



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## Trans Youth Activism on the Internet

Eli Erlick

Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies, Volume 39, Number 1, 2018, pp.  
73-92 (Article)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/fro.2018.a690810>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/690810>

# Trans Youth Activism on the Internet

ELI ERLICK

The intersections of being transgender and rural bring into question the concept of access: How does one know their identity when they think they are the only one with it? How does one find others who similarly identify? At the age of eight, in the remote town of Willits in northern California, I told my parents I was a girl. They immediately protested my identity and left me without the support I needed to survive as a young trans person. The people in my rural town had no understanding of the complexity of gender, bringing them to attack, assault, and isolate me frequently. However, I was very privileged to belong to one of the first families in this community to have Internet access, which greatly improved my experiences and life chances as a trans youth.<sup>1</sup> After spending years thinking I was alone, I decided to do research online. I came across one word, *transgender*, that instantly changed my life. Through the Internet I was able to reify my identity and gain the knowledge I needed to thrive within a cissexist school system. I not only read about other transgender people but also learned that trans youth created much of the content online. As someone without access to a physical community, I found that the Internet saved me and continues to radically alter the ways in which trans people (particularly trans youth) find support.<sup>2</sup> Young trans people are benefitting from and leading these new online trans organizing methodologies and discussions. The digitization of trans youth activism has led to monumental growth for transgender people and organizations.

As with many other young trans people, I was desperate to find information about my identities and communities but had no way of conceptualizing transness when I was in middle school.<sup>3</sup> I believed I was the only person like this and that I was alone. Because my town was so small, I was indeed the only openly trans person, and my sole option was to learn about trans identities online. However, young trans women in rural communities cannot afford to be complicit in the commonplace apathy rural youth express about education.

We must learn about our identities and options in order to transition, survive, and thrive.<sup>4</sup> It was necessary to research my identities for my own well-being after I realized I was not alone in my gender being different from my sex assigned at birth. Online transgender outreach provided me the opportunity to obtain critical information alongside becoming a queer and trans community activist. Having taught myself web coding in elementary school, at age sixteen I co-founded the organization Trans Student Educational Resources (TSER) at [www.transstudent.org](http://www.transstudent.org). TSER primarily operates on the Internet and offers services and information to trans youth in the United States. We found that outreach methodologies focusing on accessibility for youth needed to center social media, the Internet, and technology, which are frequently the only options these youth have for connecting with the community.<sup>5</sup>

Online trans youth activism like that of TSER goes overlooked while it is actually some of the most generative organizing in the trans community. Young transgender activists, artists, and scholars collectively work to shift the movement radically to one of transformative justice through innovative technological means and methodologies. In this essay I contextualize transgender youth organizing to contemporary digital epistemologies through analysis and critique of the highly varied effects of transgender praxis on the Internet. The discrepancies in trans culture allow for a broad review of differing aspects of online transness, including organizational practices, crowdfunding, identity production, and resisting pathologization.

#### ONLINE TRANSGENDER ACTIVISM

The transgender community has an extensive history in the field of technology. The explosion of digital industries in the 1990s gave way to the proliferation of *trans*. Transgender people, particularly young trans women programmers, were able to enter these communities and radically change the state of transness by influencing digital media.<sup>6</sup> Lynn Conway, who notably revolutionized computers while working at IBM from the age of twenty-four, describes the industry as hostile toward transgender people. However, it was also a way for trans women to escape the antagonism of personal interactions, leading to a disproportionate number of trans women in technology (a fact that is well known among trans community members yet remains underarticulated in academic spaces).<sup>7</sup> I found this narrative to reflect my own experiences as I used coding and online resources to escape the violence of rural transgender life. The Internet offers a virtual space distinct from the trauma and “realness” of the nondigital environment. It is a point of assemblage for

the transgender community that remains essential for every trans person, particularly youth.

With the intersections of age, gender, and transness affecting Trans Student Educational Resources' validity in activist communities, attempts to legitimize the nonphysical are polemical at best.<sup>8</sup> TSER continues to be observed as simply a "student project," unable to provide real services or make authentic change because of its structure—founded by trans women and currently run by trans youth—and lack of a formalized office. Considering groups with a physical space more real, of course, reinforces the violences that create the need for an organization like TSER in the first place. Many movements, including Black Lives Matter, the Zapatistas, and the Arab Spring, have used digital technologies extensively to lead their successful efforts (though success should not be a way of operationalizing necessity). These largely hegemonic perceptions are misconceived: within two years, TSER was able to educate millions of people on trans issues through online outreach alone. Using Google Analytics, we observed TSER's website receiving thousands of unique daily visitors and reaching people in countries across the world while maintaining an average viewer age of under thirty. The latter fact is of particular pertinence as TSER is the only national organization in the United States run entirely by trans youth. In 2013 we began our queer and trans infographic series that was quickly shared millions of times on various social media, university, healthcare, organization, and scholarly websites. Through simple graphics we were able to educate the public on critical issues, such as the importance of parents supporting their transgender children and transgender rights through Title IX. Although visibility is a neoliberal practice that functions to assimilate transgender people instead of working against institutional violences, these public education campaigns on the intersections of transgender identity remain effective at representing critical issues the community faces.<sup>9</sup> Visibility, awareness, and tolerance (common liberal educational initiatives) frequently emerge within nonprofit frameworks as contradictions to transphobia, despite the fact that lived experiences, empirical data, and most research point to visibility actually increasing violence.<sup>10</sup> Visibility itself must embody a strategic methodology in order not to be co-opted by transnormativity. This most often entails critical practices led by transgender people ourselves when sharing narratives, statistics, or epistemologies.

