

Introduction: (Re)Writing Gender in Internet Histories

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Abstract

This special issue aims to illuminate women's contributions throughout history by using gender as a critical lens in internet historiography and challenging the dominance of male-centered narratives. In the introduction, we contextualize the socio-cultural moment in which this issue was conceived and outline its dual focus. First, we reconstruct women's contributions to the history of the Internet. Second, we examine gender identity and the role of LGBTQ+ communities within this history. Our approach is guided by two perspectives: understanding gender identity as a site of political mobilization and situating the Internet within the broader digital world. We also advocate for future directions that emphasize decolonizing and expanding Internet historiography.

Keywords: gender, Internet/Web history, women, LGBTQ+ communities, feminism, Internet Historiography, decolonizing

This special issue was inspired by a critical moment in history: the intersection of rapid technological developments—such as the rise of Web 3.0, decentralized systems, and the integration of AI and machine learning—with the ongoing sociopolitical struggles of women and gender-diverse groups on both local and global scales. Writing history is always an act of connecting the past and the present: revisiting historical events through the lens of today's realities while also using historical insights to better understand the present.

The goal of this special issue is to explore how gender and the Internet/Web have shaped each other over time. Over the last 50 years, successive waves of feminist movements have expanded public awareness of women as critical social and political actors. Before this shift, historical narratives were largely dominated by male perspectives, reconstructing relationships and events primarily through the lens of men's roles. The voices and experiences of women were often rendered invisible. As Joan Wallach Scott (1988, p. 3) observes, "The universal, the general, the neutral are defined in opposition to the particular, the specific, the different. In a male-dominated society, it is the male who is universal and neutral, the female who is particular and different." This framing rendered women's experiences peripheral, shaping history as a story of men and their roles.

Today, we have both the opportunity and responsibility to rewrite history in a way that not only acknowledges the presence of women and LGBTQ communities but uses it as a starting point to interpret historical events, systems, and cultural and social phenomena. This approach reveals patterns and insights that might otherwise remain hidden. Over the past few decades, gender has become a vital lens in historical research, thanks to the commitment of the humanities and social sciences to advancing gender studies and driving critical reflections on these issues.

Unveiling Women's Contributions Across History

The first step in raising awareness has been uncovering the pervasive invisibility surrounding women's contributions, both within the home (Dalla Costa, 1972; Federici, 2020; Fortunati, 2025) and in the workplace (Joshi, 1991). Historically, domestic labor—primarily carried out by women—was rendered invisible, seen as natural or unworthy of recognition. This societal oversight extended beyond the home, obscuring the roles of women in paid labor markets that were largely

structured around norms, rules, and expectations designed for men. As a result, women's contributions across various fields have been overlooked, forgotten, or even erased from historical memory

The history of computer science provides a striking example of this erasure. Historians have long worked to uncover and celebrate the vital contributions of extraordinary women whose efforts shaped the foundations of the field (Nowak, 2024). One glaring gap in historical narratives is the focus on technological inventors—typically male engineers or scientists—while ignoring the crucial scaffolding work that allowed innovations to succeed. Laine Nooney, author of *The Apple II Age: How the Computer Became Personal* (2023), and a participant in the SHOT roundtable we organized with Valérie Schafer, posed the incisive question: “Who are all the people doing the support labor that allows these industries to exist?” (Abbate et al, 2024). Jane Vincent, in her paper for this special issue, addresses this question by shedding light on women's significant yet invisible contributions to early internet development, particularly within technology organizations from the 1980s to the 2000s.

Bringing these contributions into focus challenges not only the biases of historical narratives but also the structural forces that perpetuate the invisibility of women's labor. By reconstructing these overlooked stories, historians ensure that the roles of women—whether in technological innovation, support labor, or domestic spheres—are no longer relegated to the shadows.

Gender Identity as a Site of Political Mobilization

Another critical area of awareness and activism has been the growing recognition that gender identity is no longer a domain where traditional assumptions can be taken for granted.¹ Instead, it has become a dynamic and contested battleground. Gender identity has evolved into a field of mobilization and radical political struggle, catalyzing the diversification of identities and expressions we see today. There is ongoing debate about how to interpret this profound social transformation: should it be viewed primarily as a civil rights movement or as a broader, more radical political struggle? (Fortunati, 2024). The contributors to the second part of this special issue, along with our own perspective, align more closely with the latter interpretation. Gender identity is not merely an individual matter but a foundational element of the social order. It underpins labor reproduction, productivity, and the division of labor, making it inherently political. Consequently, it must be understood as a site of mobilization and struggle, central to the fight for social and political transformation.

