

From “Interested” to Showing Up: Investigating Digital Media’s Role in Montréal-Based LGBTQ Social Organizing

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ABSTRACT

Background *This study investigates the role of digital media in LGBTQ social organizing through a textual and visual analysis of media produced by two Montréal-based event series: locally run open mic nights and dance parties hosted by an international company.*

Analysis *The authors’ analysis identified three influences of digital media: a) Facebook pages and linked materials framed boundaries of inclusion for physical gatherings; b) platforms and apps overlaid physical and digital instantiations of events; and c) platforms’ digital economies contributed to the precarity and risk associated with organizing and attending LGBTQ events.*

Conclusions and implications *The findings further demonstrate how geographic and social elements can be integrated into digital media to embed events within a local community. However, continued precarity and risk come with the use of digital media for grassroots LGBTQ social organizing. Additionally, commercial apps can gifify events without investing in local resources and people.*

Keywords *New media; Electronic culture; Feminist/gender; Visual communication; Community networks*

RÉSUMÉ

Contexte *Cette étude examine le rôle des médias numériques dans l’animation socioculturelle chez les communautés LGBTQ au moyen d’analyses textuelles et visuelles des médias produits par deux séries d’événements à Montréal : une soirée de scène ouverte et des soirées dansantes animées par une compagnie internationale.*

Analyse *L’analyse des auteurs a identifié trois influences des médias numériques : a) les pages Facebook et les documents associés encadraient les limites de l’inclusion pour les rassemblements physiques; b) les plates-formes et les applications superposaient les instanciations physiques et numériques d’événements; c) les économies numériques des plateformes contribuaient à la précarité et au risques associés à l’organisation et à la participation à des événements LGBTQ.*

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Conclusions et implications *Les résultats démontrent également comment des éléments géographiques et sociaux peuvent être intégrés aux médias numériques pour enraciner des événements au sein d'une communauté locale. Cependant, il existe toujours la précarité et des risques personnelles inhérents à l'utilisation des médias numériques dans l'animation socioculturelle LGBTQ. De plus, les applications commerciales peuvent tirer profit des événements sans investir dans les ressources et les communautés locales.*

Mots clés *Nouveaux médias; Culture électronique; Féminisme/le genre; Communication visuelle; Réseaux communautaires*

Facebook remains a key mechanism of social organizing into the 2020s. The authors' News Feeds abound with a range of local events, from activist marches to goat yoga and late-night dance parties. Appearing through Facebook's mobile and desktop instantiations, events are also sometimes promoted cross-platform, appearing on Instagram, dating apps, and ticketing websites. Facebook events appear with an "Interested" button, made eye-catching through a star that transforms into a checkmark when clicked. Depending on Facebook users' privacy settings, this action adds their names to a list of others who are interested, publishes their interest to their networks, and subscribes them to updates that often urge the "interested" to push the "Going" button and show up.

Since Facebook endures as a key outlet for publicizing lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ)¹ events in Montréal, this article presents an examination of event pages and their associated media to understand organizers' approaches for drawing users to hit the "Interested" button. Further, it explores how event pages integrate and map on to local social-geographic spaces, especially as mobile media enable targeting physically proximate potential attendees and publishing real-time updates as events unfold. Montréal is a particularly interesting site for these explorations, given its history of LGBTQ activism and vibrant queer communities. Following the grassroots activism of the 1970s to the 1990s (Hildebran, 1998; Remiggi, 2000), the 2000s saw the augmentation and immense commercialization of LGBTQ spaces, with Fierté Montréal—the city's annual Pride festival—becoming the largest in Canada and the Francophone world (Cyprien, 2018). Likewise, patterns of gentrification and heterosexualization similar to those in other Canadian urban centres (Ghaziani, 2014; Nash, 2013) emerged in Montréal's Gay Village, resulting in its subsequent domination by mainstream commercial venues generally catering to upper-middle class white men. Despite these shifting landscapes, Montréal has had a long-standing queer cabaret and grassroots social scene, embodied in performance and dance parties like the iconic Meow Mix "for bent girls and their buddies" (McLeod, Rault, & Cowan, 2014, para. 1). More recent commercialization has also been met with grassroots and community initiatives, often occurring outside the Village, and even explicit backlash, such as alternative Pride events organized by more "radical queer" groups (e.g., Pervers/cité, n.d.).

While commercial dance parties and grassroots social gatherings often function according to different aims or interests, the publicity, promotion, and organization of events has become centralized on Facebook. This article examines the role of digital media in two different LGBTQ event series to determine how social media and apps

are used to frame social gatherings. In conducting visual and textual analysis of Facebook pages and linked digital media for events hosted by a grassroots community organization and a commercial events company, we identified three notable and contrasting influences of digital media on event series. These included a) the framing of events through their digital presence, pre-delineating boundaries of inclusion and exclusion; b) the creation of hybrid spaces (de Souza e Silva, 2006) overlaying physical and digital instantiations of events and shaping their relationship to the local social-geographical context; and c) the integration of LGBTQ social organizing into contemporary digital economies that emphasize sharing, spontaneity, and constant relationality. In analyzing these influences of digital media, we expand upon Adriana de Souza e Silva's (2006) theory of hybrid spaces to consider the relevance of local geographic and social factors in digital event communication. We also highlight how elements of the digital economy contribute to the precarity of LGBTQ social organizing efforts and provide observations on the ways inclusive discourse is differentially employed within social media organizing.