In 2015 Trans Student Educational Resources began to distribute prints of resources created entirely by trans youth along with politically charged transgender-themed buttons and stickers through an online form system on our website. In just a few weeks we received hundreds of orders to ship the

packages throughout the country. Many of these went to schools, colleges, and organizations that distributed the knowledge contained in the items. Within the next few months the resources were noticeably available at conferences, events, and groups around the world. They soon became required readings in schools, sparked evangelical protests in multiple states, and entered state- and province-wide teaching guides across the globe. We had a rare opportunity to reclaim space in an increasingly transgender world. The mechanism of ordering resources from a digital location to produce a physical product is notable as it reveals how the virtual can bring tangible materials to alter discourse significantly within social movements. This is not to say that physical resources are more legitimate but that they will be effective in bringing accessible changes to discussions on trans issues.<sup>11</sup> In the following months, we created two model policies online that are currently being used at several institutions around the country. One focused on women's college admissions and another on general four-year institutional procedures regarding trans students.<sup>12</sup> Without the Internet, this information would not have been distributed.<sup>13</sup> This is what we were trying to build: an organization by youth, for youth to educate our communities and the public. From its inception, as noted, TSER was the only national organization in the United States led by transgender youth. The neoliberal definitions of organizational "success" that focus on individuals providing physical resources through the power of capital ignores these collective accomplishments and unfairly privileges offline activism, while much of the advocacy has the same result of distributing education. When a PDF of educational material is considered less legitimate than the printed copy, one must question the role these standards play in benefiting larger liberal organizations (with more funding) over smaller radical/progressive ones.<sup>14</sup>

Inside the trans community itself, Internet activism is essential. Our effort to create an online trans activist/transfeminist presence was not alone: the connection between trans activism and the Internet is now even more integrated due to a phenomenon described by academics Jian Chen and Lissette Olivares as *transmedia*. Transmedia in the context of trans politics focuses on the radical uses of differing forms of media by and for trans and "gender defiant" people.<sup>15</sup> Notably, this definition diverges greatly from Henry Jenkins's prominent neologism "transmedia," which denotes content that transfers across differing platforms.<sup>16</sup> As discussed in Jenkins's *Convergence Culture*, this (along with many descriptions of transmedia) details a much different phenomenon than what Jenkins intended.<sup>17</sup> Both these definitions index the migratory and viral nature of media. In Chen and Olivares's transmedia, this means accessing multiple open spaces and technologies to produce and pub-

licly distribute trans discourse, a framework of viral expansion. I question the universal praise for such practices as they may be implicated in the globalization of western and medicalized ideals of transness. Although this also allows for community building, the virality of transness through online cultural distribution is interestingly viewed as a literal epidemiological issue to many reactionary groups, who argue that exposing youth to information about transgender people will “cause” them to become transgender.<sup>18</sup> While liberals may debate against this, they overlook the substantial role that knowledge plays within the process of identity production and *becoming* trans.<sup>19</sup> As I will elaborate later in this article, one is not inherently or biologically “trans,” a fact only recently allowed to be known through the digitizing of trans identity. One could argue that the claim of trans on the Internet being viral is correct, as represented by young transgender people like myself learning of and identifying with the community through the Internet. “Transgender” represents one of the first moments in history when subjectification has almost exclusively become digital. We are infected with a conceptualization of our being, hastened by *transmedia* that both obfuscates and clarifies knowledge of the self through representations of identity. *Trans* is a category contingent on a blurred distinction of “self versus other,” as the other constructs the self. It is “self *and* other” that develops through a collective and viral community. That is, we may then choose to change the linguistic description of our identities and manifestations thereof to fit within existing categories (many of which are created by other trans youth online) and will see these categories as means for assemblage.<sup>20</sup>

While identity is dismissed as a distraction from mass mobilization, solidarity through these identities actually plays a vital role in online trans activism. In 2014 Trans Women of Color Collective launched their TWOCC in Solidarity Campaign through the crowdfunding website GoFundMe. The organization established this initiative to give opportunities to trans youth for transition-related costs and basic needs along with supporting the combined activism of Trans Women of Color Collective. Using the power of social media, the organization, collectively led predominantly by young trans women of color, was able to surpass their initial goal of \$10,000 to reach over \$38,000.<sup>21</sup> This is a significant amount when the average annual income of 34 percent of Black transgender people is less than \$10,000 annually—far less than required to cover transition expenses, which can add over \$100,000 without insurance.<sup>22</sup> This is just one of many examples of trans activists in the age of the Internet reappropriating virtual methodologies of liberal “gay and lesbian” organizations for collective trans liberation.<sup>23</sup> Other approaches can range from simple awareness campaigns to organizing significant

protests to large-scale crowdfunding drives like that of Trans Women of Color Collective.<sup>24</sup> Recently many have refocused their Transgender Day of Visibility efforts on trans women of color, some of the most marginalized people in our community, rather than those embodying the most power (who receive the majority of the positive visibility).<sup>25</sup> The emphasis on trans women of color would not be possible without the Internet, as mainstream media are most likely to focus only on the positive existence of white trans people.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, this has helped negate general “equality” discourse, recognizing that equality for trans people will not bring liberation or justice for trans women of color.<sup>27</sup>

