

Carefully Navigating the Messiness of Community-Engaged Feminist Internet Research

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Abstract

Community-engaged feminist internet research is often complex, as researchers navigate the needs of communities alongside institutional expectations to produce knowledge that meaningfully serves local digital realities. Rather than viewing this complexity – or ‘messiness’ – as a weakness, this paper argues that it is a productive and necessary dimension of rigorous, care-centred research. Drawing on two recent studies, the Feminist Internet Research Meta-Research Project and The Left Out Project, the article illustrates how methodological uncertainty, ethical negotiation, and shifting contextual conditions shape feminist internet research in practice. Embracing and making visible this messiness enables greater reflexivity, supports more inclusive and accountable knowledge-making, and strengthens the ethical foundations of engaged research. The paper concludes with three recommendations for navigating the complexities of community-engaged feminist internet research: practising ongoing reflexivity, building communities of practice, and grounding research in an ethics of care.

Keywords: *community-engaged feminist internet research; engaged research; internet research; feminist research; messy research*

Introduction

“I know research has always been messy... And it’s a challenge to address it and work it out in your theory” (FIRN Research Partner 1).

Community-engaged feminist internet research sits at the intersection of relational practice, situated knowledge-making, and the shifting dynamics of working alongside communities whose digital and offline lives are shaped by structural inequality. Because of these conditions, such research rarely unfolds in linear ways. Instead, it demands responsiveness to context, to participants, to risk, and to the politics of knowledge production. Yet in

academic publication, these complexities are often tidied away, giving the impression that rigorous research follows an orderly, predictable path. This article argues the opposite: that the complexities and disruptions encountered in community-engaged feminist internet research are not only inevitable but central to ethical, reflexive, and transformative research practice.

To ground this argument, the paper draws from two recent feminist internet research projects carried out within the Feminist Internet Research Network: the Feminist Internet Research Meta-Research Project (McLean, 2022) and The Left Out Project, which explored online gender-based violence against transgender, non-binary, and gender-diverse (TNBGD) people in four African countries (McLean & Cicero, 2023). Across these projects, researchers encountered methodological uncertainty, ethical dilemmas, shifting access conditions, and unexpected findings, each revealing the kinds of ‘messiness’ that typically remain absent from final research reports.

Rather than treating these moments as problems to overcome or conceal, this article approaches them as sites of insight that illuminate how knowledge is co-created, negotiated, and shaped through care-full engagement. The next section therefore offers a conceptual grounding by defining *messiness* as a methodological and ethical condition within research, before moving to examples from the two studies. Through these reflections, the article demonstrates how embracing and making visible the messiness of community-engaged feminist internet research strengthens both rigour and care, and why doing so is vital for researchers committed to justice-oriented digital inquiry.

Defining Messiness in Research

Messiness is an inherent and unavoidable feature of research (Bloyce, 2004; Cook, 2009; Clark et al., 2007), yet it is frequently absent from published accounts. Despite researchers informally acknowledging being ‘in a mess’ at various stages of a project, academic writing often presents research as linear, predictable, and neatly structured (Cook, 2009, p. 279). This tendency reflects the longstanding association of ‘messiness’ with poor rigour, lack of discipline, or methodological weakness, an assumption reinforced by dominant research cultures that privilege order, coherence, and authority. Feminist, queer, and community-engaged researchers, particularly women and gender-diverse scholars, feel this pressure acutely, often working within disciplinary environments shaped by masculinist norms that reward detachment and certainty (Dadas, 2016).

However, messiness is not a methodological flaw but a generative space within which learning, reflexivity, and conceptual refinement occur (Cook, 2009; Dadas, 2016; Law, 2004). As Bloyce (2004) and Cook (2009) argue, attempts to eliminate complexity restrict what research can reveal: they encourage researchers to report what fits rather than what is, foreclosing the possibility of deeper insight. When researchers acknowledge unexpected turns, shifting participant needs, analytic uncertainty, or institutional constraints, they not only strengthen transparency but also validate the realities of knowledge-making as

lived rather than idealised practice. Messiness is therefore both methodological and ethical: it invites researchers to recognise the relational, situated, and evolving nature of inquiry, and to remain open to what emerges when neat categories break down.

Importantly, messiness is not merely the residue of challenges encountered during fieldwork; it is also enacted through the need to adjust research designs, rework research questions, negotiate positionality, and respond to ethical dilemmas (Billo & Hiemstra, 2012; Edwards & Mauthner, 2012). In community-engaged feminist internet research, where power, care, and participation are central, these disruptions become especially instructive. Messiness in this context signals attentiveness to participants' realities, responsiveness to context, and willingness to reconsider frameworks when they do not align with lived experience. Rather than impeding rigour, such openness strengthens the trustworthiness and transformative potential of engaged feminist scholarship.