The First Fundamental Key: Interdisciplinarity

The content of this special issue provides us with two fundamental keys to understanding the history of gender and the Internet. The first is the critical need for interdisciplinarity—building knowledge that transcends disciplinary boundaries to create robust conceptual frameworks. The editors of this special issue exemplify this approach: Leopoldina is a sociologist, Autumn is a communication scholar, and Janet is a historian. Their collaboration underscores the value of interdisciplinary perspectives in enriching our understanding of gender and the Internet.

This interdisciplinary approach is reflected throughout the contributions to this issue. For example, Will Mari and Fanny Ramirez employ media studies to analyze gendered imagery in 1990s Internet magazines, while Anne Kustritz draws on media and cultural studies in her exploration of "slash fan fiction" communities. Similarly, Jane Vincent's sociological perspective sheds light on women's roles in early Internet development, highlighting how interdisciplinary methods can uncover neglected histories and perspectives. This interdisciplinary approach not only enriches our

understanding of gender and the Internet but also equips researchers to identify and challenge the biases embedded within digital technologies. By drawing on the strengths of sociology, communication studies, media studies, and history, these contributions illuminate how systemic inequalities are reflected and perpetuated through technology design and use. For instance, sociological and historical analyses reveal the cultural contexts that shaped the hyper-masculine ethos of ICT development, while media studies unpack the ways in which digital spaces reinforce or challenge gendered narratives.

The Second Fundamental Key: Contextualizing the Internet within the Digital World

To fully understand the history of gender and the Internet, we must always be aware that the history of the Internet is inseparable from the broader history of digital technologies. As such, we need to adopt a horizontal perspective on the digital world, one that recognizes the interconnectedness of the Internet with other technologies that serve as its material foundation—computers, tablets, smartphones, and increasingly, televisions. Isolating the Internet as an object of study risks overlooking these connections and the broader social and cultural contexts in which digital technologies are designed and used.

Fortunati and Edwards (2022) argue that digital technologies—particularly the personal computer—have historically posed unique challenges for women. In the early 1970s, following the first wave of the feminist movement, communication indexes suggested that many gender disparities had been overcome, with few statistically detectable differences remaining between women and men, and these of minimal practical significance. However, the advent of digital technologies, particularly the personal computer, introduced new barriers. Women’s access to and use of these technologies lagged behind men’s, driven in part by the hyper-masculine culture of the ICT sector in the 1990s. This era was marked by the overrepresentation of young, white, male designers and programmers, which reinforced gender and generational biases in the design of digital tools (Rosales & Svensson, 2021; Svensson, 2023).

These technologies were predominantly engineered for and marketed to a narrowly defined audience: young, highly motivated, knowledge-driven men eager to embrace novelty and adaptability (Ensmenger, 2015; Lingel & Crawford, 2020). This design bias not only excluded women’s perspectives but also represented a significant setback for them in the realm of communication—a critical political and social space where negotiations and conflicts between genders often unfold. As a result, men regained power in communicative domains, reversing some of the steps women had taken in these spaces during earlier decades.

Women And History

Given these premises, the political and cultural visibility that women have gained through successive waves of the feminist movement compels us to dismantle the veil of invisibility that has historically obscured their contributions. For much of history—including recent contexts such as the history of the Internet—public spaces and social life have been mediated by men, while traditional historiography has perpetuated this exclusion by focusing predominantly on male experiences and perspectives.

This veil of invisibility has been reimposed with the advent of digital technologies and the Internet, which in its early stages often became hostile terrain for women. As several papers in this special issue demonstrate, the denial of women’s contributions and the open hostility toward them were perpetuated by predominantly male online communities, marked by arrogance and misogyny, that

occupied virtual spaces. These dynamics not only excluded women but also actively worked to delegitimize their presence.

What, then, must be done at a historical level? Like Penelope weaving and reweaving her tapestry, we must go beyond documenting history; we must rethink and reshape it. This demands a more nuanced perspective that highlights women's roles as historical subjects, shedding light on events, phenomena, and movements where they have been central actors—or, at the very least, important social participants whose roles must not be overlooked. Importantly, this reframing does not invoke women as essentialist figures but rather as diverse historical agents whose experiences are shaped by intersecting social, political, and cultural factors.

This special issue focuses on three primary areas of research: the role of the LGBTQ+ community in the development of the Internet; the contributions of feminist and women's experiences and agency to the evolution of the social Internet; and the methodological and archival challenges inherent in studying these histories.

