Transfeminist tech

Introduction

In light of the specific context of Covid19, APC collaborated with Astraea translating CommsLabs to a hybrid setting, addressing additional safety and security considerations on creating safer places for organizers, advisory board, and participants who belong to marginalized, and in some countries, criminalized communities. An online space, based not only on free/libre and open source technologies, but care and well being, offering, beyond the specific events, a continuum for solid movement building and cooperation between different regions, that they could use without fear, being themselves.

Transfeminist politics make a specific accent on the centrality of community, intentionality, humility and active listening; an embodied politics of care that really articulates what it means when technology is enacted by people of different and discriminated genders, place, age, caste or class. They are not an “addon” but a positionality that helps and facilitates the use and the choice of technology in line with the actual needs, conditions and desire of the people.

Listen to the conversation about transfeminist perspective

Transcript

[in the background gentle upbeat Marimba music]

The invitation of Astraea toward APC to engage, work on the realisation, ideation, implementation of CommsLabs was rooted in an existing relationship of trust, feminism, ways of looking and understanding the politics and the values of the politics very close. Astraea was interested in exploring intentionally this specific intersection of CommsLabs with the way APC uses, talks and practices technology.

I remember fondly this first month of collaboration between APC, RAD and Astraea where we were navigating together how we would translate and accommodate all the requirements of physical, digital and psychological safety in this new format. Where we learned so much about the local context shaping the work done by LGBTQI+ activists in the Caribbean.

CommsLabs were one of the rare spaces where queer people and sex workers from the Caribbean and Central Asian South Caucasus regions could safely co-create and share space, discuss issues and share experiences. It offers unique opportunity to connect with activists across the region.

Participants, their needs and wishes are put in the central stage of everything related to the event. This means really listening and designing the event with this learning in mind.

[music fades out]

Central Asia and South Caucasus CommsLabs was influenced by the wars and the strong Russian influence on governments which work against social justice movements, particularly LGBTQI movement. On the other hand, Caribbean CommsLabs had more focus on addressing the effects of colonialism, land ownership, racial justice and usage of online platforms for advocating about LGBTQI issues. [music: dynamic arpeggio of metallic tubes fade in and out] When the precondition to be online remotely in order to discuss, prepare, plan and engage already starts from a high risk situation, it's completely different. And we can say that our experience of the two CommsLabs in this regard were somehow extreme.

The Caribbean edition started to be planned in a moment where the global COVID-19 pandemic had severely aggravated the visa injustice, making it even more difficult for people to travel. For this reason, we designed an event happening simultaneously in two different places, which were still connected to one another in order to make it feel like an actual regional meeting. This was our workaround to a structural challenge we could not change. At the same time, having an event this dependent on internet connectivity and access to technology added barriers that also required a lot of attention. We offered training, tech support on all the tools we were using throughout the event design and implementation, and we also offered data plans to make sure folks could be connected at all time. We were cognizant of the different ways people engage online and the overwhelming fatigue caused on people through online presence at this late stage of the global pandemic. And we tried to have this understanding translated in the design of our event and its preparation stages too.

[Pensative hang drum music fades in and out]

For me, attending CommsLabs and visiting countries where LGBTIQ lives are criminalized was one of the biggest eye-openers. First of all, learning about the laws, but also how communities are organizing to be able to do the work, have fun, respond to violence, threats, and connect with activists in other countries to form networks of support and collaboration.

Since the CommsLabs events had been, until this point, a completely in-person meeting, the approach to safety and security was focused more on physical and logistic aspects of it. When APC joined, we came in specifically to help with translating CommsLabs events to a hybrid setting, bringing our experience with holding fully online events and hybrid ones, and all the necessary adjustments this implies.

It added additional safety and security considerations, not only about safety and security of the in-person events, but also how digital tools used during the preparation and hybrid events need to create safer places for organizers, advisory board, and participants who belong to marginalized, and in some countries, criminalized communities.

[Relaxing meditative bells fades in and out]

I think the most beautiful experience is the working group on safety and security and then a specific working group done by trans people that were part of the activist advisory board, the coordination team, and facilitators, which created, not only a protocol, but actual a physical

experience of moving through borders together, providing prevention, protection and support.

It was important to look at all angles of digital security, from server and platforms themselves, to how sensitive information is handled and where we store it.

We wanted to create a safer online space where informed consent and self-determination are giving everybody space to express themselves, from choosing the user name, uploading profile picture, sharing more information about themselves, sharing contact details, and pronouns. Giving users of the platform's choice to decide for themselves which information they want to share and how they want to represent themselves was empowering for many. We also wanted to create an online space where multiple CommsLabs events can be held and people from different regions could be connected in one big activist network for longer time, not just for the duration of the in-person events.

