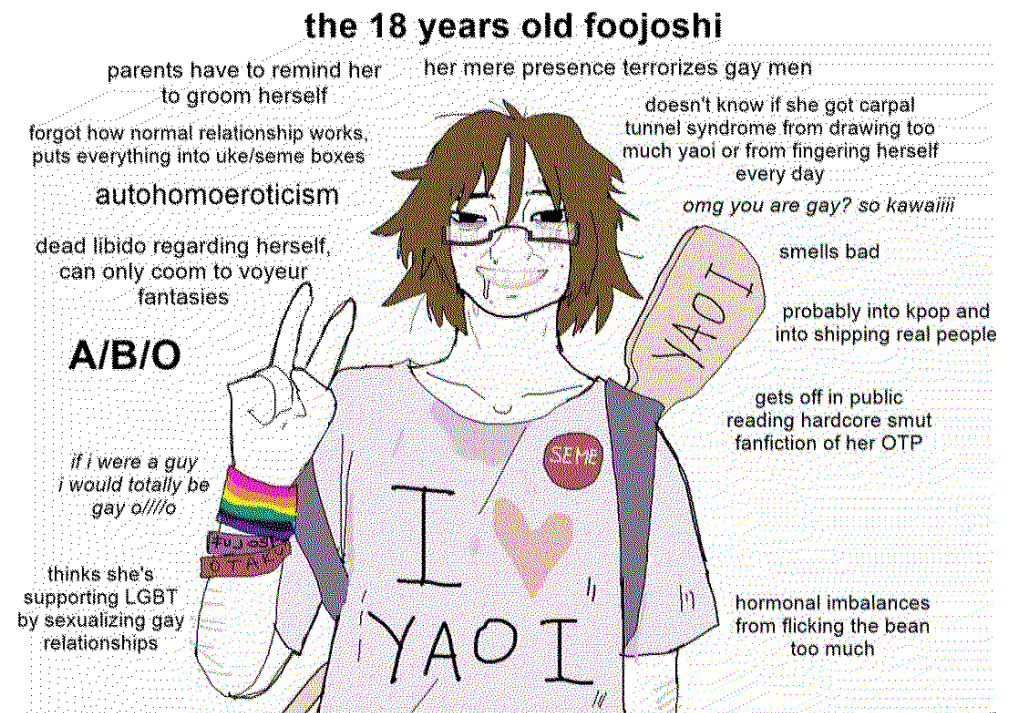


fig. 3. the female fan, pathologized

12. Translation of the Japanese term “Fujoshi”. It is derogatory term coined by men who deemed fans of slash as unfit for marriage, due to their non traditionally feminine, “rotten” interest in queer themes. It has since been reclaimed by female fans.

Fanfiction, and especially slash fiction, is treated as an inappropriate, excessive and filthy response to the canonical text, written by “rotten girls.”¹² Naja Later, (2018, p.333) researcher in the intersection of pop culture and politics, presents fanworks as a bodily performance that disrupts the source material and crosses the boundaries of what society regards as proper or (in the context of intellectual property) legal. Thus, they are treated as repulsive in polite society and often discussed about using biologically-infused words— rot, hormones, wet dreams— meant to pathologize and marginalize fangirls and transformative fandom.

CHAPTER TWO

Mind / Body

The introduction of the internet was followed by mythologizing the potential of disembodiment; a true separation of mind and body in cyberculture through text-based, computer-mediated communication. Disembodiment was not a newly conceived concept, of course— Western civilization had been fascinated by the idea for ages. Megan Boler, (2002) media and gender studies scholar with extensive research on the topic of online disembodiment, argues that this fascination is but a repackaging of the cartesian theory on dualisms¹³ and the desire to transcend the corporeal body. Such turn-of-the-century narratives surrounding cyberculture, fueled by marketing hype and the hopes of cyber-enthusiasts, resulted in the formation of what she named “new digital cartesianism”. (Boler, 2002)

Feminist theorists and philosophers have been denouncing the cartesian theory for decades. In *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, (1994) philosopher Elizabeth Grosz notes that looking at the world through a dualistic lens correlates with further segregation of concepts. The duality of mind and body have become representationally aligned with the male/female binary, reinforcing hierarchical gender structures and the objectification of women. (Grosz, 1994) Philosophy is a male-dominated discipline that has historically viewed knowledge as purely conceptual, relating concepts of the mind, such as reason and rationality, with denunciation of the corporeal. (Grosz, 1994) On the other hand, femininity is implicitly connected to the body and its supposed irrationality—the supposed innate nurturing instincts of women and nonwhite

13. Oppositional pairs of concepts, such as mind/body, good/evil, nature/culture, right/wrong. (Jaarsma and Berkhout, 2022)

people established them inferior to men and closer to animals than rational thinkers. (*Schiebinger, 1993*) To elevate the mind, one has to experience disembodiment, yet that possibility is only available to the white and male-coded body. (*Grosz, 1994*) “Digital cartesianism” is but a naïve manifestation of Descartes theory, founded on hyperbolic marketing campaigns that pandered to the dreams of cyber-enthusiasts.

Complete virtual disembodiment presents an interesting paradox — even though the body is alleged to transcend in virtual environments, in reality it still functions as the final signifier of what counts “real and true” on the other side of the screen. Anonymity is allowed but only to an extent. Boler (*2002*) brings up the example of “age/sex/location”, one of the first questions one would be asked in text-based communication, invoking the “real body” to authenticate one’s identity.