Messiness, then, should not be concealed but invited (Elden, 2012). It is a site of possibility where new knowledge, ethical clarity, and collaborative insight can emerge. By naming and examining messiness, researchers contribute to a culture of transparency and care, modelling practices that support both emerging and experienced scholars in navigating the complexities of engaged research.

Engaged Research

Engaged research begins from the recognition that knowledge-making is neither neutral nor detached from the social worlds in which it is produced (Key et al., 2019; Tandon et al., 2016). Rather than treating research as an individual pursuit, or the property of academic institutions, engaged research positions knowledge as a public good shaped through reciprocity, dialogue, and accountability to communities. At its core, it emphasises co-creation: building knowledge *with* communities, not *for* them (Holliman, 2017). This ethos aligns closely with feminist internet research, which grounds inquiry in the lived experiences of those most marginalised in digital and socio-technical environments, including transgender, non-binary, and gender-diverse (TNBGD) people.

Engaged research is best understood as a spectrum of approaches united by participation, responsiveness, and collaboration (Key et al., 2019). Its strength lies in maintaining stakeholder involvement throughout the research process, from shaping questions to interpreting findings. Feminist internet research amplifies these commitments by insisting that the standpoints of those excluded from dominant digital narratives are not ancillary but central to understanding online harms and imagining more just digital futures (McLean, 2020). This shared orientation toward relational and contextual knowledge production foregrounds the responsibility researchers hold in shaping what becomes visible, whose voices are centred, and how power circulates through inquiry.

A range of theoretical traditions help clarify this grounding. Ecosystems theory highlights that communities are embedded within interconnected social, cultural, political, and technological systems, an especially useful lens for understanding online

gender-based violence, which moves fluidly across digital and offline spaces (Tandon et al., 2016). Critical theory, particularly in feminist and postcolonial scholarship, deepens this lens by interrogating how power structures shape both research relationships and the digital landscapes under study. Feminist internet research extends this by emphasising reflexivity, recognising that researchers' identities and positionalities influence not only data interpretation but also the conditions of participation itself (Billo & Hiemstra, 2012).

African philosophical traditions further enrich engaged research. Ubuntu centres relationality, interdependence and ethical responsibility (Letseka, 2012; Metz, 2014), reminding us that knowledge is inherently communal and bound to questions of dignity and care. Decolonial and Indigenous research paradigms similarly foreground epistemic freedom, social transformation, and the co-production of knowledge (Chilisa, 2012; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). These perspectives call attention to the structural hierarchies, inclusive of colonial, racialised and gendered, that shape whose knowledge is valued and how research proceeds. As Nyamnjoh (2019) argues, confronting these hierarchies is essential if research is to move beyond extractive engagements toward meaningful participation.

Within this landscape, community-based participatory research (CBPR) is often regarded as one of the fullest expressions of engaged research. CBPR emphasises mutual respect, shared decision-making, and equitable distribution of benefits (Mosavel et al., 2005). It recognises the expertise held in lived experience and seeks to embed research outcomes in community priorities to ensure sustainability and impact. In feminist internet research, these principles become vital for addressing the unique harms and possibilities of digital life, particularly for communities rendered vulnerable through online surveillance, harassment, or exclusion.

Despite its transformative potential, engaged research does not unfold seamlessly in practice. Scholars caution that institutional precarity, rigid bureaucratic systems, and entrenched hierarchies can constrain genuine collaboration (Heney & Poleykett, 2022; Rose & Kalathil, 2019). Even when researchers and communities are committed to shared power, structural conditions such as funding mechanisms, ethics approval processes and institutional expectations can reproduce inequality or limit participation. These critiques highlight that engaged research requires continual negotiation, not simply good intentions.

The ethical imperative of engaged research lies not in achieving perfect harmony, but in remaining responsive, adaptive, and attentive to the evolving dynamics of research relationships. This is especially true within feminist internet research, which extends engaged research into digital and socio-technical contexts shaped by rapid change, surveillance, and shifting forms of risk. In this sense, feminist internet research does not replace engaged research but deepens it - offering methodological, ethical, and epistemological tools for navigating complexity while remaining grounded in relational accountability, care, and justice.

Feminist Internet Research

Feminist internet research is a transdisciplinary approach that positions digital inquiry as both political and emancipatory. Drawing from feminist theory and praxis, it foregrounds lived experience, standpoint, and reflexivity as means of contesting the patriarchal, racialised, and colonial power structures that shape the internet.

