

Introduction

Interpreting the Internet: A Feminist Sociomaterial Approach

In 2016, internet-fueled protest is everywhere. Across South Africa, students have used social media to spark mass protests and ignite a national debate on the right to education, shutting down universities in the process. Black Lives Matter activists in the United States have created hashtags and used “Black Twitter” to reveal the devastating impact of systemic, institutional racism on black and brown bodies. On Facebook and Twitter, immigration advocates circulate pictures, stories, and petitions, seeking just treatment for those whose homes are battle zones in declared and undeclared wars. Around the world, people rely on the internet to decry injustice and demand change.

But there was a time, not very long ago, when digital natives had yet to be born and activist communities were going online for the first, and second, and hundredth time, learning as they went. As they explored this new technology, which emerged simultaneously as a tool to wield and as a place to engage with each other and the world around them, users made and remade the internet in their own image(s).

This book is the story of that mutual development and its impact in a dynamic and complex context: Latin American feminist and queer communities.¹ Whether defying the Catholic Church’s defense of heterosexual marriage and rejection of abortion, calling out neoliberal profiteers for their exploitation of working women and men, or demanding that democratic legislators and voters live up to their constitutions’ declarations of equality and freedom, these diverse communities embrace a



FIGURE 1. International Women's Day commemorative stamp, Mexico (March 8, 1999). Reprinted from Servicio Postal Mexicano.

wide-ranging repertoire of means to confront deep-seated regional hierarchies. For the last two decades, a range of internet-based applications has changed, and sometimes enhanced, this repertoire of activism.

When I first started to wonder about the internet's impact on Latin American feminist activists and organizations in particular, I noticed a striking trend. As the technology spread across the region in the early 1990s, a new use for the typographical "@" symbol cropped up everywhere I looked. Even as activists began to share their *correo* (short for *dirección de correo electrónico*, or email address) in order to increase their connections, they repurposed the all-important @. Instead of typing out the *o/a* used in Spanish words to indicate that both genders were intended—an awkward, but rhetorically crucial, feminist grammatical intervention—*niño/a* (child) became "niñ@"; *ingeniero/a* (engineer) became "ingenier@"; *politico/a* (politician) became "politic@"; *ellos/as* (they) became "ell@s"; and so on. Spanish-speaking feminists interpreted

the @ symbol as symbolic inclusion, a new solution to an old linguistic challenge.

This was far from the original intent. Ray Tomlinson, a U.S. programmer, established the symbol's use in email addresses to indicate the location of a user's server. The @, an accounting or commercial symbol meaning "at a rate of," was readily available on English-language keyboards, handily located above the 2. But @ was seldom needed by Spanish-speaking writers before the advent of email; traveling around Latin America in the early 2000s, I found that cybercafé computers often had a strip of paper glued to their keyboards with instructions on how to type the crucial symbol by using a complex combination of keys.

As the use of email spread across their region, Latin American feminists had good reasons to memorize that combination. The symbol's use in email would enable them to further a regional specialty: extensive networking. But they had also found a symbol which looked to their gender-sensitive eyes like an *a* embedded inside an *o*. The @ wasn't originally intended for feminist use, but that is how they interpreted it in their own vernacular. Because activists were seeking ways to challenge gender-based exclusion, they found what they were looking for literally embedded in the internet.

What I noticed during the initial popularization of the internet among feminist activists illustrated what another decade of observation and conversations would finally teach me. In asking "What is the internet's impact on Latin American feminist communities?" I had been considering only half of the topic. In addition to wondering what the technology was doing to them, I needed to consider what they were doing to the technology. I needed to ask, "How have the internet and feminism changed each other?" Eventually, I came to realize that the internet's significance is determined through use; in this case, the diverse ways in which activists in Latin America have incorporated the internet over time.

This book makes two original contributions to our understanding of the intertwined nature of the internet and society. Empirically, it offers the first in-depth exploration of the way Latin American feminist and some queer communities have interpreted the internet to support their "counterpublics." Counterpublics are the places, spaces, or means through which those pushed to societies' margins develop their identities, construct communities, and formulate strategies for transforming wider publics. Latin American feminist and queer communities, and their regional networks, long predate the internet, but they have always relied on the circulation of alternative media. The internet has both enhanced

and complicated their preexisting practices. Encouraged by a global network of women and men determined to make an internet accessible to all, feminists and LGBT activists have changed—and been changed by—this web connecting all they do. Other regions and other activists have had similar experiences, but Latin America was uniquely positioned to take advantage of the early internet. In no other region of the Global South were so many “early adopting” technically skilled organizations ready and eager to get such deeply regionally connected counterpublics online. This book also considers what has happened over time, as the internet has become entrenched in activist practice.

Conceptually, this book addresses some of our central preoccupations about the internet: Does it change everything? Fall short of fulfilling its promise? Mirror preexisting experience? Does it shift our perceptions, weaken or strengthen our attachments, stimulate or restrict our participation? Around the world, development planners, venture capitalists, teachers, parents, community organizers, elected officials, and even terrorists ponder these questions. Every day, a burgeoning array of news sources, whether digital versions of traditional media or our own Facebook and Twitter feeds, offer reflections, prognostications, or critiques of our digital lives. We are wrestling with the implications of the internet. How can we grasp them? This question consumes change-seekers. Because the two major attributes of the internet—its facilitation of communications and its information distribution—are essential to the work of counterpublics, it seems ideally suited to their endeavors. But how is it helping the lives beyond the screens?

Through an exploration of Latin American feminist and queer, principally lesbian feminist, counterpublics, I advance three interrelated arguments about the nature of the internet and its potential for producing social and political transformation. First, as is true of all technologies, the development of the internet, from creation to deployment, is influenced by social contexts, variable over time and place. Second, the internet in itself offers no guarantee of transformation; as Faith Wilding and María Hernández of the cyberfeminist collective SubRosa warn, “it is foolish to believe that major social, economic, and political issues can be addressed by throwing technology at them.”² Instead, my third contribution is to argue that the internet’s potential depends on the consciousness and creativity with which activists translate it into their own contexts, through adopting, sharing, and deploying it.

