Maintaining Difference: Experiences from FemTechNet
Ann Wu and Sharon Irish

We are committed to "Maintaining Difference" in the [FemTechNet collective](). Like many digital phenomena, FemTechNet is always under construction because intentional anti-racism and inclusion of queer and Trans people demand "responsive-ability," in the words of Meiling Cheng: responsive to the violence perpetrated against people and accountable to those same people. (Cheng 2002, 129)

What is FemTechNet, you ask? We are an activated network of hundreds of scholars, students, and artists who work on, with, and at the borders of technology, science, and feminism in a variety of fields including Science and Technology Studies (STS), Media and Visual Studies, Art, Women's, Queer, and Ethnic Studies. Launched in 2012, the network has developed and experimented with collaborative processes to address the educational needs of people interested in feminist science-technology studies. We began with the idea of offering an alternative to the MOOC (Massive Open Online Courses). We created the [DOCC: Distributed Open Collaborative Course](). The DOCC represents a feminist retooling of MOOCs that were (and still are) embraced by many higher education institutions in the US. A MOOC is typically created by one or two instructors as a course to be offered to a massive number of students by a brand-name institution, or through a third-party organization, such as Coursera, Udacity, or EdX.

What maintenance work keeps FemTechNet operating? FemTechNet carries out most of our work in committees, which are also distributed like the DOCC. We have participants across the U.S. and Canada, as well as in Mexico and Colombia. The tasks of what is now called the FemTechNet Operations Committee for the last four years have included trying to maintain connections among our international collective committed to critical feminist interactions around science and technology studies: these connections are usually virtual, but also face-to-face, full of emotion, and intellectual brilliance. As maintainers of FemTechNet digital tools, we work to make our labor visible and affirm that the delicate maintenance of technologies and relationships is crucial to our collective. We use or have used a variety of platforms to facilitate courses, projects, and events, including Wiggio (now defunct), [Commons in a Box](), [Vimeo](), [Zotero](), [Google Drive](), [Flipboard](), [MailChimp](), [Wordpress](), [Scalar](), [Bluejeans](), [EdCast](), [Slack](), [Twitter](), [Facebook](), and [TinyLetter](). FemTechNet pedagogical activities have used [Google Maps](), [SoundCloud](), and [Twine](), among others. At one point many of us signed up for [ello](), and we have tried [Signal](). The combination of these platforms to communicate and collaborate across our collective's trajectory has less to do with intentional planning and more to do with incidental improvisation. The reality of the collective's differences is on

display virtually and in person; this messiness is part of what we maintainers must address.

We once tried to imagine and commission a unifying platform that would serve all of our needs; that platform was never realized due to lack of funding and the fact that we could not reach a common understanding of what we needed. As a result, we cobble together whatever we can muster for whichever purpose we need to serve at the moment. We no longer attempt to see any platform as perfect or comprehensive. At the same time, we realize that continued labor and financial maintenance determine whether or not we will employ certain platforms into the future.

Pivoting as Needed, or Improv: The FemTechNet Critical Race and Ethnic Studies (CRES) Committee began using Scalar to create an edited Workbook that aggregated syllabi, activities, and bibliographies that could grow as the network contributed materials via email. Thus Operations aimed to support those who needed assistance with Scalar in order to participate. Now CRES is called Situated Critical Race and Media (SCR+M), and the members are working with SoundCloud for podcast production while continuing the Scalar project. At first glance, it may seem that the charge of the Operations Committee is simply the maintenance of various technological platforms in order for the wide network to stay connected. True, that is our most visible role, but the digital tools, like any socio-technical system, must be included in the evaluations of and reflections about the projects being developed with them; they should not be invisible because our projects unfold within systems that need scrutiny. We have initiated, explored, utilized, evaluated, and abandoned a variety of platforms for our courses, projects, and events. Some initiatives have been dropped because they made "maintaining difference" harder than it already is. That ongoing active maintenance is the urgent pivoting we must do in order to daily calibrate ourselves and our network.