Activism, commercialization, and queer sociality

Social connection and political challenges to heteronormativity have gone hand in hand for LGBTQ people. LGBTQ gatherings give rise to counterpublics that challenge the assumed heteronormativity of public space (Warner, 2002). Such publics lend political power to highly visible Pride marches and LGBTQ venues within gay villages (Brickell, 2000; Castells, 1983). Sexual connection has historically been politically charged, with police raiding sites of LGBTQ sexuality, such as bars and bathhouses, throughout the 1960s and 1970s. While Stonewall and its resulting riots are publicly resonant instances of this political reality, Canada has its own history of police raids on gay and lesbian bars and sex clubs, resulting in political action (Nash, 2013). Alongside physical instantiations of counterpublics, LGBTQ people have long produced media, from newspapers to radio shows, constituting what Rodríguez (2001) calls "citizens' media," which empowers communities to enact change. LGBTQ-generated media has the capacity to bring people together and forge social connections which, in turn, can foster activism and political change.

Despite this, LGBTQ movements are often fragmented and disparate. Moussawi (2015) reminds us that LGBTQ organizing is comprised of multiple subject positions and intersectional struggles within and across a variety of organizations. From gay liberation adherents to lesbian feminists, political organizing in North America has often been fraught with discursive efforts to delineate boundaries of inclusion and exclusion surrounding movements (Smith, 1999). Marginalized groups are often situated outside these boundaries; for example, Ware (2017) illustrated how racialized and Indigenous activism and histories are often erased from LGBTQ archives and memories. The emergence of "queer" as a movement and set of politics in the 1990s aimed to bridge these divisions (Jagose, 1996) by rejecting hegemonic binaries and other categorizations that reinforce social divides permeating lines of sexual orientation, class, race, and gender (Eng, Halberstam, & Muñoz, 2005). However, queer's integration into mainstream parlance as an umbrella term for LGBTQ people now carries variable degrees of political efficacy, depending on its use.

In recent decades, LGBTQ social organizing has responded to intensifying neoliberal political and economic contexts. Barnhurst (2007) cautioned that visibility could foster not only tolerance but also assimilation and relegate LGBTQ people to a market niche. A shift toward campaigning for equal rights in the 1990s and 2000s, focusing on the right to same-sex marriage, has given rise to homonormative political approaches emphasizing LGBTQ people's normality and similarity to heterosexual people (Richardson, 2005). Within heteronormative logics, consumption is a means to citizenship, in terms of full social and economic participation, as multiple brands and corporations pander to the "pink dollar" (Sender, 2004). In turn, politically charged Pride marches have been replaced with heavily branded events, which Browne (2007) has termed "a party with politics" (p. 1). Montréal's Gay Village has likewise been scrutinized as a site of hypermasculine representation catering to affluent and English-speaking male tourists (Ray, 2004). To separate themselves from the concept of a "gay" neighbourhood and its narrow views of hypermasculinity and homonormativity, those identifying as *queer*—primarily Anglophones—are moving away from organizing in the Village. Instead, they are opting for neighbourhoods perceived to be more welcoming to a wider diversity of people and that oppose the commercial culture of the Gay Village such as the Mile-End (Lecavalier, 2018). Although commercial campaigns have often targeted White gay men for their increased earning power over other sexual minorities, the greater visibility of minority identities has led to more elaborate targeting of market niches, such as through parties promoted to Hispanic queer women (Squires, 2019).

Many grassroots organizations as well as individuals, such as lesbian and bisexual women, are facing systemic barriers to financial security in the face of rising rent prices and gentrification. Consequently, their living and gathering spaces have become dispersed across cities (Ghaziani, 2014; Podmore, 2006). Media reports convey how venues for LGBTQ women are disappearing from Montréal and Toronto as businesses and organizations are unable to keep up with rising rents (Paré, 2018; Xtra Video, 2018). However, Gieseking (2016) argues that even as these material spaces shift over time, women's imagined lesbian-queer spaces across cities play an important role as welcoming spaces for queer bodies and lives.

Hybrid digital sociality

Digital and mobile technologies increasingly play a role in the formation of imagined, immaterial, and material LGBTQ spaces. From early email listservs to today's social media, these technologies have enabled dialogue and facilitated the formation of publics and counterpublics among LGBTQ people (Cooper & Dzara, 2010; Gray, 2009; McLean, 2014; Siebler, 2016; Wakeford, 1996). However, contemporary social media and apps introduce sociotechnical arrangements that warrant further investigation in relation to LGBTQ social organizing. The use of digital media within other kinds of social movements has been widely studied, with scholars identifying that social media enable information exchange and rapid mobilization (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Many studies have focused on large political actions organized through social media, which garner broadcast media's attention to form "hybrid media systems" (Chadwick, 2013) that operate across old and new media formats. Analyzing Canada's Indigenous movement #idlenomore, Callison and Hermida (2015) built on the concept of hybrid

media systems to identify how social media enable multiple voices to contribute to an issue, facilitating “resonance” that constructs “the movement’s collective identity” (p. 713). While organizing through social media is often paired with in-person protests or gatherings, this online dialogue plays a key role in pre-defining such actions. Mobile media also frame smaller scale in-person encounters. For example, the streamlined interface and conversational norms of Grindr—a social networking app with a large user base of men seeking men—contribute to framing future in-person meet-ups as sexual encounters (Licoppe, Rivière, & Morel, 2016). As digital media plays a role in framing social interactions, this study extends a growing line of research (Dhoest & Szulc, 2016; Miles, 2017) that examines how LGBTQ publics and counterpublics interface with the locales in which this technology is used.