In our 2012 interview, Carlos Alvarez, a founder of Wamani, a Buenos Aires-based internet provider and civic capacity-building organization,

attested to the importance of context when he cautioned me that “technological spaces are never different from society.”³ But the argument that technology’s significance depends on use reaches beyond that deterministic equivalence: it tells us, in the words of media studies scholar Liesbet van Zoonen, to take into account not only contexts, but “practices of usage.”⁴ As different people and communities interact with the internet over time, they alter its meaning and (re)shape its structure. Following social theorists Saskia Sassen and Robert Latham,⁵ I call this approach to understanding technology’s meaning to society “sociomaterial”: it incorporates the material practices of technology, or local attempts at interpreting global forces, along with the contexts in which such practices are embedded.

I did not begin this study with a sociomaterial perspective. Instead, I started off in a straightforward social science way: I had a factor, internet technology, whose impact on a political phenomenon, gender- and sexuality-based organizing, I wanted to study. I designed a comparative study of this subject in Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico, and went to talk to over a hundred feminist, women’s,⁶ and LGBT counterpublic organizations, individual activists, and socially motivated computer technicians in 2001–2. I completed a round of research within a framework that held subject and object as separately intelligible. Using these organizations as the primary example, I published research that examined the internet’s impact on civil society in new democracies. I wrote another piece exploring whether the internet had enabled lesbians to address major challenges to their sexuality-based organizing. In this work I advanced claims about the ways in which this technology could assist civic organizations in promoting democratization and diversity. I based these conclusions on the common assumption that we can treat technology and society as two separate phenomena—so that we can look at how one factor affects the other.

Since writing those first publications, however, I have become convinced that, like other technologies, the ever-evolving internet is “constitutively entangled” with society.⁷ As scholars who study science and technology have shown, technology is inseparable from its environment. But this doesn’t mean that society determines technology or is determined by it. Rather, they are intimately related parts of a whole—what has been called an “assemblage” or a “network of actants”⁸—that takes its shape from the relations among humans and nonhuman elements. We normally think and talk about people and technologies as separate from one another, making it difficult to conceive of, conceptualize, and express this relationship. But if we want to grasp the implications of a technology that

each day becomes more profoundly integrated into our lives, we must understand the internet and ourselves as parts of an interconnected web.

In retrospect, I can see why my early research separated technology from society. In my interviews, I heard activists trying to come to grips with something new. They could easily remember life before the internet. Indeed, some of them mainly lived a pre-internet life when I arrived to ask nosy questions about email traffic and website design. But because I followed some activists and organizations over the course of a decade or more, I saw the gradual interpenetration of activism and technology, and realized that, even at the beginning, the processes had interlocked. Talking to and watching Latin American feminists and queer activists as they interpreted the internet through their practices forced me to reject the idea of either techno-causality or social determination. A “cause and effect” model could not capture the mutual and dynamic unfolding between the internet and activism. To understand the meaning of the internet to activist communities meant seeing both sides as an integrated whole.

This sociomaterial approach differs from early feminist theories of the internet, which understood the internet as separate from, and inherently useful to, women. “Cyberfeminists” proposed that the internet ideally suited women’s agency, given its fluid, horizontal, relational nature, and its availability in multiple sites.⁹ Such views assumed that both the internet and women had a given, and fixed, nature, largely ignoring the social construction of the technology and of gender itself. They also neglected the many women who could not access the new technology, or who were effectively embedded within the “integrated circuit” through their work on the assembly lines of digital devices.¹⁰

The next generation of researchers proved more skeptical. They warned that internet technology, like all technology, incorporated dominant ideas about how technology should work—and for whom.¹¹ But they still saw society and technology as separable.

Other scholars have refuted essentialist assumptions about machines and their integration into women’s lives. They emphasize “the medium as well as the embodied experience of and with the medium.”¹² Instead of seeing women and technologies as separate from one another, “as if there was such a thing as a body or a world unmarked and unmediated by technologies,”¹³ they see them as intertwined. The feminist sociomaterial perspective I use in this book acknowledges the shifting entanglements of individuals, including their positions in gender, race, class, and sexual hierarchies, with a technology laced with utopian fantasies and mined by persistent inequalities.

WHY LOOK AT LATIN AMERICAN FEMINIST AND QUEER COUNTERPUBLICS?

This book traces the evolution of Latin American feminist and queer counterpublics, from close to the beginning of the internet through the advent of social media, to show how on- and offline worlds have merged and what that demonstrates about the social relations of technology. Such insights could come from focusing on many different communities. But Latin American feminist and queer counterpublics are ideal sites for the evaluation of global trends in digitally enhanced activism. Like activists in other world regions, they have responded to exclusionary social hierarchies and political institutions, as well as exploitative economic models, by constructing counterpublics at local and national levels. But nowhere else have activists developed such a vibrant *regional* community in response to shared challenges, communicating through the widely shared language of Spanish, as well as Portuguese in the case of Brazil.¹⁴ Moreover, these communities are committed to inclusion. Latin American feminists have valiantly, though not always successfully, attempted to work across deep-seated divisions of ideology, geography, class, ethnicity, race, sexuality, and even gender itself. Since the 1980s, LGBT communities have also organized to demand that their lives and rights be recognized by states and societies. These counterpublics have seized the opportunities seemingly afforded by the internet, in many cases becoming early adopters. Building on their histories of struggle, they have incorporated new technologies to strengthen their communities and achieve world-renowned successes in political representation, legal reform, and identity recognition.

Feminists' mere existence, let alone their goals, have long stirred controversy in Latin American societies.¹⁵ Powerful politicians and threatened patriarchs have belittled, ignored, and punished them for their outspokenness. Pastors have railed, and rallied their followers, against them. Hierarchies that subordinate women and LGBT people structure Latin American society and politics, contributing to a set of norms that cross national boundaries. The historic dominance of the Catholic Church has embedded traditional Catholic ideals in society. In particular, patriarchal heteronormativity, or the privileging of male power and heterosexual gender relations, anchors social, political, and even economic institutions. This has made it difficult for women to challenge Catholic gender roles, particularly women's primary identification as devout mothers. In fact, in the first half of the twentieth century, political

parties judged whether to support women's suffrage on the basis of party leaders' perceptions of women's fidelity to the interests, if not the instructions, of the Catholic Church. Until the late twentieth century, LGBT communities also faced denigration because their sexuality or gender identity seemed to violate the social order.

