

COMMENTARY AND CRITICISM

## Editors' Introduction: Gender and the Information Society

The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) is being held this year in Geneva, with a follow-up conference in Tunisia in 2005. Under the aegis of the United Nations, the summit addresses issues that are of immediate relevance to scholars in the field of communication, including the "new world order" created by global flows of information, the impact of information technology (IT) on the First World-Third World configuration, the information gap and its effects on practices of democratic governance and civil society formations, and numerous other related topics.

Given this timely consideration of the role and place of IT in our lives, we have sought to identify the various ways in which gender is implicated in this brave new world, using the criticism and commentary section to highlight gender as a crucial variable in this debate. Too often discussions of such global topics are enveloped by wide-ranging and global policy concerns, where such a focus tends to ignore the real and material effects that policy has on the lives of women and men. Therefore, we want to highlight the ways in which gender is implicated in both information technology processes and in the access to and use of IT. In other words, through a focus on gender, we want to render visible the opportunities and challenges afforded by the development of the Information Society and explore the ways in which the rhetoric of empowerment masks the perpetuation of existing gender hierarchies.

The topic generated a lot of interest and elucidated a broad array of experiences from across the globe. Whether assessing women's access to technology or the ways in which information systems are mobilised to "develop" the South, a unifying theme is that of uneven development. Even those essays that underscore the beneficial aspects of IT include a cautionary note on the blind spots that emerge when the utopic promise of the technology is materialised. Together the essays outline the challenges feminist scholars face as they participate in discussions of democratic governance in Information Society, especially in the realm of universal and equitable access.

Moulding the literature on the digital divide to account for women as subjects and objects of IT discourses, Leda Cooks and Kirsten Isgro ask questions about the empowerment rhetoric focused on information and communication technology (ICT), gender and development which emanates from a First World perspective. They suggest that self-conscious reflexivity about the relationship between capital and technology could provoke changes in First World practices and not simply shift the emphasis onto a more informed and inclusive ICT strategy for the developing world.

Following this theoretical roadmap is a series of essays that chart the multifar-

ious modalities through which ICTs have been mobilised in the global South. Priya A. Kurian and Debashish Munshi argue that the male capitalist grip on technological development is merely the most recent manifestation of traditional imperialist and colonising tendencies exerted by the West over the rest. They point out that where ICTs have clearly failed have been where so-called "local initiatives," with rural women as the alleged beneficiaries, have actually been organised remotely by men thus perpetuating the familiar and gendered power dynamic.

Internet use amongst gender equality organisations in Latin America comprised the research sample in Elisabeth Friedman's essay that is based on findings from a study which focused on ICT use in 100 gender equality organisations in Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico. She found that although access to ICTs continues to constitute a digital divide, 75 percent of her sample either had their own websites or were actively planning to set them up. Moreover, these organisations recognised the obvious benefits in information transfer afforded by the Internet and especially e-mail. However, 15 percent of the groups have experienced some form of online harassment, from entrapment to targeted viruses, and many groups complained about the volume of email traffic they have to deal with.

Similarly, through an analysis of web logs maintained by women in the Middle East North Africa region, Victoria Newsom and Laura Lengel's essay draws attention to the emancipatory potential of ICTs. Despite the numerous barriers to women's Internet use, such as the dominance of the English language and cultural factors specific to "Islamic" societies, the authors believe that IT use can help carve out a narrow sliver of the public space for marginalised groups, where they can temporarily move away from the peripheries and come into voice. Jonathan Sterne and Carol Stabile, on the other hand, question the growing emphasis on connectivity in development projects. Unpacking the "success" of micro-credit projects the authors reveal an important double movement: the euphoric rhetoric of connectivity and communication technologies helps obscure the structural causes of global poverty and, at the same time, the neoliberal emphasis on entrepreneurialism in these projects reinstates North-South hierarchies.

Priya Kapoor's essay charts a different kind of "success" story: how the promise of the Internet can be materialised through cross-cultural collaborative projects. Through an analysis of the Global Reproductive Health Forum South Asia website, she points out how the symbolic capital of Harvard University has been harnessed to benefit the agenda of a "powerless activist group," such as that of Indian reproductive health groups.

The second set of essays turn the analytical lens on First World women's use of ICTs. Mei-Po Kwan requires a cautious approach to be brought to the discourses of empowerment, not least because history shows us that the promises of liberation from gendered drudgery has rarely been achieved and has often worked to reinforce sex-based stereotyping. Focusing on First World Internet use, she argues that, for example, women tend to use the Internet to maintain relationships and that men are more likely to use the technology to seek out information.

The way in which women in their role as 'home-based' consumers (and mothers) have been targeted by the communications industry is the focus of

Michelle Rodino's essay. She argues that when the anticipated growth of mobile information and communication technologies (MICTs) such as cell phones and laptops failed to meet industry sales expectations, women were seen as an untapped market to exploit. The introduction of 'Audrey' as a woman-friendly 'internet appliance' (but in reality simply a palm computer) makes clear that women's proper place is in the kitchen, where new technologies reinforce rather than redefine the gendered division of labour.

Shifting the site of analysis to digital design industries, Lisa Pitt tracks the covert and overt practices, such as the predominance of a "laddish" culture and a "networky, drinky" work environment, that render invisible women's contributions. Enumerating the findings of Untold, a London-based support group for women digital designers, Pitt maps the different axes along which gender imbalances are sustained in new media industries. Issues of identity construction and sexual concealment is the central concern of Sarah N. Gatson's essay, which also looks at the ways in which notions of femininity are represented and performed, in particular the ambiguous nature of gender identification that is allowed by remote technologies. She also considers the threat posed to net users and the potential dangers of violence, including stalking and harassment of women by other net users.

We close the essays with Jane Osmond's highly personalised account of dealing with a teenage son's curiosity about and interest in sex as he explores the vast terrain of pornographic websites. She argues with herself about the best way to deal with the situation as a single parent with no male figure in the home, and is forced to retreat into the familiar parental response of saying "No, because I say so."

*Sujata Moorti and Karen Ross*  
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## **A Space Less Traveled: Positioning Gender in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Development**

*Leda M. Cooks and Kirsten Isgro*

Gender theorists working within the area of computer-mediated communication (CMC) have both celebrated and decried the advent of information and com-

munication technologies (ICTs), simplifying, bipolarizing, and some would contest, obscuring the ideological positions and material realities that locate people, their identities, communities, and societies in relation to these new technologies. This short essay analyzes development discourse around the digital divide, gender and ICTs in terms of theoretical frames and the positions possible within such frames. We hope to build an awareness of the need to understand the complex connections between globalization, technologies, and development *for* women.

To begin, we look meta-theoretically to the ways technology, identities, and spaces/contexts are conceptualized by gender and ICT theorists and practitioners. To build our framework for analyzing the connections among gender, technology, and development, we extend Renée Houston and Michele Jackson's (2003) technology-context scheme to consider the ways gendered spaces are positioned in technology (ICT) and development approaches and initiatives. The concepts are fairly straightforward: "technology" is defined in terms of the information or communication tool, "context" is defined as the space in which the technology is introduced. Space both defines and is defined by the tool; space is made up of the material, including the discursive and symbolic, practices that give meaning to the technology.

Houston and Jackson ask two basic questions of ICT and development approaches, specifically in the area of educational programs: (1) Is the constitution of technology separable from context? (2) Is the constitution of the context separable from the technology? They separate four approaches based on the degree to which the perspectives isolate/integrate technology from context and vice versa or integrate the two (see below).

