

The Use of Social Network Software for queer-feminist activism, using the example of Ladyfest

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In this presentation, I will first give you a short report on the nature of Ladyfest, as an example for queer-feminist activism, and what kind of activism they present. In the following, I will discuss the benefits of social network platforms for groups organizing a Ladyfest as well as problems which come along with that.

Short introduction in herstory of Ladyfest

During the early Nineties a movement of female Punk- and Hardcore musicians and bands became famous as the riot grrrl movement (Garrison 2000). The idea of riot grrrl spread from the USA and UK all over Europe, first in subcultural scenes and media, like fanzines. In mainstream media riot grrrls have often been reduced to the phenomenon girlie, whose feminist and political impact was denied. The messages of riot grrrl were explicit feminist and political, with an “in your face” attitude, discussing topics like beauty-norms, rape or sexual abuse. Riot grrrl also focused on building counter-publics and –structures, such as providing spaces and networks for self-empowerment for girls and women. As riot grrrl movement is and was deeply rooted in the DIY culture, media production was a central point. The strategic use of mainstream media, writing riot grrrl fanzines and later blogs and establishing own labels and networks for bands etc, helped to spread the movement (Zobl 2004).

Former riot grrrl musicians, artists and activists organized the first Ladyfest in 2000 in Olympia, Washington, USA. Ladyfest as a queer-feminist and community festival offered a platform for a new, or at least another, approach of activism, getting in touch and networking. The Ladyfests spread very quickly from the United States, to Canada, Australia and Europe (and to other countries like South Africa etc., but most countries and Cities, where Ladyfests take place, are western industrialised countries). Since 2000, there have been about 170 Ladyfests that took place all over

the world, 70 of them in Europe, and about 30 in German-speaking countries (relating to figures from 2008).

Ladyfests are not the only label of queer-feminist festivals. There exist a huge number of festivals with similar ideas that chose another name or have a different focus, like queeruption, red dawns festival, love kills anarchafeminist festival and a lot more. I will concentrate here only on Ladyfests because they are a widely known and acknowledged practice, that link queer-feminist activists internationally under one umbrella term. As Melanie Groß in her research shows, naming the festivals Ladyfest allows to find them easily in the internet (get “real hits”) and to become known in a wider scene (Groß 2006).

Of course, every Ladyfest is unique and the possibilities of organizing a Ladyfest are diverse, referring to different local, cultural and political backgrounds. But they are still recognizable as a connected phenomenon, by sharing an established and well-known name and also referring to the same history and roots of the riot grrrl movement and the first Ladyfest in Olympia.

Ladyfests share the concepts of a non-profit and Do it yourself – Festival that offers Workshops, Discussions, Exhibitions, Film Screenings as well as Parties, Concerts, and Performances. Queer-feminist artists, musicians and activists establish contacts through communication at Ladyfests, but also via the social network platforms such as myspace or facebook, where a lot of Ladyfest groups have there own profile, post their announcements and calls for action and do advertising for their events (see on Ladyfests and technology also Aragon 2008).

Ladyfests use virtual networks for exchanging ideas, knowledge and strategies for concert organisation, parties and workshops. On these social network platforms, there is space for debates about queer-feminist theories or transgender-activism as well as for music downloads or self-made videos that try to develop a queer aesthetic. For example, the homepage of Ladyfest Olympia gives an inside into the planning of the first Ladyfest and what their experiences were (www.ladyfest.org). Ladyfest Vienna offers access to flyers, trailers, and recipes for Cocktails (cunttails, as they named it), using an open source software for content management solution (plone), that offers an easy access for group-members without special knowledge of programming to fill in content (<http://plone.ladyfestwien.org>).

Ladyfest Vienna is a very good example, how the internet platforms are used and experiences and resources shared. On the one hand, a platform offers to the group a space to facilitate intensive debates and to share materials. On the other hand, there they post papers about debates held on their assemblies and therefore create transparency and reveal their conflicts and ambivalences to a public. Consequently a lot of information is offered to other Ladyfest activists in order to learn and enabling mutual participation. And of course, other Ladyfest groups follow this example and do the same way.

What does queer-feminism mean? Example Lady

I call Ladyfests a kind of queer-feminist activism and I would like to precise what I understand by stating the example of the term *Lady*.

Lady is mostly used as a self-definition. A *Lady* is not necessary someone who is a woman or female by biological terms. Most Ladyfest groups precise the category *Lady* as open for women, lesbians and transgender people. But in some cases it is used as name for all kind of genders. A common motto of Ladyfests is for example: "Whatever your Gender may be, if you feel like a Lady, be part of the Ladyfest." *Lady* does no longer follow an "aristocratic understanding of Woman", but is a label that represents debates on gender identity and identity politics in feminist and queer contexts.

One answer to the question "What does Lady mean?" is provided on the website by the Ladyfest Olympia: „Events listed as ‚ladies only‘ are open to all women, including women who identify as men, and ladies who were born gentlemen. Transgendered women are welcome to lead workshops, play music, show art, do performance art, etc." (<http://www.ladyfest.org/FAQ/index.html>).

