

Curating a Technofeminist Space: Feminist Practices in Editing Online Publications

Part 1: *agnès films* Past and Present

By Alexandra Hidalgo, Hannah Countryman, and Jessica Kukla

agnès films was originally a project that I, Alexandra Hidalgo, developed in 2010 with Caitlan Spronk for a graduate course at Purdue University. It featured essays written by women and feminist filmmakers, member profiles of filmmakers and academics, and news items, such as film festival calls for entries. We explicitly welcomed men as long as they empathized with our mission of supporting the work of women filmmakers. Filmmaker and scholar Denah Johnston joined the team as our Experimental and Fringe Film Editor that year.

As technofeminist Mary Hocks argued in 1999, “feminists need to create their own audiences and involve them in the production and consumption of new technologies” (p. 117). Although many of our target audience were already making films and videos, there weren’t a lot of spaces for them to talk about their work with each other online. For the next three years we published a moderate amount of content and started building a community through a Facebook group, where women filmmakers would share news and seek advice. In 2013, when I became a faculty member at Michigan State University, Denah and I began to think of ways to expand the site. We invited reviewers to join the staff and reached out to filmmakers asking to feature their work.

In 2014, I received an internal MSU grant that allowed me to hire undergraduates to work as staff members. The students took on the copy-editing and posting duties that Denah and I had been performing until then. They also developed our social media strategy, running our Twitter account and increasing our presence in the film world to the point that within months, we were receiving as many requests from filmmakers as we could handle.

agnès films today has become a community of women whose work and interests overlap and influence each other within the space we have curated. Our over 300

published pieces aim to illustrate how women navigate the challenges of the film industry, to provide support to women and feminists behind the camera, and to encourage others to think critically about issues facing women in the film world. Since our foundation, we've had over 131,000 pageviews from over 55,000 users in 185 countries.

We realize the power of film to change the world and operate *agnès films* with that influence in mind. We conduct interviews with women filmmakers to learn about their motivations, technical choices, and ways of navigating the challenges of the film industry. Our reviews never mock the work and provide constructive criticism, seeking to provide readers a feminist lens with which to understand films. Filmmakers write essays about their work and offer advice to others looking to expand their skillset. We also publish news items with information about film festivals seeking submissions or where our members' work is being screened.

Besides being a digital publication, *agnès films* is an online community. In their video essay entitled "A Feminist Approach to Social Media," Alex and former assistant editor Katie Grimes discuss their process for developing *agnès films*'s social media presence through feminist principles. Instead of having an official Facebook page that people can "Like," we have a public group that anybody can join. The over 1,100 group members provide the majority of our Facebook content. They use the page to share their work, as well as other links of interest to the community, engaging in thoughtful discussion through comments. *agnès films* staff hold administrative privileges and post *agnès films* content.

Our Twitter account has over 1,800 followers. In addition to content published on *agnès films*, we retweet content shared on the Facebook page. Posting on Twitter connects directors, writers, and film accounts that are not tag-able in Facebook posts. Since 2014 we've had nearly 4,000 tweets, over 2,000 retweets, and over 800,000 impressions. 80% of our followers are women ranging from the ages of 25 to 44. *agnès films* has also grown a global audience with the largest percentage of followers coming from the United States and The United Kingdom, followed by Canada, France, and Australia.

Because we are a publication aimed at supporting women and feminist filmmakers, it makes sense for our staff to be comprised of women. The only man who has worked with us is undergraduate student Tommy Truong, who helped redesign and migrate the site to MSU's server, work that didn't include attending our regular weekly meetings. During the first round of hiring I selected women because my son Santiago attended meetings and nursed through them. Being an untenured faculty member, it seemed unwise to nurse in front of male students.

I have kept the women-only staff practice going. In my video book, *Cámara Retórica* (2017) I argue it is vital for feminist filmmakers to hire women to work on our sets and to feature women's stories on camera. Because the percentage of women working on film crews and being represented as protagonists on screen is so small, feminist filmmakers need to consciously involve women in their projects. The gender disparity

for digital content production is not as steep as it is for film. Women directed only 7% of the 2016 250 top-grossing films (Lauzen, 2017), but the disparity is still significant. According to a 2015 study by the Women's Media Center, "Overall, men generated 62.1 percent of news [and] women generated 37.3 percent." Although the percentages are better for online content, with women generating 42 percent of the content, there is still a gender disparity that *agnès films* works toward resolving.

Moreover, as Jennie Ruby (2003), who worked on the radical feminist publication *off our backs*, argues, "while there can be feminist space with men in it, there is something indescribable and indispensable about women-only space that cannot be achieved otherwise" (p. 15). Ruby (2003) believes that the power of women-only spaces comes in part because "women themselves, due to our internalized experiences, react differently to men—so that even if a man devoid of all the effects of patriarchal conditioning existed, he could still the trigger automatic conditioning of the women present" (p. 15). Although I don't rule out hiring men to work on our staff, for the time being I, like Ruby, want to explore the particular interactions that take place in women-only spaces and the activist content that is produced by those interactions.

Now that we've explained the history of the publication and why we have an all-woman staff, we want to briefly discuss what we each do for the organization.

The *agnès films* website is the hub for much of our content, and there are many quirks that come with maintaining an online space. My name is Hannah, and in my role as web editor and visual designer, I strive to keep our digital publication looking and functioning at its best. This work ranges from solving unforeseen problems in the backend of pages and posts to designing graphics and virtual postcards for our social media presence.

Our four-person team also includes assistant editors. Elena Cronick and Sabrina Hirsch, who having graduated couldn't participate in making this video essay, copy-edited and posted all our content, often communicating with filmmakers to determine if a piece was a good fit for us and making the changes filmmakers requested to pieces after revision.

As social media coordinator, I, Jessica, write, post, and moderate *agnès films's* social media content on Twitter and Facebook. I take our own content and links that members post on the Facebook page and share them as Twitter posts. I also design social media postcards and banners.

As the co-founder and editor-in-chief, I communicate with filmmakers and writers from the time of their original inquiry to seeking their approval for the final piece. I work with them on drafts until all parties are satisfied that a piece is ready for copy-editing. I also write the grants that support us, hire our staff, set up goals for team members during our weekly meetings, and provide feedback for design and social media matters.

Credits

Written and Narrated by

Alexandra Hidalgo, Hannah Countryman, and Jessica Kukla

Cinematography by

Alexandra Hidalgo and Nathaniel Bowler

Additional Photography by

Hannah Countryman, Jessica Kukla, and Lindsey Spitzley.

Edited by

Alexandra Hidalgo

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Soundtrack

"Blue" and "Silk"

By Podington Bear

Downloaded from
Soundofpicture.com

Ambient Sound

"The Sound of Deep Forest"

By craftport

Downloaded from
freesound.org

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