When technologies are emphasized over context, technology is viewed as constructing and determining human progress, culture, and relations. When context is viewed as separable from technology there often exists the presumption that contexts could and should change, but that technologies and uses for them do not. For our purposes it is important to note that meanings and uses for technologies are constructed and coordinated in specific spaces, and cannot be isolated one from the other. Technologies may be introduced into spaces that are fluid and dynamic, defined, for instance, as individual and/or communal, local and/or global, more or less developed, etc. Technologies themselves are altered and adapted by the people who use them. Meaning is made about who does or does not need to use ICTs and what the consequences of such uses should or ought to be.

Houston and Jackson (2003) organize their scheme into four quadrants as shown in Figure 1.

Each quadrant recognizes the emphasis placed on technology, context or both.<sup>1</sup> Obviously, such determinations hold importance for women, yet the construction of gender itself is rarely examined within ICT development programs. Rather, the place of women's bodies within the spaces of development is often assumed. Utilizing the technology-context scheme outlined above and in Figure 1, we can begin to question the place of gender within perspectives on ICT development. If we highlight gender as a specific and unique component of context, then we can query the ways spaces are/not constructed in relation to gender and technology and vice versa. Looking again at the two questions and the various quadrants, we could ask the following:

Q1: Is the constitution of technology separable from context?

		YES	NO
Q2: Is the constitution of context separable from technology?	YES	1) Determinism	3) Context as filter
	NO	2) Technology as change agent	4) Integration

Figure 1. Technology-context scheme.

**Quadrant 1: Determinism**

- Is ICT understood apart from the gendered constructions of its use? Here we could ask whether the construction of technology has been influenced by the dominance of one particular gender, or whether the non-gendered “nature” of technology is assumed? What is assumed about gender and technology in development programs driven by digital divide assumptions?

**Quadrant 2: Technology as change agent**

- Are gendered spaces constituted apart from ICT and/or development? What remains or is left behind when we remove one or more terms? Does one term bear more importance than another? If, for instance, cultural contexts are assumed to be different but gender within those contexts is often assumed to remain stable, there is a male and female nature to bodies and thus to experiences.

**Quadrant 3: Context as filter**

- How/does the cultural coding of or meanings for ICTs change over time? Do the gendered uses for ICT change while the technology itself remains unchanged? In this quadrant, the lens of gender and/or culture serves as a filter through which we come to understand technology.

**Quadrant 4: Integration**

- If gender, development, and ICT are socially constructed, dynamic, and fluid in use, then how can we work reflexively to challenge our assumptions about each of these constructs? How can we evaluate changes in the substance of a context after the introduction of technology? How can we evaluate the changes in technologies after interactions in specific contexts?

Looking at each quadrant, we can focus specifically on the construction and visibility of gendered development spaces in the implementation of information/communication technologies. In the area of technological determinism (Quadrant 1), we can analyze the ways digital divide arguments—those who have access to and those who do not have access to new technologies—position

women in less developed countries (LDCs) as always/already in need of ICTs to improve the conditions of their lives. The idea that technology determines the basis for economic, political, social, and cultural relations is influenced by modernization theory. Technology and gender are “natural” forms that determine one’s value in the global scene.

In the second quadrant, the introduction of a specific technology is implemented across a number of contexts. Development and ICT programs explicitly targeted toward women have addressed issues such as violence against women, literacy, and human rights; however, the main objectives of these programs have been to link non-governmental organizations (NGOs) throughout a nation or internationally through the Internet. Wendy Harcourt (2001) cites several programs, such as UNIFEM’s Violence against Women, noting that ICTs provide women with a forum for addressing issues that previously had remained hidden to local communities and the wider world. She argues that the Internet may be useful to women who may not have physical contact with other women.

Where the context serves as the filter for how particular technologies are used and understood (Quadrant 3), women in different areas may use ICTs for social, political, or economic means, or a combination of all three. In Pilar Riaño’s (1994) edited book, *Women in Grassroots Communication: Furthering Social Change*, many of the authors and activists point to creative ways that media, for example, are used by women, often to highlight and extend expression of their cultures and identities.

The integration perspective (Quadrant 4) recognizes that both technology and context are interdependent. Rather than focus on the outcomes of technology, this more integrated perspective focuses on how ICTs are part of larger socio-technical processes that interact with both cultures and technologies and occur in specific contexts. Christopher Mele’s (1999) examination of the Jervay Place project in Wilmington, North Carolina focuses explicitly on the ways women who were socially, politically, and economically marginalized took it upon themselves to learn to use ICTs to save as well as redesign their community. The technology became a mutable medium through their usage, working in collaboration with architects to draft viable building designs and working with local politicians and website owners to publicize their plight (the impending destruction of their community).

## **Conclusion**

Our intention in this short piece is not to downplay the potential benefits of information and communication technologies. As women who have worked with non-profit organizations and NGOs in a variety of capacities, we have seen the benefits that gaining publicity and public recognition for concerns that have been private and hidden can provide for women in contexts that would otherwise have remained peripheral or invisible. However, we question the consequences of such recognition and visibility in situations where the material conditions and cultural practices that give rise to such circumstances remain disregarded and unchanged. Moreover, the need for the mirror to be turned back on the position of the First World calls for reflexive examination of how connection through technologies can/could change the material practices of those developers as well as those targeted for development with regard to issues

of globalization. In other words, how can the technology also be used to create activists in the First World?

Communication technologies claim to be erasing boundaries when in fact they may be creating and re-inscribing the same hierarchies, between rich and poor, male and female, young and old, citizen and non-citizen, and, of course, First and Third World. Of the 3 percent or so of those in the world who have access to computers and the Internet, the vast majority of people are concentrated in the First World, are professionals, and are well (by world standards) educated, with a working understanding of the English language. Like Houston and Jackson (2003: 75), we argue that a more integrated approach between the technology-context scheme "might allow us to examine the more dynamic relations in developing societies." However, we argue that within the various paradigms of technology and capitalist development, it is important to consider gender in addition to technologies and context as a way to understand both the paradoxes and contradictions that perpetuate inequities, while at the same time celebrating the possibilities that these technologies allow.

## Notes

1. Quadrant 1: Determinism places emphasis on technology over the contexts in which the technology is introduced. This approach characterizes traditional ICT development programs that place assessment on measurable criteria related to technology use. Quadrant 2: Technology as change agent, again places emphasis on technology over the contexts it is used by viewing technology as causing changes in the environment without measuring changes in other criteria. This approach may measure technology use as change agent across a variety of settings without evaluating the qualitative (i.e., cultural) differences in setting. Quadrant 3: Context as filter. Here, the spaces in which the technology is introduced alter the perceptions of technology and its given uses. Houston and Jackson (2003: 62) note that: "theories operating from this perspective would see cultural elements as enduring and technologies as implements or tools of these deeper currents." Quadrant 4: Integration. Characterized by the evaluation of the relationships that define technology use, placing emphasis on the ways technologies and contexts are shaped and changed through the introduction of ICTs in particular places and spaces, in particular cultural contexts.

