

## **Crafting Intellectual Community Online**

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### **Abstract**

By closely reading the video works of "Snappy Dragon and Sexy Cyborg," this paper explores how the two creators assert a personal identity that is strongly tied to their embodied experiences as women, each with distinct interests and positionalities. The first is a Jewish woman interested in historical clothing and identifying dress, and the other is a Chinese woman interested in cyberpunk and augmentation. In addition to the thematic links in their work, both assert their personal agency by explaining their making process in ways that showcase the conceptual considerations of the project through to the material execution, inviting viewers to engage in similar considerations by taking up a making practice of their own. I argue for an intellectual community that develops outside the academy and enables collaborative thought across physical and temporal distances. My research thinks through these invitations in relation to the theoretical work of Hannah Arendt (1958) and Paulo Freire (1970), drawing on ideas related to the formation of an intellectual community of peers through a dialogic method which can then be reinterpreted in relation to the unique challenges of the internet as a new site of education beyond the academy.

**Keywords:** *public realm, intellectual community, Makers, YouTube, textiles*

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## Introduction

As part of the ongoing discourse about educational spaces, the inaccessibility of the university, and the systematic marginalization and oppression that happens within it, seems to be something that can be taken as a given. Especially within the context of the conference that York University hosted in May. In response to these issues, my research expands beyond the traditional academy to explore how intellectual communities, focused on sharing knowledge and skills with the opportunity for critical dialogue, form online, specifically in Maker communities on YouTube. While there is a temptation to argue that leaving the academy will miraculously solve issues of inaccessibility and systematic oppression, an examination of these spaces suggests that while the intellectual community is possible online, they also in many ways replicate the larger social issues that are prevalent within traditional educational spaces. This paper uses the case studies of Snappy Dragon and Sexy Cyborg on YouTube to examine the different ways that issues of exclusion and oppression appear in the online intellectual community but also to argue for the possibility and potential of these spaces for forming productive intellectual communities through creative practices and alternate educational strategies that emphasize dialogue and participation.

The concept of the Maker has been considered in a range of contexts since the early 2010s, as researchers and participants explored the boundaries of this type of practice. Much of that research has focused on the ways that Makers can move offline and transition into the 'real' world. This includes the seminal text by Chris Anderson (2012), *Makers: The New Industrial Revolution*, which argued for the Maker as a new figure for entrepreneurship within a capitalist model. Since then, research in this area has expanded to less-commerce-focused contexts, particularly education. For example, in *Makeology: Makerspaces as Learning Environments*,

Peppler, Halverson, and Kafai (2016) explore the pedagogical potential for Makers to model educational activities in the physical classroom. Across these areas of study, there has been some inconsistency in the application of the term and a single standard definition remains elusive, leading to this paper's approach that considers the Maker in relation to more established areas of theoretical study in both politics and pedagogy. In contrast to many of the prominent discussions of Makers which posit the role of Makers in the offline world, this paper is concerned with discussing Makers in situ, in the online spaces for which they create content for a wide audience. Given the range and diversity of such creators, the two case studies being discussed are taken as particularly rich examples. However, through their connections to the wider Maker community, they also provide paths outward for future more expansive studies.

### *A Theory of the Maker*

I identify the two creators discussed in this paper as part of the online Maker community, a concept that was popularized by the work of people like Adam Savage (of MythBusters fame) but has developed into a rich and diverse space where a variety of creators pursue a wide range of creative practices. In my work, I define Makers as separate from replication-focused Do-it-yourself (DIY) in their emphasis on community members being able to contribute incremental changes or developments to ongoing, collectively-designed, but individually-created projects. In this definition, the practices of creators like Snappy Dragon and Sexy Cyborg are inseparable from the online community spaces that they work within. Their practices are not just defined by their use of materials or methods, but also by how they produce content that responds to their digital peers.