The discussion about the term or the category *Lady* shows the interaction of Ladyfest as activism with academic and theoretical debates in feminist and queer contexts: It refers to postmodern feminist and queer criticism of identity politics and heteronormativity. It allows a discussion about diverse gender identities that go beyond a binary system of gender and heterosexual desire. (That means for example for queer-feminism to focus on transgender and intersex-issues as well as homosexuality, but also in general on issues that are supposed to represent anti-normative ways of life.) I understand queer-feminism here as a criticism of normative

structures and normative social orders that focuses on gender diversity and diversity of sexual orientation.¹

Central to the criticism of normative structures as well as the category *Lady* are questions of inclusion and exclusion: Who can call her or himself a *Lady*? Where should the line be drawn, when *Lady* is supposed to remain a feminist label? What does this mean for Women-only-spaces, or Women-Lesbians-Trans-only spaces? And how to deal with the ambivalences of criticising identity politics on the one hand, but on the other hand still referring to identity categories such as women, lesbians or transgender?

Ladyfest activism can not give a straight or clear answer to these questions that come up with discussions about queer and feminist theory. But I see Ladyfest festivals as platform for discussing these issues and for trying to turn these questions into a concrete practice. As temporary spaces Ladyfests can share knowledge and strategies to deal with these questions and to develop collective practices.

One example, beside others, is the permanent and in every Ladyfest group discussed question: What kind of programme should be open for what kind of gender? The parties and concerts are mostly open to all genders, but some workshops are often only offered “women-lesbian-trans-only”, in order to create a safe and comfortable environment. Every group has to decide what kind of exclusion or inclusion they legitimize and why they do so. Therefore I consider Ladyfests as one space for dealing with queer-feminist questions and differences.

Social Software

Social software is one that provides possibilities for communication that is characteristic for the changes in using the internet, what is often called the Web 2.0.

Jan Schmidt differentiates between 3 different functions of Social Software: First, the management of information and content that means providing tools for searching, evaluating and organising online information. 2. The management of identity that is mostly the possibility of representing of oneself in the internet, or at least aspects of one's identity. 3. And at last the organising of acquaintances and friendships that help people to establish and manage contacts and to visualise them (Schmidt 2006). In the case of Ladyfests all of these aspects are important.

¹ See for queer-feminism Richardson et al. 2006, for Heteronormativity Hartmann et al. 2007.

What kind of Social Network Platforms are used and how?

As I said before, Ladyfest groups use social network platforms in order to organise, network and communicate. You can find a huge number of Ladyfest groups on Myspace, but also on Facebook. Besides these commercial platforms there exist activist platforms such as grassrootsfeminism.net, that provides an online archive for Ladyfests and other queer-feminist festivals, which has an increasing amount of submissions. I am convinced that there are several other platforms and tools used, such as for example blogs, but nevertheless I will focus here on these two Platforms, because they are the most important ones.

On Facebook you can actually find 65 different groups that name themselves Ladyfest. There exists also a group named "I am/was a Ladyfest organiser", where people who organised a Ladyfest can exchange experiences, discuss or communicate with each other. On Facebook every activist has his or her own profile and can connect him or herself with several groups. So here the focus is of linking activist, but not necessarily linking groups.

On Myspace there are about 130 Ladyfest-profiles that represent not individuals but groups. Characteristic to these profiles is the linkage to other queer-feminist artists, bands or other groups that support Ladyfests and/or have performed at Ladyfests. Myspace offers therefore the possibility to do advertising and announcements but also booking of artists and performers. It also allows the representation of theoretical debates, art, music or pictures of each activist or groups.

Benefits of using social network Platforms

What are the benefits of using these social network platforms for activism such as Ladyfests?

Ladyfest groups can easily use a platform like Myspace for advertising, for sharing materials, for publishing information and debates and to communicate intern as well as with other groups or activists.

Local Ladyfest groups can link very easily with other groups that exist in neighbored regions or near cities, but even internationally. As Ladyfest-organisers, they don't have to know each other personally and it is not necessary to get into real life contact. In that way, it is possible to build a network with many groups and people

and to benefit from the networks and connections of others. Using this network, it is easy to find information, or at least find someone to ask for information.

Since Ladyfests are also very much about music and booking bands, myspace offers the opportunity to get in contact with bands or other artists and to communicate in different ways. It happens very often, that bands write to Ladyfest organisers to offer a gig on their tour, so they come to have an interactive exchange. (It should also be mentioned that Ladyfest organisers are often also artists or musicians, the line can not always be drawn clearly.)

With myspace it is possible to build very quickly a virtual representation with an online address in the internet. You don't need a specific knowledge about programming or building a website and you don't have to pay for it. But you have the opportunity to publish your information.

To sum it up, social network platforms are very easily accessible as long as you have access to the internet. In that sense, Ladyfests are a highly participative kind of activism, with low barriers to get in touch, with a lot of support and information offered by the network.