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## **Terms of Empowerment: Gender, Ecology, and ICTs for Development**

*Priya A. Kurian and Debashish Munshi*

The obsession with technology as a primary tool for development without any regard for the social and cultural needs of society has not done much to help the cause of women or other disempowered groups. The accent on technology for technology's sake is part of a masculinist worldview characterised by the tendency to equate technical competence with male gender identity (Judy Wajcman 1995). As a counter, a feminist approach to technology looks at ways of dealing with core life-sustaining issues of food, clothing, shelter, education, and a general sense of well being (Debashish Munshi and Priya Kurian 2003). Indeed, as Ingunn Moser (1995: 6) points out, science and technology are not only "social and cultural projects, formed in power structures and coloured by dominating values in the societies and the cultures in which they occur" but are political as well.

As political projects, they have specific implications for much of the rural Third World that are only now beginning to be recognised. In line with feminist critiques of science (see Evelyn Fox Keller 1987; Sandra Harding 1998; Maralee Mayberry, Banu Subramaniam and Lisa Weasel 2001), ecofeminists such as Vandana Shiva (2000) have talked about the colonising and imperialistic tendencies in the technology-based control over new life forms by multinational corporations and the commodification of knowledge evident in the World Trade Organization (WTO) regime. Such material exploitation often is institutionalised by policy formulations that fail to recognise power inequalities within societies. The knowledge derived from the use of new technologies, as with much of scientific testing, can become an instrument of power and control over individuals or society. This exercise of power is also reflected in the subtle negotiations



over the validity of certain types of knowledge. On the one hand, local, traditional, and cultural knowledge, whose repositories are often women and indigenous groups, are often marginalized or delegitimised (see Priya Kurian 2000). On the other hand, “indigenous people’s biological, intellectual, and cultural heritage” is tapped into constantly by global biotechnology industries (Bevan Tipene-Matua 2000: 98), a process that is now being optimised and hastened by the computerisation of information.

In examining the stories that abound on the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) for gender and development, it becomes quickly evident that “success” has been elusive in initiatives that have been driven from the top down. In a conversation with some rural women in an “e-village” in southern India, a complex picture emerged where although they “ran” the village computer centre, the actual directives on the “who, what, when, where, and how” of the data downloaded came from an urban-based administrative structure that was not only overwhelmingly male, but highly bureaucratised as well. The rhetoric of rural women’s empowerment, here, is muted by a rigidly masculinist style of organisational communication, characterised by a centralised, hierarchical set-up with little input from the bottom up (see Kathy Ferguson 1984). It is a set-up where actual control over decision-making rests not with the grassroots (consisting of rural women), but with management personnel (primarily men) based in a geographically distant urban centre. This example offers insight into how women’s participation in cyberspace is often showcased without a scrutiny of fundamental power relations.

Arturo Escobar (1999: 52) has argued that critical to the success of ICT projects advocating empowerment of women, and rural communities more broadly, is the ability to maintain a relationship “between activism in cyberspace and place-based social change.” An explicit recognition of such thinking can perhaps be seen in Steven Rudolph’s (2003) discussion of “Digital Ecologies,” where he argues:

The key to creating sustainable ICT solutions lies in understanding existing rural ecologies, and then creating digital solutions that harmonize with them. It is at this stage, when an existing ecology absorbs and sustains a technology, that we could say a digital ecology has been formed.

Rudolph describes the work of the Jiva Institute in India in working with villagers to develop sustainable *material* systems offline—economic, health, social, and educational—in order to eventually develop appropriate uses for ICTs that would help support and sustain these “human systems.” Although his silence on gender issues deserves scrutiny, the notion of a “sustainable digital ecology,” involving complex interdependent networks of relationships, as fundamental to the use of ICTs in development contexts is an exciting one. It is also one that helps explain why the blind advocacy of “ICT for development” by the World Bank, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and others is unlikely to succeed as long as they are driven by “experts,” whose knowledge and understanding of local contexts is minimal and whose agenda is often antithetical to local needs.

For those concerned about gender and ICTs in the Third World, the insights offered by the lens of “women, culture and development” (see Kum-Kum Bhavnani, John Foran and Priya Kurian 2003) provide ways of extending the

metaphor of “digital ecologies” to address women’s specific needs, desires, and agency. It is in theorising about the gender and diversity implications of new technologies that we can even attempt to make policies to achieve equity in the use of such technologies. Such theorising is essential in the area of computer technologies because the discourses about them are so intensely contested. The value-laden battles already occurring over new technologies demonstrate that such technologies are neither neutral in their construction nor benign in their application.

A theoretical framework to conceptualise the gender implications of computer technologies can be anchored on the basic premises that: first, the attitudes and perceptions of people on the advance of new technologies differ not only in economic and technical terms but also in social and cultural terms; and, second, that these attitudes and perceptions are gendered. It is in acknowledging social (and cultural) rationalities, and giving them primacy in policies, that policy makers can make the use of ICTs equitable and sustainable. We need to identify and evaluate the practices, conditions, and values that underpin the use of new technologies. These practices, conditions, and values shape the nature of competing, informal coalitions that emerge in society in the ongoing struggle over policy-making.

This critique of the current dominant uses of information technologies from a gender perspective does not mean a wholesale rejection of technology itself. However, it does imply a more reflexive and deliberative approach to dealing with science and technology policies, involving a more meaningful relationship between “experts” and citizens than currently exists. More specifically, we would want feminist visions to imbue the creation and use of new technologies if we are to mobilise technology as a force for social justice.

In essence, we urge moving away from the dominant, masculinist ICT projects offered by international development agencies. Explicit in such projects is the assumption that development dilemmas in the Third World will melt away when rural women get access to the World Wide Web. Instead, we point to the need to look at the gendered dimensions of information technologies that recognise issues of power as fundamental to the use of technologies. We call for theoretical perspectives such as those informed by a “women, culture and development” paradigm that recognise women’s agency, desires and needs as central to empowerment strategies. Such perspectives would allow the evolution of an inclusionary development practice—one where technology lends itself as a practical empowerment tool to women and men whose creativity and needs shape the nature of information technologies.

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## ICT and Gender Equality Advocacy in Latin America: Impacts of a New “Utility”

*Elisabeth Jay Friedman*

To what extent has Internet-based Information and Communication Technology (ICT) helped—or hindered—gender equality advocacy in the developing world? Scholars and policy makers vehemently disagree over the impact of ICT in general. Promoters of ICT praise it as the engine that will transform the developing world’s “industrial age” into an “information age,” revolutionizing the organization of economy, society, and polity (Anthony Wilhelm 2000). Detractors argue that every new “age” has exacerbated serious disparities between world regions and within them, and that ICT in particular fosters a “digital divide” between Internet haves and have-nots (Brian D. Loader 1998; Bosah Ebo 1998). A number of scholars interested in “cyberdemocracy” have found that those already active in politics tend to exploit the new technology, often to advance traditional goals (Michael Margolis and David Resnick 2000; Chris Toulouse and Timothy W. Luke 1998). Other scholars and advocates document the ways that civil society organizations and social movements use ICT to promote social justice in local, national, and global arenas (APC/WP 1997; Osvaldo Leon, Sally Burch and Eduardo Tamayo 2001; Guobin Yang 2003).

The few studies of real-time gender-based organizing show that women’s organizations rely on ICT as a mechanism for information, communication, and advocacy (APC/WP 1997; Nancy Hafkin and Nancy Taggart 2001). However, while ICT is a key resource, it also brings new obstacles. These include online harassment; problems with costs, access, and training; and deflection of attention away from local contexts and contacts (Wendy Harcourt 1999).