Gender as a Critical Lens in Internet Historiography

How can histories that integrate gender and the Internet help us comprehend the sociological, cultural, and political dimensions of each? The study of gender in computing has already generated a rich historiography, one that not only adds to our knowledge but also challenges dominant narratives that have traditionally excluded the contributions and experiences of women, LGBTQ+ communities, and gender minorities. Viewing the Internet's evolution through the lens of gender reveals how digital infrastructures and cultural practices are deeply intertwined with societal norms, shaping and reshaping one another over time.

Historians have examined gender issues across a wide spectrum of topics, including computing labor and women's technical expertise (Hicks, 2017); structural and cultural obstacles to women's participation in technology (Wajcman, 1991); the formation and conduct of online communities for women and gender minorities (Gray, 2009; Papacharissi, 2015); the masculinization of online spaces and its attendant misogyny and anti-LGBTQ backlash (Phillips, 2015); the imaginaries and representations of gender and sexuality in digital culture (Nakamura, 2002); and feminist and gender activism online (Mendes, Ringrose, & Keller, 2019). These inquiries not only enrich our understanding of the Internet's past but also uncover the persistent inequities encoded into its present.

Within the pages of this journal, prior research has offered critical insights into gendered online dynamics. Fortunati (2018), Horbinski (2018), and Kyritsis and de Wild (2024) have explored women's online communities and content production. Petit (2022) examined the exclusion of women from online spaces, while LGBTQ+ online communities have been analyzed by Floegel (2022) and Brewster (2024). Research has also addressed masculinized digital movements, including men's rights activism (de Coning, 2022), and gendered representations of Internet users (Ferrari, 2020). Building on this foundation, the current issue invited contributors to think broadly about the intersections of gender, Internet technology, and digital culture. The articles in this issue expand upon existing themes, while also exploring new areas—particularly in LGBTQ+ Internet histories. Importantly, they challenge us to ask whether the very sources and frameworks of Internet historiography have unintentionally contributed to gender-biased accounts, underscoring the need to interrogate both content and methodology.

Challenging the Privilege of Male-Dominated Narratives

Will Mari and Fanny Ramirez examine how women have been represented as both workers and recreational users of networked computers in their study of gendered images in 1990s Internet magazines. Their analysis reveals that the gendering of the Internet does not occur exclusively within online spaces but is deeply rooted in cultural artifacts such as print media. This reevaluation of women's roles highlights the need to expand historical categories that have traditionally privileged male-dominated technical labor, often overlooking the diverse contributions of women as enablers, strategists, and cultural producers. By interrogating these historical narratives, their work underscores the necessity of a more inclusive historiography that accounts for the full spectrum of labor—technical and non-technical—that underpins technological development and adoption.

Content created by and for women, particularly in the context of sexuality and motherhood, is the focus of articles by Anne Kustritz and Emily Edwards. Kustritz documents the migration of women's communities writing and reading erotic "slash fan fiction" from print media to the Web, navigating challenges such as censorship, hostility, and invisibility. Her work sheds light on how these women not only adapted to digital spaces but also shaped them as sites for creative and subversive expression. By contrast, Edwards explores the world of Mormon "mommy bloggers," who foreshadowed the rise of today's social media influencers. These women built and monetized large audiences for their content, carving out an ambiguous space for feminist autonomy within the confines of traditional domesticity. Together, these articles demonstrate the multifaceted ways in which women have used digital spaces to assert agency, create community, and challenge traditional gender norms.

Other authors turn their attention to women's efforts to participate in—and reshape—masculinized spaces online. Roberto Carradore and Tiziana Pirola problematize the (in)visibility of female gamers within the Italian Twitch community, illustrating how cultural and structural barriers marginalize women in gaming culture. Similarly, Steve Jankowski examines women's struggles to organize for gender equity within the male-dominated world of Wikipedia. Here, the act of raising gender issues is frequently stigmatized as a violation of the platform's purported "neutrality," exposing the structural biases embedded within collaborative digital spaces.

Shifting the focus from digital culture to network infrastructure, Jane Vincent highlights the critical yet overlooked roles of female "enablers" in Internet histories. Vincent argues that women's non-technical contributions in areas such as human resources, business strategy, market research, and legal and regulatory support have been essential to the commercial viability of technologies often attributed solely to men. These roles, though less visible, were instrumental in shaping the Internet's development and adoption, challenging the traditional attribution of technological progress to male-dominated technical labor.

The Intersection of Representation and Infrastructure

This issue highlights a growing body of scholarship on LGBTQ+ experiences and contributions to Internet technology and culture. Kat Brewster examines how FidoNet, a pivotal Internet precursor, was shaped by founder Tom Jennings's identity as a queer anarchist activist. These studies reveal that digital infrastructures are not neutral but are deeply intertwined with societal norms and power dynamics. For example, debates surrounding Wikidata's gender classifications expose how platforms encode societal assumptions about identity while simultaneously serving as sites for activism and transformation. This recursive relationship between infrastructure and identity underscores the role of technology in mediating representation and shaping gendered and queer identities.