Gender and sexuality are far from being the only social relations of power structuring this region. Although *mestizaje* or racial mixing is a hallmark of Latin American countries, racial hierarchies generally privilege people with lighter skin over those with darker, presumed to be a sign of African heritage or indigenous ancestry. Such hierarchies overlap perniciously with those of class; Latin America is notorious for having the worst economic inequality in the world. School systems, economic opportunities, urban development and the like reflect these relations of power. The region's social rankings relegate poor Afro-Latin and indigenous women to the bottom, and generally stack the deck against those without gender, racial, sexual, or class privilege.

Not surprisingly, political organization has most often reinforced social hierarchies. Pendulum swings between authoritarian and democratic politics, with periodic attempts at revolutionary transformation, have alternately repressed and opened space for citizen incorporation. Paradoxically, women's political inclusion has not always tracked larger shifts. During the worst periods of political repression in the 1970s and 1980s, Latin American military and military-backed governments, under the banners of national security and anticommunism, often violently repressed all manner of social organizing. But from Argentina to Guatemala, mothers emerged as the backbone of opposition movements as they denounced that their sons and daughters had been kidnapped, tortured, and murdered by their governments.¹⁶ However, with the return of democratic politics, women found themselves sidelined and their demands for full participation in political life and leadership positions brushed aside. This has also been true in more radical contexts: despite having leading roles in revolutionary struggles in Cuba and Nicaragua, radical women were subsequently organized in support of the state, rather than allowed to defend their own interests.¹⁷ And early LGBT activists faced similar demands and challenges.¹⁸ Although they were stalwart members of leftist parties, their sexuality was judged as taboo, contrary to "revolutionary morality." This attitude was reflected in the homophobic policies and practices of the early revolutionary regimes in Cuba and Nicaragua. Access to Latin American political institutions was limited on the basis of gender and sexuality.

Often but not always in tandem with political transitions, shifting regional models have also conditioned opportunities on the basis of gender. The neoliberal export orientation of the late twentieth century led to the creation of jobs disproportionately filled by women, such as in the manufacturing, processing, or assembly plants known as *maquiladoras*.¹⁹ But as public social service provision weakened or disappeared under the neoliberal dictate of “shrinking the state,” low-income women took up the slack in expanded responsibilities for family and community survival.²⁰ Even after left-leaning governments rose to power in the early twenty-first century’s “pink tide,” antipoverty programs continued to rely heavily on women to ensure their families’ well-being.²¹ Both market-oriented and state-led economic models have been based on the exploitation of women’s productive and reproductive labor.

To confront the shifting, multiple, and overlapping sources of repression, marginalization, and dependence that they have faced, women have constructed a wide array of historical and contemporary counterpublics. Unlike the male-dominated institutions in wider society, these are communities where women could develop and share their own strategies for social change. A century ago, educated women circulated their ideas in their own journals, held feminist literary salons, and, eventually, built suffrage organizations.²² By the 1970s, women in left-wing parties and movements debated whether to withdraw from or engage with these male-dominated efforts. Some chose to create feminist organizations as a platform from which to critique capitalist patriarchy and strategize to achieve women’s liberation and equality with men. Others opted to engage in “double militancy,” fighting from the inside to put gender issues on the agenda. Despite their differences, all agreed that their natural constituency were the poor and working-class, and often the indigenous or Afro-descendant, women who made up the majority of female Latin Americans. However, they were not waiting to be recruited. Instead, many were fighting their own battles, whether for improved state services or in defense of their cultures, families and communities against repressive regimes. They often did so by claiming, instead of rejecting, their traditional roles as mothers. Over the next twenty years, self-identified women’s organizations and movements grew in strength and numbers, informed by—but always in uneasy tension with—the feminist ideals and organizing principles of middle- and upper-class white and *mestiza* women.²³ Throughout the twentieth century, Latin American women created a variety of counterpublics that reflected their distinct interests.

The region-wide transitions to liberal democracy and neoliberal economics beginning in the 1980s spurred activists to develop—and debate—new approaches to women’s empowerment. Some feminists with educational and class privilege formed nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) whose aim was to influence state policies on issues such as economic development, violence against women, and the promotion of women’s political leadership.²⁴ But the autonomy of these NGOs could be curtailed by the priorities of their funding agencies, whether these were international philanthropies or governmental ministries. Moreover, feminists in NGOs began working with state bureaucracies just as they were beginning to shed their responsibilities for social welfare and economic growth as demanded by neoliberal models. As a result, feminists who chose not to engage with state institutions criticized those who did as being a “gender technocracy” in support of “global neoliberal patriarchy” by teaching poor and working-class women how to cope with, rather than oppose, austerity measures.²⁵ The division between the self-proclaimed *autonomas* (autonomous ones), who continued to work in grassroots organizing, and those they identified as *institucionalizadas* (institutionalized ones), who sought change through formal institutions, marked a painful rending of feminist energies.

But despite their many differences, feminist and women’s organizations have maintained contact, not only coming together in local and national counterpublics, but also expanding and developing regional counterpublics through which to contemplate their common challenges and to debate solutions. One of the most notable spaces for counterpublic work is the Latin American and Caribbean Feminist *Encuentros* (encounters) that began in 1981. These unique regional meetings provide multiple ways for activists to interact around a shifting agenda of regional preoccupations, becoming “key transnational arenas where Latin America-specific feminist identities and strategies have been constituted and contested.”²⁶ In turn, these meetings have nurtured and inspired thematic and identitarian networks focused on issues such as reproductive rights, Afro-Latin identity, and lesbian feminism. Through these opportunities, broadcast by alternative media, women have created productive confluences, whether around gender-specific issues such as violence against women, or more general challenges such as the detrimental impact of exploitative economic development on their families, communities, and ancestral lands. Coalition building has emerged as a central strategy, as it enables collaboration without demanding comprehensive political alignment. Considerably prior to the internet’s

arrival, Latin American feminist communities developed and expanded their identities and strategies for change. They were poised to take advantage of a technology in many ways geared toward enhancing networks.