Dichotomous assessments of ICT use are easy to construct and highlight important issues. But the “social embeddedness” of ICT means that it will not have predictable, universal impacts, especially in the arena of civil society-based activism (Leon, Burch and Tamayo 2001; Mark Warschauer 2003). Contextualized studies are needed to show the differences ICT is making on the ground.

I offer here a brief summary of a larger field research-based study of ICT use among 100 gender equality organizations in Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico. Why these countries? They have the largest numbers of Internet users in the Latin American region, which is one of the fastest growing Internet markets in the world (NUA 2002; Anthony Faiola and Stephen Buckley 2000). It is also a region that, although marked by considerable gender discrimination in political, economic, and social life, boasts a long history of gender equality advocacy. My findings about the way people use ICT for gender equality advocacy<sup>1</sup> tells a story about how technology can often help, but sometimes hinder, activists and advocates’ attempts to express their identities and develop their politics.

Without question, ICT has had a significant impact on gender equality organizations and the people who staff them. “It’s changed life completely,”

sums up Monique Althul of Buenos Aires' *Fundación Mujeres en Igualdad* (personal interview with author, 31 October 2001). Moreover, Estelizabeth Bezerra de Souza of João Pessoa's *Cunhã Coletivo Feminista* attests that ICT is "like water and electricity. We can't even imagine how we survived without internet" (personal interview with author, 6 September 2002).

If ICT is really "like water and electricity," how does this new "utility" affect gender equality advocacy in Latin America? ICT use among the organizations in my study expanded rapidly with the spread of the commercial Internet in the mid-1990s, though some went online as early as 1989. Many began in order to communicate more easily with organizations and individuals outside of their local areas. Crucially for a sector that frequently lacks material resources, these organizations have found the Internet relatively inexpensive and easy to use. Nevertheless, the reliance on free servers, few computers, and limited numbers of email addresses for one-third of the sample shows that access remains circumscribed. The existence of a website does mark a type of digital divide among those with access; small, under-resourced and grassroots-oriented organizations are under-represented in this region of cyberspace. However, 75 percent of the organizations have websites or are explicitly planning for them.

Crucially, the Internet allows for rapid, cheap, easy, and wide dissemination of a great deal of alternative information. For example, interviewees mentioned over 250 different electronic bulletins or lists from which they regularly received news, reports, urgent actions, invitations, and other information. Such dissemination efforts support networking, one of the principal strategies through which civil society organizations broaden their communities, develop new understandings of critical issues, and coordinate action, whether locally or globally. The connections nurtured by email use are often manifest in efforts to include gendered perspectives in international conferences, such as the World Social Fora and the 2003 United Nations World Summit on Information Society.

Although not a new practice, participation in national and international advocacy campaigns is an activity facilitated by the availability of email. Campaigns can reinforce the globality of gender equality movements, or perhaps their "glocality." Mary Martínez, the president of the social development organization *Fundación Siglo 21*, located in San Salvador de Jujuy, Argentina, explains that before the Internet, "if one wanted to lend support to a cause it was hard to show it. Now you can support something and sign on and there it is. Like in the case of the Muslim woman who was going to be killed for adultery ... what happens is that suddenly [the ability to respond] has become like part of us, something so daily that we perceive it like something normal" (personal interview with author, 9 October 2002). The Internet helps to expand the horizons of activists and their community of responsibility, as it shrinks the distance between places as far apart as northern Argentina and northern Nigeria.

ICT also helps to equalize and extend relations within activist communities. Cristina Zurutuza, the head of the Argentine branch of the region-wide women's rights network *CLADEM*, finds that Internet use reinforces her organization's commitment to participative, consultative democracy and bolsters their efforts for consensual decision making. Besides providing extensive information, websites have become places to expand organizational support and audience. Vera Viera, the general coordinator of the São Paulo-based popular education network *Red Mulher de Educação*, describes its trilingual website as "superfundamental" be-

cause it helps get new supporters and partnerships and “you can leave the ghetto [i.e., the immediate community] through it” (personal interview with author, 13 August 2002). The web is also particularly important for activists who seek to organize or assist those who have trouble connecting in “real time.” Mariana Pérez Ocaña, the editorial and design director of the Mexico City-based lesbian rights organization and magazine *Les Voz*, explains that their website allows them to reach a large audience of women for low costs—and with little fear of censorship (personal interview with author, 31 May 2002).

However, the Internet is not a completely safe or uncontested space. Some 15 percent of the groups have experienced some form of online harassment, from entrapment to targeted viruses. In addition, the very freedom of expression allowed by email and websites can become a point of contention. Several lesbian groups in Mexico mentioned a debate over representation within the community that became widely known when an email was circulated outside the country, while another serious internal disagreement between two activists became the subject of a webpage. Of course, national debates have reached regional audiences before, through other “grapevine technologies” such as telephone, fax, regular mail, or personal contact, but the speed and extent with which news (and gossip) can travel, and the many-to-many possibilities of expressing opinions, changes the nature of such exchanges, leaving plenty of opportunities for misinterpretation and sometimes very harmful results.<sup>2</sup>

While all my informants attested to the importance of their Internet access, many also complained that ICT has increased their workloads, describing volumes of email that they simply cannot keep up with and have to “triage.” Figuring out who is responsible for Internet-based communication, from answering email to updating webpages, has become an often daily and frequently contentious issue in organizations.

At the same time, Internet access remains highly restricted. Among the organizations, there is a significant “digital divide” in terms of ICT access that maps onto class and racial/ethnic lines. None of the 48 organizations that do at least part of their work with “popular” communities (whether urban squatters in Argentina, rural Afro-Brazilians, or indigenous peoples in Mexico) use email directly with these populations. In rural areas, often the lack of electricity and phone service is a problem; in urban barrios, the high crime rates mean even community computers are not safe.

However, several respondents discussed how they share this new utility even with those who cannot use it directly, often through the re-circulation of information originally received via email. A few organizations provide computer access and training for their communities. Projects such as the ICT and Media Advocacy project of the AfroBrazilian women’s group Geledés, based in São Paulo, are designed and executed to give marginalized people, and women in particular, the power of technology. In this case, local organizers in San Salvador de Bahia learned how to use ICT in order to take on central roles in their organizations and reach broader audiences with self-generated analyses of their situation.

I was able to get some sense of the impact of not only severe income disparity, but also economic crisis on ICT use since I was in Argentina immediately prior to, and then during, the devastating economic crisis of 2001–2002. While many interviewees had downgraded their use in some way, the Internet also helped many to continue communications during this difficult period. It literally kept

one organization from disappearing due to the crisis; when CEASOL, a progressive faith-based organization focused on community organizing in poor neighborhoods in Buenos Aires, could no longer pay its rent, it gave up its office to become a virtual network.

Thus, despite its limited reach and the new set of challenges it presents, ICT has clearly become a crucial resource for gender equality advocacy in Latin America. It has enhanced networking and advocacy capacities and provided new spaces for organizing. Increasingly, ICT is not considered a luxury item, but an indispensable utility.

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### Notes

1. The organizations focus on a wide range of issues, but all of them do work within the general category of "gender equality." This is quite a broad category, ranging from publishing feminist magazines to fighting against domestic violence to promoting responsible teenage fatherhood.
2. For example, in May 2003, Nigerian activists tried to halt an international email petition circulating widely throughout the Spanish-speaking world on behalf of a woman sentenced to stoning to death for adultery because the petition was both inaccurate and potentially damaging to her case. See <http://www.wluml.org/english/new-archives/nigeria/amina-lawal-summary-0802.htm> (accessed 19 May 2003).