Shell Avenant’s interviews explore how nonbinary Internet users support one another in navigating and performing gender identity, particularly in the absence of mass media representation. Similarly, Beatrice Melis, Marta Fioravanti, Chiara Paolini, and Daniele Metilli document how the Wikidata community has debated and gradually expanded the platform’s representation of gender, enabling greater inclusion of queer identities. Turning to the preservation of queer histories, Jesper Verhoef critiques the failure of libraries and researchers to build and utilize queer archives, urging collaborative efforts to ensure this history is not lost.

Methodological Innovations for Inclusive Internet Histories

Continuing *IH*’s robust tradition of methodological research, several articles in this special double issue tackle the lack of historical sources documenting the experiences of women and gender minorities online, urging innovative research methods to surface these overlooked perspectives. Collectively, these contributions challenge Internet historians to rethink not only the sources they use but also how they analyze them. From feminist “small data” approaches to queer web archives and critical examinations of knowledgebases like Wikidata, the authors in this issue model ways to amplify marginalized voices and disrupt the historiographical biases that have long shaped the field.

Jesper Verhoef’s “Queer Web Archive Manifesto” critiques the neglect of LGBTQ websites in queer archival projects and advocates for better web archiving practices alongside more rigorous scholarly use of existing archives. Adopting a critical data studies approach, Beatrice Melis, Marta Fioravanti, Chiara Paolini, and Daniele Metilli analyze Wikidata’s knowledgebase to uncover how biographical entries are gendered and how the platform’s options for describing gender have evolved beyond a binary—often in response to activism both within and outside the Wikidata community. Shana MacDonald, Brianna Wiens, and Nick Ruest caution against unreflective reliance on big data, arguing that “small data” approaches can more effectively reveal feminist activities that are underrepresented in conventional web archives. Building on Laine Nooney’s (2020) work, Jane Vincent critiques historical frameworks that privilege male technical labor in computing. She advocates using surveys and interviews to document the contributions of female “enablers,” whose non-technical roles—such as in human resources, strategy, or legal work—have historically been overlooked despite their essential contributions to technological development. Vincent’s methodological interventions highlight how expanding the scope of historical inquiry can help counter systemic erasures.

The paper “Researching Gender in the History of the Internet and the Web,” reporting on the SHOT 2023 roundtable chaired by Valérie Schafer, complements these studies by exploring approaches to uncover silences in digital histories (Abbate et al., 2024). Featuring contributions from Janet Abbate, Cassius Adair, Avery Dame-Griff, Deena Larsen, Laine Nooney, and Schafer herself, the roundtable addressed issues such as the cultural and political dimensions of gender in Internet development and systemic biases that erase marginalized contributions. As Deena Larsen poignantly remarked, “Women’s history is being lost and will be lost much more in the future. So, we need you. Please help change this. Please volunteer to write for Wikipedia and write primary and secondary sources that are considered notable” (Abbate et al., 2024, p. 9). This call to action exemplifies how historians can innovate methodologically by intervening directly in public platforms like Wikipedia, ensuring the contributions of marginalized groups are not only uncovered but also made widely accessible and influential.

Future Directions: Decolonizing and Expanding Internet History

Looking ahead, many questions about gender and the Internet remain unexplored. To decolonize Internet historiography, future research must prioritize perspectives from the global South and

address the intersectionality of race, gender, and class. These dimensions are essential to understanding how digital technologies shape and are shaped by diverse global experiences. As digital technologies continue to evolve—from artificial intelligence (AI) to the Internet of Things (IoT)—historians must examine how gender remains a critical analytic axis, ensuring that the digital future is documented and interpreted through an inclusive and justice-oriented lens.

Histories that move beyond the US and Europe are urgently needed to construct a fuller and more accurate understanding of gender and the Internet. Scholarship that highlights the intersectionality of race and gender in Internet infrastructures and communities is particularly vital. While platforms such as social media, websites, and online games have been widely analyzed through a gender lens, emerging domains like IoT, chatbot functionalities, and the foundational role of the Internet in AI development remain underexplored. These areas present critical opportunities for expanding the scope of gender-focused Internet histories.

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Notes

1 Here we have used the terms “LGBTQ,” “queer” and “gender minorities” somewhat interchangeably to indicate gender issues that go beyond cis-hetero women.

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