Access to the Internet opened up activist opportunities for organizations with limited financial or geographic resources globally. Trans Student Educational Resources’ presence online helped the organization gain over a dozen youth members and volunteers from across the US within just a few months in 2015 and dozens more over the next year. By the end of 2017 TSER had over fifty people involved, including ten paid staff members, twenty fellows, and twenty frequent volunteers. We found recruitment through social media to be the most effective means for youth involvement. We even launched the only national fellowship program for young transgender people, Trans Youth Leadership Summit, which received hundreds of applications through exclusively online outreach. The fellows went on to educate thousands more in their local communities and online. Many of these young trans people are isolated or unable to fly to a central location. Online opportunities allow them a new way to be and remain involved. Along with their lived experiences, members were also inspired to become activists by learning online about other organizers, statistics, and lived experiences of transphobic violence.<sup>28</sup> The Internet additionally produced and distributed consistent understandings in the trans community of anti-transgender violence among many ongoing conflicts between radical and assimilationist movements: we are disproportionately affected by suicide, physical attacks, and institutional discrimination, and it is necessary to take action against this violence.<sup>29</sup> What trans community organizers do for activist practices of destabilizing transphobic violence greatly varies, with many of these decisions depending on the Internet itself. Younger people, more regularly mobilized on online communities, frequently take intersectional approaches against institutionalized violence. These organizing methodologies are often a much more radical, liberation-focused take on transgender justice as opposed to the methodologies utilized by many older trans advocates offline, which regularly have an assimilatory foundation adhering to for-profit business models.<sup>30</sup> Older activists tend to be more engaged with organizations that are financially sustainable—those operating inside

the nonprofit-industrial complex—indicating activism that does not fundamentally end transphobia or state violence but simply shifts the violence onto those who are more vulnerable. However, this is not to ignore the legacies of adult organizers working alongside radical groups that have physical spaces, such as INCITE! or Sylvia Rivera Law Project.<sup>31</sup>

In late 2014 the viral suicide of young trans woman Leelah Alcorn brought the community together against anti-trans violence. Alcorn's suicide note was posthumously published on the personal blogging web site Tumblr to hundreds of thousands of people sharing it within days of her death. While the initial mainstream media reactions focused on the most privileged identitarian aspects of the community (as those of Alcorn: white and gender-conforming), trans youth of color swiftly shifted the discourse online, speaking out regarding the disproportionate numbers of Black trans people who have experienced violence or attempted suicide.<sup>32</sup> Through her whiteness and overall identity capital, Alcorn's death became a cisgender commodity and an object of capture within media, yet quickly expanded generative critical trans youth discourse on suicide. When cisgender people sold twenty-five dollar phone cases with Alcorn's image through ecommerce craft websites and organizations with histories of ignoring trans people martyrized Alcorn in crowd fundraisers, trans youth were also finally able to bring our discussions on suicide and violence to the public due to our own online outreach.<sup>33</sup> Trans youth called for the legacies of trans people to be critically analyzed, as the visibility of most legacies is inversely related to the violence they experienced. As trans youth organizer Eunbyul Lee questioned, "Who gets to be human in death? I want to call out everybody who has readily acted in honor of Leelah but so effortlessly failed to recognize Islan, Alejandra, Tiffany, Jennifer, Gizzy, Zoraida, Kandy, and Yaz'min. As a trans person, I want to help end violence against trans people, but I need us to destroy the racism embedded in the making of trans legacies."<sup>34</sup> This form of analysis of the erasure of trans bodies in discussions of anti-transgender violence would not be possible without the Internet.

Perhaps in one of the clearest illustrations of how online trans discourse has advanced the trans movement, young trans people were a driving force on Give Out Day, the online national day of giving for LGBTQ organizations. Instead of the continued domination of large organizations with the finances to advertise donation pages, for the past two years smaller groups that center young queer and trans people of color have received the most Give Out Day donors.<sup>35</sup> In 2014 Black Girl Dangerous, a youth-focused queer/trans person of color news website, raised over \$14,000 from 634 donors, more than any other organization.<sup>36</sup> In 2015 the Audre Lorde Project, an organization focusing on mobilizing and educating "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Two Spirit, Trans



and Gender Non-Conforming People of Color” had the most donations with over \$42,000 from 1,206 donors.<sup>37</sup> Young trans organizers such as poets Janani Balasubramanian and Alok Vaid-Menon of the performance duo DarkMatter spearheaded the fundraising, citing their own experiences with marginalization as trans people of color and their work with the Audre Lorde Project.<sup>38</sup> The organization’s youth activists utilized online outreach to mobilize volunteers and call prospective donors using phonebanking techniques. This also helped establish a contact network of queer and trans people of color, scaling beyond the virtual confines of crowdfunding to community building.<sup>39</sup>

#### TECHNOLOGY AND THE TRANSGENDER BODY

Queer activist and academic Eve Shapiro asserts the trans community becoming less reliant on pathologization and medicine was dependent on the growth of contemporary online culture. Assemblages such as Give Out Day would not be possible if trans people were still entangled within medicalization as they were before the Internet. Online information and resources have directly reduced the reliance on the trans community’s capture within the medical-industrial complex, which has allowed trans people (particularly trans women, who are hyperpathologized) more freedom to choose how connected to the community they want to be. Shapiro explains in her study “Transcending Barriers”: “Most gender clinics strongly advised trans people to go stealth post-transition, which consequently did not foster community. The key distinction is that before the Internet, trans people were reliant on the medical profession and the few trans support organizations for information.”<sup>40</sup> The online presence of transgender people gives the community more agency to self-determine critically rather than remain reliant on the cisgender medical constructions of transness. The clinic is a space of enclosure while the Internet is an expanse; medicine may only confine transgender identity while the Internet rhizomatically increases its boundaries. The rise of transgender youth activism directly correlates with this trend as youth, being more likely to frequent the Internet, become and remain engaged with online advocacy.