Anchored in standpoint theory (Harding, 2004; Wylie, 2003), feminist internet research holds that knowledge is socially situated, and that those marginalised by systems of oppression may possess ‘epistemic privilege’ through the insight of lived experience. It is also deeply intersectional, following Crenshaw’s (1989) and Collins’ (1990) work in showing how overlapping oppressions co-constitute experience. Drawing on Haraway’s (1988) critique of “neutral vision” and Mohanty’s (2003) call for Global South women to “tell their own stories”, feminist internet research actively resists extractive research logics. Through a feminist ethic of care (Blakely, 2007), it centres accountability, reciprocity, and the well-being of participants, making feminist internet research both a methodology and a politics of transformation.

This emphasis on relational accountability also echoes African humanist philosophies such as Ubuntu, which foreground interdependence and ethical responsiveness within community life (Letseka, 2012; Metz, 2014). These shared values situate care and collaboration not only as feminist practices but as part of broader African epistemological traditions that understand knowledge as inherently communal and responsibility-bearing.

Drawing on feminist epistemologies, it insists on reflexivity, intersectionality, and care as methodological principles. However, as Rose and Kalathil (2019) remind us, calls for co-production and shared power often remain aspirational when institutions of knowledge production continue to privilege Eurocentric, rationalist, and white epistemologies. Without confronting these hierarchies, engagement risks reproducing the exclusions it seeks to resist.

Feminist internet research does not stand apart from engaged research but rather deepens it, offering methodological, ethical, and theoretical tools to ensure that engagement is not only collaborative and rigorous but also attentive to intersectionality, digital realities, and the transformative possibilities of research for equity and justice. Importantly, it extends the idea of ‘community’ to include online collectives and counter-publics, highlighting how digital and offline spaces are intertwined (McLean, 2018).

To illustrate how this plays out in practice, the discussion turns to two feminist internet research projects: The Feminist Internet Research Meta-Research Project and The Left Out Project. These examples show how inviting in the mess enriches both theory and practice in community-engaged feminist internet research.

Defining Community-Engaged Feminist Internet Research

Community-engaged feminist internet research brings together the principles of engaged research and feminist internet research to form an approach grounded in relationality, participation and justice. While feminist internet research offers the theoretical and ethical grounding – foregrounding standpoint, intersectionality, and the politics of digital life – community engagement extends these commitments into collaborative research practice. This approach centres the lived experiences, knowledges, and priorities of marginalised communities, particularly women, transgender, non-binary and gender-diverse people, as co-creators of digital knowledge.

Rather than treating research participants as data sources, community-engaged feminist internet research emphasises co-creation, care, accountability, and ongoing reflexivity. It attends to power dynamics, challenges extractive research logics, and works toward building more just and inclusive digital worlds. In doing so, this approach operationalises feminist ethics within participatory research processes, making explicit how feminist epistemologies shape research design, relationships, and outcomes.

Positioning the two projects that follow within this framework clarifies how they enact feminist theory in practice. Both projects draw on feminist and participatory principles to navigate complex digital, social, and political contexts while co-producing knowledge that centres the needs and experiences of communities most affected by digital harm.

Feminist Internet Research Network

The Feminist Internet Research Meta-Research Project and The Left Out Project were both projects commissioned by the Feminist Internet Research Network (FIRN). FIRN (firn.genderit.org) is a collaborative and multidisciplinary research project led by the Association for Progressive Communications (APC), funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC). FIRN aims to build an emerging field of internet research with a feminist approach to inform and influence activism and policymaking. The focus of FIRN has been on the making of a feminist internet as critical to bringing about transformation of gendered structures of power that exist online and onground. Projects within FIRN strive to bring about change in policy, law, and in internet rights discourse through data-driven and evidence-based feminist research, with a core focus being to ensure that women, gender-diverse and queer people and their needs are included in internet policy discussions and decision-making. Key areas of research of the FIRN projects are access (usage and infrastructure), big data and its impact on vulnerable populations, online gender-based violence, and gendered labour in the digital economy.

The first example, the Feminist Internet Research Meta-Research Project, was a project that sought to explore the methodological processes and ethical practices of the first eight research projects implemented under FIRN. This project sought to study FIRN's own

practices of knowledge-making, create feminist space for dialogue and reflexivity, and to provide a methodological and ethical framework for conducting feminist internet research.

A Brief Note on Methodology and Research Design

Community-engaged feminist internet research requires methodological flexibility, reflexivity, and a commitment to care-full research practice. Research rarely unfolds in a linear or 'neat' way; instead, it is shaped by shifting relationships, evolving questions, and the practical and ethical complexities of working with marginalised communities. This section offers a brief overview of the methodological approaches underpinning the two projects discussed in this article, the Feminist Internet Research Meta-Research Project and The Left Out Project. Both projects sought to address a core research problem through a research design grounded in feminist, participatory and care-centred principles that embrace rather than conceal the messiness of engaged research.