I understand these digital spaces through Hannah Arendt's (1958) notion of community, as developed in her later work from 1958 onward, through the public and private realms, and the

rise of the social that infringes on these established spaces through pressures towards conformism and echo chambers. Arendt suggests that specific qualities with large implications characterize appearances in the public realm. Arendt (1958) writes, “If action as beginning corresponds to the fact of birth, if it is the actualization of the human condition of natality, then speech corresponds to the fact of distinctness and is the actualization of the human condition of plurality, that is, of living as a distinct and unique being among equals” (Arendt, 1958, p. 178). Arendt is particularly interested in the notion that the life of the mind and the ability to form individual opinions is core to the individual's functioning. However, she also argues that part of human nature is the need to bring all those ideas together. The idea of plurality points to the ways that differing ideas and opinions should not overwrite each other. The goal is not to come to a single way of thinking, but rather for the public realm to be filled with competing ideas which are upheld and debated by the people who move through that public space. The plurality speaks to the importance of discussing ideas in public, but Arendt (1958) does not want to lose sight of the importance of the individual saying that people must live as “a distinct and unique being among equals” (p. 178). I argue that this contrast between the individual and the idea of a community of equals is very important when thinking about online Makers.

Arendt (1958) is deeply concerned with what she calls “the rise of the social”, where conformity overrides the sense of individuality and the possibility of challenging new ideas, which is a behaviour that is often observed online in how users create echo chambers (Arendt, 1958, p. 38-50). However, the Maker community continues to function with the sense of unique creators, who showcase their approaches and projects while recognizing that their work exists in relation to those around them. While disagreements happen and creators often tackle similar projects and problems in contrasting ways, there is a general recognition that alternative

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approaches are possible and that Makers can learn from engaging with each other's practice. In this way, the place and practice of the individual is not subsumed into a collective. However, there is still an emphasis on the sharing of knowledge so that it can be discussed and developed by the many other people who participate in that space. I think this openness to differing opinions and the importance of plurality of ideas within online Maker spaces grounds the understanding of these spaces as Arendtian public realms.

The creators discussed in this paper exist within these types of spaces. At the same time, each works on individual areas of interest while maintaining a sense that their work is made possible by and contributes to the larger discourse. They are not lone geniuses but rather inhabit a community of peers where they take up ideas, make criticisms, and work collectively on problems within the discourse. Snappy Dragon and Sexy Cyborg do not speak to each other expressly. However, their ideas are linked by their approaches to presenting content and the issues they take up, as each woman applies their Making practice to an exploration of femininity, hidden labour, and what it means to be visible in a female body. Turning to a closer look at these two Makers, there is also the opportunity to examine how they respond to the oppressive systems that push back against their work. A surface-level analysis of their content reveals typical Maker strategies which encourage viewers to learn and practice new skills, but upon deeper exploration, each creator's content emphasizes an awareness of the particular lived experience of the creator in relation to the skills they teach.

Even when understanding Makers as a part of an Arendtian public realm, these creators must still be interpreted in relation to offline systems of oppression and bias replicated in online settings. In *The Intersectional Internet* (2016), editors Safiya Umoja Noble and Bredesha M. Tynes bring together explorations of digital spaces that emphasize the need to understand and

grapple with the ongoing marginalization many diverse creators experience online. In the collection, Noble and Tynes strongly emphasize the need to develop critical race technology studies. In the introduction, the editors state:

[Critical race technology studies] allows us to interrogate naturalized notions of the impartiality of hardware and software and what the Web means in differential ways that are imbued with power. It allows us to examine how information, records and evidence can have greater consequences for those who are marginalized. Unequal and typically oppressive power relations map to offline social relations in ways that are often, if not mostly, predicated on racialized and gendered practices. (p. 4-5)

When considered in relation to the gendered and racialized systems that allow the internet to function, the participation of the creators discussed in this paper in the public realm offers an opportunity to challenge the ways in which oppressive systems are replicated. The prevalence of education in their content, as well as the emphasis they place on personal lived experiences, creates a critical intervention into the public realm, while the reception of their content in wider online communities continues to underline the ways in which the internet perpetuates the kind of “typically oppressive power relations” that Noble and Tynes point to (Noble & Tynes, 2016, p. 4-5). After considering two case studies, this paper will also bring in the work of Paulo Freire (1970) to build an interpretation of these creators as educators who intervene critically in gendered and racialized spaces.