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## **The Power of the Weblogged Word: Contained Empowerment in the Middle East North Africa Region**

*Victoria Ann Newsom and Laura Lengel*

In her weblog, "Notes of an Iranian Girl," Shahla Aziz (2003) writes:

Women's struggle here, of course, is different from the West. [Women] strive to be considered a full witness in court and have the right to travel without your husband's permission ... With more than 20 percent unemployment and lack of real opportunity for women, the only way to assure any kind of upward mobility is still a good marriage. Only now, a good marriage is considered to be one with someone who holds a Western passport—an exit to a better life.

Ideally, the Internet can be a passport for otherwise marginalized persons to enter a space where they are comfortable speaking. The Internet can also provide the opportunity for individual or personal empowerment, allowing marginalized voices to develop unique characteristics not bound to established social patterns. However, because the Internet is itself a patriarchal construct and Internet access is determined by established norms, such as online domination of the English language, marginalized voices are often restricted to spaces allotted them online, and not necessarily heard outside these spaces. Internet space itself is unique because it exists in both public and private spheres, and its nature is determined by the cultural rules assigned to each sphere. Nevertheless, online spaces are themselves restricted by offline cultures that dictate who and how many people have access to these spaces.



This is particularly true of women in the Middle East North Africa (MENA) region, whose voices are traditionally excluded from public sphere communication. On the Internet, their voices transcend the traditional barriers between public and private, yet are still restrained by cultural interpretations and social norms. As with Shahla Aziz's comments above, women in the MENA region engage in online communication to transcend regional and international barriers—they travel online, but remain rooted at home. Their online mobility does not translate into their material lives. Further, their ability to "travel" online is often thwarted by social norms. In various regions, only men have free access to the Internet. Similarly, often men control access to the skills and knowledge of how to use the technology itself. Radhika Gajjala (2002) argues that it is not only access, which is always a concern, but also the way that persons from the Global South are represented on the Internet which reinforces the digital divide. She notes the power structures of the Global North dictate the way the Internet is structured which therefore disenfranchises women (and men) in the South because the knowledge formation on the Internet is rooted in perspectives from the North.

Weblog spaces allow the existence of women's voices, but do not necessarily translate into women's lived experience offline. This further widens the digital gender divide. The nature of communication from the South is a legitimate form of empowerment, although an empowerment contained within the existing power hierarchies of dominant discourses online. "Contained empowerment," a theory developed by Victoria Newsom (2003), is liminal power restricted by social norms to spaces specifically created to empower marginalized individuals. Contained empowerment is real power, and provides a space where dismantling hegemony can be envisioned and planned. However, this power is limited temporally, and thus its impact on hegemony is often indirect.

Despite the limitations of online communication, women can be personally empowered through online interaction. Contained empowerment often takes the form of personal empowerment, rather than political or social empowerment, focusing on empowering the individual rather than communities or social groups. One of the ways that women seek personal empowerment is by expressing themselves online through *weblogging*. "Weblogs," or "Blogs," are usually comprised of short, frequently updated postings arranged chronologically, like an online diary. While blogging is not a new phenomenon, it has only become widely known in recent years, and the numbers of blogs are increasing exponentially. For example, the "blogs by women" site provides access to, at the time of writing, 1,083 women's blogs (Bonnie Elizabeth Hall 2002). Some blogs have a serious, political or social purpose, yet still focus on individual voices. Like the Internet itself, blogs blur boundaries between public and private. Women use weblogs to tell their own stories, and reach out to others who may share similar life experiences.

Furthermore, because the Internet is an international space, weblogged voices reach others in one's diaspora or from other cultures, and can draw attention to concerns of women in the South. These concerns include violence against women both online and off (Susan Herring 2002), women's rights, and raising awareness about the essentialization of women of the South. Blogs by women in the South are on the increase, still on sites like "blogs for women," they are a tiny minority: Of 1,083 blogs, only nine are visibly by woman of the South. Five

of these are blogs by women in the MENA region. An Iranian journalist (Hossein Derakhshan 2003) notes, there are more than 1,000 Iranian weblogs, however, most are difficult to find using an English-language browser or search engine. This discrepancy between those visible to English-language users and those inaccessible by an English-language search engines reinforces the marginalized and contained nature of the empowering potential of weblogs in the MENA region.

Further complicating online communication in the MENA region, under the authoritarian or semi-authoritarian governance of most MENA nations, many voices are intentionally silenced. Users speaking critically against their nation or government may be silenced by subtle ways, from “problems” with their telephone lines or Internet Service Providers (ISPs) or confiscation of computer equipment. Many MENA governments, such as that of Tunisia, have constituted Internet-specific legislation in keeping with their controls on critical speech in other media and in the public sphere. At worst, users who are suspected of critical speech online are subjected to imprisonment and even torture or murder.

Language and cultural barriers also have an impact on weblog activities. Women with access are still challenged to make their voices heard by women of other language and cultural backgrounds, without losing the unique nature of the voice through translation. The ability to be heard is necessary to empowerment, whether visualized as the power to create change or the power to benefit from the system: the system itself often only recognizes those who are visible. However, when those in power are aware of the marginalized, recognition may be as marginalizing as it is empowering. Thus, “coming to voice is not just the act of telling one’s experience. It is using that telling strategically—to come to voice so that you can also speak freely about other subjects” (bell hooks 1994: 148). This is the ideal that weblogs can provide, the space to speak freely.

Therefore, while weblogging is an example of a positive outcome of IT on individual women’s lives, the contained nature of this empowerment limits women’s power and freedom to these particular phenomena. We argue that the challenges and restrictions of the Internet hamper, but do not entirely erase, the potential of weblogging to actuate any social or cultural change in the regions where the voices originate. We submit that these activities offer hope by creating a space of contained empowerment where voices can gain momentum and potentially encourage other forms of social and cultural change. Our ongoing research on women’s blogs explores the potential for individual women’s empowerment that weblogs provide in the MENA region. At the same time, we examine whether these weblogs can impact the greater political structures that ultimately contain women, or are increasing the gap between the genders in this region by separating men’s and women’s places of empowerment.

While many women like Shahla Aziz write openly about politics, culture, and society, other women prefer to remain anonymous. Aziz’s weblog is unlike many weblogs from the MENA region simply because it is written in the dominant language of the Internet, English, and is one of the 1,083 sites accessible on “blogs by women.” Further, Aziz clearly understands cultural variations between her own and Western cultures. She also expresses a common concern of women in the MENA region—a desire to exit to the West and “a better life.” Aziz is using this weblog as a means of exiting her life, implying the hope that the exit can transcend the Internet space.

The concept of the Internet as a passport for women from the MENA region should not be dismissed simply because of the temporality and localized nature of blogs online. Despite their contained nature, these spaces still give women in the MENA region a place to speak: it provides a means by which women can gain a voice in the public sphere in a part of the world which might otherwise silence them. The potential for these women's blogs is great, if they can avoid being marginalized discursive spaces.