Queer activists have joined feminists in seeking their own liberation and acceptance. Faced with social denigration, rejection, and outright repression by many of the same forces as feminists, they also seized the opportunity of democratization to build counterpublics.²⁷ Often marginalized in both gay male-dominated and straight-feminist arenas, lesbian feminists began independent organizing by the 1980s, often forming the most radical of feminist groups.²⁸ The HIV/AIDS crisis of the late 1980s resulted in some rapprochement between mixed-gender groups and lesbian feminists, as well as more state support for LGBT efforts. Transgender people have also established their own organizations and collaborated in more general LGBT efforts. Pride parades, the most outward manifestation of queer counterpublics, have reached epic proportions in places like São Paulo, Brazil, the home to the world's largest parade; given rise to anti-assimilation countermarches by more radical activists in Buenos Aires, Argentina; and include a yearly thousands-strong lesbian march through the center of Mexico City. Thanks to the growth and development of their counterpublics, LGBT and feminist activists were able to develop coalitions around issues of gender and sexuality.²⁹ As the internet spread across the region, they eagerly incorporated it to undergird their efforts.

Although their internet access now depends on the commercialization that has helped to make Latin America the developing world region with the highest percentage of internet users,³⁰ some in these communities were early adopters. Given the many forms of exclusion they faced, they had already built alternative means of communication and organization and were eager for new tools to support their counterpublic work. Such tools were extended to them by progressive technology activists such as the men and women of the international Association for Progressive Communications, whose goal was to democratize digital access and provide internet training across the developing world. Latin America was a central hub of this activity. From the early 1990s, these technologists made it possible for activists to incorporate the resources of the internet in order to achieve their goals for social change.

Through their increasingly internet-enhanced coalitions, the region's vibrant, deeply networked counterpublics have achieved world-renowned policy gains. Although reproductive autonomy remains largely out of

reach, with abortion restricted or prohibited nearly everywhere, feminist demands for candidate quota legislation have translated into the highest regional average of women in national parliaments, currently at 27 percent.³¹ Thanks to collaborative, intensive lobbying, Latin America leads the world in regional and national legislation outlawing violence against women.³² Savvy strategizing by LGBT organizations has also been remarkably effective.³³ A majority of Latin American countries now ban discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, and a third do so on the basis of gender identity or expression. Same-sex marriage has been legislated in Mexico City, Uruguay, and Argentina, and several countries have approved some of the most progressive gender-identity recognition policies anywhere in the world. Drawing on their history, their diversity, and their ability to work on a national and even regional scale, feminists and queers in Latin America have demanded and received recognition and support from varied sources of power.

WHY COUNTERPUBLICS?

Given the internet's potential for enhancing gender- and sexuality-based activism, a study of Latin American feminist and queer counterpublics provides an excellent opportunity to consider the interconnection of technology and society. But why focus on feminist and queer counterpublics, rather than their actions in the shared space of the so-called "public sphere"?

From its beginnings, users and analysts alike declared the internet the ideal arena for widespread, egalitarian participation, a sphere of unfettered exchange made possible by its (relatively) low cost and widespread availability. Cyberoptimists channeled social theorist Jürgen Habermas' utopian vision of a universal public sphere, free from the effects of societal inequalities, where every individual has the same standing to express herself and be heard.³⁴ Habermas modeled his vision of this ideal on nineteenth-century European civic society, where vigorous debate took place in public squares and coffeehouses and was widely transmitted by a vibrant print culture.³⁵ Many have hoped that, in the move from "coffeehouse to . . . cyber café,"³⁶ the internet could (re)construct the Habermasian ideal by providing both a place and a means for free expression, agenda-setting, debate, and discussion outside formal political channels, that would create a truly public opinion.³⁷ The kinds of conversations made possible through internet-based technology would form, even if slowly, the conditions for the emergence of a public sphere.³⁸

As this book shows, inclusive, widespread access and participation was, in fact, a goal of the early developers of the internet. But it has evolved to reflect real-world hierarchies instead of fundamentally changing the dynamics of public communication. Some of those hierarchies are embedded in the institutions of the state and the market. States can put up “digital gates,” ranging from basic filtering or blocking techniques to real-time surveillance.³⁹ Corporations seeking to commodify users’ information have enclosed the so-called “internet commons”⁴⁰ by offering a devil’s bargain: trading access to global networks for individual privacy.⁴¹ In the Global South, private owners who have purchased formerly state-run telecommunications have often concentrated telephone coverage and services in wealthy and urban areas. Neither the state nor the market is invested in open access.

Other hierarchies embedded in the internet reflect seemingly inescapable social relations of power. Internet-based technology has (re)produced and (re)configured offline inequalities: as gender and communications scholar Jenny Sundén argued about the early internet, the “material body marked by gender, race and class not only forms the physical ground for the cyberspace traveler, but is also clearly introduced and reproduced in the new electronic space it inhabits.”⁴² Racial inequalities permeate the online, just as they do the offline, world. The powerful idea of a “digital divide,” a phrase often used to evoke global inequalities in internet use, was first introduced in a 1995 study discussing the limitations that African Americans faced in accessing the technology. Communications scholar Jessie Daniels argues that such a notion takes “whiteness as normative,”⁴³ putting racial minorities on the “wrong side” of the divide. Development practitioners borrowed the concept to reference how predominantly poor, darker-skinned people around the world were also stuck across a chasm, implicitly or explicitly suggesting their need for rescue by wealthier, whiter digital natives. Deeply raced understandings of power are also implanted deep in hardware—such as “master and slave” devices (where the “master” has control over the actions of the “slave”)—as well as in software, including the “white hand pointer” used by some applications.⁴⁴ Race and media analyst Lisa Nakamura’s work shows that while users can produce new race-based meaning through the visual culture of the internet, from Instant Messenger icons to YouTube videos, these applications remain embedded in broader racial hierarchies.⁴⁵ Since every point of the technological trajectory, from development through distribution, reflects such hierarchies, substantial obstacles remain to achieving the internet’s promise of becoming a sphere of participation open to all.