### ***Snappy Dragon and the Exploration of Historical Jewish Clothing***

The typical vision of historical costuming, even as it exists as a subculture community on YouTube, is filled with fancy dresses and debates about the uses and misuses of corsets. These

topics are taken up in interesting ways. However, without delving into the deeper layers of this community, a visitor might overlook how these Makers, primarily women and femmes, think critically about the historical narratives and seek out voices that may have been erased or suppressed. Snappy Dragon is a Jewish-American woman who researches and recreates historical clothing from Jewish communities, often thinking about what it means to find the regular history of Jewishness and celebrate ordinary joy in the face of historical tragedy, but also acknowledging that even before the yellow star of Nazi Germany, identifying clothing has been forced onto Jewish people (Snappy Dragon, 2020).

Snappy Dragon presents deeply researched videos and a level of sensitivity to what identifying dress may bring up, but she is also ultimately presenting information that invites viewers to take up their sewing needles and engage in a material practice. Her 2020 video, *What did medieval Jews wear? 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> century hair and veil tutorial* becomes a microcosm of how Maker content, in general, and Snappy Dragon's in particular, refuses to be just one thing. She begins by acknowledging that this video is a project of reclaiming an element of history that might otherwise be traumatic or negative. She gives the sewing instructions for the veil, a design dating back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century in Italy, but also emphasizes that the design and created piece can only be fully understood and worn through a deep understanding of the history (SnappyDragon, 2020). The design of this particular veil maintains the deep significance of the blue and white stripes in Jewish culture; the function of the veil as antisemitic came much later as an appropriation of dominant Christian European culture. She acknowledges that her contemporary experience of the veil may differ from her ancestors, but for her, the wearing of the identifying veil is an empowering act that makes her body and experience visible as that of a Jewish woman (Snappy Dragon, 2020). This discussion is entwined with the practical elements of creating and

pinning the piece for use. In the paradigm of Snappy Dragon’s channel, the practical skills of craft production, ones that have been in use for centuries, are inherently connected to the ways that she grapples with history. In what Paolo Freire might describe as an implementation of a “problem-posing” education (Freire, 1970), Snappy Dragon moves beyond imparting a useful skill to viewers and instead speaks to the problem of how to participate in historical discussions that oppressed your ancestors and continue to be a source of marginalization today.

In a 2022 video titled *Why we dress up: Reflecting on Anukkah, historical dress, and Jewish heritage*, Snappy speaks more directly about what she finds powerful about encountering her marginalized history in the form of historical costuming (Snappy Dragon, 2022). For her, it is an opportunity to seek out the regular and ordinary lives of her ancestors rather than just the moments of tragedy; it is an opportunity to encounter them in the context of their everyday lives and their celebrations of the same high holidays that she still practices. Both the act of research and the time and energy that goes into the sewing of the garments are a pathway to understanding and connecting with a past that might otherwise be difficult to spot. This video is also notable because even though she is not visibly working on any particular sewing project, she maintains the values of dialogue and information-sharing that is important to the pedagogy of online Makers. The video begins with responses from her viewers and community members when asked why they are interested in historical costuming. She also points viewers to other creators who explore these issues, including Muse and Dionysus, who engages the history of black Tudors as a contemporary Black woman, and CationDesigns, who works with traditional Chinese textiles (Snappy Dragon, 2022).