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## Using Women as Middle Men: The Real Promise of ICTs

*Jonathan Sterne and Carol Stabile*

Critical scholars, not to mention many of those burned by the dot.com bust, may have dispensed with the heady technological determinist claims of the early 1990s, but these claims live on in the fantasy world of development literature. They thrive in the official language of Women in Development, especially that of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). "Information technology," one USAID publication reads, "brings women increased access to resources ... the lack of a voice is a large measure of what has kept them from equity and parity worldwide. Information technology can mean opportunities for a whole range of women, including poor women" (Nancy Halfkin and Nancy Taggart 2002: 93). USAID's refusal to consider structural issues is not surprising, given its unsavory history of promoting private, corporate interests internationally, but its discourse of female "empowerment" is particularly problematic in light of feminist challenges to female entrepreneurialism and the belief that technology can set workers free. Our essay briefly examines two elements of the discourse of female empowerment through information technology: the ideology of connectivity and the related belief that information and communication technologies (ICTs)—in and of themselves—provide solutions to global poverty.<sup>1</sup>

In its various forms (cellular, Personal Communications Service (PCS), etc.), wireless telephony is one of the most rapidly expanding ICTs worldwide. ICT boosters uniformly invoke the success of Grameen Telecom's village telephone program in Bangladesh: first, because it was profitable; second, because it made telephones more widely available in rural areas; and third, (by way of afterthought) because many of the "entrepreneurs" it supported were women. Some commentaries on this program border on the fantastic. Consider this one:

[Grameen's village telephone program] offers a relatively inexpensive model for connectivity and with it, access to the world's information resources for populations that were hitherto isolated and information poor. It reminds us, too, that empowered by only voice connectivity people can and will take advantage of information to better their lives and improve their economic situations. (Jean L. Camp and Brian L. Anderson 1999)

Here, the word "information" is evacuated of its meaning. Are *telephones* the technologies most needed by Bangladeshi women? What "information" can they really access through telephony? *How* will telephones allow Bangladeshi women to improve their lives? Bangladeshi women might incorporate ICTs into their lives in many different ways, but were Bangladeshi women, who certainly know their needs better than USAID, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and the multinational corporations that stand to benefit from expansion of markets for various technologies, consulted about their everyday lives and needs? In place of a flat program of universal service, poor families ought to have a choice

of services from which they can select those that are most relevant to their everyday lives. They may indeed find telephones to be an empowering technology, but telephony should be one option among several.

Although every case is different, it is instructive to look at a case where an underserved community's information needs were actually examined. In studying poor African-American households in the United States, for example, Jorge Schement (1998) found that many women opted for cable television service over telephone service. While to many middle-class people, this would seem to prove that these women made bad consumer choices, within the context of their everyday lives, such a decision made perfect sense. Cable television allowed these women to know where their children were, while the telephone mainly provided a conduit for bill collectors searching for household members or other relatives (Jorge Reina Schement 1998). Similarly, Grameen Telecom's Bangladeshi customers may have needs unanticipated by a narrow focus on entrepreneurialism.

As Schement's research demonstrates, while economically disenfranchised populations do need access to ICTs, these are only part of a much larger mix. It is not a question so much of getting poor women online or on the phone; it is also a question of understanding those technologies in relation to other basic resources, such as education and employment. Alone, information technologies cannot offer the poor much upward mobility, because "information" alone does not solve the economic and social problems of poverty (Gordo Blanco 2003).

The idea that ICTs *do* solve social problems dovetails nicely with the discourse of neoliberalism, in which solutions to poverty are never structural. Instead, neoliberals focus on the poor as a giant aggregate of freewheeling individuals who can use ICTs to pull themselves up by their bootstraps. Neoliberal policy constructs people in poor countries as "entrepreneurs" who simply need to bring their wares to "the global market"—often via the Internet. For instance, PEOPLink, an organization with ties to eBay and other Internet startups, describes itself as "a nonprofit marketplace benefiting grassroots artisans and their communities around the world," and cites the United Nations to justify its existence:

The cover of the 1992 United Nations Human Development Report shows a graph in which *the richest 20% of the world's population receives 82.7% of the global income while the poorest 60% receives only 5.6%*. Yet the same U.N. document opens with the following statement: "*The world has a unique opportunity in the current decade to use global markets for the benefit of all nations and people ... Markets are the means. Human development is the end.*" (PEOPLink 2003, emphasis in original)

This is absurd. It is to argue that the solution to the poverty endured by the poorest 60 percent of the global population is to empower "poor producers to use the Internet to maximize the benefit of world trade," rather than redistribute some of the 82.7 percent of global profits hoarded by less than 20 percent of the population. After all, the neoliberal line goes, people are poor because they fail to take advantage of the bounties of the global economy. Neoliberals' focus on entrepreneurship also has the effect of diverting "attention (intentionally or unintentionally) from the disastrous effects of IMF [International Monetary Fund] and World Bank austerity measures" (Winifred Poster and Zakia Salime 2002: 192).

Neoliberals' endorsements of entrepreneurialism border on the obscene in their inattention to the materiality of women's everyday lives. Entrepreneurial-

ism relegates poor women of the South to positions within the informal economy rather than the formal economy. In order to be part of a “digital economy” or “information society” (both dubious constructs, given levels of ICT access internationally), poor people have two choices: they can encounter information society as workers in the service industry; or they can encounter information society as small producers, with, as Marx put it, only their hides to sell. When poor women encounter information society as workers, their situation is not meant to be “empowering”—it is meant to provide cheap labor for multinational corporations. Because women need science and technology education (as well as literacy in English) to participate in ICTs at the level of programming and design, women typically work in “the service sector jobs outsourced by major corporations in the U.S. and Europe” (Halfkin and Taggart 2002: 3). Service sector jobs do not provide a living wage in the United States, much less in the countries of the South. These jobs require few skills beyond basic literacy and offer no skills or training to workers (Naomi Klein 2002).

When they encounter information society as small producers, the risks poor women confront are even more severe: even under the best of circumstances, small businesses often fail; workers are granted few of the protections and privileges accorded to workers in the formal economy; small businesses often function at the expense of other subsistence labor for which women are typically responsible, particularly subsistence farming; and small businesses can siphon energy away from political activities that might collectively benefit their communities (labor organizing, environmental activism, etc.). Additionally, these women are forced to seek credit to start small businesses, which is notoriously difficult for poor people to secure.

International aid organizations and large nonprofits have touted microcredit programs, which are said to enable poor women to engage with ICTs, as a solution to this problem. Microcredit offers poor individuals entrepreneurial loans of US\$500 or less, but these programs emerge from the needs of the multinational corporations that back them and not the people they are said to help. One need only scratch the surface of these programs to find corporate names like Citibank, MasterCard, and Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu (one of the largest accounting firms in the world). The founder of Grameen Bank calls microcredit “a system which allows everybody access to credit while ensuring excellent repayment.” Grameen’s repayment rates are an astonishing 97 percent, mostly because the collateral for these loans is provided by a peer group. If a woman defaults, nobody else in her immediate social network gets a loan (Gina Neff 1996). As one Grameen worker put it, “We are much better at getting our loan money back now that we are using women as middle-men [sic]” (quoted in Neff 1996).

The very structure of microcredit programs can have devastating and as-yet not fully understood effects on the lives of women and girls. Despite a long history of marketing new technologies to women as laborsaving devices, new communication technologies actually increase women’s workloads (Ruth Schwartz Cowan 1983; Juliet Schor 1991; Michelle Rodino 2003). And women entrepreneurs must often delegate full time domestic labor to their daughters, effectively closing off their daughters’ pursuit of educational advancement (Poster and Salime 2002).