Not only race, but also economic relations power the internet. The development and distribution of the physical infrastructure that brings us the internet embed worker exploitation, as does much of the content we see. Those who make chips, screens, mice, hard drives, smart phones, and the like labor under difficult circumstances, and are often forbidden to organize for better working conditions.⁴⁶ The information age also depends on “produser” (producer-user) collaboration⁴⁷—that is, unpaid contribution of both data and analysis through social media—whether through reviews on product websites or volunteer writers on sports, politics, and activist Facebook pages, Twitter feeds, and blogs. Today’s internet thrives because of low-cost, if not unpaid, labor.

Sexual relations of power also help to determine access to the internet. Again and again, proposed measures to regulate who can gain access to the internet, what they can see, and how they can do so reflect normative assumptions about sexuality. Powerful decision makers use the excuse of protecting children against sexual predators in chat rooms and sexualized content on websites and blogs to insist on state control over sexuality-related resources. They find support for this interpretation of the internet from influential conservative, often religious organizations,⁴⁸ who share their understanding of and goals for society. While there is a real need to guard against sexual predators online, queer people can find their issues or interests blocked by heterosexist screening algorithms and politicians who rely on patriarchal and heteronormative narratives to determine what is appropriate for social circulation.⁴⁹

Not only state control, but also market forces pose obstacles to the internet-mediated expressions of queer identity. Jan Moolman, the senior project coordinator for the international internet-focused Women’s Rights Programme, argues that “one of the biggest transformative powers of the internet was the potential to be free from having . . . identity regulated, including gender identity and sexuality.”⁵⁰ But identity exploration is not profitable for firms seeking to extract revenue from personal information, as illustrated by Facebook’s insistence that transpeople use their legal, rather than chosen, names.⁵¹ For those for whom “coming out” online is not an option, or who wish to choose their own online identities, anonymity or pseudonymity is a benefit challenged by identity commodification.

Finally, women and queers face serious aggression online, where threats and harassment have even led to physical assault. Individuals and groups attempt to exert control over girls, women, and queers, using a barrage of digital means to hound them about the way they look, the stories they tell, and the genders they subvert. Misogynistic

hackers—or others seeking to shame or humiliate—break into accounts and steal intimate photos and videos. Those brave enough to explore issues of gender and sexuality online, whether through advocacy or research, face targeted abuse. Brutal harassment, ranging from sexist, homophobic, or transphobic comments to death threats, have forced some to back away from their public work or even to go into hiding.⁵² And recipients of virtual abuse have even killed themselves to stop the all-too-real pain.⁵³ The internet can be a very dangerous neighborhood.

The deep-seated inequalities that permeate every aspect of the digital world make it a difficult and often discriminatory arena for public interaction, yet the internet still holds great potential for alternative counterpublics. Critical theorist Nancy Fraser articulated this concept in a critique of Habermas's ideal model of the public sphere: nineteenth-century European civic society. Though Habermas presented it as a place that invited universal participation and free expression, Fraser argued instead that the public sphere was where materialistic, conventional middle-class men could entrench their own power. She concluded that only under conditions of full equality could such an egalitarian sphere exist. Living in a world that clearly failed to provide such conditions, "members of subordinated social groups—women, workers, peoples of color, and gays and lesbians—have repeatedly found it advantageous to constitute alternative publics"⁵⁴ because these counterpublics enable community empowerment outside wider publics.

Fraser singled out gender inequality as a motivation for, and illustration of, counterpublic construction. She pointed to the "late-twentieth century U.S. feminist" community, which generated a wide range of artistic, academic, and political production through which they conceived and circulated language that captured women's experience of subordination, from "sexism" to "the double shift." Using their own tools, women built their own communities and created pathways to broader publics.⁵⁵ Although Fraser's illustration of the U.S. feminist counterpublic suggests that they are a national phenomenon, they are not limited to the national level. They exist wherever people meet to contest their subordination through individual and community growth. This book focuses on national and transnational (particularly regional) counterpublics, but these in turn depend on efforts at the local level. Latin American feminists and queer activists have long histories of carving out spaces in which they come together to figure out who they are, what they stand for, and how they can stand together to face their common sources of oppression. They are exceptionally experienced counterpublic constructors.

Why focus on counterpublics instead of social movements, the more familiar term for sustained collective challenges to the social order? Both counterpublics and social movements are vehicles through which those who have recognized their exclusion seek to challenge it. But while social movements forcibly assert their dreams, desires, and demands in wider publics and challenge those with power, counterpublics serve as arenas for internal development and debate, where movement participants articulate their identities, build their communities, and hone their strategies. Counterpublics undergird movements' emergence and expansion, as "spaces of withdrawal and regroupment" as well as "training grounds for agitational activities directed towards wider publics."⁵⁶ As such, they are the places to look in order to see how social transformation happens from the inside out.

As for what to look at inside counterpublics, alternative media is fundamental. Although Fraser's conceptualization predated the popularization of the internet, she argued that the currency, so to speak, of counterpublics is communication: in her words, these are "discursive" arenas. To articulate their ideas, members of counterpublics rely on what media theorist Clemencia Rodríguez calls "citizens' media," the "communication spaces where citizens can learn to manipulate their own languages, codes, signs, and symbols, empowering them to name the world in their own terms."⁵⁷ The internet offers one such communicative space: sociologist Ann Travers makes the case that feminists and other progressives "occupy public space in a way that is unprecedented offline," given the new ways they can construct "parallel publics."⁵⁸ Offline, as Fraser described, women create separate spaces where they build their skills, confidence, and solidarity. Online, feminists also construct their own alternatives to the exclusionary public sphere. This is particularly important for women who may be unable to access the (physical) public, due to social or physical constraints, meaning that the internet can augment or transform the way activists engage the world on their own terms. Since the late 1990s, the internet has increasingly become the primary communications conduit of feminist and queer counterpublics. As I will show, activists have widened their counterpublics through the internet in ways that have brought them new resources and ideas as well as new sources of discord and inequality.