Cyber / Organism

Donna Haraway, a prominent scholar in the intersection of feminism and technology, had already introduced a more nuanced approach to virtual existence, that of a hybrid form of corporeality and technology, rather than a definitive split of the two. In her influential essay *A Cyborg Manifesto* (*Haraway, 1985, p. 5*) she writes about the “ironic, political myth” of the cyborg, informed by feminist and socialist ideas. In her fable, the cyborg takes the form of a physical body with digital parts as extensions. In cyborg theory, physicality is inevitable and never treated as something to get rid of— the body is not nullified, but augmented.

Through her hybridity, Haraway’s cyborg opposes the idea of the human/technology dualism and, by extension, the feasibility of cartesian theory. “The constructed female gender identity cannot be an essential singularity, since there is nothing about being female that naturally binds women” (*Haraway, 1985, p. 16*) — the same applies to dualisms on race, class and, might I add, sexuality. The utopic virtual being she proposes is done through

“recrafting” our body, rather than discarding it. (*Haraway, 1985, p. 33*) Ultimately, adopting fluid identities as a form of “infidel heteroglossia”¹⁴ will result in a post-race, post-gender, post-sexuality, networked society. (*Haraway, 1985, p. 68*)

Transformative fandom are a much faithful representation of Haraway’s cyborg. When they first came online, media fans saw themselves as first and foremost human bodies, utilizing the internet to introduce a new dimension to their real-world exchanges and urgently build digital archives of their culture. (*De Kosnik, 2016*) Media scholar Abigail De Kosnik refers to that moment as the “print-to-digital” transition. Fandom was part physical, still exchanging printed fanzines and attending face-to-face meetings, part digital with the move to the internet, and mostly female. (*De Kosnik, 2016*) The promised virtual disembodiment was never in fandom’s plans. They utilized visibility as a compass that would lead them to their community in this new, unexplored virtual landscape. As De Kosnik (*2016, p. 219*) best puts it, internet fandom created a digital surrogate for their physical counterpart. They build spaces for the circulation of female and queer information and production, developed community, lore and rituals.

In *Twenty years of “cyberqueer”*, sociologist Brady Robards and his colleagues (*2018, p. 153*) highlight the importance of digital spaces in shaping queer identities. Young people are connected with likeminded individuals and through these interactions, they are offered the opportunity to exchange important knowledge on different gender and sexuality identities. They receive access to crucial sexual health information and revisit negative perceptions and stereotypes that might have been societally imposed upon them. As mentioned in the text, the Internet provides opportunities for exploring sexuality and gender, and engaging in forms of queer world-making. (*Robards et al., 2018, p. 153*)

14. The presence of two or more linguistic varieties or viewpoints in the same place

CHAPTER THREE

Purges / Deaths

The internet is a social technology that was created in a racist, patriarchal society, therefore it cannot be politically neutral, nor impartial. As sociologist Judy Wajcman (1991, p. 25) explains, the gender relations expressed in technologies are inseparable from the social structures that create and maintain them. Online spaces simply restate existing social relations— the possibility of disembodied performance is completely written off. Since the age of computer-mediated communication, Boler (2007, p. 140) argues that the ways in which users interpret and derive meaning from text is informed by simplified bodily markers that re-establish stereotypical beliefs surrounding “racialized, sexualized and gendered bodies”.

Under the guise of anonymity, some users are compelled to lower their inhibitions and behave in antisocial ways— rude language, harsh criticisms, anger, hatred, even threats— which they would never perform in the AFK¹⁵ world. (Suler, 2004, p. 321) Doing so, they reinforce pre-existing social inequalities and mark many digital spaces unwelcoming for minorities. Media scholar Suzanne Scott (2019) explains how the current structure and policies of online platforms allow the proliferation of abusive behaviour. An abusive user might have gotten their account terminated, but they can instantly create a new one and continue the cycle of harassment, which makes online toxicity seem highly pervasive and, quite frankly, invincible. (Scott, 2019)

15. “Away From Keyboard”. Refers to the face-to-face world

For queer/fem media fans, the internet offers an amplified expression of the fandom exclusion they face in real life by their

16. Digital, rapidly spreadable media that are humorous in nature, often with slight variations

17. Further reading; “#Gamergate and The Fappening: How Reddit’s algorithm, governance, and culture support toxic technocultures” by Adrienne Massanari

hegemonic male counterpart. Without going into much of a detail into meme¹⁶ culture, since that would lead me outside the scope of this thesis, but I would like to focus on one specific instance that poses as a great example of what Scott (2018) calls “spreadable misogyny”, a case of viral gender-based toxicity amongst fandom; the “idiot nerd girl”. Stemming from the general “fake geek girl” narrative, the meme got popularized in the 2010s and developed into a series of lighthearted jokes that put women’s quality of “nerdiness” under scrutiny. The subtle and satirical nature of a meme is masterfully deceiving; it still operates within the same cultural logics of more pervasive and targeted campaigns of hate speech and harassment. (Scott. 2018, p. 89) Another notable example is the Gamergate incident, a loosely organized misogynistic online harassment campaign targeting women that brought up sexism and lack of diversity in video games.¹⁷