We feminist scholars of information technology certainly have our work cut

out for us. Although the debates about technological determinism are largely over in academic circles, we need to actively challenge these in the arenas of policy and economics, where they “live on” like the economic vampires that they are. At the same time, we need to rethink some of our own emerging sacred constructs. ICT-specific terms like “universal service” and the “digital divide” are inherently flawed concepts because they separate ICTs from their broader economic and social milieus. While extended telecommunication service to the poor is a good thing, poor women cannot eat information or phones (though neoliberals may wish that they would try), and they cannot feed technology to their families. In the end, it may make more sense for feminist scholars to take a broader view of technology and dispense with the narrow ICT framework altogether. “Giving technology to the poor” may be a great slogan for ICT boosters, but it cannot substitute for demands for water purification systems, viable agricultural programs, health care, education, and basic democratic rights. By separating ICTs from other technologies and focusing on individual entrepreneurs instead of structural and infrastructural issues, neoliberalism only offers poor women gifts that they cannot use.

### Note

1. For the sake of brevity, we have had to exclude any consideration of women as producers of IT content.

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## Gendered Sites of Conflict: Internet Activism in Reproductive Health

*Priya Kapoor*

Women's access of the Internet has evoked considerable concern because studies show that they are the least likely users of the Internet, globally (Robert McChesney 2003; Rhona O. Bautista 1999). This inequity is even more glaring in South Asian countries—home to over 515 million poor people (Bautista 1999). Given that the Internet is understood as a possible egalitarian medium of communication vital to democratic movements and participation (Loong Wong 2001), statistics showing below par usage among women are indeed worthy of concern. The implications of this lack of access to technology reflect back to the non-recognition of the productive roles women play in society and within their immediate spheres of existence. Conversely, studies have also shown that despite male dominance on the Internet, women have been able to carve out a niche for themselves whether as users or more particularly as user-activists and user-scholars. I write as a user and participant-observer of an Internet site that provides common ground for those involved in debates, activism, and community work in the area of reproductive health in South Asia.

I examine here the strategic positioning of the Global Reproductive Health Forum South Asia site (GRHF) that emerged around the mid-1990s under the aegis of Harvard University, though managed and maintained jointly by the Centre for Women's Development Studies (CWDS), New Delhi, and SNTD Women's University, Mumbai, India. A study by W. Timothy Coombs (1998) shows that a powerless activist group is easy to ignore by powerful organiza-



tions; therefore, when using the Internet as a tool for activism it is important to maintain a link that many can access. An extensive study on citizen activism on the Internet by Kevin Hill and John E. Hughes (1998) shows that activist and progressive websites usually do not show up through common search engines. Therefore, the prominent placing of the GRHF South Asia site is an important matter of discussion.

The Forum's prominence and visibility is partly made possible by the support and collaboration of top academic institutions: Harvard University in the United States and SNDT Women's University in Mumbai, India. CWDS, New Delhi, is a collaborating institution that makes connections between Women's Studies and women's movements in South Asia, and its commitment to both scholarship and advocacy are explicitly part of the organizational agenda. The GRHF South Asia site is easily accessed through Harvard University's web page. The provenance of GRHF South Asia is linked to the global discourse of empowerment of women that emerged as an outcome of the proceedings and participation of feminist citizen groups in two key United Nations Conferences: the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), Cairo, 1994, and the World Conference on Women, Beijing, 1995. The active lobbying efforts of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) thrust several women's issues to the forefront, especially reproductive health.

During ICPD, the issue of population was politicized and thereby questioned, as were the repressive means employed by some countries to control their population count. At the instigation of citizen groups or NGOs, the language of *population control* shifted to that of *reproductive health*. The change in language is not merely cosmetic but a paradigmatic shift since *reproductive health* does not engage with women's fertility in the narrow way, as do population control policies of most nations of the South. Reproductive health addresses reproductive rights, human sexuality, empowerment of women through equality and equity, the relationship of reproduction policies to HIV-AIDS, and the nexus of poverty and sustainable development.

National development and population policies of countries in South Asia (Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Pakistan, India, and Sri Lanka) share some significant overlap in context and implementation, though their political structures are disparate. South Asian governments, since the 1950s or the immediate post-colonial period, have administered centralized programs of population control and reproductive health as part of their five-year planning cycles. For decades, these policies escaped the scrutiny of citizen groups and the non-governmental sector. It has always been exceedingly difficult to access gender-specific government policies, something the GRHF website makes readily available.

South Asian population programs gained European and American donor funding and, by the 1990s, became increasingly demographic-target-dependent and coercive toward women's bodies. Activists and feminist scholars have been trying to dismantle the ideological frameworks of international development as a way to address the role of women in families and in society. This pro-active measure on the part of NGOs has made government departments in South Asia more accountable to its citizens, though a long-term assessment of actual changes in ideology are yet to be completed.

A substantial questioning of institutional purpose has already occurred due to

the forum provided to feminist organizations by the United Nations conferences in Cairo and Beijing. Nevertheless, NGOs, activists, and scholars need an open forum, separate from governmental control and regulation, where academic and other resources are freely available to them without the restrictions that come with membership and access to elitist organizations. The structure of GRHF South Asia is such that it regulates the different aspects of debates related directly or indirectly to reproductive health that need further discussion. The site homepage directs users to its multiple links that are managed by several different persons and collaborating institutions in South Asia, though India and Nepal seem most represented. The site is composed of the following categories:

- Partners: an introduction to the collaborating institutions—CWDS and SNDT Women's University.
- Forums: the most comprehensive site with links to a plethora of legal documents and research related to dowry, domestic violence, crimes against women, foeticide, child marriage, girl child, sati, pregnancy, injectable contraceptives, and tribal communities.
- Library: research papers and bibliographies on topics ranging from abortion and the status of women to sex selection.
- Discussion: an interactive electronic discussion link called "Bol!" begun in 1998.
- Resources: includes bibliographies, non-government organizations, audio/visual resources, statistics on domestic violence, pregnancy, etc.
- E-Journals: *Re/productions*—a refereed journal for all issues in South Asia related to reproductive health including news on donor policies and dated Western policies on eugenics. Radical activists and scholars contribute their work to this e-journal.

As a researcher on grassroots movements and reproductive health issues in India, I have found GRHF South Asia to be inclusive of multiple perspectives, well managed, and participatory in that it shows coordination and collaboration with many different institutions within South Asia. This conjuncture of ideas and activities is unique as gender-based population and public policies have traditionally been difficult to acquire or research. Even though the region has produced several indigenous activists, access to governmental policies, leave alone multiple-nation policy comparisons, would be virtually impossible for the average researcher without substantial clout in political or governmental circles. Even though I do not present the Internet as a democratic utopia, it has loosened the hold of the government on information and statistics that women and individuals need to evaluate and read for themselves before they believe the self-congratulatory stories that are handed to them by the state institutions.

Studies show that all modes of communication and education need to be employed to close the increasing gap in information among South Asian publics. Folk forms of communication, street theatre, satellite television, and song and dance are well-established ways to disseminate vital messages of empowerment and gender equity. The Internet does not substitute traditional communication channels; rather it complements them. Even though a large number of persons have little or no access to the Internet, a vast number do and are committed to democratize and apply the information they receive to others they come into contact with through university classrooms or grassroots activism. To that end,

I laud the work being done by those who believe in staking a claim to the World Wide Web, being a foil, or rubbing elbows with the vast number of right-of-center sites that outnumber activist sites.