The Feminist Internet Research Meta-Research Project, conducted between 2020 and 2021, set out to address a key problem: the absence of a methodological and ethical framework for doing feminist internet research in the Global South. Its primary question was: how do FIRN research partners conceptualise, enact, and reflect on feminist methodological and ethical practices in their own projects? This question emerged from the recognition that feminist internet research requires more than applying standard methods; it requires critically examining how research is framed, enacted and negotiated. Drawing on feminist research, standpoint theory, intersectionality, and a feminist ethics of care, the project used document analysis, iterative feminist dialogues (interviews), and thematic analysis to explore methodological processes and ethical practices across eight FIRN studies with 14 research partners. This design intentionally co-created space for partners' own meaning-making, acknowledged shifting power dynamics, and treated reflexivity as a continuous – preliminary – ethical practice. In line with engaged research principles, the project sought to co-create knowledge with partners while openly grappling with the inevitable messiness of researching research itself.

The Left Out Project, conducted between 2022 and 2023, responded to a different but equally urgent research problem: the invisibility of transgender, non-binary, and gender-diverse (TNBGD) people in existing online gender-based violence (OGBV) frameworks. Its central research question was: What are the specific experiences, forms, and impacts of OGBV faced by TNBGD people in Botswana, Rwanda, South Africa and Uganda, and how should policy and advocacy frameworks be reshaped to include them? This project required a methodology centred on the lived experiences of those most affected. The research adopted a feminist, community-engaged approach, using feminist dialogues (interviews) with 29 TNBGD participants alongside contextual country analyses. By foregrounding standpoint, intersectionality and care, the study recognised the risks participants navigate and adjusted its design to prioritise safety, anonymity, trauma sensitivity, and relational ethics. This resulted in a research process that was necessarily nonlinear – shaped by access barriers, varying comfort levels, and political constraints – and thus also profoundly rich,

producing knowledge grounded in the realities of those typically left out of digital rights research and policymaking.

Together, these projects demonstrate that community-engaged feminist internet research is inevitably messy but methodologically generative. Both studies show that research problems in the digital gender justice field cannot be addressed through rigid or extractive designs; rather, they require iterative, reflexive, context-attentive approaches that centre lived experience, negotiate power, and embed care as an ongoing practice.

Feminist Internet Research Meta-research Project

Meta-research is the study of research – including its methods, how research is reported and evaluated – in order to understand and improve on research and research processes (Ioannidis, 2018). The Feminist Internet Research Meta-Research Project formed part of the broader FIRN project and sought to research and analyse the methodological processes and ethical practices of the eight research projects implemented under the broader project.

The Feminist Internet Research Meta-Research Project created a feminist space for dialogue to explore the complexities of doing internet research through the critical exploration of the research methodological processes and ethical practices of the FIRN research projects. From the very beginning, the Feminist Internet Research Meta-Research Project understood that research on the internet is complex and that current methodological approaches and research tools are not sufficiently reflexive to account for, for instance, feminist perspectives on power relations, positionality, researcher-participant relationships, access to digital data, and related issues.

Understanding that research is already a messy affair, it is thus given that this meta-research project would be even messier. This is because it not only sought to understand the methodological processes of the feminist internet research projects but to also take into consideration the process of doing a feminist internet research meta-research project. This entails considering both the messiness of the individual research projects and also the messiness of the Feminist Internet Research Meta-Research Project in relation to the messiness of the other projects.

For instance, while the overarching focus of FIRN was on the making of a feminist internet as critical to bringing about transformation of gendered structures of power that exist online and onground, the individual projects within the network addressed various areas. The Feminist Internet Research Meta-Research Project needed to account for the individual projects while also bringing these projects into conversation with each other to be able to propose a guiding methodological and ethical framework for future feminist internet research projects.

The Feminist Internet Research Meta-Research Project surfaced many different forms of messiness, ranging from methodological uncertainties to ethical challenges and logistical frustrations. Among these, two examples stand out as particularly instructive. The first illustrates how grappling with positionality shaped the process of developing a coherent feminist internet research framework. The second shows how discomfort and critique,

often seen as tensions, can in fact be reimagined as forms of care. Together, these examples reveal how the messiness of feminist internet research is not a weakness to be tidied away but a central component of its rigour and ethics.