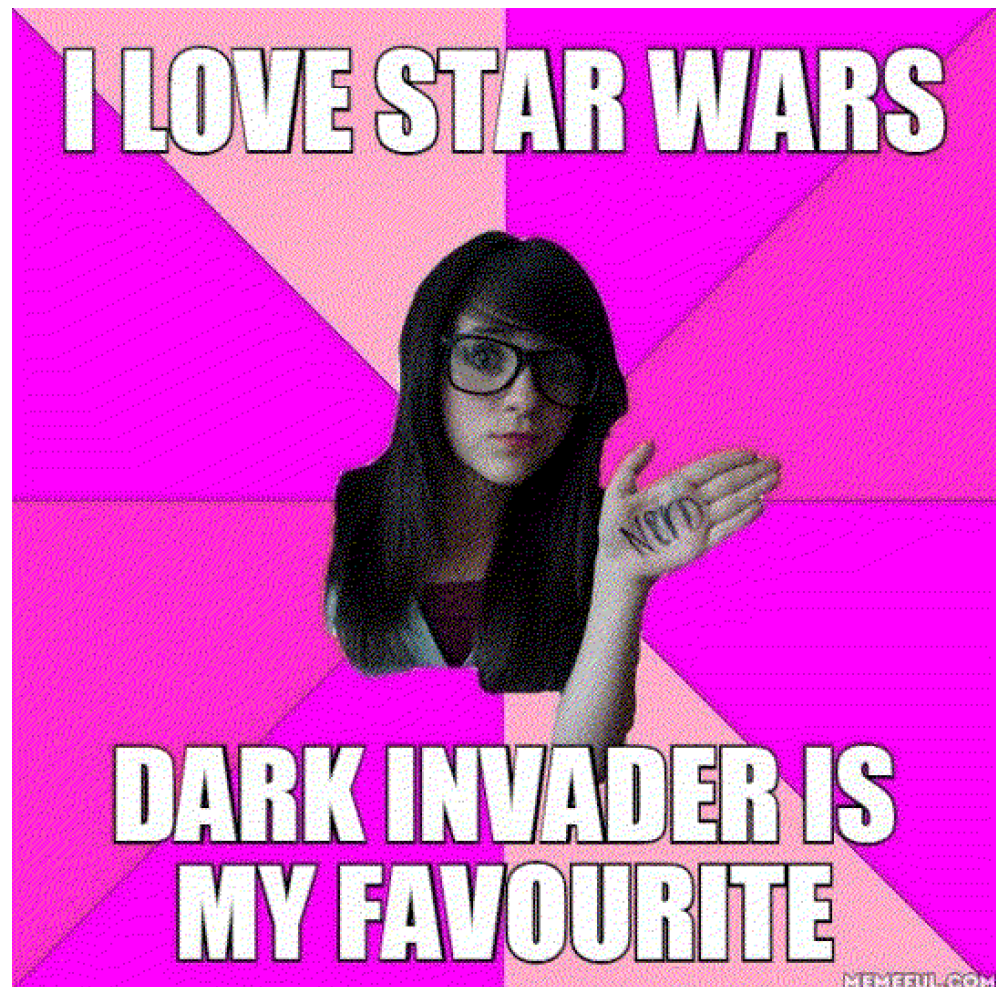


fig. 4. an “idiot nerd girl” meme

Amidst the highly toxic online environment, queer/fem fandom

has been migrating from platform to platform, looking for a safe corner to settle. Unfortunately, despite the attempts, most of fandom's online experience is plagued by platform "purges" and "deaths". The safe spaces we have built tend to follow the same formula for disaster, outlined by communications researcher Diana Floegel:

"Fannish spaces such LJ, FFN, and Tumblr that were advertiser-free and moderated by fans are purchased and then governed by corporations. New policies are then introduced to make the platforms "advertiser-friendly." Under these new rules, arrangements of human and algorithmic moderators systematically remove content deemed to be inappropriate, resulting in purges of content and users." (2022, p. 96)

Tumblr is a microblogging platform where once subcultures could built community and post fan creations without any fear of censorship. In its first decade of operation¹⁸, Tumblr was a charmingly weird corner of the internet with a flourishing community of nerds, approachable staff and a founder to whom users jokingly referred to as a father figure. It was around those first years that I joined Tumblr, in June 2012. Back then, it was the fandom "place to be".

The way Tumblr used to be perceived as a platform has changed throughout the years, after going through many rounds of acquisitions and purges. What was once a haven for fannish practices, is now infamous for betraying its user base time and time again. Following Yahoo's acquisition of Tumblr in 2013, ads were introduced for the first time, even though up until that point the development staff were openly against the prospect of allowing ads on the platform. (STRANGE AEONS, 2024) In 2019, following an incident of child pornography¹⁹ that got the Tumblr application removed from the Apple app store, the terms & conditions of the platform got updated to eradicate NSFW²⁰ content, with the infamous mention of "female-presenting nipples". Meanwhile, nazi content was left untouched.

18. It was founded in 2007.

19. Child pornography was already against the terms & conditions of the platform in the first place.

20. "Not Safe/Suitable For Work". Refers to adult content, such as nudity, "suggestive" content, depictions of violence.