The internet holds the potential for buttressing the three central characteristics of a counterpublic, according to media studies theorist Lincoln Dahlberg: building identities, creating community based on new ways of thinking, and strategizing for change. First, the internet provides a space

where people who cannot be heard (or, I would add, seen) in wider publics come together to explore who they are. Second, its “interactivity and reach” helps communities dispersed in time and space to articulate alternative discourses. Finally, the internet enables counterpublics to contest dominant, mainstream beliefs.⁵⁹ Given these contributions, existing counterpublics have integrated the internet, even as new counterpublics have cropped up largely within its confines. Jac sm Kee, a prominent feminist internet policy advocate, affirmed the internet’s potential for those “who’ve had difficulty accessing spaces in general” because it provides a space to “articulate a sense of self. Like who am I in this space? Who am I in relation to you? Who are we in relation to this larger world that we are occupying, and who do we want to be?”⁶⁰ The internet simultaneously becomes a counterpublic space and a means for a counterpublic development when it enables people to explore who they are, who else shares their values, and what it is that “we want to be” to larger publics.

INTERPRETING INTERNET PRACTICES IN LATIN AMERICAN COUNTERPUBLICS

Effective integration of the internet by counterpublics depends heavily on social contexts. Dahlberg reminds us that technology is both “socially constituted and constituting,” thus requiring “mutual constitution analysis.”⁶¹ Although careful observers of technology argue that this has ever been the case, the extensive spread of internet-based media makes it a prime area in which to see and explain—to interpret—how society and technology affect one another.

Because the social and material cannot be separated, they must be examined together. To do that with respect to Latin American feminist and queer counterpublics, I am inspired by a sociomaterial approach called “information ecology analysis,” as conceptualized by Bonnie Nardi and Vicki O’Day.⁶² This analysis focuses on the interactions among the people, values, practices, and technology of a given environment. Its central insight is to show that the values of social communities inform technological practices, rather than practices emerging from static technological attributes that somehow inevitably guide users to a predetermined end. This approach centers the preexisting social environment—where the values are formed—incorporating why communities do what they do with technology, as well as how they do it. As in the ecologies of the natural world, technological developments are facilitated or mediated by those who make up an influential “keystone species.” These are the

people who have an outsized impact on their communities due to their ability to introduce new information technologies to their communities.

Counterpublics shape their own information ecologies. As Nardi and O'Day explain, an ecology is a “lively . . . intensely social place” where technology and human relationships evolve together under the guidance of a keystone species. As a result, the participants in the ecology “construct the identities of their technologies through the rhythms and patterns of their use.”⁶³ This approach underscores the importance of context to counterpublics’ interpretation of technologies such as the internet. A given interpretation cannot be predicted from the internet’s “affordances,” like its low cost and rapid transmission from one to many. Instead, the technology’s attributes evolve depending on the values and practices of a given community. In other words, the internet offers *contextual* affordances. Technological advances affect and mold counterpublic work, but users also shape the medium in unexpected and creative ways.

One of my contributions to the study of practice is not only to analyze the counterpublics I have learned from, but also to take into account how they change over time. Because I was able to talk to activists near the dawn of their time online, I observed a unique period. The experimental early days of technology feature utopian dreams and messy practicalities.⁶⁴ This introductory period is a “special historical occasion,” according to media theorist Carolyn Marvin, “when patterns anchored in older media that have provided the stable currency of social exchange are reexamined, challenged, and defended.”⁶⁵ This reexamination can be hard to access once the new media has become part of the communicative fabric. In addition to capturing the early experimentation, I was able to interview many of the same people up to a decade later, tracking what had happened to their dreams and practicalities as the internet permeated their lives and work. Although an ever-accelerating explosion of and prognostication about internet-based technology makes it impossible to analyze every new dynamic, chronicling the evolution of practices from near their beginning may offer insight into their future. It also offers the opportunity to consider whether new generations of technology bring fundamental changes.

To understand these activists’ internet practices and their changes over time, I have followed the multi-sited feminist sociomaterial methods advocated by Kristine Blair, Radhika Gajjala, and Christine Tulley, who argue that to understand the way women use the internet, ethnographic work must be done in “online and off-line” spaces, taking into account the relevant political, economic and social contexts in which technology

has, or has not, become available.⁶⁶ While those studying “purely” online phenomena are at pains to justify their work as effectively embodied, that is, still anchored to offline phenomena and people,⁶⁷ the place where I focus, at the intersection of activism and technology, is rooted in offline experience. Many of the counterpublic organizations I study preexisted the internet, and they flourish or fade in real time. To interpret their experiences with the technology, I traveled to talk to them in Latin America, while also following their digital trails across the web and social media.

Although I focus in this book on regional communities, given the many parallels in feminist and queer reality across Latin America, these are, of course, grounded in national experiences. In particular, I have observed practices within feminist and queer counterpublics in Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico. I chose these three countries because of the ways that technology and activist communities developed there. They had the greatest numbers of internet users in the region when I began my study at the beginning of the 2000s.⁶⁸ And underneath those numbers was a little-known history of the internet: in all three, social justice-oriented technicians attempted to ensure that some people on society’s margins would be in the center of this new media environment. Moreover, a long history of discrimination had inspired feminists to create activist counterpublics, from the earliest production and distribution of periodicals by and for women in the nineteenth century through the tumultuous years of late twentieth-century democratization and beyond. Building alongside feminist activism, queer counterpublics were becoming more visible toward the end of the century. The intersection of the internet and counterpublics provided a complex landscape to survey. I went to talk to activists, particularly those inside the organizations that form the counterpublic architecture, about what it looked like on the ground.