Example 1: Grappling with positionality

One of the most visible forms of messiness in the Feminist Internet Research Meta-Research Project emerged in the constant negotiation of positionality. As the researcher, I found myself questioning whether the texts I was engaging with constituted theory, methodology, or literature. Because this was a meta-study of feminist internet research, the boundaries were blurred between what was a theoretical framing, what was methodological, and what constituted literature on the subject, and because of this I often felt uncertain about my own place within the project. This uncertainty, at first experienced as a personal failing, was in fact deeply tied to the politics of location (Rich, 1986). As Rich reminds, knowledge is situated: it matters where one speaks from, and no perspective is ever universal. My grappling with the methodological categories revealed how positionality shapes the very scaffolding of research, from the identification of frameworks to the analysis of themes.

Working through this mess required collaboration. Through discussions with FIRN colleagues and peers, I was able to map which texts would serve as methodological guides and which would be engaged as literature. In practice, this process was not about ‘solving’ the confusion but about recognising it as part of the labour of feminist research - I came to understand this challenge as providing a richer understanding of doing meta-research and how it could go on to guide and assist others who may encounter a project similar in nature.

FIRN Partner 3 shared their experience of their project’s research design and how in the final report it would read that they had set out to do in-depth interviews and case focus groups. But it was not that simple: “that’s what it will come across [as] to the readers of the findings but on the ground, a lot of it was developing as the project went along” and that the project “required a lot of improvisation” (FIRN Partner 3).

FIRN Partner 4 described joining a project team after the proposal had already been finalised and struggling to reconcile their own approach with the framework they had inherited. Through discussions with their team, they were able to integrate “some suggestions of mine to be able to do it [the research] myself” (FIRN Partner 4). Their reflections on reworking the project with colleagues revealed how intersectional perspective shaped the project’s trajectory, requiring both negotiation and compromise (McLean, 2022).

The eventual outcome of the meta-analysis illustrates how this grappling produced new insights. By sitting with the contradictions in the data and engaging the FIRN team, the analysis moved towards four key pillars of feminist internet research: standpoint; intersectionality; reflexivity; and feminist ethics of care (McLean, 2022). Difference was included in the discussion on ethics of care; this was a critical addition because it ensured that knowledge was not flattened into sameness but recognised diversity within feminist and community perspectives. What began as an often frustrating tangle of frameworks ultimately became a richer, more inclusive articulation of feminist internet research.

In this way, grappling with positionality exemplifies how messiness is not a detour but the substance of engaged feminist inquiry. It is through uncertainty, negotiation, and recognition of difference that feminist internet research grounds itself in the realities of those it seeks to serve.

Example 2: Embracing critique and discomfort as care

A second form of messiness arose from the tension between critique and care. Within feminist research, there is often a strong emphasis on honouring participants' stories and ensuring that their voices are not misrepresented. While central to an ethic of care, this commitment can sometimes make researchers reluctant to apply critical analysis, for fear of misusing power. FIRN Partner 6 described this tension powerfully:

...when I first started writing and drafting the report, because the stories were so precious to me and I was so conscious of the power [I had] as a researcher, to a point where I actually paralysed myself from giving my own analysis.

This resulted in their first draft being largely descriptive, holding back from drawing patterns or offering critique because "I was fixated on presenting their stories as to this I couldn't quite see the key patterns" (FIRN Partner 6). Only through conversation with the FIRN team and other feminist colleagues did they come to see that their hesitancy to analyse the stories shared with them was due to their recognition that as researchers "we are [in] the position of power, I felt embarrassed to exercise that power" (FIRN Partner 6). Power imbalances in research are inevitable, but what matters is how we think about the power we possess and that we come from a space of care when enacting this power (Gringeri et al., 2010; Hesse-Biber, 2007). The FIRN team and network helped them to realise that stepping into analysis was itself a responsibility: critique could be a form of care.

I experienced a similar hesitation in my Feminist Internet Research Meta-Research Project. At times, I caught myself softening critique in the name of being 'nice' to research partners or to the data itself. Yet on reflection, I came to see that this avoidance risked doing injustice to what participants had shared. Without critique, we allow existing conditions to persist, and research loses its transformative edge; critical feminist perspectives, even in our own realm, are necessary for growth and continued knowledge building. Care in feminist research, therefore, is not passive or gentle but active and rigorous; it requires us to hold contradictions, challenge assumptions, and remain accountable to both participants and knowledge production.

Other FIRN partners echoed this recognition of discomfort as productive. Partner 7, for instance, described how in the case of the framework their team had opted to use, they came up against difficulties and discomfort in its messy implementation. They went on to state that "at some points [it] can be a little messy. It can get a bit confusing and sometimes we need some days to process a contradiction or to deal with something that we just noticed" (FIRN Partner 7). Rather than dismissing these moments as failure, they framed them as

integral to the research process. Such accounts highlight that critique and discomfort are not obstacles to care but essential to it.