When I was a teenager, one of my physicians told me it was a shame I was not leaving the community after medically transitioning. Her rationale ignored the care I have put into the community and immediately made me worried about what she was recommending to other trans patients.<sup>41</sup> The biopolitical valorization of “stealth” (often proposed under the guise of “safety”) exemplifies how medicine has permeated into, co-opted, and broken down the strengths of trans organizing, even within the “posttranssexual era.”<sup>42</sup> The spread of information and anonymity allowed by the Internet opens gateways

into activism accessible even to those at risk of violence. Because I was involved in the community and had access to the Internet, I already knew that I wanted being a transgender woman to remain an essential, permanent part of my life. I largely owe this motivation to the Internet and the connections and community I made through it. Remaining active within the community should not have to be a demanding aspect of resistance to cisgender hegemony but instead should be an undertaking that carries opposition to the desired function of our bodies after “completing” transition (assimilation).<sup>43</sup>

Despite the consequences, these long-held medical principles are highly praised and too rarely critiqued from inside the trans organizing community.<sup>44</sup> However, any discussion of the technology of transness is incomplete without assessment of the relationship between technology and the transgender body, which can be problematized through the misconception of the universalized need for “transgender surgery.”<sup>45</sup> Our identities are technologized through inseparability from contemporary Internet activism as our bodies are simultaneously technologized by medical interventions including modern surgical methods and hormonal therapies.<sup>46</sup> Somatechnics, a term coined by transgender professor Susan Stryker and colleagues at Macquarie University, highlights this inseparability of the construct of the body and technology/technological systems/*dispositifs*. The study of transgender is as much a study of the body as it is of narrative. Somatechnics functions to illustrate the liminal space between these two facets of trans subjectivity. The somatic reality of many trans people is one of technologization through medicine and the perceived (post)modernity of transgender identities, making somatechnics a necessary intervention into understanding transgender identity. In being classified as a new phenomenon, transness becomes indivisible from the Internet and mass communication. This is particularly true for youth, who more frequently use online spaces to discover and determine our identities. In this, trans youth identities and bodies are delegitimized as a temporary, fashionable aesthetic rather than a concrete reality.<sup>47</sup> The Internet is helping us reconceptualize this trans-technology relationship when online trans spaces are a rapidly expanding fixture of the community.

#### DIGITAL ACTIONS, PHYSICAL OUTCOMES

Many trans people do not want or need medical treatment: a fact that has only become more common knowledge inside the trans community due to the Internet. Trans youth act as primary educators on media sites such as YouTube and Tumblr to describe their own transitions and transgender theory. An emphasis these young trans people bring to the discourse of transitioning

is that there is no one way to transition. All trans people have unique “journeys,” which may or may not include medicine.<sup>48</sup> The accommodating nature of transition has helped many trans youth, including myself, realize our identities.<sup>49</sup> Transgender linguistics are highly affected by this same discourse as well. They are the new polemics of youth struggling to articulate our identities. With the proliferation of transgender Internet culture, terminology fluctuates at exponentially increasing rates. Terms are birthed online and can rise and fall from popularity within a matter of months. Trans\* (trans asterisk) may most notably embody this phenomenon, as its popularity in the mid-2010s led to utilization by thousands of publications and organizations, followed by an outcry against its use. The term was initially imagined and popularized by trans youth on blogging websites such as Tumblr, aiming to create a “more inclusive” trans. In Boolean terminology, the asterisk allows online search engines to include anything beginning with the term, including transgender or transsexual.<sup>50</sup> Trans\* would act as an umbrella term encapsulating trans women and men as well as nonbinary people, genderqueer people, and more. This additionally encompassed drag queens and gender nonconforming people, who are often cisgender. In some envisionings of the term, two spirit and Hijra were included, reflecting the colonial foundation of trans\*. Many trans activists deemed the term’s scope as too wide and the term unnecessary in its entirety, leading to its first wave of critiques. Binary transgender people also frequently used the term to delegitimize nonbinary or gender nonconforming transgender people, claiming they were trans\* and not trans. Within a matter of years the term had gone from extreme popularity to being widely acknowledged as stigmatic. In fact, the same groups who conceived it became those who most heavily critiqued it and those using it, to the extent of delegitimizing entire essays for its usage.<sup>51</sup>

Contemporary language production does lead to incredibly generative results and understandings in the trans community. The constant evolution of trans discourse helps us further transgender epistemologies and public understanding. In 2014 Youth activists from Trans Student Educational Resources collaborated with GLAAD, a national organization focusing on “LGBT” media, to update their Transgender Media Reference Guide. After online outreach we comprehensively reviewed the guide and provided suggestions for the revision. The guide is now used by major media sources to report on trans issues. We utilized linguistic models developed and popularized by other youth on the Internet to make our recommendations for the changes. With each new phrase or reimagining of terminology come arguments that further the discussion on trans subjectivity. What language is appropriate for us to use as it evolves? How does this language subvert transphobic and cis-

sexist violence?<sup>52</sup> Due to our collaboration, GLAAD removed a number of transphobic definitions that would otherwise have been utilized by the media. For example, their definition of “gender identity” was changed from “One’s internal, personal sense of being a man or a woman (or a boy or a girl)” to “One’s internal, deeply held sense of one’s gender.”<sup>53</sup> While we can certainly still problematize notions of the essentializing internal-external divide, the harm reduction of ending the discursive gender binary persists in the updated definition. These questions of terminology are amplified through the ease of public discourse that the Internet permits almost anyone with a computer. This is most pertinent for blogging websites such as Tumblr, which host large social justice-oriented communities. Arguments often arise within them on transgender language and may result in more advanced and critically interrogated discourse. Although malicious, the disputes lead to trans cultural production.<sup>54</sup> They also lead to a more unambiguous definition of and spelling of trans (as opposed to trans\* or trans-).<sup>55</sup> Having consistent language (or terminology that does not lead to intracommunal conflict) is critical for transgender liberation or, at the very least, understanding the futures of transgender communal growth. Identitarian movements necessitate a solidified identity in order to thrive, an objective that language can deliver.<sup>56</sup>