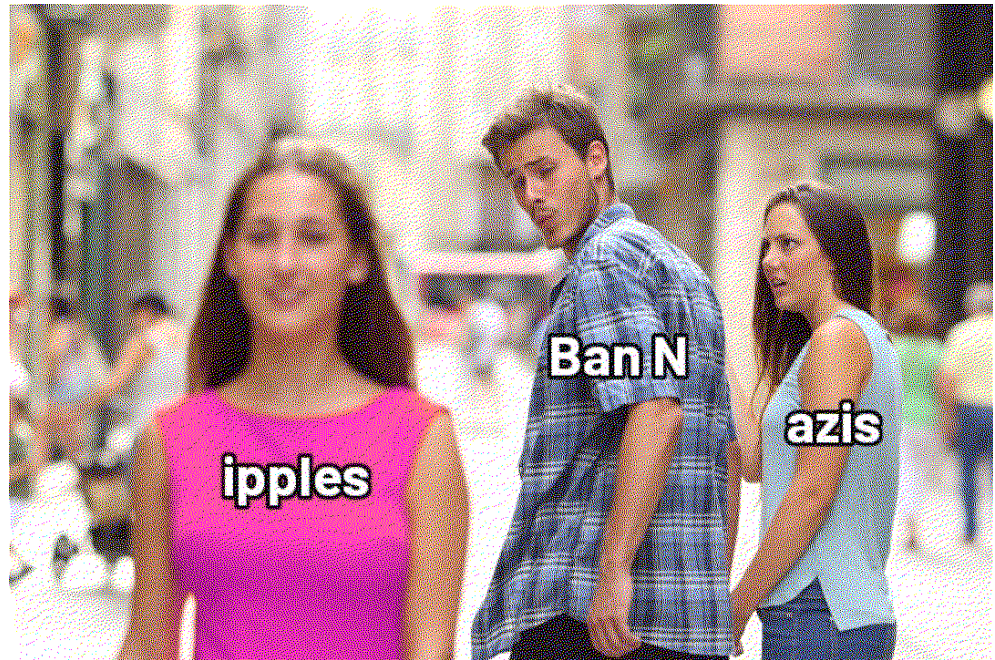


fig. 5. Tumblr's priorities

This turn of events disproportionately affected queer users and artists. Transgender users would document their transitions, some would post pictures of top surgery scars. Of course, since transformative fandom is queer/fem and frequently deals with queer themes in their creations, they got massively affected as well. Fanart and fanfiction depicting or describing “adult content”, which were once accepted and celebrated on the platform, were suddenly deemed inappropriate. (Floegel, 2022)



fig. 6. Tumblr post on the website's trans issues

Since then, there have been waves of mass-banning that disproportionately target the blogs of LGBT users. These events are masterfully swept under the rug and the only documentation available is bits and pieces of anecdotal information, gathered from the trans bloggers themselves and their network of “mutuals”²¹. Queer/fem fans, especially fans that identify as transgender, feel alienated. Our bodies are unwelcome, but we have nowhere to go. The homes we build on those platforms might be mobile, yet we’re running out of places to safely settle in.

21. Blogs that follow each other. It is an important part of Tumblr user lingo, signifying a feeling of proximity and affection.

Online Safe/r Spaces

It’s important to understand that what is cherished about tumblr is the community on there, not the platform itself. Tumblr might have seemed like a safe space for fandom in the past, yet in reality we’ve been depriving ourselves of online spaces where transformative fandom is respected and supported. Despite the continuous attempts, those safe spaces are not to be found in existing platforms. It all boils down to commodification. Existing platforms may present as “safe spaces”, but are quick to betray the userbase in the face of profit. However, this realization should not dishearten, but empower fandom. To reference the ever-inspiring Virginia Woolf essay, fans need spaces of their own, places of respite where they can connect, support each other, foster their community and share their transformative, transgressive art.

The need for fandom safe/r spaces²² has been a running conversation for years. The most notable instance that changed the course of online fandom history took place in 2007. After the announcement of FanLib, a commercially-owned fanfiction archive, LiveJournal user astolat (2007), upset by that prospect as most fans were, proposed the idea of a fan-owned, fan-run, donation-supported fanfiction archive, where the writer would have full creative freedom and control of their stories. The post soon gained traction and ultimately resulted in the creation of Archive of Our Own (Ao3), which launched in 2008 by the

22. the slash is added because spaces are never complete safe, we should continuously strive to make them safer

23. for a more detailed timeline, see https://fanlore.org/wiki/Archive_of_Our_Own

newly-funded, non-profit Organization for Transformative Works (OTW).²³

What the visualizers Ao3 recognized from the beginning was that to create a safe/r space online, it is important to have full control over the infrastructure. In a LiveJournal post in support of the OTW, user Speranza perfectly encapsulates this shared belief in a single statement;

“I want us to own the goddamned servers. I want us to make our own infrastructure, host our own party, set our own terms of service and play by our own rules.”
(*Speranza, 2008*)

Indeed, in 2009, Ao3 bought its first dedicated servers. The whole archive was built from the ground up, and is to this day maintained, by fans. OTW did not just built a platform, they successfully trained a group of volunteer fan-coders that were mainly women, a crowd that is underrepresented in computer science, instead of outsourcing work to professionals. (*Fiesler, 2018*) Fast forward fifteen years, and the fans still own the servers. Ao3 has become the go-to repository for fanworks and has grown exponentially through the years, counting over 10 million users and more than 17 million works posted²⁴ That marks the project an deniable success. However, this success comes with its own pile of issues.

