

THE NEW SCHOOL

VERA LIST CENTER FOR ART AND POLITICS

Freedom of Speech: A Curriculum for Studies Into Darkness

Seminar 3: Personal and Pervasive

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INTRODUCTION

The main purpose of this seminar is to unpack how technology has impacted and altered the ability of women to exercise the right to freedom of expression. This may seem like a straight forward topic, however as our discussion will prove, it is incredibly complex, at times harrowing, at times deeply empowering.

I have been leading ARTICLE 19's work on this issue for the last few years, that is not to say that this is a "new" issue. Unfortunately, violence against women has long existed, it is a historical issue and a very present one. But technology is reshaping power relations and gender dynamics, and this has implications for how speech is exercised online and by whom.

At ARTICLE 19, our work on this topic has centered on coordination and mapping. There are many resilient women, LGBTQI persons and allies—including our speakers today—that have been tackling online inequality and misogyny, and conducting research, for years. Our aim is to bring all of this together, and to track at a forensics level how abuse occurs online (the who, what, where, when, why) as well as the channels in which abuse lives and how it travels through the architecture of the Internet, and the real-life consequences this has on gender expression and Internet freedom as a whole. We truly believe that the ability of women to express themselves online has freedom of expression implications for society as a whole. This is not a singular issue, it is not *just* a women's issue, it is a societal issue. It has been an overwhelming task, and we have found ourselves asking way more questions than having any answers, such as:

How are women creating agency online? What tools and tactics are being used and to what cost? This varies from context to context. We have many offices around the world, and not one experience has been the same from the next. The variety of devices and how they are used also changes our ability to analyze a situation. The consequences are individual and hyper personal.

Who are these attacks coming from? Here we find that there is no one-set answer again, it also varies from context to context and can range from the State to non-state actors, to religious groups down to work-colleagues, family members and intimate partners.

How about the geography of all of this? A singular incident can span many countries, continents, jurisdictions. How do we handle a case where an attack originates in country A, and is received in country B, and travels through technology that has servers based in country C?

How does the law respond? Does the law even have a place in responding to situation as such?

What happens when attacks are shared onwards and amplified? This is what's particular about looking at violence against women online - the sheer volume and amplification potential of the Internet, and the immediacy. You can get thousands of attacks within a minute, within an hour. And it occurs when you turn on your phone in the bathroom, or in your bedroom.

Who is responsible for handling attacks? Where is regulation and accountability? This is the big question. Are we looking at States, NGOs, educators, engineers and software developers? Often times the spotlight returns to companies, as it should, since companies play a big role in this. But here is another question – do we trust companies? Do we trust Twitter and Facebook to be the regulators of online content, to be the gatekeepers, and to determine what is appropriate and what is not? I think most of us, deep in our guts, feel that the answer is “no” particularly since we know that the culture in Silicon Valley is hyper male and not a friendly one to women – and I am saying that as an understatement.

How do we even start to assess online content to determine when an attack happens and how to respond, or when there is gender expression and we are using our bodies to express ourselves? The sheer volume of content generated makes it untenable for nuanced human assessment and the task is often given to machines. **Do we trust machines?** Machines have to learn from somewhere, and what we are seeing is that they are learning based upon the biases of their creators and the demographics of Silicon Valley. Take facial recognition technology for instance, many of us have this feature on our devices. Research has shown that this form of technology is more secure for white male faces than it is for any other face – it is not an equal security mechanism because it is being built based off the architects, who tend to be heteronormative cisgender white men.

How about anonymity and encryption? These two tenets of the internet are very empowering and in some of the most oppressive contexts, enable people, dissidents and activists to speak out. But when we look at online attacks, these same tenets can become veils for people to hide behind, and for attacks to be conducted with impunity.

Last but not least, there is the rapid pace of technology. As we sit here, engineers are creating new technology, new algorithms and new devices. **How do we keep up with this?** The minute one thing is built, one thing is altered, one piece of code changes, the entire risk landscape shifts. How do we as civil society, journalists, artists get ahead of the curve in order to use the Internet safely and securely?

So here we were are - to speak on a hyper complex, deeply personal and urgent issue that is rapidly evolving. The purpose of all these questions and this seminar is not to overwhelm, as overwhelming of an issue this is, but rather to identify how we can start creating space – the kind of space that promotes diversity and inclusion. As we are seeing online, space is being co-opted and used for the antithesis of what we want. We are seeing a flourishing of hate speech, a flourishing of viewpoints that are against diversity and inclusion, and a spike in xenophobia.

How do we create the space that we want?

We are certainly doing right now, by giving this issue a platform. The question is how to replicate this space and extend it online, and sustain it. How do we make this type of space grow alongside the growth of technology? That is the challenge and that is what we are here to speak on today.

*The seminar series **Freedom of Speech. A Curriculum for Studies into Darkness** is organized by the Vera List Center for Art and Politics as part of the center's 2018–2020 curatorial focus *If Art Is Politics*. It is directed by Carin Kuoni, Director/Chief Curator, Vera List Center, and Laura Raicovich with assistance by Gabriela López Dena. Partner organizations for the seminars are ARTICLE 19, the National Coalition Against Censorship, New York Peace Institute, and Weeksville Heritage Center. *Pervasive and Personal* is presented in partnership with ARTICLE 19.*

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