While the video is primarily of Snappy Dragon talking about her own deeply personal experience, she points to the other people who are challenging the same issues of historical

erasure through their practice within the Making community. This refusal to abandon her lived experience aligns with Arendt's insistence that conformity prevents a productive public realm from functioning. Arendt's call for "distinct and unique beings" (Arendt, 1958, p.178) and Snappy Dragon's participation in spaces which usually privilege Christian European experiences reasserts that Snappy Dragon's lived experiences do belong in the public realm, that discussing these issues and learning from her experience are a part of acknowledgement as a peer.

### *Sexy Cyborg and the Augmented Self*

The gendered gap in Making is something that often remains unspoken, at least in the sphere of high-tech, which is predominantly male. When the silence on gender politics is occasionally broken, the community demonstrates a defensive and reactionary response which become flashpoints for considering these issues. In 2018, that response was turned against a female Chinese Maker, Naomi Wu, who participates in the online Maker community under the handle Sexy Cyborg. The internal Maker community conflict was further amplified by a VICE article (Emerson, 2018) which broke boundaries that Wu explicitly set when agreeing to be interviewed and resulted in a messy situation which put the physical safety of several people at risk while exposing the far from idealistic ways that Maker community norms, particularly in tech, are enforced.

Wu's work as Sexy Cyborg emerged around her embodied experience as a woman, with her projects being focused primarily on wearables that emphasize explicit femininity with her large, augmented breasts and revealing wardrobe. In the wake of the controversy, Wu self-describes herself as, "a futuristics Chinese girl, 1/25 Synthetic, the rest Human. I am from Shenzhen – the most cyberpunk city in the world. I hack hardware, write code, and make things you've never seen before" (Wu, 2019). She claims her embodied experience as a cyborg with a

synthetic form and her ability to create that body herself. Wu's ability to create, and engage with the principles and core values of the Maker community, was at the heart of the controversy as Makers on Reddit and other platforms had been accusing her of not being the creator of the projects she wore, suggesting that instead they were made by her tech-educated partner. This conspiratorial debate demonstrated underlying biases about the intellectual and physical capabilities of women, implying that one could not be both beautiful/sexy and competent in a chosen field of expertise.

It was Wu's discomfort with addressing the brewing conspiracy theories about her work that led to the situation with VICE, which was then further complicated by the American publication's lack of sensitivity to the precarity of politicized speech in China. In 2018, Naomi Wu agreed to be interviewed for a VICE profile on her work, and leaked emails would later show that she clearly established boundaries about what she was willing to discuss, including her relationship status and family, to protect her personal safety from individuals in the public and consequences from the Chinese government. Just prior to the visit from reporters, she emailed to confirm:

Off limits stuff -I don't talk about my relationship status or my sexual orientation. China is China and it's a complex issue that is sometimes dealt with in pragmatic ways – and my focus is on other issues. It's just a lot of trouble here that I don't need at this point.  
(Wu, 2018).

Wu's email demonstrates the circuitous wording that Wu used throughout the entire controversy, likely to avoid further risking her safety with statements about the potential implications of an article that was not written with cultural sensitivity in mind. However, after the initial interview was completed, the situation collapsed with VICE publishing an article that violated the

previously agreed-upon boundaries and put Wu's personal safety at real risk. In response, Wu doxed one of the editors at VICE, an action that, in turn, put his physical safety at risk and, as such, should be condemned, being both ineffective as a way of explaining her position and creating a situation that could easily result in harm. The situation continued to devolve, with VICE denying they had done anything to violate agreed-upon boundaries and condemning Wu's doxing of their editor, while Wu defended her desperation and fear of consequences in the very different cultural landscape of China. The ethics of the situation are complex and, while I would suggest that both parties acted recklessly, there is an underlying dismissal of the validity of Sexy Cyborg's content as Maker creations. By focusing on this gendered undercurrent in the situation, there is a much more relevant starting point for a discussion of how a theoretically meritocratic system of information and education sharing reproduces the biases and exclusionary forces of more traditional intellectual spaces.