24. As of April 2026.
Numbers can be found on the archive’s homepage.

Media studies scholar Mel Stanfill (*2024, p. 4210*) argues that Ao3, despite not being part of the platform economy, is still contributing to further platformization of fandom practices—meaning that fandom practices have been reorganized around it. Therefore, fans have narrower options and increased control over their practices. It is a known experience amongst fans by this point; every time there is a planned update on the site, the ones that are aware have already prepared by downloading fanfiction in advance, the rest are left in distress. Let’s not undermine the precarity that threatens an online archive, once it massively scales. Two years ago, the Ao3 was targeted by a DDoS attack²⁵, going offline for longer than a day. (*Powell, 2023*) That brought the whole practice of posting and reading fanfiction to a worldwide pause.

25. Distributed Denial of Service

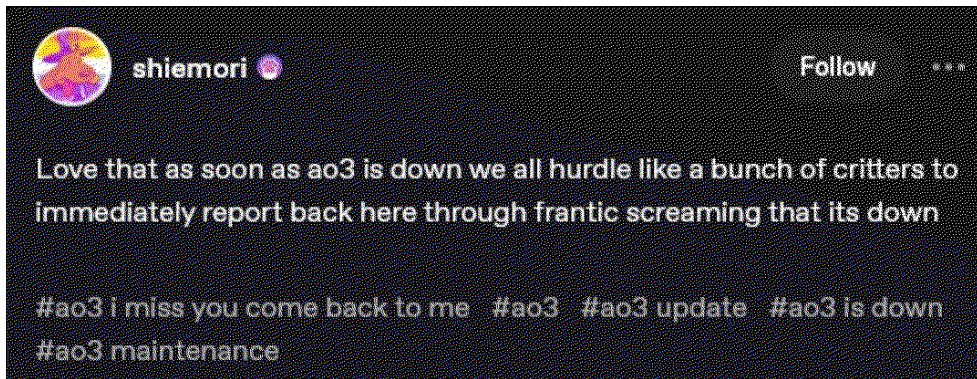


fig. 7. Ao3 is down

Sufficient content moderation, especially by a group of volunteers, is practically impossible. After experiencing many content purges and censorship as fans, the creators of Ao3 have stated that beyond some very specific exceptions, everything is allowed on the archive if properly tagged. (OTW, 2025) As Stanfill puts it, fans are stuck with the values of Ao3 and some of those values are hard coded in the software, such as which metadata they deem mandatory and which optional. (Stanfill, 2024, p. 4212) This argument becomes particularly evident when warnings for graphic and sexual violence are considered obligatory, yet warnings for racist content are not. (Stanfill, 2024, p. 4212)

Ultimately, when it boils down to its purpose as a project, OTW have made their intentions clear. Ao3 is not an online community platform, but an archive— a repository for fanworks. On its own, a single platform cannot facilitate the whole range of fandom practices and needs. Ao3 has proven that owning the servers as fans is a solid possibility, not just a collective daydream. Maybe the answer can be found not in one safe space, but in a safe/r network of fan-run spaces, much like the heteroglossia Haraway (1985) calls for.

The spark was once there, in those LiveJournal posts that gave shape to Ao3, but it seems to have deemed down through the years. There are many variables that could have influenced a lack of initiative for more fan-run online spaces, but I will be focusing on one of them. The internet used to have materiality that existed in our proximity. You would connect through that one home computer, through an ethernet cable. Now the internet is everywhere. It's wifi connections. It's Alexa²⁶ patiently waiting

26. Amazon's cloud-based voice service and home assistant.

for a request. It's on your phone in your pocket, but also on your smart home devices. I believe that by being deprived of that physical, tangible materiality, our collective imagining of fan-run infrastructure has been weakened. During my studies in Experiential Publishing (XPUB) I was introduced to the values and practices of feminist servers. I believe that they share similar experiences with transformative fandom, thus their approaches and teachings could be a valuable source of inspiration for fandom's next steps.

CHAPTER FOUR

Cloud / Materiality

Dreaming of virtual disembodiment has ceased. Such stories are now obsolete, since they no longer fit the marketing interests of networked communication— they are longer in need of a desirable narrative to draw people in, as being online is the norm. Anonymity is not profitable. What sustains Big Tech now is data collection. Accounts are created using personal phone numbers, platforms require identification through face scan or legal documents to have access to their content, and every online move is being surveilled to profile users and gather data that is then be sold to third parties. Instead, new narratives focus on the immateriality of digital infrastructure, the disembodiment of digital services. The current theories and narratives surrounding digital networks, like the algorithm, or the cloud, have distanced us from the materiality of the internet and the platforms we inhabit. The internet is presented as intangible, incorporeal— therefore, untouchable.

However, much like how digital disembodiment is impossible, so is infrastructural immateriality, and this new genre of mythologies is built upon gatekeeping technological knowledge.

Infrastructure is material— it is built and it is owned. Therefore, it is inherently political, reflecting the politics of the builder and the owner. In recent years, the SaaS²⁷ model is becoming one of the most prevalent standards in computing. The user is provided with access to software on a subscription basis, rather than owning it on their system. In return, they have access to said software on demand, over the internet. It is supposed to unburden users from the cost and hustle of owning and maintaining software, and by

27. Software as a Service.

extension the hardware needed to facilitate said software, since services are cloud-based.

