

**Position Paper for:
Feminism and Feminist Approaches to Social Computing (CSCW 2015)**

Dr. Rena Bivens

Introduction

I am a Banting Fellow in the School of Journalism and Communication at Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada. As a communication studies scholar, my work is informed by queer theory, feminist science and technology studies, and software studies. My research agenda is geared towards interrogating normative logics embedded in software.

Having attended three events in 2014 that attended to feminist and queer approaches to CSCW, I am very invested in these discussions. This past year I have participated in the *CSCW Feminist and Social Media Research* pre-conference workshop, the *ICA Feminist Approaches to Social Media Research* panel, and the *Queer Internet Studies* workshop at Columbia University.

My Work

The following is a vignette from my work on the 10 year history of coding gender on Facebook. This article is currently under review but available on SSRN (<http://ssrn.com/abstract=2431443>). First, the abstract:

“A February 2014 iteration of Facebook’s software upgraded the number of options for gender identification from two to fifty-eight. Drawing on critical theoretical approaches to technology and insights from science and technology studies, this iteration is situated within ten years of software and user modifications that pivot around gender. Analysis follows the dynamic materiality of an antagonistic oscillation between competing constructions of gender as both a rigid binary and a fluid spectrum. This article argues that the relationship between Facebook’s software and its users is deeply structured by the gender binary while simultaneously productive of non-binary possibilities. Three findings are revealed: (1) an original programming decision to store three values for gender in Facebook’s database became an important fissure for non-binary possibilities; (2) gender became increasingly valuable to the system over time; and, (3) at both deep and surface levels, neither the binary nor spectrum have been fully materialized.”

Next is an excerpt from the conclusion:

“Within this liminal space, and at a deep level, Facebook’s code has functioned to normalize the gender binary and regulate the social life of users even though the capacity to move beyond the binary has always been a programmatic possibility.

...

The antagonism between competing constructions of gender as a rigid binary and a fluid spectrum plays out in and through the software-user relationship, tied to design choices, coding practices, the significance of gender as a variable and a field for data collection, and the myriad ways in which users both accept and challenge Facebook's software. Analyzing a decade long software-user relationship, as it pivots around gender coding, offers an opportunity to consider these entanglements of power.

...

This analysis of the materiality of antagonistic constructions of gender in social media software offers important opportunities for nuanced and dialectic insights into the 'invisibly visible,' shallow/deep capacities for the production and enactment of power in and through software-user relationships and the regulation of social life through code. More research that critically examines coding practices – coupled with similar practices beyond programming – and the difficulty of deprogramming the gender binary in both society and software is needed. Findings will be influenced by whether analyses focus on the user interface alone, the underlying database, some measure of both, or a combination of other software processes and actors linked to social media software.”

Annotated References

Finally, I will offer three annotated references – one conventional and two that are purposefully unconventional (due to their disciplinary underpinnings) but hold much generative potential when applied to feminist approaches in CSCW:

1. Sandvig, Christian, Hamilton, Kevin, Karahalios, Karrie, and Langbort, Cedric. 2014. *“Auditing Algorithms: Research Methods for Detecting Discrimination on Internet Platforms.”* Paper presented to “Data and Discrimination,” a pre-conference of the 64th annual meeting of the International Communication Association, Seattle, WA, USA.

This paper offers a useful introductory step towards developing methodological techniques to expose normative logics (and hence discrimination) in algorithms. The auditing method proposed is still in its infancy but holds promise for architectural analyses that I feel feminist approaches to CSCW ought to consider, alongside other similar approaches, in order to both expose how software programming perpetuates problematic marginalizing regimes and how we can contribute to alternate configurations.

2. Barad, Karen. 2007. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. North Carolina: Duke University Press.
[for a short introduction see Chapter 3 – ‘Interview with Karen Barad’ in Dolphijn, R. and van der Tuin, I. 2012. *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies*. Michigan: Open Humanities Press.]

Barad is a feminist theorist and theoretical physicist who offers us an admittedly philosophical but important analysis of the nature of the world and knowledge that attends to questions of ethics and accountability. Her focus on responsibility within these questions is very relevant and applicable to CSCW analyses of technological design, particularly when we perform feminist and queer interventions.

3. DiSalvo, Carl. 2012. “Spectacles and Tropes: Speculative Design and Contemporary Food Cultures,” *The Fibreculture Journal: Digital Media + Networks + Transdisciplinary Critique*, 20:109-121.

This article offers a useful analysis of the limits and potential of speculative design – an approach that generates imaginative objects that become fictional designs. The intent of speculative design is to provoke dialogue and reflection about the broader relationship between technology and society. I draw on this approach because of my engagement with feminist design as a practice that is both critical and imaginative, tied to a future world that offers alternate possibilities and power arrangements.