Sexy Cyborg draws attention to gaps and boundaries within the theoretically meritocratic and open (Noble & Tynes, 2016) Maker community through her identity as both a Maker and a sexualized woman. Her work catalogue includes the facets I have already established as core to the Maker community. In her 2018 video, *LEBs – Cyberpunk wearable fiber optic implant transillumination*, Wu takes viewers through the process of creating a top with a lighting system that passes light through her breast implants resulting in a deep red glow that gives Wu the sexualized cyborg aesthetic that her handle suggests. From the beginning of the video, Wu makes it clear that the goal of the project is to explore further the properties of the material she has available to her – the silicone implants and her own body tissue – and walks viewers through the challenges that arise out of that exploration, which is primarily centered around the balancing of light powerful enough to create the effect, without being too hot and burning her skin (Wu,

2018). Similar projects of exploring a particular material or process are an accepted part of the Maker community. Wu's posting of the video opens the human tissue + silicone implant medium for further exploration and alternate problem-solving in line with the information-sharing values of the community. Read on its own, the video captures the features I have identified as core to the Maker community, as Wu shares processes in the public sphere and then responds to comments, questions and suggestions that arose in response to her work. In the reception and response to her work from the other participants, questions of exclusion arise, seemingly based on how female bodily autonomy are addressed in the oeuvre of the Sexy Cyborg channel.

Wu's uncompromising practice of taking her own body as material for her projects changes male Makers who, rather than accept her status, fall back on the idea that Sexy Cyborg is not their "peer" and is instead an unequal "outsider.". While male Makers may try and place Naomi Wu outside of their conceptions of the Maker's public realm, the online platform that she works in invites a new group of intellectual peers to form around her work who are capable of recognizing each other as "distinct and unique being[s] among equals" (Arendt, 1958, p. 178), thus pursuing the creation of a new public realm that better enacts the Arendtian notion of what it means to be in intellectual community with others.

### ***A Problem-Posing, and Problem-Seeking, Education***

What becomes clear through the work of Sexy Cyborg and Snappy Dragon is that gendered discrimination and the exclusion of othered bodies and selves is not solved simply by removing oneself from the traditional academy. Just like the academy reproduces the patriarchy, colonialism, racism, transphobia and homophobia of the wider society, those issues permeate the online sphere - even in spaces that seem progressive and welcoming. However, I would suggest that the open nature of internet communities, and the emphasis on participatory dialogue offers

models for how more radical pedagogies can be implemented. By considering the role that education plays in these two creators' content, we can think more deeply about how Snappy Dragon and Sexy Cyborg enter the public realm. As demonstrated through the case studies, both creators present a view of themselves in dialogue with a community of online participants while asserting individual identity through lived experience, in line with the key elements of how people participate in Arendt's notion of the public realm. However, the work of Noble and Tynes (2016) also tells us that the internet can only be understood in relation to larger themes of systematic oppression that are then replicated online and must be actively challenged, which I would suggest is happening through an educational program in line with the framework of critical pedagogy.

For me, this connects to the work of Paulo Freire (1970) as a starting point through his notion of problem-posing education, where teacher-students and student-teachers engage in a dialogue that is focused on understanding an issue and exploring solutions rather than on replicating information that is to be memorized but not critically engaged. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1970) writes:

[Those truly committed to liberation] must abandon the educational goal of deposit making and replace it with the posing of the problems of human beings in their relation with the world. 'Problem-posing' education responds to the essence of consciousness - intentionality - rejects communiques and embodied communication. (p. 79)