Contrasting with early conceptions of the internet as a virtual space, scholars have underscored how digital media permeates physical space and off-line relationships (Daniels, 2009). According to de Souza e Silva (2006), mobile technologies extend this permeation, giving rise to “hybrid spaces,” which she defined through three qualities. First, hybrid spaces constitute a “merging of borders between physical and digital spaces, because of the use of mobile technologies as social devices” (p. 265). She underscored that mobile technologies do not in themselves construct hybrid spaces, but the social networks mobilized across physical and digital space give rise to a hybrid space of sociality. Second, hybrid spaces emerge as mobile interfaces, bringing social networks into physical spaces. Whereas “static” computer desktops require individuals to enter digital networks from bounded locations, mobile interfaces allow users to bring along their networks as they traverse public space. Lastly, hybrid spaces constitute social spaces that reconfigure interactions with nearby others and the physical space they occupy. Hjorth and Lim (2012) similarly observed the emergence of “mobile intimacy” among individuals connected digitally and physically, as mobile technologies enable an “overlaying of the material-geographic and electronic-social” (p. 478). Although de Souza e Silva’s theory of hybrid spaces focused on location-based gaming and emerging mobile activities in the early 2000s, the widespread uptake of smartphones in Canada over the past decade contributes to an everyday permeation of mobile devices into physical space (CRTC, 2019). Individuals function seamlessly across space and devices to participate in digital publics that are anchored in physical locations or generated due to proximity. This hybridity is reflected in studies of dating apps, which generate a co-presence among gay and lesbian users, enabling connection even if individuals are physically situated in heteronormative spaces (Blackwell, Birnholtz, & Abbott, 2015; Tang, 2017).

The modes of profit generation used by platforms shape the configurations of, and practices associated with, hybrid spaces. Since user data provides the main revenue source for platforms, such as Facebook and free apps, their policies, infrastructures, and features encourage sharing widely in exchange for sociality (Papacharissi & Gibson, 2011). This results in a “default publicness” that Cho (2017) observed is potentially harmful for LGBTQ people, especially LGBTQ youth of colour, as a design logic that can inadvertently “out” them to unwelcoming acquaintances in their networks. Research confirms that social media’s imperative toward sharing leads LGBTQ people

to develop strategies for containing and selectively communicating information about their sexual identity (Hanckel, Vivienne, Byron, Robards, & Churchill, 2019).

The digital economies propelled by social media also shape modes of labour and marketing approaches associated with sociality and social organizing. While the labour of women, racialized people, and immigrant communities has long been devalued and precarious, Baym (2018) reflected on how an increasing number of jobs have become subject to gigification through social and digital media. Individuals view themselves as entrepreneurs who must sustain a digital persona and potentially lucrative connections through “relational labour”—“the ongoing, interactive, affective, material, and cognitive work of communicating with people over time to create structures that can support continued work” (p. 19). This work supports sporadic “gigs” and piece-meal jobs that combine to allow individuals to earn a living. The gig economy is sometimes more generously referred to as the “sharing economy” since individuals implement their own resources in the work (Martin, 2016), such as by sharing their homes as AirBnB hosts or, more abstractly, sharing their social capital to direct attention to an artistic endeavour (Baym, 2018). Despite promises of flexibility and low barriers to entry, the gig economy has given rise to an increasing number of individuals working precarious jobs while their labour channels money into platforms hosting gig work (Stemler, 2017). Platforms and businesses also take advantage of hybrid spaces through “brand activations” invoking digital and physical engagement at events, such as through custom hashtags and Instagrammable displays (Carah & Angus, 2018). Digital media’s framing and facilitation of hybrid spaces within this economic context raises questions about how social media and apps shape LGBTQ social organizing.

Methods

As two queer media scholars who have relocated to Montréal from elsewhere in Canada, we were particularly interested in how social media was implicated in framing the local meeting spaces of LGBTQ people in this city. Although we found social media to be a common route to discovering social gatherings, we often hit the “Interested” button but did not, in fact, show up. As we subscribed to but rarely attended events, we found ourselves as observers, noting how particular “queer” event series caught our attention. We chose to focus on two event series that called for wide participation from “queer” people but contrasted in their approaches, with one as a grassroots endeavour and the other originating in a commercial context. We aimed to identify how such different events were framed and promoted through similar platformed arrangements of digital media. Given the impact of gentrification on the social organizing of sexual minorities, we specifically selected event series focused on engaging participation from individuals other than white gay men. Our analysis began with the most prominent digital promotion of events, which occurred through Facebook event pages, and branched out to linked media and apps.

The Montréal-founded GENDER B(L)ENDER: open mic queer (hereafter abbreviated to GB) began in May 2013 and continued on a near monthly basis until May 2018. In this time, more than 40 editions of GB were held across the city, hosting 600 performances including drag and burlesque—following the traditions of past Montréal queer cabaret event series. The majority of performers belonged to the

QTPOC (queer and/or trans people of colour) community, as well as other non-binary and trans communities (La Mackerel, 2019). Recognizing that intersectional and often marginalized identities are frequently rendered invisible in more mainstream gay and lesbian spaces, GB's founder, host, and organizer, Kama La Mackerel (2018) recalled in a Facebook note the series being

a space that i created to fill the void that i felt when i moved to montreal 6 years ago: i was hungry ... for community spaces that would welcome me, even if i wasn't one of the cool queers, even if nobody knew me, even if my art was not polished.