In order to grasp the relevance of email, distribution lists, websites, Facebook pages, and other applications to these organizations, I conducted 125 interviews with feminist, women’s, and LGBT advocates, along with the technicians who facilitated their access to digital platforms, in workplaces, cafés, or other public spaces, and in homes. Sometimes we would sit next to their computers, as they patiently put off answering an avalanche of email, or in later years, not-so-surreptitiously checked texts on their smart phones. In my early visits I was generally received by the director or founder of an organization; a decade later I was often directed to the staff member tasked with responsibility for social media. My initial collection of interviews (conducted in 2001–2) was divided evenly: thirty-two in Mexico and thirty-four each

in Argentina and Brazil. I began all the interviews with the same set of survey questions, although my interviewees often shared their most profound insights during the digressions prompted by open-ended questions. To explore changes over time, particularly with respect to the rise of social media, I returned to the (offline) field sites between 2009 and 2013 for follow-up interviews with a quarter of the original interviewees. The early and later interviews helped me to estimate the extent to which the internet was changing, and being reinterpreted by, the organizations and people who made counterpublics possible.

Given the vast array of people working to contest gender- or sexuality-based inequality in these countries—living in small villages and capital cities, organized in collectives and nongovernmental organizations, relying on their own resources and external support—I sought to capture that heterogeneity. Because technologies map over preexisting sources of inequality such as class and race, I could not rely only on prominent groups located in capital cities if I hoped to gain a broad picture of internet interaction. I had to visit a wide variety of organizations. To find them, I relied on my own and colleagues' contacts; listings from the internet service providers run by community-minded technicians; and "snowball sampling," that is, asking interviewees for references to others with whom I should talk. Relying on two essential criteria for selection—that my interviewees had an email address and a focus on gender or sexuality in their counterpublic work—I cast a wide net.

This approach provided me with a highly diverse set of observations in terms of geographic location, years of experience, scope, and resources. The interviewees not only represented three different countries, but twenty-one different cities. In each country, I spoke with activists working in the major cities (Mexico City, Buenos Aires, Rio de Janeiro, and São Paulo), and in smaller cities or towns (such as Comitán, Jujuy, and Olinda). Forty percent of the organizations had been active for ten years or less; 49 percent between eleven and twenty years; and 11 percent between twenty-one and forty years. Fifty-five percent had fewer than ten staff members; 22 percent between eleven and twenty; and 12 percent between twenty-one and fifty. Three groups had between sixty-four and four hundred members. In addition, seven networks brought together between 8 and 215 groups. Forty-two of the groups received financial support from their own governments and six from other national funders; forty-one from U.S. foundations and twelve from U.S. nonprofits; thirty-four from European governments and organizations; thirteen from UN-

related organizations or agencies; and six from the Inter-American Development Bank.⁶⁹ Eleven had no funding at all, and only two received membership dues. Other sources of income included payment for services or publications and personal resources (i.e., salary from other employment). Although it would have been impossible to select a set of interviewees that would provide an exact mirror of the extremely varied landscape of counterpublic organizations in the three countries, the various axes of diversity in my sample helped to make it representative.

While the organizations' objectives varied widely, all focused in some way on the feminist goal to contest and transform gender-based relations of power and/or the related queer goal to contest and transform those based on sexuality. Of course, this is quite a broad category! In my sampling, it included these among other subjects: women's rights and leadership; reproductive and sexual health and rights; violence against women and intrafamilial violence; women's access to microcredit and small business development; feminist communications, feminist theory, and cyberfeminism; Afro-Brazilian women, indigenous women, and racism; lesbianism, homosexuality, and sexuality; and paternity, masculinity, and sexism. To achieve their goals, the groups carried out a diverse array of activities, ranging from consciousness raising, to consulting, to political advocacy. They ran bookstores, community centers, and archives, and provided services, training, and evaluation. They also wrote and distributed research and analysis in print and electronic form. The organizations worked at various political levels: 23 percent identified as local organizations, 15 percent as functioning at the state level, 16 percent at the national level, 16 percent at both local and national levels, 21 percent at national and international levels, and 9 percent at all three. That they pursued a wide range of goals, employed a great variety of actions, and occupied a swath of the political spectrum enabled me to gain insight into the diverse character of regional counterpublic activity.

Although the interviews are my primary source of data and analysis, I also studied online evidence in order to enhance my understanding of counterpublics' interaction with the internet. Besides listening to people's stories, I looked at what they were writing on websites and distribution lists, blogs, and Facebook posts. And sometimes, I found myself scanning the bounced-back email messages, broken hyperlinks, missing websites, and stalled social media efforts where digital trails disappeared. Because internet technology gains its meaning through use, its departure also tells a story worth listening to.

BOOK ORGANIZATION

This book interprets how Latin American feminist and queer counterpublics have changed and been changed by the internet. I approach this mutual constitutive analysis by incorporating the contexts in which these counterpublics have developed, which are often regional and global as well as local and national. I start by grounding the account of this mutual development in the rich history of Latin American feminist counterpublics, and explain how they have been nurtured by long-standing alternative media production. I then move up to the global level to tell the little-known story of how women and men with a vision of an internet open to all invented and shared technology in order to create counterpublic construction and impact. With both the regional counterpublic and global technological context in place, I move on to analyze what the encounter with and development of that technology has meant for Latin American feminist and some queer counterpublic organizations. I then narrow the focus to consider an application that has been a fundamental part of the regional digital architecture, the distribution list, and its meaning to Argentine feminists. The final chapter explores the ramifications of internet incorporation for privacy and visibility in Latin American lesbian feminist communities. Together, these chapters constitute a complex sociomaterial analysis of the ways in which counterpublics have built identity, created community, and struggled for social transformation before, during, and after the inception of the internet.

Chapter 1 traces the historical outlines of Latin American feminist counterpublics. Through their publications and face-to-face meetings, activists during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and their extraregional allies, developed strategies to name and claim women's rights long before the advent of the internet. Their work served as a model for the explosion of activism beginning in the 1970s, when new regional publications enriched and inspired an unprecedented, and globally unreplicated, counterpublic space, that of the Latin American and Caribbean feminist "encounters." The chapter then profiles two global communication projects in which Latin American counterpublics were embedded, and ends with an analysis of the very first computer-mediated project to promote women's rights at an international venue.