The mess of navigating critique and care underscores a broader lesson: feminist internet research requires reimagining care as something that includes challenge, tension, and even discomfort. To do justice to participants and communities, researchers must embrace analysis as an act of care, ensuring that stories contribute not only to representation but also to transformation. In this way, critique and discomfort become central to the ethic of engaged feminist research.

Taken together, these examples show how the Feminist Internet Research Meta-Research Project illuminated the often hidden labour of feminist research: negotiating positionality, working through contradictions, and reframing critique as an act of care. Rather than being tidied away, these experiences demonstrate that messiness is integral to feminist internet research, shaping both its methodological innovations and its ethical commitments. By embracing such complexities, the project highlights how engaged feminist research can remain accountable to the communities it serves while also challenging researchers to sit with discomfort, uncertainty, and difference. This recognition provides an important foundation for the next case: The Left Out Project, which further demonstrates how messiness emerges in fieldwork and community partnerships.

The Left Out Project

The Left Out Project was another FIRN initiative that explored the experiences of TNBGD individuals in Botswana, Rwanda, South Africa and Uganda (McLean & Cicero, 2023). TNBGD people are often subjected to violence based on their gender identity. Transphobic violence manifests in a number of ways, which can range from verbal to physical abuse, sexual violence, and murder (Müller et al., 2021; Graaff, 2021). The violence experienced by TNBGD people is of critical concern given the rate at which it is increasing worldwide (McLean and Cicero, 2023; Iranti, 2019). The Left Out Project sought to frame the violence that TNBGD people experience on the basis of their gender identity as gender-based violence.

Situated within the broader Feminist Internet Research Network, the project exemplified both engaged research and feminist internet research by working in close partnership with local NGOs, activists, and community members. Its aim was not only to document harms but also to amplify voices often excluded from mainstream digital and policy conversations. In line with engaged research principles, the project was collaborative and responsive, guided by community priorities. It fostered co-production of knowledge through dialogue and reflection while addressing urgent concerns of safety, inclusion, and justice in digital contexts. Grounded in feminist internet research methodologies, it centred reflexivity, intersectionality and care as guiding principles. Researchers navigated complex ethical challenges, constantly balancing the value of visibility with the imperative of protection in contexts where disclosure could pose profound risk to TNBGD participants.

While the project was initially framed around documenting state and societal forms of online gender-based violence, the fieldwork revealed findings that unsettled these assumptions and demanded a deeper, more complex engagement with the lived realities of TNBGD communities. One particularly unexpected finding challenged our initial assumptions.

Example 1: Intra-community violence in Uganda and Rwanda

Violence affecting TNBGD people online was pervasive across the four countries included in the research. Participants described multiple forms of harm, including discrimination from health care professionals, arbitrary arrest and detention, sexual harassment and violence, and being targeted by organised transphobic groups, to name only a few. Online harassment was widespread, with participants reporting both direct attacks and coordinated campaigns aimed at silencing them (McLean and Cicero, 2023).

One of the most striking findings of the Left Out Project emerged in Uganda and Rwanda, where research participants described experiences not only of violence from outside their communities, but also of harm within the LGBTIAQ+ community. Participants shared how members of the broader LGBTIAQ+ community, namely lesbian and gay individuals, would dismiss their lived experiences, refuse to use their pronouns, misgender them, stalk them, and share their images without permission.

This was unexpected, as the project had initially been framed around documenting online gender-based violence by state actors, institutions, and broader society. Yet these accounts of intra-community violence unsettled these assumptions, demanding that the researchers rethink the frameworks of GBV often applied uncritically. It was through this uncomfortable finding that the researchers argued for the interrogation of transphobia within LGBTIAQ+ spaces in order to understand how exclusion and harm can circulate in community contexts, even among groups otherwise marginalised in broader society. Through this interrogation it became clear that lesbian and gay groups were engaging in transphobia as self-preservation. One Rwandan transgender woman shared with the researchers how because there are no legal protections for LGBTIAQ+ people, lesbian and gay people will discriminate against TNBGD people so as not to draw attention to themselves, to protect themselves and their families. An unexpected finding that sadly made sense in its context. The accounts of intra-community violence in Rwanda and Uganda complicated the research assumptions, demanding that researchers re-think frameworks of GBV that are often applied uncritically.