Although GB was held in multiple venues, this study focused on the most recent events held in its final location: L'Euguélonne, librairie féministe (feminist bookstore). We analyzed the Facebook event pages used to publicize GB open mic nights as well as the linked bookstore website that provided more information about the venue and its mandate.

The other event series consisted of dance, party, and music-themed events organized and hosted by HER, which describes itself as follows:

With over 3.5 million users and live in over 55 countries, HER App is the world's largest dating and social networking app for LGBTQ+ women and queer people. HER is also the largest international LGBTQ+ events company for women and queer people globally. (HER App, 2018a)

Initially launched in 2012 as the lesbian dating app Dattch, this company rebranded its app to serve a wider range of female-identified queer people while attempting to remain competitive as a dating app through Silicon Valley models of marketing (Murray & Ankersen, 2016). In addition to managing the mobile app, which enables users to match with each other, chat in community forums, and view nearby events, HER hosts physical events in multiple cities across the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia; Toronto and Montréal are the only Canadian locations. Seasonal parties are organized by locally based "Her ambassadors" and publicized through Facebook events and the HER App. We examined the Montréal Facebook event pages, app announcements, and linked ticket and venue websites.

For each event series, we conducted poststructural textual and visual analysis (McKee, 2003; Rose, 2012) of digital media relating to the most recent events as of July 1, 2019. This analysis involved close reading of Facebook event pages, including the description, banner image, and posts made by the organization, which ranged from reminders to memes aimed at generating interest among potential attendees. We also analyzed venue information and links from Facebook event pages to further media (e.g., promotional YouTube videos and performers' Soundcloud pages). Counting each post, image, and linked webpage as a media artifact, our analysis comprised approximately 140 media artifacts for HER and 100 for GB. Some media artifacts were larger, such as press releases, while others were short posts, but even memes and reminders were discursively rich texts for analysis. We iteratively coded the content for individual events from each series, identifying descriptive, topical, and analytic codes (Berg, 2009). Analytic codes were then compared and contrasted across event series to iden-

tify emergent themes (Morse & Richards, 2002). Theoretical saturation was reached after analyzing six events from each series, encompassing GB events from September 2017 to May 2018 and HER events from June 2018 to June 2019. Our analysis incorporated our growing local knowledge of Montréal's geographies as well as the practices and norms of its LGBTQ communities.

Since our analysis focused on the digital media used to organize these events, we examined only posts made by the organizers, not individual users' posts. This was also an ethical choice, respecting that attendees might not anticipate that their social media activity would be re-contextualized (Eynon, Fry, & Schroeder, 2017), whereas organizers' social media activity is intended to be viewed widely and shared to boost promotion. We paid attention to how the platforms involved—mostly Facebook but also the HER App, ticketing platforms, and performer websites or social media accounts—shaped organizers' approaches to publicizing these events. For this reason, our analysis is limited to the digital media concerning events and does not extend to the physical spaces in which events took place. This opens up the opportunity for future research that extends online observations into physical space to further understand how digital organizing shapes in-person experiences of events. Our findings invite such endeavours as our analysis illustrates how physical and off-line elements of place, networks, and social and economic relationships became instantiated in these events' digital promotion.

Findings and discussion

Three key themes emerged from our analysis, indicating the role of digital media in organizing these LGBTQ events. These themes reflected how Facebook pages and associated media (a) were used to construct boundaries of inclusion and exclusion for events; (b) facilitated the creation of hybrid spaces across specific locales; and (c) enabled constant, relational forms of organizing that carried elements of precarity for LGBTQ gatherings, venues, and individuals. The following sections elaborate on these themes, and our conclusion identifies their implications for LGBTQ social organizing.

Boundaries of inclusion and exclusion

Digital media surrounding events were pivotal in identifying who they were *for*—not only in terms of explicit statements about desired participants or attendees, but also through subtle indications about who was welcome. Both series described their events as “queer” and being for “queer” people, but this term took on a different meaning in GB's event media in contrast to HER's media. GB's recurring event description notes, “GENDER B(L)ENDER is a space for queer performances including music, poetry, drag, projections, comedy, ‘experimental art’ and YOU” (La Mackerel, 2017). GB positions itself as a radical space of queering Montréal's art scene, not only based on performers' gender and/or sexual identities, but by challenging hierarchies of performance art. La Mackerel (2019) states, “Drag, gender-bending, gender-fucking are appreciated, as is anything that pushes boundaries.” By pushing the boundaries of what constitutes traditional open mic performances to encapsulate a multitude of art forms relating to a queer audience, GB provokes imaginaries of counterpublic gatherings, which are in tension with and break away from the norms of dominant publics (Warner, 2002).