Media scholar Plantin and his colleagues (2016) offer an intriguing point of comparison to the cloud by their informative insight into the “Open Web”. The “Open Web”, the internet in its original conception, is built on a set of technical components that exist as publicly accessible, communally regulated standards, where content is accessed using browsers, through unmediated hyperlinking. (Plantin et al., 2018) Its openness means that anyone could create visible, findable and linkable content—therefore the web is decentralized, largely beyond the control of any particular corporation or government. (Plantin et al., 2018) The SaaS model attempts to centralize and monetize what is essentially a global commons, under the guise of comfort, while gatekeeping access to valuable networking information. However, to have control over our virtual spaces, we need to know how our networks are built, by whom, how they work and who they benefit.



fig. 8. Meme about the "Cloud"

FLOSS Bros / Feminist Servers

The Free/Libre Open Source Software (F/LOSS) movement believes that software should belong to the people, and that users should have the freedom to read, replicate and modify it as they see fit. Open source means the code is both free of charge (free) and at liberty (libre) while also readily available— that is, for the ones that know where to look. The culture developed around the F/LOSS movement has an underlining hierarchy and an entrance gate made out of glass. People participating in F/LOSS projects are a byproduct of computer science circles, meaning mainly white and cisgender male. In a 2016 paper that looked into the demographics of the F/LOSS community, (*Robles et al.*) the gender gap is undeniable, with more than 80 percent of participants identifying as male. But how could that be, when all F/LOSS knowledge is openly available?

Just like the science fiction fandom in the 60s, the F/LOSS community has formed a tight brotherhood that poses as open and welcoming, but ultimately suffers from elitist and exclusionary practices. In 2016, I got admitted into a computer science BA program. On the first day, I realized I am one of the ten(ish) female-identifying students in a group of more than a hundred people. Soon enough, it became apparent that I was lacking basic computing knowledge that others took for granted, and despite the “no question is stupid” rule, I couldn’t ignore the scoffs around me. I would seek refuge in online forums, like the ever-hostile stackoverflow, looking for people that have asked the question I wouldn’t dare post myself. Even though the identities of my body were not explicit, my lack of knowledge and the community’s predisposition would make them easy to guess.

Despite being publicly available, F/LOSS knowledge is gatekept behind “if you know, you know” attitudes, heavy use of slang and jargon (as seen on “the Jargon File” (*Raymond, 2004*)) and

the infamous RTFM acronym— “Read the Fucking Manual”. Documentation is a vital part of any F/LOSS project, so that the user is presented with a full outlook and understanding of the code and the software’s usage, but at times, it feels like being given a book in a language unknown to you and being asked to translate it yourself. On ArchWiki, the documentation of a linux operating system distribution, there is a special page dedicated to how you are supposed to read this wiki. It is clearly stated that you are expected to “examine several related sources in order to understand an ArchWiki article,” then that “it is especially important to study the supporting material before seeking additional help from other users.” (*“Help:Reading”, 2011*) There is no room for inexperience or amateurism. In a 2011 research, Dawn Nafus, a tech-involved anthropologist, further analyzes how those liberal approaches to technology ultimately lead to the exclusion of women and the proliferation of sexist beliefs in F/LOSS circles. (*Nafus, 2011*) F/LOSS knowledge might be at liberty (libre), but not liberated from the tech brotherhood.

28. Activists using computer technology to make their statements.

29. An association for arts and media in Brussels. They have a long history of feminist work on technology

Several queer-feminist collectives have used those experiences as an opportunity to revisit, deconstruct and build their own narrative around libre culture. They aimed to combat the exclusion and mistreatment they face from the F/LOSS community and throughout the years, there have been many such initiatives developing alongside the F/LOSS movement, such as anarchist and community servers, hacktivist practices²⁸ and feminist hackerspaces. [Some notable examples are Riseup, launched in 1999 and Autistici/Inventati, launched in 2001. They both provide digital communication tools to activists. (*Toupin and Hache, 2015, p. 23*)] As artist and researcher Femke Snelting points out, with Constant²⁹ they were already “performing and acting (...) the feminist potential of free software”, before they acknowledged the need to make their feminist intentions more clear and direct. (*Sollfrank, 2018, p. 3*) According to Snelting, the F/LOSS manifesto shares undeniable similarities with the feminist manifesto through the values they advocate for. (*Sollfrank, 2018*) On the same interview, sociologist Spideralex quotes researcher Laurence Rassel’s opinion on the relation between free software and

feminism— that as a feminist, one wants to have access to their “exploitation system”³⁰ and the ability to change and modify it. (Sollfrank, 2018, p. 4)

Thus, the idea for explicitly feminist servers started coming to fruition. Two community events marked the beginning of a new feminist server movement; the Feminist Server Summit in 2013 and the TransH@ckFeminist Convergence in 2014. (Toupin and Hache, 2015, p. 22) During those events, several discussions took place, focused around a collective imagining of what a “feminist server”. The documentation of those discussions was compiled into the first iteration of a Feminist Server Manifesto.³¹ In 2015, the manifesto was included in the publication *Are You Being Served?* by Constant, presented as the “afterlife” of the summit. (Constant, 2015, p. 54)

30. Système d'exploitation, the operating system in french.

31. After this initial “0.01” version, many re-writings have been made during several workshops, events and discussions, such as the Wishlist for Trans * feminist Servers. (Moubarak, 2022)

