

Season 2, Episode 5 - Craftivism transcript

Intro: People at a march there are noise makers and drums in the background as people chant: “Show me what democracy looks like” and responding “this is what democracy looks like.” [Two calls and responses.]

Elyse: On January 21st 2017 over five million people around the world participated in the women's March making it one of the largest human protests in history one of the symbols from the March became known as the knitted pussy hat and was the result of a collaboration between Kat Coyle, Krista Suh and Jayna Zweiman their act of protest is part of a larger movement known as craftivism. On this episode of the media and social change podcast we'll examine what happens when craft meets activism.

Intro (multiple voices) MASCLab is a hub for multimodal and digital scholarship that explores the relationship between media and our changing society. We support, curate and create media intended to spark dialogue and social change and the development of pedagogy that uses media to foster civic engagement. MASCLab is located in the Communication, Media and Learning Technology Design Program at Teachers College, Columbia University.

Elyse: I'm speaking with Sandra Markus today who is a doctoral candidate in the Communication Media and Learning Technologies Design program here at Teachers College. She also

serves as a professor of fashion design at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York.

Sandra: I think craftivism has its own unique place. So the term originated with Betsy Greer. it's a portmanteau so it's a merging of the words craft and activism and if I had to define it I think craftivism is using creativity through craft to bring change or attention to political and social issues.

I think we're seeing with the use of social media that it's creating the affordances for new types of activism. Also people talk about Sarah Corbett who's a very well-known craftivist talks about gentle protest and it's really a different form of gentle protest.

Elyse: Don't let the word gentle fool you sometimes this gentle protest takes place under brutal circumstances.

Sandra: The suffragettes and in Britain when they were imprisoned in 1912 and Holloway prison, they actually embroidered. The guards allowed them to embroider while they were incarcerated and they embroidered, they embroidered really a legacy to what had gone on. They documented everyone who had been imprisoned, they documented the trial and these many of the needlework, because they were for many reasons, but one of the reasons because they were women's work were not kept as important so they don't exist, But in particular there's this one embroider Jeannine Torero whose embroidery about her incarceration during that time still exists in the Museum of London

and it really has created a legacy about what happened during the Suffragette movement and the fact that they were imprisoned and it was done right under the noses of the guards.

Elyse: If you would like to see the last remaining needlework by suffragette Jeanne Torero there is a link on the MASClab website to its Museum of London home. As it did for Torero craftivism appeals to people who wouldn't otherwise have the opportunity to protest or wouldn't consider themselves activists.

Sandra: I think I think there's two issues here, there is a generational passing down of knowledge; there is a sort of apprenticeship model of learning some of these skills, but when I talk about the generational aspect of it is when we think of participatory culture and we think of participatory politics we think of youth. That is our traditional population. We think of youth harnessing social media to get out their message and what I'm seeing is, I'm seeing middle-aged women with bad knees who are getting out the message and it is a new population that, it's that overlooked population that is really creating some change. You know we have political clout; we, we vote. And I think we are asking our sisters to, you know, think about what needs to change, and and and vote to support those changes. One of the things that emerged in the pilot study, which I was not expecting, which is now a focus in the dissertation is this issue of intergenerational and generational aspects of craftivism and looking at participatory culture and participatory politics and craftivism, and what are the demographics of craftivism. And how this generational component impacts participatory culture which,

again is is that's never--we never think, we never talk about participatory politics in terms of older women we talk about it in terms of youth.

Elyse: A craftivist group from Virginia is using social media to broaden the impact of their activism. They call it the Kudzu Project named after the fast growing weed that blankets entire landscapes throughout the south.

Sandra: The Kudzu Project is a little different because I really conceptualize that as yarn bombing, and so there's flash installations of the Kudzu Project. Originally they did try to leave the Kudzu vines up. You know they, they knit them they attach them to netting and then they throw them over the Confederate statues, and except that they were taken down by authorities and obviously destroyed. There's tremendous amount of labor in them so they really decided to do it as flash installations where they would do it during the night, photograph them and take them down.

Elyse: In other words the Kudzu project realized that social media can help them circulate their message more broadly.

Sandra: Well I think what their aim is, or is really to have the Confederate statues taken down and they're beginning to achieve that, so it's not necessarily about the yarn-bombing per se but about the conversations that it provokes. Part of this gentle activism is not to radically change things, but to ask people to

think deeply about an issue and perhaps come to a different point in their perspective.