Images and text descriptions on GB's Facebook event pages reinforced messages of queer inclusivity. The banner image, which appeared in various formats across events, featured the outline of a food blender on a pixelated chromatic background with each event posting a unique design and/or colour scheme (Figure 1). Changing colour schemes across events supported a sense of queer fluidity, whether in gender identity, expression, or sexual orientation. The final event banner showcased a collage of images from past events, which included diverse portrayals of gender non-conforming people, unicorns, rainbows, hearts, and butterflies alongside the iconic blender—avoiding distinct identity categories while reinforcing the event's non-normative aesthetic. When defining what constitutes queer community, GB underscored that its events were “a safer space where folks from LGBTQ+ communities can have access to a stage without being judged” (La Mackerel, 2017). This safer space was instantiated through the following post on each event page:

**Figure 1: Banner from Gender B(l)ender 38:
open mic queer à l'Euguéllonne**



Source: La Mackerel, 2017

GENDER B(L)ENDER, as an open mic, strives to be inclusive, experimental but also safe(r) for the audience as well as for the artists. Therefore, this space aims to be an anti-oppressive space: so please keep any sexism, homophobia, transphobia, racism, ableism etc. and any other oppressive language or behaviour out of the space. Performers are also requested to issue trigger warnings before their performances, should their performance be triggering, as well as make sure audience consent is obtained if a performance requires audience participation. (La Mackerel, 2017)

By explicitly stating expectations for conduct, GB shifted from the use of “queer” as an event descriptor to its use as an *act* of inclusion, the *work* of forging queer identities (Gray, 2009), through fostering behaviour that counters oppression, obtains consent for participation, and traverses boundaries of gender, race, and (dis)ability. This too reflects the framing of events as counterpublic spaces, fostering a space of regroupment (Fraser, 1990) protected by these stipulations, which then allows for a visible difference from and challenge to heteronormative and homonormative publics.

In contrast, HER's frequent use of the term “queer womxn” is part of a rebranding strategy rolled out in 2018 (Brabaw, 2018). Intended to welcome trans and non-binary people, queer womxn is used as a catch-all term for female-identified LGBTQ people. Despite this official wording, the media and organizations affiliated with the HER events observed tended to narrow the definition of their intended participants. For example, a June 2019 event featured performers from the “Girlie Circuit Festival” on tour from

Barcelona, Spain. Sponsored by HER, Girlie Circuit's tagline read "international lesbian festival." A very small section in the festival's FAQs noted "transsexual public is absolutely welcome" (Circuit Festival, 2019), but lacked information about whether or how the space was inclusive to those with gender identities outside of "lesbian" and "transsexual."² Salah (2007) noted how queer women's events have a legacy of excluding trans people even when they include welcoming discourses. Some posts on HER's event pages also implied that imagined attendees identified as lesbian, often communicated through memes (Figure 2). Memes invoke humour to draw boundaries between in-groups and out-groups, hailing an intended audience in ways that can exclude others for whom the joke does not resonate (Miltner, 2018).

HER events were also variable in the degree to which they defined event spaces as inclusive across sexuality and race. Only the Guapa—A Queer Latinx Dance Party Facebook page included a warning resembling GB's stipulations stating, "Any racist, misogynist, homophobic, sexist, classist and/or transphobic behaviour will not be tolerated and you will be asked to leave" (HER App, 2019). Assertion of an inclusive stance was likely meant to augment participants' sense of safety in attending a Latinx-themed event, anticipating racism that could arise with whiteness being decentred. In contrast, a concert featuring CupcakKe, a Black female rapper who has vocalized support for LGBTQ people, lacked any information about inclusion, let alone wording specific to LGBTQ audiences. The event was co-hosted with several non-LGBTQ event companies and co-sponsored by the beverage company Monster Energy. HER's involvement was indicated only through its logo on promotional materials and event notifications sent to HER's Facebook followers. The Guapa and CupcakKe events were exceptional in their focus on women of colour, while the other event pages included more images featuring women who appeared to be white or fair-skinned in posts about performers and DJs, in memes, and in photos from past events. Thus, HER appeared to be enmeshed in the corporatization and commercialization of LGBTQ identities (Sender, 2004; Squires, 2019), defaulting to interpellations of homonormative subject positions that downplay elements of difference apart from sexual identity (e.g., race, gender diversity) and speak to majority market niches (e.g., White, lesbian) (Richardson, 2005).

Across event series, digital media was used to construct boundaries of inclusion relating to language—an important factor in Québec, where French is the official language, and Montréal, a multilingual urban centre. Although Facebook does not enable

Figure 2: Meme from HER Pride Party Facebook page



**My girlfriend hasn't
texted me in 3 hours
which is 6 months in
Lesbian Time**

Source: HER App, 2018b

toggling between languages for event titles, GB's use of "open mic queer" placed the adjective after the noun to enable interpretation of the English "open mic" as an anglicization of the French term, *scène ouverte* or *scène libre*. This not only nodded to Montréal's language fluidity, but it opened interpretation of what was being defined as "queer." Although HER uses the term "queer womxn" across its international branding, the term was sometimes similarly reversed to "womxn queer" on Montréal pages. Both event series used point dividers to incorporate masculine, feminine, and plural forms of French nouns to convey gender inclusivity (e.g., *ami.e.s* for a gender-inclusive format of "friends"). Despite l'Académie française (2017) condemning this practice, we have observed that such use of *l'écriture inclusive* ("inclusive writing") is increasingly common in Montréal's social justice spaces.