Alongside broad community-based transformation comes healing with support for individuals and subcommunities. Organizational and personal crowdfunding campaigns had a surge in popularity among trans people following the creation of websites such as Indiegogo, YouCaring, and Kickstarter. Between 2014 and 2015, using GoFundMe and PayPal donations, Trans Student Educational Resources established the only national scholarship program for transgender students. In the wake of Leelah Alcorn’s death, concerned community members reached out, donated, and distributed the link to our fundraiser throughout social media. This form of fundraising would not be possible without the Internet: we did not have the capital to pay the costs of advertising a campaign or hosting a major fundraising dinner.<sup>57</sup> While larger, cis-centric organizations may already have this donor base, they are not built to foster the intersectional activism of trans youth that smaller organizations using these platforms can do.<sup>58</sup>

Additionally, personal crowdfunding is a central part of many young trans people’s transitions. Most often, these campaigns are for gender-affirming surgeries, but they can also be for legal, hormonal, or therapeutic costs. This brings into question the pitfalls of such methodologies: what bodies are acceptable (“passable”) for funding? Who receives these payments? Researcher Megan Farnel of the University of Alberta points to the fact that a disproportionate number of white trans men host public fundraisers

and receive more donations than other groups. In this they represent the experiences commodified by cisgender people: bodies within the realm of gender-conforming white masculinity.<sup>59</sup> The donors support white masculinity and gain social capital from it. This is not to say that they are hurting the trans community in any way but rather to critique the larger amount of fundraisers fully financed for white trans men as opposed to trans people of color or trans women.<sup>60</sup> While insufficiently analyzed, this phenomenon does not go unnoticed. ray(nise) cange of Black Girl Dangerous reported on the topic stating, "In a popular queer group a white trans man posted his fundraiser for top surgery and raised roughly half his funds within a day . . . A trans woman of color posted her fundraiser for living expenses because she was fired from her job due to discrimination and she was asked to promptly remove the post because it violated 'community policy.'"<sup>61</sup> Observing the clear inconsistency of support is not uncommon. Trans women of color are far less likely to be able even to attempt to obtain medical treatment due to their experiences of violence. Capitalism and medical gatekeeping are designed to promote white, male, cisgender mobility, effectively preventing thousands of trans people from accessing the medical services they need each year.<sup>62</sup>

However, crowdfunding websites are not the only transgender methodology operating against the denial of access. Trans youth are working to make sure that *all* trans people can obtain care they need. In 2013 Donnie Collins received viral attention when his fraternity brothers helped crowdfund his bilateral mastectomy using Indiegogo after his insurance company denied his coverage.<sup>63</sup> He was able to use his power as a white man to reroute donations to low-income trans people after they raised over \$19,000 beyond their goal. Collins donated the excess money to the Jim Collins Foundation, an organization dedicated to funding gender-affirming surgery for those in need. This helped trans people facing intersectional marginalization obtain the grants they needed to gain access to surgery.<sup>64</sup> Donnie Collins is not the only young trans person working to increase access to surgery either. In 2013 trans youth Jacob Rostovsky founded the organization TUFF (Trans United with Family and Friends) after a short GoFundMe campaign.<sup>65</sup> Like the Jim Collins Foundation, TUFF "aims to provide access to healthcare, transition services, safe housing and education for the underserved transgender population." The organization, with no physical offices, uses the Internet to offer trans people life-saving surgery through an application process. This process of funding can help negate the racially and financially unbalanced distribution of who is able to receive medical care and allow trans people of color, poor trans people, and trans women more access.<sup>66</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The Internet offers radical transformation for the state of social movements. While, as ray(nise) cange notes, white trans youth still receive significantly more attention and funding, trans youth of color are still leading the transgender community in collective action. The nature of online neoliberal mobilization shifts assets onto those experiencing the least marginalization—those who are more valued among cisgender people.<sup>67</sup> However, digital trans youth activism revives historical radical transgender approaches to organizing for the new political economy. Likewise, those facing violent oppression similarly spearhead cultural and linguistic production as well as depathological advocacy. Online activism articulates and recontextualizes these methodologies to both tangible and discursive interventions into the present.

Online organizing may translate into real-world effect but it is critical to understand the limitations of solely using the Internet for advocacy within the transgender movement and being critical of the individualized and collective involvements of our communities. Online activism in conjunction with physical action is crucial for our liberation. A click on a White House petition or a hashtag attached to a tweet will not end the murders of trans women of color or transgender suicide. While this may appear obvious, the Internet subtly acts as a deterrent from creating real transformation within social structures. When we believe we are performing a moral act (regardless of scale) we may think that we have done valuable work and will not contribute further.<sup>68</sup> The moral self-licensing that occurs during the decision not to continue the work may actually have destructive effects on community activism. One interdisciplinary 2013 study even found that potential contributors were far less likely to donate to nonprofits when they symbolically contributed to a cause through the Internet.<sup>69</sup>

Despite the possibility of people following groups on social media instead of donating, activists and organizations almost unanimously agree that the Internet is a critical tool for collective action.<sup>70</sup> When co-founding Trans Student Educational Resources, I kept in mind the room for growth beyond a digital sphere. At the time I did not have the capital, geography, or resources to move beyond the Internet. However, starting online, expanding, and then moving into more a more physical existence proved to be an effective approach for organizational sustainability. When we began to host workshops at conferences, established Trans Youth Leadership Summit, and reached out to larger organizations, we already had some legitimacy within activist circles. This helped us collaborate with several groups on online and offline projects. Within the trans community, organizers cannot afford to work exclusively online.<sup>71</sup> Dig-

ital activism may assist in social transformation but it will not, alone, bring revolutionary politics to the public consciousness. The Internet will be a critical tool for political transformation and is inseparable from the future liberation of all transgender people.