Elyse: Besides helping spread the images and convene this kind of conversation, social media also plays a part in helping craftivists organize. Markus says Facebook is an important tool, but so too is Ravelry.com. Ravelry is a website dedicated to crafts like knitting or crocheting, for instance, but not everyone on the website considers themselves craftivists.

Sandra: In Ravelry there is no vetting process. So the conversations are much more unfiltered in Ravelry, and we see that one of the craftivists had made, it's called the protest patriotic shawl, and it garnered hundreds and hundreds of comments. So when I was going through all the comments on Ravelry you could see that clearly the left was using this as an artifact to represent their position and so was the right. You know the flag is controversial, and the conversations were really very heated. So that was particularly interesting to me. On Facebook, when you look through the craftivist, the various craftivist groups, and there are quite a lot of them on Facebook--and when I say a lot I mean a dozen, or you know they're not hundreds of different groups--you're really seeing a very select conversation happening. So I'm looking at a number of different things. I'm looking at the relationship between activism, craftivism and feminism. I'm also looking at how new media, the relationship in particular between new media and craftivism.

So I was a member of Ravelry long before, I think, I went to graduate school. I am a knitter. I wouldn't say I'm a really serious knitter. I really love knitting. It's not what I teach--it's really more of a personal passion of mine. So I am involved in that world for my own interests. I looked at a craftivist group, they're located in Westchester. One of the things that was very interesting about them was that they had an offline and online presence. So I've been attending, their first meeting was April of 2017, so I've been attending, I think I've attended every face-to-face meeting except for one. And, and they have a very strong online presence in Ravelry, in Facebook, and on their website and on Instagram. But Instagram is a little less interesting to me so I looked at the community, I looked at their Facebook presence. I looked at their Instagram presence, and interviewed their founder, and, and attended meetings. So I was gathering information there and obviously they agreed, the people who were in the face to face meetings agreed to the research. I mean the thing about social media is that you're looking at text based analysis; you're looking at visual analysis; you're looking at obviously discourse analysis. So there are different kinds of things you're looking at. You know, the use of emojis. It's pretty diverse what you're looking at in online spaces.

Elyse: Probably the most famous example of craftivism mentioned earlier is the pussy hat and the women's March in January 2017. These online channels were instrumental for rapidly orchestrating the huge turnout.

Sandra: Well the pussy hat project was a, is an interesting project on many levels. It was really the first time, it was, you know there were two founders. There was Krista Suh and Jayna Zweiman who conceptualized this. So, it, they started the idea around Thanksgiving of 2016, post, just post the election. And between that day and January 21st at the Women's March, so roughly six weeks, they built a really, a global movement around the Women's March and using the pussy hat as a visual sign of the march. I mean the thing that's so amazing about it is how quickly that movement built and how quickly the activism rallied, or really around the world. So it's, so the pussy hat is a very interesting project. The pussy hat was criticized for, for many issues. The, the issue of pink was brought up that not all women's vaginas are pink. Not all women have vaginas, so the trans movement criticized it. It was criticized by black and Latina women for not being inclusive. And it clearly is an issue--I think the movement is trying to work towards being more inclusive. I think it is an ongoing issue so what we see in a lot of these Craftivist movements and meetings. We see a lot of informal learning, and going along with it could be learning about knitting, but it's always learning about knitting about doing a craftivist project and about gaining political knowledge. So though those meetings always involve perhaps politicians coming to speak, perhaps learning how to use media. I went to a craftivist meeting where somebody came and talked about the use of Twitter, of being able to get out the message. One craftivist meeting was manning phone banks to get out the vote for a Democratic candidate in Westchester. So it's, it, it is a huge--it's not just about knitting. I really see what the pussy hat sparked, and I think it sparked a lot of movements. I

don't think that #Metoo movement, what, it would have happened without the pussy hat coming right before it. I think what it has catalyzed is we see a tremendous amount of women running for office. I think that's the fundamental change that we need to see.

People chanting: “Yes we can! Yes we can” (at a rally slowly fades out)

Elyse: We want to thank Sandra Marcus for sharing her research with us at MASCLab. You can find more information about what was discussed today by visiting our website, masclab.org or you can send us an email at masclab@tc.columbia.edu or a tweet @MASCLab and let us know what you thought of this episode. You can also find out more about our collective of researcher practitioners at masclab.org including regular blog posts, news about upcoming screenings and other events, and links to other media and research. Our theme music is Kelp Grooves by Little Glass Men published under creative commons attributions license at freemusic.archive.org. This episode was produced and edited by myself, Elyse Blake, Kyle Oliver, Joseph Riina-Ferrie and Lalitha Vasudevan, we hope to hear from you!