Lastly, digital media was often used to articulate boundaries of accessibility, though with varying degrees of detail. GB provided a large amount of accessibility information, including considerations for people with mobility reductions or adaptations. Both L'Euguélonne's website and Facebook event pages aimed to be transparent in disclosing details of potential barriers, such as wheelchair inaccessible bathrooms. In contrast, HER's event pages included a single line of information noting whether the space was inaccessible, partially accessible, or fully accessible to "people with mobility limitations," sending potential attendees searching for further details regarding other accessibility factors. GB's aims toward increasing accessibility speak to an effort of crafting a queer counterpublic that is also in tension with ableist discourse and material arrangements in dominant publics. Therefore, GB's inclusive framing extended beyond gender and sexual identities to include diverse bodies and (dis)abilities.

Localized hybrid spaces

Our findings reflect the qualities of hybrid spaces outlined by de Souza e Silva (2006) while revealing the importance of local geographies for such spaces. First, Facebook event pages and associated media served the purpose of "merging of borders between physical and digital spaces" (p. 265) through the framing illustrated in the previous section. Event pages garnered attention for and provided a sense of how an event would occur in a particular space and time. Since the event series were not tethered to a single venue—GB had two earlier homes prior to L'Euguélonne—networked media in the form of social media pages, ticketing websites, and apps were necessary for maintaining an event's digital presence when its physical manifestation was subject to change.

Second, as de Souza e Silva (2006) observed that hybrid spaces allow for existing social networks to be brought into a physical space, event-related digital media enabled GB and HER to draw on existing networks and grow their followings, with indications that this event-related digital media subsequently filled event spaces. GB's originator, Montréal-based artist and public figure Kama La Mackerel, pulled together networks of QTPOC artists, both established and emerging, who contributed to GB's popularity. As an international company, HER appointed local ambassadors to generate networks in each city. The Montréal ambassador prominently displayed an affiliation with HER on a personal Facebook account and re-posted event announcements there. HER events reached existing LGBTQ networks through Facebook-based cross-promotion with other local events alongside the HER App's location awareness, which automatically adds

local events to users' feeds. Facebook's algorithms extended the reach of both event series to members of related networks, such as by displaying event pages to friends of those attending and listing them for geographically proximate users on the platform's Events tab. Both Facebook and HER's mobile interfaces brought events to users' attention when they were in social and physical proximity to venues and organizers.

Third, digital media for these two event series enabled the formation of new social spaces, which reconfigured interactions among individuals and within physical spaces (de Souza e Silva, 2006). Event pages constituted emergent social spaces where organizers' messages interpellated anticipated attendees, fostering users' engagement with the online event space and each other, with hopes that this would permeate into the physical event space. GB experienced a notable increase in engagement across event pages, jumping from 200 "interested" or "going" Facebook users for Event 38 to more than 1,000 by Event 41. La Mackerel sustained interest on event pages by posting updates and responding to questions from those interested in performing. La Mackerel also recruited volunteers and posted photos from around the physical event space, including snapshots of venue setups, refreshments, and established QTPOC performers to fuel excitement in advance of an event. Increased interest in GB eventually led to full houses, which La Mackerel managed by posting during events that the venue was at capacity. Their use of mobile media in the moment, while embodied in the physical event space, managed this hybrid social space by bringing a sense of the physical space into Facebook pages, aiming to invoke further involvement from potential attendees or volunteers. La Mackerel's posting in real time also managed people's expectations of the event by keeping them informed and re-directing crowds if necessary.

HER's Facebook event pages opened up a social space revolving around discourses of fun-loving nightlife culture. Attendees were reminded to purchase early bird tickets in order to "spend yo monies on tequila instead" (HER App, 2018b). Pages were adorned with photos of women in bikinis or revealing outfits while memes, videos, and other posts communicated sexual innuendos and jokes. Announcements on Facebook during events encouraged attendees to arrive early to avoid lines and to get free HER-branded swag. Photos posted after events enabled attendees to tag themselves and engage in dialogue about the evening. With a photo release clause included on each event page notifying individuals that the purchase of a ticket gave consent for photos to be taken and posted, HER also used these images in subsequent event promotion in ways that perpetuated a sense of community and sustained participation.

HER photos brought evidence of the physical and temporally bounded event into the digital space of the Facebook page. As McBean (2013) noted, Facebook photo albums from LGBTQ events accumulate into queer digital archives, tracing a queer historiography that is often lost. Indeed, Cowan and Rault (2014) underscored the difficulties and labour involved in creating community-generated archives, making HER's records and labour on behalf of attendees seem invaluable. The possibilities of such an archive preserving queer women's gatherings sits in uneasy tension with both HER's commercial reuse of images and the hosting of these photos within Facebook's database, where individuals have little agency over the context, storage, or long-term retention of images. Despite this, albums and event pages altogether provide a new

social space; as de Souza e Silva (2006) noted, social spaces occur through relationships among people and objects in the merging of the physical and digital. Relationships of event goers to the event and each other are captured in photos of their physical interactions and activities (e.g., drinking, dancing), which also form connections among Facebook, users, HER organizers, and tagged friends when the photos are uploaded to event pages.