[upbeat marimba music fades in]

We wanted to create an online space the communities participating in the CommsLabs could own, that could serve them before, during, and after the event. A space that would extend their connection, making so that the actual dates of the event would represent just an increase in engagement, but that the conversation would be a continuum for solid movement building and cooperation between different regions, that they could use without fear and be themselves.

It was very important for us to make sure that we are not using corporate tools which might put the participants in danger if and when their government request data from the platforms. It was also very important that services we use are not part of any advertising networks which gather data, categorize it, and make it available to the highest bidder. The infrastructure that would satisfy all these criteria can only be self-hosted platforms on a secure server which is regularly updated and maintain

[music fades out]

We facilitated this process through participant onboarding and training on the tool, as well as being available for any questions or issues they had throughout the whole process.

We have definitely worked on making the usage of the platforms easier, for example with single username and password that gave access to all platforms. However, there is also a need to integrate the basic instructions into every online meeting and informing participants how to use the features. During the preparation of the events, we have noticed that participants gravitated back to the familiar tools, for example wanting to use Zoom instead of adopting Big Blue Button. Sometimes it was the issue of connectivity and sometimes just familiarity with the tool. When it was challenging to convince people with limited time and attention to read through manuals or attend an onboarding session, it was very important to explain why self-hosted solutions were chosen and what are the benefits, how it enhances safety and security, and how it is on the whole community to create this safer space.

[inspiring hangdrum percussive music fades in]

Transfeminist politics make a specific accent on the centrality of community, that is, at the same time, the one that will think, live, experience the event; but will also identify the issues, the themes, the specific nuances or intersections that matter to them and space. The free and open source technologies that we have mostly used during the CommsLabs don't come from a point of fear, they come from a point of care and well-being. And that's why it is so important that we position ourselves into this realm of digital technology from a perspective that is not only embodied, but of an embodied politics of care that really articulates what it means when technology is enacted by people of different and discriminated genders, place, age, caste or class. All those variables are really central to the discourse. They are not an "addon" and it's from this perspective, from this positionality, then technology is designed, experienced, translated, explained, introduced to people that might not have used that specific tool or that specific way.

It is a positionality that helps and facilitates the use and the choice of technology in line with the actual needs and the actual condition of the people. This is what transfeminism brings to understanding technology, to the intentionality, bridging the intentionality of Atraea and APC in practicing and being in a more active listening and humble position, to really listen and understand what the communities were saying and asking; and then trying to do the translation bit so that the application of the technology of the space of infrastructure, the model of the events that we had would be supportive of their reality and their desire.

Texts, videos and websites

- Is technology our savior — or our slayer?, Ruha Benjamin
- Technology for liberation, Astraea + RAD
- Tour Delirio, María Juliana Soto N (Spanish)
- Afrofeminist Data Futures, Neema Iyer, Chenai Chair and Garnett Achieng'
- Me falta privacidad para la autonomía de mi deseo, Lucía Egaña (Spanish)
- Que no quede huella, que no, que no. Diálogos feministas para las libertades y autocuidados digitales, #SomosTormenta (Spanish)
- Campaña La Clicka Libres en línea, Luchadoras MX (Spanish)
- Alerta Machitrol, Fundación Karisma (Spanish)
- Acoso.online (Spanish)

Guides

- Digital care guides, Frida Young Feminist Fund (English)/(Spanish)
- Ciberseguras (Spanish)
- Cyberwomen Curricula, IWPR (English)/(Spanish)/(Arabic)

Collectives

Meet some amazing transfeminist collectives.

Association for Progressive Communications Women's Rights Programme

The Association for Progressive Communications Women's Rights Programme (APC WRP) has a long-term goal of ensuring that women and people of diverse sexualities and genders participate in, shape and co-create the internet and digital technologies that reflect and respond to their lived realities. APC WRP plays a vital role in bringing together people, organisations and communities, working to provide a feminist analytical framework of internet rights, and to locate women's and sexual rights agendas at the centre of debates around internet rights. It works through four interrelated strategies: knowledge building, capacity building, policy advocacy and movement building.

Based in: Global

Some of their projects:

- GenderIT
- Feminist Principles of the internet
- FTX: Safety Reboot

Some more

- Point of View (India)
- SurSiendo (Mexico)
- Marialab (Brazil)
- Donestech (Spain)

Online Gender Based Violence Helplines

In different parts of the world, feminist collectives and networks are creating local and regional helplines for people facing gender-based violence in digital spaces. And even though they usually work with limited resources, these initiatives are acting on the front line to mitigate digital threats and attacks.

Mujeres Activistas por el Software Libre (Venezuela) seek to feminise technology by organising workshops, providing advice, and supporting people facing digital violence. They also create content to raise awareness.

Digital Rights Foundation (Pakistan) is a feminist, notfor-profit organization based in Pakistan working on digital freedoms since 2013. Digital Rights Foundation envisions a place where all people, especially women, can exercise their right of expression without being threatened.

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