DATA FEMINISM

5 Questions on Data and Civil Rights with Mariana Valente

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By Catherine D'Ignazio with editing by Isabel Carter

Image courtesy of Mariana Valente

Mariana Valente is one of the directors of InternetLab, an independent research center based in São Paulo, Brazil, that focuses on the intersection of law and technology in online spaces. She holds a PhD in Sociology of Law from the University of São Paulo and is a researcher at the Center for Law and Democracy at the Brazilian Center for Analysis and Planning (CEBRAP). Valente has also written and edited several books on human rights and Internet policies, copyright and access to culture, knowledge, and education, and gender and women's rights and technologies.

In *Data Feminism*, Lauren Klein and I draw on Valente's work at the InternetLab developing anti-hate speech practices for the Internet age in "The Numbers Don't Speak for Themselves." In that chapter, we discuss the Desmond Patton's work in which young Black men's language on social media being improperly categorized as violent when, in reality, they are simply quoting lyrics. Valente has encountered many such examples in her own work, leading her to conclude that context is crucial for understanding social media conversations. I spoke with Valente about InternetLab in 2019. What follows is a transcript of that conversation. It has been edited for clarity.

How did InternetLab begin?

We started five years ago, wanting to be a think tank based in the city of São Paulo. I used to work at the Center for Technology & Society based in Rio, which was perhaps the first center in Brazil to be looking at legal and digital rights issues. (It wasn't even called digital rights back then.) I worked there for two years, and there wasn't such an organization here in São Paulo. We — Francisco Brito Cruz, Dennys Antonialli, and I — had been collaborating and wanted to start something. At first we were working inside the university.

Eventually, we decided to be independent. It's very bureaucratic to work inside the university, especially if it's a public university. It's difficult to raise funds, difficult to spend funds. It makes sense because it's public money, but we wanted to do something more flexible. So we started this tiny institution that's now become much bigger. We're now 15 people working at InternetLab.

When we were starting, I had a personal interest in bringing those subjects together: gender and technology. I'm sure there were many other people in Brazil with those same interests, but it wasn't a subject you could study at the time. To get around this, digital rights organizations tended to ground their work in more recognized fields. Now,

feminist organizations are of course concerned about the Internet, but at the time, it was not that common. That was 2014 that we started.

Tell me about the SlutWalks.

So I had done some research on nudity online. I had a hunch — that's actually confirmed now — that there was something there because of these SlutWalks that were going on in Brazil and because of how they were being documented and posted on social media. This was from 2012 on.

A lot of different people were starting to study this movement. If you look it up in the academic repositories in Brazil, there are many studies about the SlutWalks — *Marcha das Vadias* (from papers to dissertations). It felt like a trend at the time. So there are these two researchers from CEBRAP, Fabíola Fanti and Jonas Medeiros, who have done extensive research on all feminist street demonstrations since the '90s in Brazil. They showed that there's been an impressive rise in street demonstrations after the SlutWalks.

They built a database on street demonstrations, and they were showing how the SlutWalk was really important for the feminist movement in Brazil because it brought a new grammar. One of the things they're discussing is the role of the Internet in that because it was an international movement, and there was international grammar of placing your body in the streets, being viewed. Also, it was a new generation of feminists using new repertoires, which were different from the old repertoires of the previous generation of feminists, who were occupying important positions in the government at the time.

There had been this movement of institutionalization for the older generation of feminists. Whereas at the same time a new grammar was being developed, like using your body, nudity, speaking about sexual freedom in new ways. And many movements were built on the Internet as well. But of course they were much stronger when they had a physical base. So that's what they were discussing. And I'm saying that because at the time, in 2013, I started studying that because I was realizing that many of the images of SlutWalks that were being posted online were being blocked by Facebook. Sometimes there were images that were even printed on newspapers, were being sold in the streets, and then when they were uploaded to Facebook, they were blocked. So I was really interested in that subject of nudity and body autonomy and terms of service and how all those things played out. I was comparing local law to Facebook's terms of service,

understanding that at the time they were much more conservative, actually, than Brazilian laws.

That was a long time ago. Now we've discussed this over and over with Facebook. We're always having meetings with Facebook to tell them about that. And they're always telling us that they have to have a general role for the whole world. Anyways, it's a complicated discussion but really interesting. Especially because they are just so many paradoxes. We're living in this moment with a very conservative government making laws in Brazil, and when it comes to the Internet we are ruled by national laws and the sort of "law" that stems from the Silicon Valley companies' terms of service.

Did that become an area of study for Internet Lab?

I was doing studies on that because I was seeing that happen. And I was seeing that was going to be an issue. When we started InternetLab, we decided to have this area of gender and technology. We had some meetings with activists and researchers at the beginning. We were showing them our plans, and it became pretty clear that there was one topic that was super urgent: violence against women online.

We focused a lot on that in our first three years. We had many concerns. First, that there was a big divide at the time between the digital rights community and the women's rights community. The digital rights community was pretty much avoiding discussions that involved crime and violence on the Internet, because the way that discussion was being conducted was very conservative.