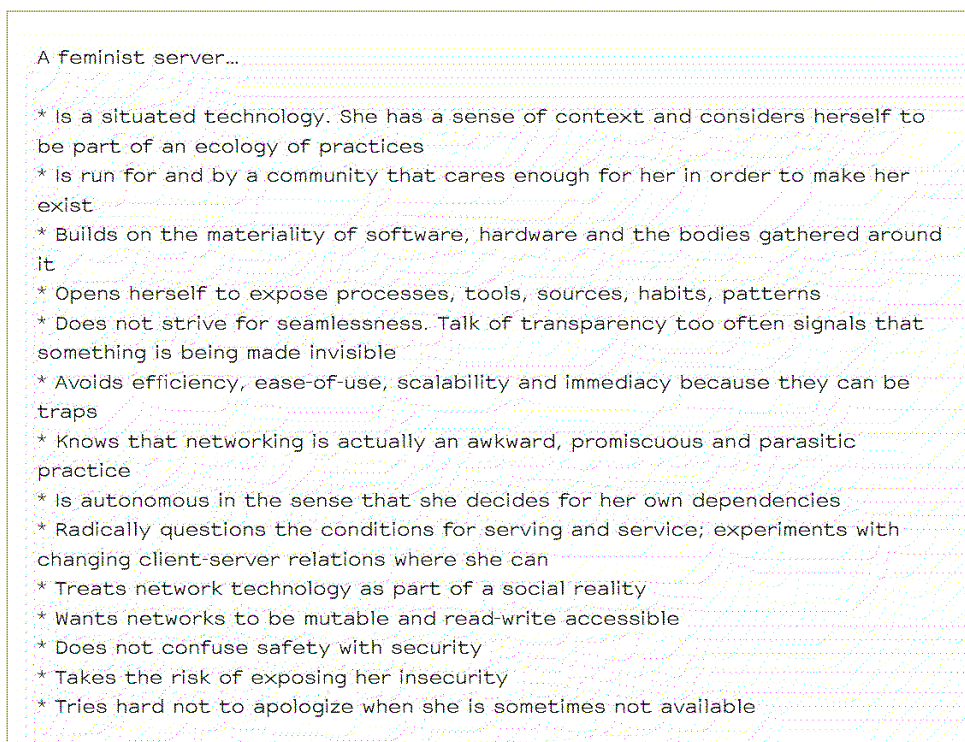


fig. 9. The Feminist Server Manifesto

Lessons / Prompts

Affective Infrastructure

As already established, feminist servers are technological infrastructures that follow counter-canonical approaches to networking technology. Infrastructure can take two meanings; one is that of software and hardware, the other of protocols and connections amongst the community that maintains them and that they maintain in return. Affective infrastructure as impactful to the bodies that gather around it and the community that it serves. Just like our bodies carry societally inscribed identities, so does the technology we use. As Haraway (1985) points out, technology is the offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, but feminist servers, following the example of Haraway's cyborg, are unfaithful to their origins. They go beyond the first layer, that of software, to look into all levels of infrastructure, and unearth the binary, capitalist, patriarchal code that hides underneath. Spideralex (Sollfrank, 2018) argues that feminist technologies are not complete, unless they look through all those layers, highlighting that all the problems happen there. They might not have the ability to change all traces of politics that are deep-rooted into technology. They recognize the affect of infrastructure from the moment of its creation. Every device is a product of mineral extraction and was most probably produced under terrible working conditions, by the hands of minorities; women, children, people of color, migrants, etc. (Sollfrank, 2018)

Feminist servers celebrate embodiment in their technological practices, the bodies around feminist servers are queer/fem, and the politics surrounding their bodies are what gets them gathered around the feminist server in the first place. Just like transformative fandom, the identities that most often exclude them from the broader male-dominated field, are now the links that bind those communities together. The feminist server does not just provide services to a community, it actively affects it. It is

build systems and write code through a cyberfeminist lens, in ways that are not just reactive, but also project their values into a desirable future. (*Toupin and Hache, 2015, p. 22*)

Growth over Scalability

Instead of hiding behind Silicon Valley-esque values, such as “frictionlessness” and opaque practices, the feminist server remains proudly exposed, vulnerable and, at times, unapologetically faulty. The goal is neither scalability nor efficiency. They do not see growth and scalability as synonyms. To borrow the words of anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, scalability is not an ordinary feature of nature and making projects scalable takes a lot of work and resources. (*2012, p. 507*) By remaining small in scale, they recognize the trap in “scaling up”, namely how it might mean betraying their values—acquiring more storage space, faster connection, “better” devices, or outsourcing processes. To the feminist server, growth does not equal expansion. They foster their community as if they would tend a garden, by putting effort and practicing patience. Around the server, there is buildup and transmission of knowledge, (*“What is a feminist server,” 2023*) no matter one’s background or previous experience with technology. It is a pedagogical endeavor.

Therefore, the feminist server is consciously anti-efficiency, its maintenance is not done by a team of designated, proficient sysadmins³². Instead, they work openly and collectively, fixing bugs, setting up tools and configuring updates together. (*“What is a feminist server,” 2023*) As Mara Karagianni, technologist, educator and artist, states; efficiency is not a core belief of the feminist server and there is no need to compare their practices with those of companies. (*“What is a feminist server,” 2023*) It is a challenge, of course. The easier, more efficient option is always at hand, but the server proudly remains a vessel for learning and sharing knowledge above all— trust and collaboration remain above a service-oriented mentality. (*“What is a feminist server,” 2023*)

32. System administrators

Extensive Documentation

Feminist server pedagogy is facilitated by their extensive documentation. Documentation can take many forms, from print-it-yourself how-to zines and collective mapping exercises to technical documentation tools, git repositories and wikis. Most feminist server collectives host their own wiki instance where they document their projects, workshops and maintenance practices in great detail and with intention. They do their best to offer further reading material and never shame the reader for any lack of knowledge on the topic. Through open and collaborative learning, they challenge the elitist idea that tinkering with technology requires some level of proficiency. Their ultimate goal is to keep knowledge circulating and people motivated.