In addition to the qualities of hybrid spaces outlined by de Souza e Silva (2006), our analysis uncovered another: the capacity of hybrid spaces to bring aspects of the geographic/physical space into a digital context. Elements of venues, locations, and the existing sociocultural milieu associated with local neighbourhoods had the potential to shape an event's digital instantiation. For GB, L'Euguélonne was a significant venue choice. Although the venue is located in the Gay Village, the bookstore's feminist mandate subverts the exclusory trends of gentrification toward male-dominated venues for affluent patrons. As a non-profit co-op, it hosts events without a money-making imperative, allowing GB to function as a "pay what you can" event. This was in contrast to HER events at commercial venues, with ticket sales ranging from \$10 to \$35. L'Euguélonne's proximity to public transit offers direct access to three of Montréal's four metro lines, including two that provide access to distant suburbs. HER events, scattered throughout the downtown and other hubs of commercial nightlife, were less reliably situated near metro lines. Gray (2009) suggested the need to decentre urban politics of visibility that inadequately represent queer youth outside of urban areas. While the municipalities outside Montréal are not considered "rural," queer visibility within the suburban landscape has unique considerations when it comes to logics of visibility and queer publicness (Tongson, 2011). The bookstore's accessible location enabled the attendance of suburban queers who were introduced to GB thanks to social media's traversal of urban/rural boundaries. With GB's physical grounding in an accessible, feminist, non-profit locale, its digital media was imbued with a sense of close connection to Montréal and localized grassroots networks of LGBTQ people.

In some instances, local geographies were also pulled into HER's hybrid spaces: many event performers, promoters, and DJs were Montréal-based and publicized their work through HER's Facebook pages, linking to personal websites or Soundcloud accounts. Some images were Montréal-specific, for example, Girlie Circuit's otherwise generic tour banner was photoshopped to include the city's iconic Farine Five Roses sign. However, HER's international corporate direction gave rise to a more universal feel for event pages and app announcements. Unilingual memes, photos of unnamed women kissing at rainbow-laden festivals that did not appear to be located in Montréal, and photos re-posted from unidentified HER events gave the sense that these Facebook pages could be promoting an event in any urban centre. HER's standard branding across events intensified this non-specificity.

In one sense, HER's generic digital branding appeals to the mobile and networked nature of events: if a person is travelling with their mobile phone and becomes alerted to a HER party in proximity, they are able to anticipate a standard kind of commercial gathering with others who feel identified in HER's event framing. However, de Souza

e Silva (2006) noted that “hybrid connections also change the perception of the physical space the users inhabit” (p. 271), in the sense of mobile media bringing individuals into places they would not normally venture and sparking attention to the particularities of city spaces. We view GB’s integration of Montréal’s specific queer culture, alongside its accessibility and price—communicated through event pages—as inviting users into a new engagement with the city and its frequently marginalized queer communities. GB’s Facebook pages communicated a sense of the geographic-social landscape prior to individuals physically attending events, opening up the possibility of new perceptions and connections through this digital overlay.

The precarity of queer labour

Digital arrangements involved in organizing these LGBTQ events contributed to elements of risk and precarity for attendees, participants, performers, and the organizers themselves. Since Facebook fosters “default publicness” (Cho, 2017) through features and algorithms that connect otherwise disparate audiences, engaging with an event page could contribute to individuals being outed. Guest lists and the inability to post anonymously make individuals’ Facebook activity trackable. Being tagged in photos, such as in HER albums, propels event-related media into friends’ News Feeds. While GB did not post event photos, participation on Facebook or in person could have been interpreted by others as an indication of LGBTQ identity. La Mackerel (2018) recognized this in the event series’ goodbye letter, which stated that GB had witnessed “multiple coming outs.” For some, this visibility can be empowering and can establish one’s belonging within a community. Event pages may reinforce this sentiment, as they promote LGBTQ events in ways that hint at “utopic queer futures” (Muñoz, 2009) and may provide a broader sense of queer space across the city. However, for many multiply marginalized communities, such as trans women of colour, this visibility may lead to an increased subjectification to violence and discrimination (Jefferson, Neilands, & Sevelius, 2013). The economic imperative toward data generation on platforms, whether as engagement to bolster Facebook’s targeted advertising or in the form of event photos for future HER promotion, can threaten LGBTQ people’s safety and limit their agency over the spread of identity-related information across audiences.

Organizing through digital media can also be precarious due to the relational labour it requires, which may eventually lead to burnout. As opposed to HER events, which come with support from the international company and ready-made branding materials, the job of creating and sustaining communication with GB participants was solely La Mackerel’s. In an open letter posted on the final event’s Facebook page, they wrote, “i have reached a point where i unfortunately need to cease planning and hosting GENDER B(L)ENDER, so i can focus on my personal life, my loved ones, and other projects” (La Mackerel, 2018). Gorski (2019) cited the expenditure of emotional labour as one of the main causes of burnout resulting from activists’ personal connection to a cause, where a sense of personal responsibility leads to emotional and physical exhaustion. Similarly, GB’s roots in anti-racism and La Mackerel’s identity as a transfeminine person of colour, cultural mediator, and educator likely carried a heavy sense of responsibility and emotional investment.

In the same letter, La Mackerel thanked QTPOC and trans women performers:

i want to thank everybody who allowed this space to exist, to thrive, to be so meaningful over the years ... the performers who courageously step on stage every month to speak their truths—y'all are my heroes <3; in particular every QTBIPOC³ who has every graced the stage, every trans woman who ever took the mic.