There were many bills before the Marco Civil da Internet, which is basically an internet rights framework. Before that, there were many bills trying to criminalize online crime. But, always, the opposition was built around stifled speech. So the digital rights community was pretty much worried about not thinking of it as a place for crime and not allowing for the discourse to grow because it was being used in very conservative ways. In research that I did about nudity, actually, I found that there was a lot of scholarship about how children's rights and nudity and explicit content were also being used in the U.S. for very conservative ends in the '90s with the Communications Decency Act.

So, at that time, the digital rights community said, "No, we don't want to discuss this." And if you talked to women's rights organizations or activists, or especially women who

were very visible and were going through violence, they had the complete opposite discourse. They were concerned about anonymity, about making platforms liable for online content. Since we have legal backgrounds and all these issues mattered to us as well, we were looking at this and saying, there is a need for doing more research into that and bringing those communities together.

This has changed a lot by now. Most digital rights organizations now care about online violence, and we found ways to talk about this, making sure that all stakes are considered somehow. It's not easy, there are many paradoxes involved. But one of the things we've been managing to do — or trying to do at least — with our research,and the digital rights community is increasingly doing, is saying, okay, of course we have to think of free speech. *But free speech for whom?* Because it seemed like the previous discourse on digital rights was considering the general subject. The universal subject, which is always the white male.

We've been trying to develop many different research projects and bring more complexity into these subjects. And things have changed a lot. Women's rights movements are also concerned about free speech because they know that they can be censored. So it's a different political moment in Brazil right now, and we're also reinventing ourselves.

Tell me about another major initiative you've worked on with the InternetLab and what you learned from it.

We started doing some other initiatives because we were aware that it's important to speak about online violence, but we need to speak about other things too. So some of the research we did was on the use of the Internet by domestic workers in the city of São Paulo.

We did action research. We had groups of domestic workers developing the research with us. And then we applied a survey only with women domestic workers. And because women are more than 90 percent of domestic workers in Brazil, we decided we were just going to research women.

There were many different things that we were trying to find out. The relationship between technology, territory, and reproductive work. The different resources. And we were talking to them about privacy. We found out they're very concerned about privacy.

Very concerned. And it was interesting because there's this common idea in Brazil that people don't care about privacy because we're very open. But these domestic workers all knew very well the tools to control privacy on their social networks. They didn't have it as a data privacy concern, but more as a security concern, because they live in very vulnerable communities.

They were basically saying, "If I post about my life — if I post that I'm traveling, for example, they know that I'm not at home. That's dangerous." Or, "I don't want people to see that I have a TV in my house." So they had a different concern about privacy that actually had to do with the inequality they were facing. I'm also a woman in Brazil. But I live in a relatively safe neighborhood in a safe building, and I can post travel because no one's going to break into my house. So it has to do with those differences that different women face. And we realized that we were speaking of privacy always in this sense of data privacy. Like what companies are going to do with my data, and how my data is being sold. And they were showing us a completely different side of privacy.

One of the things that we talk about in Data Feminism is this idea of embracing pluralism — this means including multiple voices and different perspectives in a participatory knowledge-making process. Participatory methods like you just described do exactly that. What was that like for you? Did you feel like it made for better research?

For sure. Yes. We had two workshops with 30 domestic workers. The first one of them was to present the research or hypotheses and see what their questions and hypotheses were. And they formulated some of the questions that we then applied to the survey. We were getting to know each other also. But the most interesting part, I think, was the second workshop. That was for analyzing the results. And that was very impressive, because some of the results we got, we wouldn't have been able to understand them.

We just looked at them quantitatively. So this information that they were concerned with their privacy because of their own home security — this was something they told us. Because we were thinking of data, privacy in terms of like marketplaces, and we were just asking like, "How concerned are you about your privacy?" And the sort of questions we made were, for example, "Do you think before you allow someone into your social networks?" Things like that. And they were analyzing the results later and would say, "Yes, of course, we are concerned about our privacy."

Around 50 percent said they were *very* concerned about their privacy. We were shocked. But they explained the results to us. One other result that was very shocking was that we were thinking that probably the Internet can help these women a lot to find jobs. And the answer was not at all. It was just 13 percent of women that said that they felt safe about finding work online. What they were telling us, was that they had experiences, or their friends had experiences, in which they weren't paid after they had worked, or they were harassed at work.

So, none of us at InternetLab were domestic workers. They were showing us another side of things. That they wanted to work in the house of a person they could trust. That they preferred to work at a place of someone they knew. So social ties were much more important for them in that case. And we thought, they would find work online, that would be great. And they said, "No, we don't want to use apps. We don't want to look for jobs on Facebook."

Staying in contact with them has been a challenge since the research ended. But one of them has been coming and presenting the results with us. And that has enriched the presentations a lot.

You can follow Mariana Valente (@mrnvlnt) and InternetLab (@internetlabbr) on Twitter. InternetLab is currently working on a multi-year research project about online hate speech against women, in partnership with IT for Change, based in India. They want to understand how normalization of misogyny is taking place, perceptions around it (and how they are changing), and how the legal framework in place is being used to deal with it.

Data Science Feminism Civil Rights Research Technology