Prior to our current approach of using a combination of digital tools, we developed various iterations of a utopic unifying platform, from [Buddy Press](#) and Commons in a Box, to Edcast, and then Wordpress. We improvised as we discovered the absence of certain features and designed interactions that adequately include the diversity of our participants. For instance, we started to use slideshows (sliders) on the website that appealed to active visual learners, and yet we discontinued this approach because it failed to adhere to our [accessibility report](#). We tried to develop community features on our Wordpress platform for secure and private learning encounters, and yet those efforts never replaced Facebook interactions on our group Facebook page because many participants were already embedded in Facebook's infrastructure. There is no canonical digital toolkit just as there is no one social or physical location for any of us.

Responding to the needs of a group as diverse and dispersed as FemTechNet means maintaining trusting relationships among us to identify and try out a range of tools, depending on the goals and aspirations of a particular committee or working group: We Do With Others. As Melissa Meade and Cricket Keating wrote in a wonderful blog post about Improvisation on the FemTechNet website: "Animating a DIY [Do It Yourself] approach with an improvisational spirit to us underscored that DIY is actually a misnomer. We need others — we need each other — to do the kind of work that will upend hierarchies, eliminate violence, create room for difference in the academy and beyond, and move past individual expressions of identity, the isolated and isolating digital practices. And so began our move from DIY to DWO (doing with others)." [FTN Roadshow Blog Series: Improvisation http://femtechnet.org/2015/06/ftn-roadshow-blog-series-improvisation/]

Maintaining Relationships. The ways in which we maintain these technological infrastructures that keep the network running smoothly resemble the often unpaid and invisible labor that many women do in domestic spheres. Some of these labor practices embody the love, and investment that maintainers hold for the web of relationships intertwined with their lives; the purpose of this maintenance work lies in fostering these relationships so that they thrive. Throughout much of art history, artists around the globe have depicted female labor, from sculptures actually showing a woman in labor, to recent performances that involved washing, sweeping, and other cleaning. Mierle Laderman Ukeles's *Manifesto for Maintenance Art, 1969!*, described the time after her first child was born: "I do a hell of a lot of washing, cleaning, cooking, renewing, supporting, preserving, etc. Also (up to now separately) I 'do' Art. Now, I will simply do these maintenance everyday things, and flush them up to consciousness, exhibit them, as Art." [Queens Museum, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Maintenance Art (September 18-2016-February 19, 2017), New York: exhibit brochure; http://www.queensmuseum.org/2016/04/mierle-laderman-ukeles-maintenance-art] Like Ukeles, we want to "flush [this work] up to consciousness."

A recent rumination on digital maintenance by Jane Ruffino stated that "technology doesn't work without maintainers. There is more to technology than founders, investors, and startups, and there is more to role modeling than financial success." [Jane Ruffino, "Nothing Will Just Come Out in the Wash" Medium.com https://medium.com/@janeruffino/nothing-will-just-come-out-in-the-wash-54d342c23009 #.gs4yi8mmg Accessed March 13, 2017] This situation is particularly the case in FemTechNet. Technology does not begin to address racism, classism, ableism, sexism, Transphobia, and so on. Rather, technologies may be seen as boundary objects that shift with the ways maintainers choose to apply, modify, and qualify these technologies

in specific located situations. (Star & Griesemer 1989) As FemTechNet's maintainers we try to combine technologies into situated interactions in our network for the purpose of maintaining differences and being responsive to our differences. While owing much to our founders, Anne Balsamo and Alexandra Juhasz, we continue to pivot to meet changing needs. (Juhasz & Balsamo 2012)

References

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S. Leigh Star and James R. Griesemer, "Institutional Ecology, `Translations' and Boundary Objects: Amateurs and Professionals in Berkeley's Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, 1907-39," Social Studies of Science 19: 3(August 1989), 387-420.