

DAZED

The feminist groups disrupting bro-tech culture in 2016

Text by Liz Pelly



Why has the narrative of computer history come to be defined more by images of Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg than by the pioneering work of Ada Lovelace, who is often recognized as the world's first computer programmer? This question and many others are increasingly being asked by women all across the spectrum of the tech world: from cyberfeminists and hackers who are deeply critical of Silicon Valley and the exploitative nature of the everyday corporate Internet platforms, to women working within the big-tech status-quo who have experienced harassment or who notice gender inequality all around them.

Before the 1980s, the number of women studying computer science was actually equal to or higher than the number of men. But beginning in the 80s, that number drastically declined. "The theory is that it had to do mostly with the early personal computers' marketing being directed at boys and men," says Addie Wagenknecht of Deep Lab, a feminist collective of researchers, artists, writers, engineers, and cultural producers. Throughout the 80s and 90s, it became a commonly accepted social narrative that computers were for boys, that gaming consoles were for boys, that 'hackers' were boys. These narratives paved the way for the bro-tech culture that exists now. "The market saw dollars, and the misconceptions became a billion dollar industry. It's these structural inequalities that formed restricted access to education and patronage, that have precluded women's full participation and autonomy that we are witnessing today. The male domination is so strong because 85% of the Western world thinks Facebook is the internet and they trust corporations more than each other."

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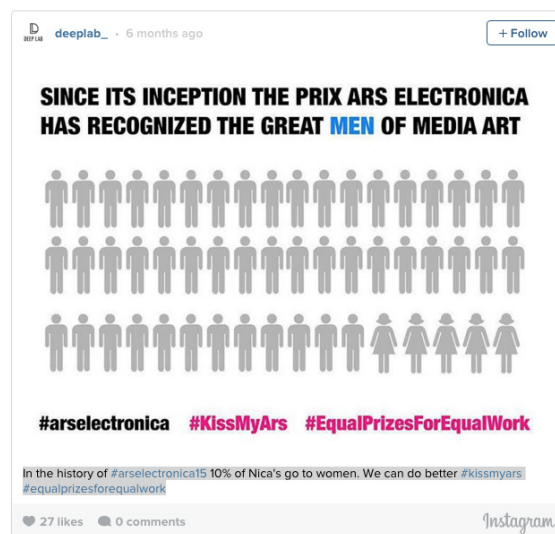
There are vast, wide-ranging initiatives that have surfaced in recent years to raise awareness of the stronghold white men have in tech, as well as direct-action efforts to teach women coding, hacking, and programming.

These sorts of initiatives are crucial in 2016, as tech culture continues to work its way into the fabric of our daily lives, and the shortcomings of digital culture reveal themselves more and more. One related initiative is Art+Feminism's annual Wikipedia edit-a-thon, which happens for the third year this weekend, a string of meet-ups where individuals will gather to edit articles related to women artists. The event centers around a main event in NYC, which takes place at the Museum of Modern Art on Saturday, and includes over 100 satellite edit-a-thons around the world as well (including at London's ICA).

The edit-a-thon's goals include making Wikipedia's female artist pages more comprehensive, and teaching more women to become Wikipedia editors. But even more, it's a day-long expression of information activism that encourages digital autonomy among women, encouraging participants to feel confident engaging with the infrastructure of the Internet. Read on to learn about four other efforts that, while varied in politics and scope, all exist at the intersections of feminism, activism, and tech literacy

SHE'S CODING

She's Coding is an organisation that grew out of the documentary CODE: Debugging the Gender Gap. The open-source project aims to provide education, resources and guidelines for anyone who wants to help bridge the gender gap in coding and computer science. "Considering that the representation of women in tech actually declined since the 80s, I think we can say with confidence that the problem will not solve itself any time soon," says co-founder & project lead Nathalie Steinmetz. "It seems that 2015 has been a very inspiring and constructive year for feminist movements overall - in the tech industry there rarely passed a day or week without major news discussing the lack of minorities working in technical jobs in the industry, the difficulties minorities face, their struggles. Minorities not only referring to women, but also people of colour, LGBTQ, etc. I think the industry is ready for a change, and organisations like She's Coding are needed to help drive it, to continue raising awareness, to provide ideas and solutions." Steinmetz points out the proliferation of organisations like Women Who Code and Girl Develop It. She's Coding is different in that it's not just focused on teaching women to code, but also on providing action guides to allies and companies who want to improve.



GIRLS WHO CODE

Girls Who Code is a national non-profit that runs summer-long immersion programs for high school juniors and seniors, as well as clubs for young girls nation-wide. Over the course of the program, girls learn to understand everything from computing and programming fundamentals, to mobile development, robotics, and web development through classes, talks, demos, and workshops. According to Girls Who Code's website, the summer

immersion also includes field trips to big-name tech companies like Google, Facebook, Twitter. And while Silicon Valley's status quo has problems beyond gender inequality, those problems will never begin to improve if the biggest companies remain totally run by white men. "Almost every girl we reach is stirring with untapped potential, no matter where she lives," Reshma Saujani, the founder and CEO of Girls Who Code, said in an interview with Amy Poehler's Smart Girls last year. "By 2020, there will be 1.4 million jobs available in the technology industry but women educated in the United States are only on pace to fill 3% of them. If that statistic is to change, we'll have to recruit and inspire as many girls as possible, and need to search for the talent and potential in as many places of the world as possible."



BLACK GIRLS CODE

Black Girls Code is an inspired organisation founded by Kimberly Bryant that runs workshops, hackathons and summer camps, all with the goal to teach tech and programming skills to young and pre-teen girls of colour. On the organisation's website, Bryant recalls feeling culturally isolated while studying engineering: "Few of my classmates looked like me. While we shared similar aspirations and many good times, there's much to be said for making any challenging journey with people of the same cultural background. Much has changed since my college days, but there's still a dearth of African-American women in science, technology, engineering and math professions, an absence that cannot be explained by, say, a lack of interest in these fields. Lack of access and lack of exposure to STEM topics are the likelier culprits." In a 2014 interview with Refinery 29, speaking on the ways to make workplaces more progressive in STEM fields, Bryant said: "We need to have women as role models, both inside and outside corporate America's leading tech companies, leading the path for other women... And then, (we also need) to hold the industry accountable. That means holding the VC community accountable, holding the corporate community accountable, holding all these different elements accountable to really create an inclusive environment (for women). Our voices need to be heard about the type of work environment we want to see, not just for ourselves, but for our daughters."



DEEP LAB

Deep Lab's research interests range from privacy and surveillance and code, to art, race, and capitalism. "Deep Lab started with the idea that creating a supportive environment for female experts in the fields of privacy, security, surveillance, and anonymity, would strengthen both our personal and community missions," says Addie Wagenknecht. "We've certainly had that experience, and are continuing to develop new projects and research. We're also laying the groundwork for satellite groups and events worldwide." The group initially convened in 2014, and has since held residencies elsewhere, including the New Museum in NYC. They have more coming up in 2016 and 2017.

"In Western Nations, every symbol of power is visually dominated by white men," she continues. "White men hungry for power have fucked up everything. That is our issue. Europe and America are the worst. As a result, as nations controlled by men, we are conditioned not to see women. There is a trauma to not being seen, as much as it exists for those being closely watched." And to an extent, that's what this is all about: women taking controls of the spaces and tools that allow them the agency to be seen, or not seen, but on their own terms.

The 2016 Art+Feminism Wikipedia Edit-a-thon takes place this Saturday March 5 at MoMA and the ICA, as well as other satellite locations globally.