We see this in how both creators present the issues and materials they work with. Snappy Dragon reflects on what it means for her as a contemporary Jewish woman to make and wear the clothes that her ancestors were forced into, speaking both about the difficulty of finding the facts of those histories and her grappling with what historical costume means for her in the face of

antisemitism. Working in a completely different set of materials and contexts, Naomi Wu shapes herself into Sexy Cyborg with her body augmentations, new technologies, and adapted textiles while asking what it means to become a cyborg, hybridizing with technology and asserting her ability to shape and celebrate very visible sexuality. These creators do not simply speak about the use cases for a given material, or recite historical facts about female agency, rather they explore with the acknowledgement that they are engaging with an audience who may have productive thoughts to add and that they rely on the labour of many people who have come before them. They do not suggest easy solutions or answers. Instead, they suggest that the best course of action is to continue to explore and experiment in dialogue with a community of peers who are similarly capable of both learning and teaching.

What is particularly powerful about these types of practices in online Maker communities is how their practices undermine any argument that radical pedagogy began with Freire or any other singular figure. Instead, they point to how knowledge has passed within the home, often in the face of oppressive or negative situations. Cid Cipolla (2019) points to this in her article *Build it better: Tinkering in feminist maker pedagogy* where she argues for Maker spaces both online and in the physical classroom as continuations of the problem-seeking and problem-solving that women, femmes, and people perceived as women have been doing in often unappreciated and overlooked contexts (Cipolla, 2019). These types of collaborative learning and the passing along of information predates the internet, existing in many offline learning spaces that have also been overlooked by the academy but the moving online invites in a much broader public who can offer new problems, ideas, voices, and solutions.

Craft, particularly textile practices, are traditionally viewed as women's work and have been historically downplayed because of their role as often unseen domestic labour. However,

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Jack Bratich and Heidi Brush (2011) reframe these practices in the context of current activist practices. In their article, *Fabricating Activism: Craftwork, popular culture, gender*, they discuss how textile makers, artists, and craftspeople have brought their practices into the public realm as a means of asserting the importance of both their current labour and the history of those practices. Brush and Bratich (2011) write:

Just as we have argued that space is reconfigured through fabriculture [the contemporary practice of working with textiles and fabrics], time undergoes this process as well.

Weaving a history can go a number of ways here: Is fabriculture part of an unbroken thread of practice? Or does it entail dropped stitches? In any event, breaking history up into segmented eras and placing craft into one of them would simply cut up fabric into strips. Relegating craft culture to a past folk or to a purely new phenomena would diminish its critical powers, thus continuing the project of devaluing affective labor and disciplining gendered production. (250)

A problem-posing education as understood by Freire is another strand that weaves into this long history, and as Bratich and Brush argue, the past of these practices and the ways we hope to bring them into the future are inseparable. Despite their obvious differences in the materials and styles they use, Snappy Dragon and Sexy Cyborg are part of this move into the public realm where they assert their agency and control over the ways that their bodies and their work are seen, inviting viewers to take up similar practices and join the dialogue about how to tackle the problems of exclusion, marginalization, and erasure through the sharing of knowledge, ideas, and experiences.

### **Conclusion**

Radical pedagogy, learning in other words, has traces that extend back beyond the internet, but what I hope this paper communicates is that the Makers of YouTube and other social media platforms are currently embodying some of these practices outside of the traditional academic spaces in ways that support collective learning on platforms with far lower barriers to access than a university. These spaces are not utopic -- Snappy Dragon and Sexy Cyborg both encounter oppressive and exclusionary systems in their digital work -- but looking at the projects and practices of these women and the communities they inhabit shows a way of enacting a problem-posing education where the process of creation and exploration is shown without prioritizing a singular correct narrative. Moving beyond the work of Freire, whose impact is both profound and well-established at this juncture, these online Maker communities show that the long history of craft and the way it has been taught across generations offers additional strategies for learning and making together. In the face of an academy that underrepresents and restricts marginalized voices, Snappy Dragon and Sexy Cyborg also invite us to engage with the voices who have not been allowed to join us here, to take the dialogue of online intellectual communities seriously, and to open dialogue with the discourses of those spaces as potential sources of learning and teaching alongside formal schools and universities.

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