Problems by using social network platforms

Also problems can be identified: You have to invest time and energy to filter commercial spam and to select your "friends" and the messages you receive, in order to not become a space for commercial postings. Additionally, it is not sure how safe your data is, so you have to be careful with personal information. With myspace-profiles that use the term *Lady*, you get very often confronted with porn spam, because the term *Lady* is often used in these sites. And while you will find very often sexist pictures and videos on private and commercial myspace profiles, there has been censorship for queer and queer-feminist groups in regard of queer / sex-positive pictures or lyrics. For example the gay band *Kids on TV*, that is also linked to several Ladyfest profiles, has been deleted by myspace in Spring 2007 and lost therefore 14.000 contacts besides concert announcements and mails. In several press releases and articles myspace was criticized for having deleted the *Kids on TV* profile. It was assumed that the reason was their explicit and sex-positive lyrics. A Band member argued: „The discussion of sexuality in our lyrics and the open embrace or radical culture was too much for myspace. We definitely ran into their limits whatever they were" (cited from von Lowtzow 2007). *Kids on TV* opened a

discussion about censorship on myspace and other artists and political activists reported of having been deleted by myspace, too, without getting informed of the any reasons or explanations.

This example shows a kind of dependence on this kind of commercial platforms. Because a lot of subcultural bands and artists use myspace for advertising, booking and networking, they depend on the good will of myspace to accept their kind of creativity. Another problem, I would like to name here is what call the phenomenon of *dead web spaces*.

What do these *dead web spaces* mean?

Dead web spaces are for example websites or personal or group profiles that have not been visited for a period of time or where hadn't been a login since more than one year. Another example are blogs with only few postings made months ago, and no comments or only rare ones.

The reasons can be very diverse: For example, the group doesn't exist anymore. Or the password has been forgotten; the group has moved to another website and has forgotten to link it. Another explanation is that the group has another focus or has to debate other topics so that no one has the time to update the website. And there can be a lot more reasons.

Referring to the obstacles by using social network platforms, which I showed above, I will here try to discuss what these *dead web spaces* mean: Do they mean anything at all? Are they only data trash, like spam mails, that have to be deleted? Besides the question, what will happen to these *dead web spaces*, it is my interest to look at what they still represent, what they still offer, and what they can say us about the potential of social network software itself.

Dead web spaces are still available for people looking for information. They offer content, but they have lost their interactive nature. They still represent activism, even if there is actually no group left or no action in planning. A problem is, that people trying to contact these *dead web spaces* communicate into 'a nothing' or something empty; imagining that there could or should be someone that receives messages, but doesn't answer. So it's dead-end-communication.

Concerning *dead Ladyfest websites* there remains the question, if they mirror a lack of organisational structures, of continuity and liability of Ladyfest groups?

Ladyfests have no strong and clear organisational structures, but are temporary events run by volunteer activists. Some Ladyfest groups deal with a lack of continuity of activists or only do a Ladyfest once. But organizing a Ladyfest can strengthen queer-feminist activism in the local scene: For example, other groups establish because people met on a Ladyfest and realize the interest on same issues. Or Ladyfest activist have worked in other queer-feminist or political groups before and the experience of a Ladyfest brings them new enthusiasm. A lot of action can follow after a Ladyfest, but it has not to be another Ladyfest.

After all, virtual social networking can only function, when the groups still exist “in real” and act local. Activism still takes place locally, there are rooms and spaces, where groups and people meet and talk to each other. For small and local groups social network software is something that makes them easily connected with groups nationwide or international, but for working and functioning, it is still necessary to have a liable structure and to have access to local resources and infrastructure. The importance of local and face to face networking is not weakened by virtual networking.

I think that virtual networks can not replace a local group, that works continuously and meet up face to face (Hamm 2006). Virtual networking can be an important tool, especially for activists that have not many possibilities for networking with local groups, like the ones from little cities or rural areas.

Regarding feminist debates on counterpublics and the question of accessibility to media and public debates, social network platforms offer much more possibilities for interaction and therefore participation than in the 1980ies (Dackweiler, Holland-Cunz 1991; Warner 2002). Print Media and even Fanzines are a kind of a one way communication that provides possibilities of interaction but less direct. But Social Network platforms do provide information as well as the offer to get involved in an easy way in activism and debates.

Following points sum it up: Social network platforms provide networking and possibilities of interaction, that have become a natural part of every ones life very fast, specially of activist groups. They provide the possibilities going beyond local infrastructure, to participate on nationwide or international scale. Besides these egalitarian possibilities, hierarchies and inequalities between different groups are reproduced in virtual networks, too.

For developing nationwide and international networks and collaboration, for sharing knowledge and resources, virtual networks and social network platforms have become a necessary and important tool. A point of return is not intended and wanted. Especially for queer-feminist activism such as Ladyfests, social network platforms do provide the space for queer-feminist debates and exposure of ideas and theories, for art and aesthetic expression.

These potentials should be used, but it should also be thought about the lack of continuity such 'fast' technologies bring with. There is still a lot of research to be done on this topic.

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