Chapter 2 turns to the story of how social justice-oriented web enthusiasts built the internet as we know it today—a network of networks—because they wanted to ensure access for progressive communities around the world. Their extension of the internet to activists and

advocates while the internet itself was taking shape presents a seemingly unique case in the history of technology. Those seeking to change the world were offered a place at the front of the line by a keystone species looking to transform society through technology. Within this global project, feminist communication activists carved out a space for women's organizing, providing the material basis for their work. From their early efforts to today, such activists have contested the gendering of internet technology as the province of men. In doing so, they have also subverted the West's domination over the internet by opening spaces for women from the Global South, particularly Latin America, to create their own counterpublics.

Chapter 3 returns to Latin America to explore how the architects of today's vibrant counterpublics—feminist, women's, and queer organizations in Argentina, Mexico, and Brazil—have integrated the internet to support their goals of inclusion, community building, and strategizing for social change. It focuses on the early encounters between counterpublic organizations and internet applications to capture that “special historical occasion” of experimentation, exultation, and confusion, but also incorporates the advent of social media. Activists have struggled to confront how class, ethnic, and racial inequalities, as well as workloads, are exacerbated by a new technology. Nevertheless, they have linked chains of access across their own digital divides; built community on the basis of low-cost services; and made an impact on national and international politics using and transforming a range of applications.

Chapter 4 takes a deeper look at the way in which a particular community of activists transformed a particular internet application, the distribution list, into a vibrant online counterpublic. It profiles one of the region's longest-lasting national feminist lists: RIMA, the Red Informativa de Mujeres de Argentina (Women's Information Network of Argentina). Large and diverse, it has boasted up to fifteen hundred subscribers; has included members from every Argentine province, all South American countries, and beyond; and incorporates women from many walks of life who espouse different political ideologies. The chapter analyzes how the values of RIMA's information ecology, which were developed through preexisting national feminist counterpublic spaces, inform their online practices. Together, “Rimeras” have built a counterpublic that encourages personal and community growth, enables debates, and undergirds campaigns for social change. Through their contested moderation, evolving list policies, and negotiated user demands, they have fashioned a digital counterpublic.

Chapter 5 turns to regional counterpublics that count as members some of RIMA's constituents, but have their own distinct dynamics: that of lesbian feminism. As is true of the RIMA ecology, Latin American lesbian feminist internet practices reflect their own circumstances and values. These have led them to focus their counterpublic work with internet applications on privacy and visibility. They need a place for their private life, to find each other and build community away from the threat of violence and rejection that still, despite significant changes in their legal status, characterizes their daily existence. Yet they also need support for lesbian visibility, to confront exclusion, bringing the fact of their existence and their demands for the worlds in which they want to live to larger publics. In doing so, they have also reinterpreted internet applications toward their own ends, such as through the innovative project of a blog-based archive of lesbian history. They have integrated the internet in order to turn it into a space of private grappling with public issues as well as a platform on which to articulate private issues to heighten public awareness.

In chapters 2 through 5 I deepen the sociomaterial analysis by exploring the three constituent layers of the internet: physical, logical, and content. The physical layer refers to the hardware through which people access the internet—computers, phones, or other devices—in addition to other elements of material access, such as cables, modems, wireless transmitters, and servers. The logical layer contains software, operating systems, “apps,” and so on, or the various “ways of translating human meaning into something that machines can transmit, store, or compute.”⁷⁰ Finally, the content layer is just that: the content that people transmit through the physical layer by means of the logical layer.

I use this disaggregation to show that the weaving together of society and technology happens in all three layers. Most social studies of the internet tend to focus on the physical layer, for example the issue of the digital divide, or the ways in which traditional sources of inequality, such as class and gender, can lead to uneven access to the “tools.” Some examine the content layer, such as the transmission of racist hate speech, pornography, and “slut shaming.” Yet the logical layer, programmed by human hands, also reflects distinct goals, values, and biases. Will software be available to anyone (open source) or protected by copyright (proprietary)? Are assumed audiences wide or narrow? What might people want their avatars to look like or be able to do? What kinds of boundaries are embedded in interactive applications? Social hierarchies are not the only values embedded in the distinct layers; so are demo-

cratic aspirations. And these values change through user appropriation and re-signification. Latin American feminist and queer counterpublics, and the larger counterpublics in which they are embedded, demonstrate such adoption and meaning-making in their own contexts.

Why the “internet,” Rather Than the “Internet”?

Although it is just now (2016) becoming widely accepted, the choice I have made throughout this book to write internet with a lower-case *i* merits a brief explanation. I am following in others’ footsteps. Back in 2002, Joseph Turow, a professor at the Annenberg School of Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, drew the attention of the *New York Times* for his decision to drop the upper-case *I* in his book on families and the internet. Well over a decade ago, he argued that “it’s part of the everyday universe,” common as air and water. And because it was already so common, he believed it was not “private” or “brand-name”: “at least philosophically, [it] should not be owned by anyone.”⁷¹ Although he did not convince the U.S. newspaper of record to change its house style, other publications have changed theirs. In 2004, the magazine *Wired* dropped the upper case *I* in order “to put into perspective what the internet is: another medium for delivering and receiving information.” However, it hastened to offer historical perspective on this most recently developed medium: “That it transformed human communication is beyond dispute. But no more so than moveable type did in its day. Or the radio. Or television.”⁷² Given its centrality to communication, the internet should no longer be regarded as a proper noun. Indeed, as this book was sent to the press, the Associated Press announced that “internet” had become a generic term, and that the AP, too, would no longer write it with the capital letter.

Hewing to the *Wired* side, this book considers the internet to be a medium of communication, like the radio or television. After all, my central argument is that the internet is inseparable from social processes—like the radio, television, or, for that matter, moveable type. But, like Turow, I acknowledge that the extent to which it has become embedded in daily life provides yet another reason to deprive it of its capital letter, even as I insist that its definition is open to interpretation.