Such findings reveal the productive ‘messiness’ of engaged feminist internet research: when researchers are willing to hold contradictions and discomfort, new and more nuanced understandings of harm can emerge. In this case, it became clear that GBV cannot be neatly mapped onto an oppressor–oppressed binary, and that harms often intersect with interpersonal, community, and structural dimensions of violence. Rather than treating these stories as anomalies, the project embraced them as opportunities to expand theoretical and activist understandings of GBV. This example illustrates how feminist internet research

both complicates and deepens engaged research by insisting on reflexivity, responsiveness, and the willingness to adapt frameworks in light of participants' lived realities.

This disruption illustrates the necessity of allowing research to be unsettled by participants' realities, rather than forcing their experiences into pre-existing frameworks. Alongside the conceptual disruptions, the project also demanded ethical negotiations shaped by care and responsibility.

Example 2: Ethical and safety challenges in working with TNBGD participants

The Left Out Project also underscored the ethical and safety complexities of conducting research with TNBGD communities, particularly in contexts where visibility can be life-threatening. Ensuring participant safety required more than adhering to institutional ethics protocols; it demanded an ongoing, relational ethics of care. This was evident in several ways. For example, in Uganda, where the risk to participants was particularly acute, researchers adopted pseudonymous identifiers (e.g., 'U1') to avoid any traceable connection to participants. In addition, researchers asked participants not to use the video function in online interviews, reducing the risk of recognition and tracing.

Digital safety was also prioritised. The research team avoided cloud-based storage of recordings, instead saving files directly to encrypted hard drives. Email communication was conducted via Riseup, a secure platform widely trusted by activists, and researchers and participants both used virtual private networks (VPNs) to conceal their locations during interviews. These practices reflect how ethics extended beyond compliance into a continuous labour of safeguarding.

Equally, researchers collaborated closely with LGBTIAQ+ organisations to ensure participants had access to support structures before, during and after interviews. This was especially important when participants described traumatic experiences of Online Gender-Based Violence (OGBV) and harassment. For example, in East Africa, where surveillance is pervasive, researchers opted to work only through trusted organisations rather than open calls on social media, acknowledging the risks of digital tracking.

These negotiations were rarely smooth or predictable. Connectivity failures sometimes forced interviews to move to email exchanges, requiring improvisation and flexibility. Participants were also invited to adapt interviews according to their comfort levels, reinforcing a commitment to care that responded to the circumstances of each encounter.

In this way, the project exemplified the labour of care that is central to feminist internet research and resonates with the principles of engaged research. It demonstrated that ethical practice is not a once-off requirement but an iterative, situated process inseparable from the politics of voice, inclusion, and justice. Here, care becomes methodology: a way of conducting research that foregrounds the safety and dignity of participants while holding open the space for meaningful knowledge production.

Together, these two examples from The Left Out Project show how feminist internet research enacts engaged research principles in digital and community contexts but also expands them through feminist reflexivity and ethics of care. Further, these negotiations

highlight that feminist internet research, like engaged research more broadly, demands a relational, ongoing ethics of care that cannot be reduced to procedural checklists of traditional research ethics.

Community-Engaged Feminist Internet Research Is Messy

The practice of feminist internet research makes visible the inherent messiness of research. This messiness is not accidental or indicative of poor scholarship; it is a reflection of the deeply relational, reflexive, and situated nature of the work (Gringeri et al., 2010; Hesse-Biber, 2007). As the Feminist Internet Research Meta-Research Project showed, feminist research, similar to engaged research, often blurs the boundaries between theory, methodology, and literature. Grappling with positionality, researchers found themselves in states of uncertainty, negotiation, and even doubt. Yet rather than being a weakness, these moments became instructive. They demanded openness to emergence, collaboration with peers, and recognition that knowledge is not produced in a linear or neutral fashion but through dialogue and reflexivity.

Messiness also emerged in the labour of balancing care and critique. Researchers and partners frequently spoke of the difficulty of honouring participants' stories while also producing rigorous analysis. The instinct to protect participants sometimes led to hesitancy in applying critique, out of fear of reproducing power imbalances. However, as the Feminist Internet Research Meta-Research Project and The Left Out Project revealed, critique itself can be a form of care: it enables participants' stories to contribute to transformation rather than remain descriptive accounts. Embracing discomfort and contradiction, rather than smoothing them over, became a way to practice an ethic of care that was both rigorous and transformative.

The Left Out Project further highlighted the messy realities of feminist internet research in fieldwork contexts. Unexpected findings – such as intra-community violence in Rwanda and Uganda – challenged what was assumed about the LGBTIAQ+ community. Ethical and safety challenges required constant improvisation, from adopting pseudonyms and encrypted tools to negotiating support systems with NGOs. These processes were unpredictable, relational, and sometimes frustrating, but they revealed care as methodology in action. Taken together, these examples demonstrate that feminist internet research is inevitably messy, and that this mess is its strength: it resists simplification, insists on reflexivity, and honours complexities of lived experience in pursuit of justice.