Networks of resonance

Remaining relatively small scale allows for a clear overlook on the work done on the feminist server, and the dynamics forming around it. Is the code of conduct respected? What about the terms of safety and privacy? (*“What is a feminist server,” 2023*) Those are important points of consideration to facilitate the community. Since scaling is not a priority, the focus of a feminist server shifts towards building networks of solidarity and care instead. (Wessalowski and Karagianni, 2023) Spideralex, (*Sollfrank, 2018, p. 8*) highlights that the goal of the feminist server is not autarchy, which would mean developing the means to cover all their needs. She makes the distinction between autarchy and autonomy. Autonomy, she says, is interconnection. (*Sollfrank, 2018, p. 8*)

A Transversal Network of Feminist Servers (ATNOFS) was a collaborative project aiming to explore alternative engagements with digital tools and platforms. (*“A transversal network of feminist servers” , 2022*) Existing feminist efforts around Europe, from five different countries, were brought together to create a network of solidarity through one common server named Rosa. Rosa prompted discussions, workshops and performances informed by the local urgencies and needs of the different groups they visited.

In their paper *From Feminist servers to Feminist Federation*, Wessalowski and Karagianni (2023) document the

creation of a common PeerTube³³ instance between three feminist servers— Anarchaserver, Systerserver and Leverburns. It is joint effort to explore the possibility of growing a feminist federation. (*Wessalowski and Karagianni, 2023*) Each server host their own respective sets of tools that ultimately help the formation of this new connecting node between them.

33. decentralized video sharing platform

Both projects highlight how feminist servers question the idea of scalability, and turn to creating and strengthening bonds in wider feminist network instead. To some extent, Archive of Our Own shares some of the feminist server values. However, lack of other fan-run projects have led to the centralization of practices. Instead of a single safe/r space, we need to foster a safe/r network to prosper.

CHAPTER FIVE

Fanon / Radio

My version of embodying what I have learnt from feminist servers will take the form of an online fandom radio station, meant as a “third place”³⁴ for transformative fandom, a place where fans can build community through sound experimentation and regular live broadcasting.

In her speculative text *Piracy Is the Future of Culture*, Abigail De Kosnik (2020) imagines what would the future of media archiving be after “the Collapse”, the large-scale breakdown of humanity’s infrastructure and by extension the big, corporate-owned servers and network technologies. She outlines the invaluable preservation possibilities that pirate, peer-to-peer archives and the personal archives of fans offer. At a later point in the text, after going over how some media files could survive, she argues that in order to be shared, they would have to be played on the few remaining computers and broadcasted over the radio, since it is one of the most durable modes of communication—easy to construct, maintain and repair. (De Kosnik, 2020)

What stayed with me from this speculative text is how De Kosnik describes this sharing of media to take form. One would have to describe everything vocally; movies, paintings, comic strips.

(2020) My mind wandered— I started thinking of the fanzines filled with fanfiction pieces and illustrated fanart in personal archives of fans. Those, just like other remaining media, would be broadcasted too. Thinking of sound, I got reminded of radio dramas during long family car rides, then podfics. Podfic, or audiofic, is an audio performance of written fanfiction, performed

34. The “third place” theory was coined by Ray Oldenburg, an American urban sociologist. Third places are informal public gathering places that are neither one’s home (“first place”) or their workplace (“second place”), where one can gather socially and build community. (Oldenburg, 1989)

by the author themselves, or another fan who got their permission. It is a performed drama in a way, not quite an audiobook. Then, there's filk artists, producing fan music. Audio has been a medium of fan creation since the dawn of fandom, but it has remained in the outskirts of fan practices.

With this project, I am interested to experience fandom broadcasted interactions and experimentations. What if podfic was performed live? What if a narrator started their story and via the chatbox listeners could play a choose-your-own-adventure fangame? Ultimately, it is up to the hosts of the shows, which is a highly exciting prospect!

Since I want to take a step away from proprietary platforms, I am warming up to the idea of setting up a mailing list. It will be used as a channel to share information and updates, instead of cross-posting on several different platforms. To help kickstart the project, I plan on building a small wiki. It will include information on how the infrastructure is build, but also various resources on how to experiment with sound. The project is still taking form in my mind as I am writing this. Its edges are still blurry, but the core seems promising. I am looking forward to seeing the ways in which unabridged fannish creativity can bloom.

CONCLUSION

Through this thesis, I have investigated how the queer/fem identities of fandom influence our online experiences as fans. The body, and the politics that have been imposed upon it, accompany us on the digital platforms we inhabit. I looked at feminist server teachings for inspiration on how to make our own safe/r spaces that would facilitate our practices and needs. I then used them as valuable guidelines for my project.

To you, the fan reading this, I hope that at this point you are as inspired as I am— I hope I planted the seed of intention in you. The radio station is one project, but my head is bursting with so many others. What other forms can our practices take? How would our creativity be expressed in safe/r spaces? Maybe feminist servers can inspire as to make a fandom server manifesto of our own.

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