Our technologies will continue to bring these concrete and abstract changes to the ways in which we collectively grow as a trans liberation movement. Although the most visibility for radical politics is within the imbricated and generalized values of trans organizations of varying political ideologies (decreasing violence and increasing survivability), trans youth online continue to develop transformative justice-based methodological approaches and bring these practices to the forefront of our community. Whether crowdfunding, creating new language, or organizing a protest, trans youth are centering the Internet in our work as young activists. As young transgender people, we are often assigned the role of “future leaders.” While this is true for some, we are leading the movement in every moment.<sup>72</sup> It is repeatedly overlooked that Sylvia Rivera was only seventeen and Marsha P. Johnson was only twenty-five when they helped incite the Stonewall Riots.<sup>73</sup> The centrality of trans youth—and especially trans youth of color—within queer organizing spaces is erased by the façade of inclusivity strategically erected by large, assimilatory, neoliberal organizations such as the Human Rights Campaign.<sup>74</sup> Having declared that one of her main goals was to “destroy the Human Rights Campaign,” Rivera’s sentiments against the erasure of queer and trans people of color from “LGBT” organizing reflect the ideals of many trans youth to this day.<sup>75</sup> For the first time in our history, we are able to represent these views publicly online—to larger platforms than we dreamed of just decades ago. Historical queer activism by people of color, trans people, and youth may be removed from public knowledge but we will continue to be the driving force for justice within queer and trans movements, particularly those online. Erasure will soon be a tactic of the past as the Internet provides intracommunally excluded groups an expansive medium to confront our concealment and create our own strategies for justice.

The Internet remains a vital point of origin for the transgender community. It is a site of possibility and growth. As a group with unprecedented visibility in an era of mass communication, we will continue to utilize these technological advances for transgender justice. Trans youth are leading the way online for community assemblage. Technology, when combined with practices of direct action, healing, and collective organizing, will help us reach what we understand as transgender liberation.



.....  
ELI ERLICK is a PhD student in Feminist Studies at the University of California, Santa Cruz. She is the co-founder and director of Trans Student Educational Resources, a national youth-led organization dedicated to transforming the educational environment for trans and gender nonconforming students. Her work and writing focus on biopolitics, neoliberalism, identity, political philosophy, and education.

## NOTES

1. Joanna Almeida, Renee M. Johnson, Heather L. Corliss, Beth E. Molnar, and Deborah Azrael, "Emotional Distress Among LGBT Youth: The Influence of Perceived Discrimination Based on Sexual Orientation," *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 38, no. 7 (2009): 1001–14.

2. Harsin Drager, "Transforming Cyber Space and the Trans Liberation Movement: A Study of Transmasculine Youth Bloggers on Tumblr.com," thesis, University of Colorado, Boulder, 2012, 1–93.

3. Alison Rooke, "Trans Youth, Science and Art: Creating (Trans) Gendered Space," *Gender, Place and Culture* 17, no. 5 (2010): 655–72.

4. Kathleen Budge, "Rural Leaders, Rural Places: Problem, Privilege, and Possibility," *Journal of Research in Rural Education* 21, no. 13 (2006): 1–10.

5. Aidan James Kosciesza, "Transgender Day of Visibility and Being 'Out,'" Aidan James Kosciesza, March 31, 2015, <http://www.aidan-james.com/transgender-day-of-visibility-and-being-out/>.

6. Stephen Whittle, "Foreword," in *The Transgender Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge–Taylor & Francis, 2006), x–xvi.

7. Lynn Conway, "IBM-ACS: Reminiscences and Lessons Learned from a 1960's Supercomputer Project," in *Dependable and Historic Computing* (Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 2011), 185–224.

8. Joyce Y. M. Nip, "The Queer Sisters and Its Electronic Bulletin Board," in *Cyberprotest: New Media, Citizens, and Social Movements* (London: Routledge, 2004), 203–24.

9. Evan Vipond, "Trans Rights Will Not Protect Us: The Limits of Equal Rights Discourse, Antidiscrimination Laws, and Hate Crime Legislation," *Western Journal of Legal Studies* 6, no. 1 (2015): 1–20.

10. Evan Vipond, "Trans Rights Will Not Protect Us: The Limits of Equal Rights Discourse, Antidiscrimination Laws, and Hate Crime Legislation," *Western Journal of Legal Studies* 6, no. 1 (2015): 1–20.

11. "Order Infographics, Buttons, and Stickers," Trans Student Educational Resources, <http://www.transstudent.org/orderform>.



12. Eli Erlick and Calliope Wong, "Model Policy on Transgender Students at Women's Colleges," *Trans Student Educational Resources* (2015), [www.transstudent.org/womenscolleges](http://www.transstudent.org/womenscolleges).

13. Harper Rubin, Eli Erlick, Landyn Pan, Charlie Kerr, and Mya Worrell, "Comprehensive Model Policy on Transgender Students for Four-Year Colleges and Universities," *Trans Student Educational Resources* (2016), <http://www.transstudent.org/college>.

14. David Karpf, "Online Political Mobilization from the Advocacy Group's Perspective: Looking Beyond Clicktivism," *Policy & Internet* 2, no. 4 (2010): 7–41.

15. Jian Chen and Lissette Olivares, "Transmedia," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, nos. 1–2 (2014): 245–48.

16. Henry Jenkins, "Searching for the Origami Unicorn: The Matrix and Transmedia Storytelling," in *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: NYU Press, 2006), 93–130.