As Baym (2018) described, relational labour carried out through digital media requires “interpersonal closeness” (p. 22) as individuals expend emotional labour to foster affinity with their communities. Relational labour is often also associated with variable financial outcomes for individuals. While GB’s “pay what you can” model promoted inclusivity across socio-economic status, it did not provide sufficient compensation to sustain the organizer’s livelihood. This precarity permeated multiple aspects of events, extending to the underfunding of performers and venues. An earlier home of GB, L’Artère coop, hosted many such events for Montréal’s grassroots organizations but without a stable income, it ultimately succumbed to the consequences of gentrification and closed (Caron, 2017). Although grassroots and community-based LGBTQ gatherings have long struggled with financial sustainability, especially in the face of gentrifying gay villages (Nash, 2013), the relational labour required to maintain digital promotion intensifies organizers’ expenditure of emotion and effort toward relationship-building.

HER events hold a similar precarity for LGBTQ individuals, performers, artists, and venues, as they constitute the gigification of LGBTQ organizing. The international company and its app enable the execution of sporadic local events without investing in event-related infrastructure, such as a dedicated event space, since locations can be rented and events announced rapidly to those within proximity. Rather than hiring local permanent employees as communications specialists, the company recruits ambassadors to provide crowdsourced labour, and while some may receive compensation, other volunteers are thanked through the chance to receive prizes, free swag, and opportunities to intern at the HER headquarters (Her Team, 2015). Ambassadors engage in relational labour, using their social capital in the local LGBTQ scene to promote HER events and maintaining an affect of anticipation and excitement on events pages. Although ambassadors may have personal commitments to community-building, their Facebook posts from personal accounts are interspersed with posts from a main HER account with event promotion from either account largely reflecting neoliberal marketing targeting LGBTQ people (Richardson, 2005) with individualized appeals toward commercialized, glamorous lifestyles and nightlife culture. Since events occur irregularly, DJs, performers, and venues also cannot count on them as a reliable source of revenue.

The parties, however, appear to be congruent with the company’s overall business model. Ubiquitous advertisements for the HER App and widespread use of the HER brand in event pages and at events (evident in photos of women waving branded fans as free “swag”) attempt to motivate attendees to download the app to—as their tagline dictates—“find your person” while simultaneously providing a direct line of communication to promote other events and premium app subscription packages. Therefore,

the immersive party environment with pervasive HER branding constitutes a brand activation (Carah & Angus, 2018), compelling individuals to seek connections in person and through the app in ways that entrench the company in their dating and social practices. These combinations of datafication, event promotion relying upon relational labour, and app marketing in physical space intertwine LGBTQ organizing with a precarious, digitally facilitated gig economy, where technology companies are often the ones who emerge as the most financially stable (Stemler, 2017).

Conclusion

Through the comparison of corporate and grassroots event series in Montréal, this article has identified three key ways that digital media shape LGBTQ social organizing. First, Facebook event pages and their linked media serve to delineate boundaries of inclusion and exclusion in relation to sexual identity as well as gender, race, language, and accessibility. Although both event series employed the term “queer” in efforts to be inclusive, GB paired this with text and images constructing events as queer counterpublics, providing inclusive spaces of regroupment for marginalized populations, especially trans and non-binary people of colour, while challenging normative discourses of both sexuality and art. HER events, on the other hand, often used “queer” as a catch-all term while event media did little to counter the assumed dominance and comfort of White, cisgender women in public spaces, frequently speaking to those who identify as lesbian. Second, digital media enable LGBTQ events to function as hybrid spaces: Facebook pages overlaid physical events, allowing organizers to bring the attention of existing social networks to physical event spaces while also fostering new social configurations of people engaged across media and in-person events, as evidenced by digital and mobile media generated before, during, and after events. Our findings demonstrate how geographies, venues, and sociocultural understandings can be leveraged in hybrid spaces as they are integrated into digital media to embed events within local communities. Lastly, the economies within which digital media function can enhance the precarity and risk of LGBTQ social organizing. Datified profit motives, the expectation of relational labour, and the gigification of events without local investment in people and resources pose threats to the well-being and financial stability of organizers, participants, performers, and venues.

This research provides a multifaceted contribution to knowledge about the intersection of digital media and changing LGBTQ social-geographical spaces. It identifies that digital media play a key role in framing LGBTQ social gatherings, builds upon the concept of hybrid spaces by attending to their relationship with local conditions, and applies emerging concepts regarding digital economies to the present situation. This article also lends insight into how digital media is being leveraged for LGBTQ social gatherings, identifying different ways that inclusive discourses are either reinforced or contradicted through media choices and social media activity. Such insights may be useful to community organizers wishing to frame their spaces as inclusive and welcoming to a diversity of identities. Our research also identifies broader structural issues, in the form of commercial platforms and economic arrangements, that contribute to personal struggles of burnout and precarity for those aiming to be active and impactful in queer social life. We invite future research that builds on these findings to investigate

whether different forms of digital media and localized approaches to LGBTQ social organizing hold alternative outcomes.

Notes

1. Acknowledging shortcomings in umbrella terms (Barker, Richards, & Bowes-Catton, 2009), LGBTQ is used here to refer to people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other diverse gender and sexual identities, including but not limited to two-spirit, intersex, asexual, and pansexual.
2. This phrasing may also indicate a lack of consideration of trans identities, since many individuals do not identify as transsexual (GLAAD, n.d.).
3. QTBIPOC refers to Queer and/or Trans, Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour.

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