In recognising community-engaged feminist internet research as inevitably messy, we are reminded that this messiness is not a liability but a resource. It is through reflexive practice that researchers can make sense of uncertainty and positionality; through communities of practice that support and solidarity can emerge in the face of complexity; and through an ethic of care that critique, improvisation and responsibility are held together. By embracing, rather than concealing, the contradictions and challenges of research, we not only produce more rigorous knowledge but also create practices that are

attentive, relational, and committed to justice. Drawing towards a conclusion, this article now presents a set of three recommendations for navigating the messiness of community-engaged feminist internet research.

Recommendations

Community-engaged feminist internet research can benefit greatly from openly engaging with the messiness of doing research. The reflections and examples discussed above demonstrate that research is rarely neat or linear, but instead marked by contradictions, discomfort, and continual negotiation. Rather than concealing these experiences, embracing them offers opportunities for rigour, care, and transformation. Considering the challenges and insights shared, I propose three recommendations for researchers working with engaged and feminist internet research: be reflexive; establish communities of practice; embrace messiness as care.

Be Reflexive

Elden (2012, p. 67) argues that reflexivity requires researchers to acknowledge and accept the messiness inherent in the research process. Reflexivity is not simply a matter of reflecting after the fact but an ongoing practice of engaging critically with how research is shaped by one's own values, assumptions, and positionality (Billo and Hiemstra, 2012; Edwards and Mauthner, 2012). This includes recognising and leaning into discomfort rather than avoiding it. As Chadwick (2021) emphasises, discomfort is central to reflexive and critical research practice; when researchers shy away from it, they risk missing opportunities to contextualise the complexities of knowledge production and to be accountable for their work. Reflexivity, then, means staying with discomfort, interrogating one's own position, and acknowledging that knowledge is always situated and partial (Billo & Hiemstra, 2012).

Establish Communities of Practice

Researchers often encounter messiness and may struggle with how to respond to the challenges it presents. Establishing communities of practice provides space to share these experiences, create dialogue, and collaboratively generate solutions. By speaking openly about the complexities of research, messiness can be reframed as a collective learning process rather than an individual failing. For example, during a FIRN convening, sharing the idea 'research is messy because humans are messy' resonated with research partners, shifting their perspectives on their own struggles with data categorisation and analysis. Such exchanges can be transformative, enabling researchers to recognise that difficulties are not isolated but part of the shared labour of knowledge-making. Building communities of practice thus sustains dialogue, supports problem-solving, and affirms the inevitability of mess in research as an integral aspect of engaged scholarship.

Embrace Messiness as Care

Feminist research ethics emphasises “care and responsibility rather than outcomes” (Edwards & Mauthner, 2012, p. 19). An ethics of care creates space for emotionally engaged research that shows concern for participants, the outcomes of the research, and care for the researcher (Preissle, 2007; Blakely, 2007). Embracing messiness can be understood as part of this ethic: it is a way of acknowledging that difficulties, uncertainties, and contradictions are inevitable and worth making visible. As Chadwick (2021) notes, confronting discomfort is itself an ethical mode of interpretive practice. By articulating the messiness of research, we not only support our own reflexive engagement but also enact care for other researchers, signalling that they are not alone in facing such challenges. Sharing these trouble spots becomes an act of care, cultivating solidarity and contributing to a broader culture of transparency in feminist and engaged research.

For higher education institutions, this means legitimising such messiness as integral to rigorous inquiry through flexible ethics processes, interdisciplinary support, and valuing time spent on relationship-building and reflexive practice. By recognising complexity, uncertainty, and emotional labour as central to ethical engagement, higher education institutions can foster environments that sustain the relational, situated, and transformative character of feminist and community-engaged research

Conclusion

In bringing these reflections to a close, it becomes clear that community-engaged feminist internet research demands that we recognise messiness not as failure but as an inevitable, productive, and ethical dimension of research practice. The examples drawn from the Feminist Internet Research Meta-Research Project and The Left Out Project illustrate how grappling with positionality, navigating intra-community tensions, and negotiating ethical complexities can unsettle our assumptions while deepening our understandings of harm, justice, and care. By inviting in the mess – through reflexivity, communities of practice, and an ethic of care – we create research that is more honest, accountable, and transformative. Such work resists neatness in favour of complexity, embraces discomfort as a form of rigour, and positions care as a central methodology. In doing so, community-engaged feminist internet research not only enriches engaged research but also expands its reach into digital and socio-technical contexts, ensuring that knowledge-making remains relational, inclusive, and responsive to the realities of those most often left out.

Notes on Contributor

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