17. Henry Jenkins, "Transmedia 202: Further Reflections" (blog post), Confessions of an Aca-Fan, August 1, 2011, [http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2011/08/defining\\_transmedia\\_further\\_re.html](http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2011/08/defining_transmedia_further_re.html).

18. Robert Knight, "KNIGHT: Snuffing Out Children's Innocence," *Washington Times*, September 9, 2011.

19. T. Garner, "Becoming," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 1–2 (2014): 30–32.

20. Oliver L. Haimson, Anne E. Bowser, Edward Melcer, and Elizabeth F. Churchill, "Online Inspiration and Exploration for Identity Reinvention," in *Proceedings of CHI* (2015): 3809–18.

21. Trans Women of Color Collective, "TWOCC in Solidarity Campaign by TWOC Collective," GoFundMe.com, July 23, 2013, <https://www.gofundme.com/TWOCCSolidarity>.

22. Jaime M. Grant, Lisa Mottet, Justin Edward Tanis, Jack Harrison, Jody Herman, and Mara Keisling, *Injustice at Every Turn: A Look at Black Respondents in the National Transgender Discrimination Survey* (Washington: National Center for Transgender Equality, 2011).

23. Sarah Lamble, "Retelling Racialized Violence, Remaking White Innocence: The Politics of Interlocking Oppressions in Transgender Day of Remembrance," *Sexuality Research & Social Policy* 5, no. 1 (2008): 24–42.

24. "National LGBTQ Day of Giving," Give OUT Day, <https://www.giveoutday.org/c/GO>; "Protest the APA and Gender Identity Disorder!" Indybay, <https://www.indybay.org/newsitems/2009/05/15/18595137.php>.

25. Kosciessa, "Transgender Day."

26. Sarah Stillman, "'The Missing White Girl Syndrome': Disappeared Women and Media Activism," *Gender & Development* 15, no. 3 (2007): 491–502.

27. Janet Mock, "Janet Mock: A Note on Visibility in the Wake of 6 Trans Women's Murders in 2015, Comments," Janet Mock, February 16, 2015, <http://janetmock.com/2015/02/16/six-trans-women-killed-this-year/>.
28. "Who We Are," Trans Student Educational Resources, <http://www.transstudent.org/staff>.
29. Jaime M. Grant, Lisa Mottet, Justin Edward Tanis, Jack Harrison, Jody Herman, and Mara Keisling, *Injustice at Every Turn: A Report of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey* (Washington: National Center for Transgender Equality, 2011).
30. Elizabeth Jane Ward, *Respectably Queer: Diversity Culture in LGBT Activist Organizations* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2008).
31. Rickke Mananzala and Dean Spade, "The Nonprofit Industrial Complex and Trans Resistance," *Sexuality Research & Social Policy* 5, no. 1 (2008): 53–71.
32. Princess Harmony Rodriguez, "Do the Work: This Is How You Can Support Trans Women of Color Right Now," Black Girl Dangerous, May 20, 2015, <http://www.blackgirldangerous.org/2015/05/do-the-work-this-is-how-you-can-support-trans-women-of-color-right-now/>.
33. Eli Erlick, "The Suicide-Industrial Complex: Transgender Identity Capital in Contemporary Neoliberal Activist Mobilizations," presentation, "Queer Death, De(con)struction, and Contagion: Affective Rhythms in Interdisciplinary Studies" Conference, Merced, April 9, 2016.
34. Eunbyul Lee, "Who Gets to Be Human in Death?: Leelah Alcorn and Trans Legacies," Black Girl Dangerous, January 6, 2015, <http://www.blackgirldangerous.org/2015/01/gets-human-death-leelah-alcorn-trans-legacies/>.
35. "National Leaderboard," Give Out Day, [http://giveout.razoo.com/giving\\_events/giveout14/national-leaderboard](http://giveout.razoo.com/giving_events/giveout14/national-leaderboard).
36. "Black Girl Dangerous," Razoo, <http://www.razoo.com/story/Black-Girl-Dangerous>.
37. "The Audre Lorde Project, Inc.," Give Out Day, <https://www.giveoutday.org/c/GO/a/alp>.
38. "Help Me Reach My Goal to Support the Audre Lorde Project Inc.," Give Out Day, <https://www.giveoutday.org/c/GO/a/alp/p/DarkMatter#sthash.sIdzaiZc.dpuf>.
39. "Give Out Day Phonebanking," Audre Lorde Project (ALP), [www.alp.org/give-out-day-phonebanking](http://www.alp.org/give-out-day-phonebanking).
40. Eve Shapiro, "Transcending Barriers: Transgender Organizing on the Internet," *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services* 16, nos. 3–4 (2004): 170.
41. Eli Erlick, "Depathologizing Trans," in *The Remedy: Queer and Trans Voices on Health and Healthcare*, 217–21 (Vancouver, BC: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2016).
42. Lal Zimman, "'The Other Kind of Coming Out': Transgender People and the Coming Out Narrative Genre," *Gender and Language* 3, no. 1 (2009): 53–80.

43. Dan Irving, "Normalized Transgressions: Legitimizing the Transsexual Body as Productive," *Radical History Review* 100 (2008): 38–59.
44. Eli Erlick, "Transgender Medicine: Depathologization, Organizing, and Practice," *Journal of the Student National Medical Association* (Fall–Winter 2014): 8–11.
45. Dean Spade, "Resisting Medicine, Re/modeling Gender," *Berkeley Women's LJ* 18 (2003): 15–37.
46. Kendal L. Broad, "GLB+ T?: Gender/Sexuality Movements and Transgender Collective Identity (De) Constructions," *International Journal of Sexuality and Gender Studies* 7, no. 4 (2002): 241–64.
47. Nikki Sullivan, "Somatechnics," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 1–2 (2014): 187–90.
48. Trystan T. Cotten, "Surgery," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 1–2 (2014): 205–7.
49. "Top 5 Most Influential Transgender YouTube Creators Who Have Helped Build the Trans Community Online," New Media Rockstars, August 23, 2013, <http://newmediarockstars.com/2013/08/top-5-most-influential-transgender-youtube-creators-who-have-helped-build-the-trans-community-online/>.
50. Avery Tomkins, "Asterisk," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, nos. 1–2 (2014): 26–27.
51. Eli Erlick, "Why We Used Trans\* and Why We Don't Anymore," Trans Student Educational Resources, <http://www.transstudent.org/asterisk>.
52. Don Kulick, "Transgender and Language: A Review of the Literature and Suggestions for the Future," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 5, no. 4 (1999): 605–22.
53. "GLAAD Media Reference Guide—Transgender Issues," GLAAD, August 1, 2014, <https://www.glaad.org/reference/transgender>.
54. Marty Fink and Quinn Miller, "Trans Media Moments: Tumblr, 2011–2013," *Television & New Media* 15, no. 7 (2014): 611–26.
55. Susan Stryker, "Introduction: Trans-, Trans, or Transgender?" *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* 36, nos. 3–4 (2008): 11–22.
56. Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (London: Tavistock, 1972), 98–101.
57. Trans Student Educational Resources, "Support Scholarships for Trans Youth," GoFundMe.com, <https://www.gofundme.com/ckzprw>.
58. "2015 Scholarship Winners," Trans Student Educational Resources, <http://www.transstudent.org/2015scholarshipwinners>.
59. Susan Stryker and Nikki Sullivan, "King's Member, Queen's Body: Transsexual Surgery, Self-Demand Amputation, and the Somatechnics of Sovereign Power," in *Somatechnics: Queering the Technologisation of Bodies*, 49–61 (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2009).

60. Megan Farnel, "Kickstarting Trans\*: The Crowdfunding of Gender/Sexual Reassignment Surgeries," *New Media & Society* 17, no. 2 (2014): 215–30.
61. ray(nise) cange, "5 Ways White Transgender People Have Privilege over Transgender People of Color," Black Girl Dangerous, July 9, 2015, <https://www.bgdblog.org/2015/07/5-ways-white-transgender-people-have-privilege-over-transgender-people-of-color/>.
62. Jessica M. Xavier, Marilyn Bobbin, Ben Singer, and Earline Budd, "A Needs Assessment of Transgendered People of Color Living in Washington, DC," *International Journal of Transgenderism* 8, nos. 2–3 (2005): 31–47.
63. William McGuinness, "Phi Alpha Tau Transgender Member Donnie Collins Gets Money for FTM Surgery from Frat Brothers," *Huffington Post*, February 26, 2013, [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/02/26/phi-alpha-tau-transgender-surgery\\_n\\_2765653.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/02/26/phi-alpha-tau-transgender-surgery_n_2765653.html).
64. Christian Bergren-Aragon, "Brothers of a Boston Fraternity—FTM: Top Surgery," Indiegogo, <https://www.indiegogo.com/projects/brothers-of-a-boston-fraternity-ftm-top-surgery>.
65. Jacob Rostovsky, "Trans United with Family and Friends," GoFundMe.com, May 1, 2013, <https://www.gofundme.com/transunited>.
66. "About Us," Trans United with Family and Friends (TUFF), <http://tufforg.wix.com/tuffnew#!about/cjn9>.
67. Dean Spade, *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).
68. Henrik Serup Christensen, "Political Activities on the Internet: Slacktivism or Political Participation by Other Means?" *First Monday* 16, no. 2 (2011).
69. Gert Cornelissen, Natalia Karelaia, and Emre Soyer, "Clicktivism or Slacktivism? Impression Management and Moral Licensing," *E-European Advances in Consumer Research*, vol. 10, ed. Gert Cornelissen, Elena Reutskaja, and Ana Valenzuela (Duluth, MN, 2013), 244.
70. Jonathan A. Obar, Paul Zube, and Clifford Lampe, "Advocacy 2.0: An Analysis of How Advocacy Groups in the United States Perceive and Use Social Media as Tools for Facilitating Civic Engagement and Collective Action," *Journal of Information Policy* 2 (2012): 1–25.
71. Autumn Sandeen, "Transsexual Separatist Slacktivism Doesn't Win," TransAdvocate, August 16, 2013, <http://www.transadvocate.com/transsexual-separatist-slacktivism-doesnt-win-legislatively.htm>.
72. Susan Talburt, "Constructions of LGBT Youth: Opening up subject positions," *Theory Into Practice* 43, no. 2 (2004): 116–21.
73. Layli Phillips and Shomari Olugbala, "Sylvia Rivera, Fighting in Her Heels: Stonewall, Civil Rights," in *The Human Tradition in the Civil Rights Movement*, ed. Susan M. Glisson, 309–30 (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).

74. Eric A. Stanley, "Introduction. Fugitive Flesh: Gender Self-determination, Queer Abolition, and Trans Resistance," in *Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex*, ed. Eric A. Stanley and Nat Smith, 1–11 (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2011).

75. Ashley Love, "On Stonewall Riot Initiator Sylvia Rivera's Birthday, Her Words about Gay Oppression Against Trans People Still Ring True," *Huffington Post*, July 6, 2010, [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/ashley-love/on-stonewall-riot-initiat\\_b\\_634115.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/ashley-love/on-stonewall-riot-initiat_b_634115.html).