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# Gender Troubles in the Internet Era

*Mei-Po Kwan*

Increasing women's access to the Internet has been a high-priority policy concern in developing countries around the world in recent years (e.g., the Women'sNet project launched in South Africa in 1998; Leslie Regan Shade 2002). Given the stark gender inequality in the access to and use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in these countries, it is not only an urgent task, but also a sensible strategy to tap the potential of the Internet to help women reach resources in cyberspace, network with each other, build supportive national or international communities, and play more active roles in civil society. In short, bridging the digital divide for women does seem to be a viable strategy for redressing part of the gender inequality in these countries. However, if women's relationships with new technologies in the past is any indication of what is to come—and there are signs that this is likely the case—we should be much more cautious in reading the potential benefits the Internet may bring to women's lives. I focus largely on women's experience in the developed world in this essay (although I do not intend to imply a naïve progressive developmental sequence).

As extensive feminist analysis has shown, new technologies do not always lead to beneficial changes in women's lives as so often touted by advocates of these technologies. For instance, the introduction of new domestic technologies such as the home washing machine or dishwasher actually did not reduce the amount of time women spent on housework (Ruth Schwartz Cowan 1983; Judy Wajcman 1991). Instead, they tend to reinforce the existing gender division of household labor and render women's lives more deeply entrenched in unequal gender relations. What is even more problematic is that the design and development of new technologies tend to be shaped by existing relations between women and men. This means that technological innovations often fossilize unequal gender relations rather than change them (Cynthia Cockburn 1997).

Recent studies on women's Internet use suggest that this is exactly what is happening in Western countries. First, women's use of the Internet seems to have a tendency to reinforce existing gender roles or gender relations. There is also considerable evidence that pre-existing gender differences in the physical world are finding new expressions in the realm of ICTs and the Internet. For instance, women use the Internet more for interpersonal communication than for searching information when compared to men (Bonka Boneva and Robert Kraut 2002). It seems that women have appropriated email as a new tool for their traditional role in maintaining relationships among family and friends, and that women's and men's behaviors in maintaining personal relationships are being perpetuated in email communication. The experiences of several women with children I interviewed in my current research also reveal that Internet use is helping them juggle multiple roles instead of changing their gender roles within the household.<sup>2</sup> In other words, the digital divide in the Western world now expresses itself more in terms of gender differences in the uses to which the Internet is put than in terms of the numbers of women and men having access to the Internet (Linda A. Jackson, Kelly S. Ervin, Phillip D. Gardner, and Neal Schmitt 2001).

The gendered construction of the Internet and the relationships between women's gender identities and their time will also put the empowering potential of the Internet for women in question. First, although more women than men now have access to the Internet in several Western countries, the Internet is rampant with commercial websites that target and construct women largely as consumers and online shoppers (Liesbet van Zoonen 2001). As women's other identities (such as activist or intellectual) are often ignored, the commercial orientation of the Internet will tend to shape the way women use it in most cases. Furthermore, as many feminists have observed, women's Internet use at home tends to perpetuate the binarized and gendered constructions of private/public, consumption/production, home/work and entertainment/information—where women's Internet use is relegated to the former realm of these binaries and coded as unimportant activities. A major challenge for women is how to subvert these social constructions and to give new meanings to their Internet use at home.

Another issue is the relationships between women's gender identities and their time, and the effect of these relationships on their Internet use—or what Gillian Youngs (2001: 18) has called “the patriarchal grip on time.” Youngs argues that women are alienated from their own time, which is identified as most legitimately directed to the care of others, especially the family in the

private realm (home), and to the service and maintenance of the public world of production (work). In addition, as women also negotiate their gendered experiences across private/public boundaries, the inferior or service status of women's time is mutually reinforced across the private/public divide. The effect of this on how, when, and where women use the Internet is significant. In my own research, I found that women with children tend to fit their Internet use into their existing schedule that is largely structured by their various domestic responsibilities and the existing gender division of labor within the household. As many of these responsibilities are fixed in time and/or location (e.g., chauffeuring children), women have a high tendency to use the Internet during segments of free time within their fragmented daily schedule.

The service status of women's time and its effect on their Internet use was also observed in a recent survey (ACNielsen 2003), which reports that women are more efficient in their Web behavior than men. This is because they have only very limited amount of time for surfing the Web, and they spread their surfing over a longer period during the day (largely between the afternoon and evening prime time hours from 4 pm to 10 pm). There seems to be a significant relationship between women's predisposition to see their time as a resource to serve others, and when, where, and how they use the Internet. Women's use of the Internet, in this light, should be understood as part of their working roles inside and outside the home (e.g., for entertainment or for finding discount coupons). Thus their construction as online consumers, their relegation to the private/consumption/home realm, and the service status of their time all serve to reinforce and perpetuate the patriarchal grip on their time.

The Internet has considerable transformative potential for progressive social change—for example, networking and community formation across national boundaries. Certain use of the Internet by women can be empowering and offers possibilities for contesting existing gender norms. Yet women's Internet use also can reinforce unequal gender relations, perpetuate existing gender division of household labor and sustain the gendered construction of ICTs. From women's experiences in the United States and the United Kingdom, there is evidence that increasing use of the Internet by women does not significantly change the patriarchal social relations they face in their everyday lives. If these trends are indicative of what the future may hold for developing countries, they should be of pressing concern for feminist activists or policy makers worldwide. Strategies to bridge the digital divide for women through tapping the potential of the Internet need to carefully negotiate these contradictory tendencies of ICTs. An overwhelming focus on increasing women's access to and use of the Internet may obscure some of the tensions lurking behind the otherwise noble call for improving women's situation. Conceiving the digital divide in broader and substantively more meaningful terms may better serve the long-term goal of empowering women and achieving gender equality.

### **Acknowledgements**

This essay is based on my ongoing project that examines the relationships between women's Internet use, and the geographical and temporal characteristics of their daily activities. I am grateful for the support for this research from

the Information Technology Research (ITR) Program of the United States National Science Foundation (NSF) and an Ameritech Fellowship.

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1. The women referred to here are married or single mothers with children who need to negotiate their multiple roles with very limited time.

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# Mobilizing Mother

*Michelle Rodino*

As the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) prepares to discuss the relationship between ICTs and the “new world order,” the marketing struggle around mobile information and communication technologies (MICTs) is producing an important discourse for feminist criticism. The promotion of MICTs reflects and refracts a larger ideological struggle around women’s work and, in doing so, constitutes a crucial intellectual and political project: examining the ideological mechanisms that reproduce the gendered division of labor. This essay outlines the confluence of marketing agendas and labor disciplining discourses as they converge on mothers and discusses its significance.

Throughout the past two decades, the computer industry has been bracing for “market saturation.” After declining growth in the late 1980s, the industry targeted women with advertisements portraying personal computers (PCs) as “home computers” that complement mother’s familial labor (Marsha Cassidy 2001). The female market became more attractive as women’s consumption of computer technologies rose throughout the 1990s (Denise Watkins 2000). Georgia Tech’s survey found that in 1994, 5 percent of Internet users were women, a figure that tripled in 1995, doubled the following year, and grew to about 30 percent in the late 1990s. In 2000 marketers reported that women slightly outnumbered men online, leading to the announcement: “It’s a Woman’s World Wide Web” (Vawn Himmelsbach 2000; Keith Regan 2000). As a result of targeting women, PC sales grew. By the mid-1990s, over one-third of households in the United States owned computers. Ownership, however, plateaued at this level (Dan Schiller 1999).

Mobile information and communication technologies like laptops, cell phones, and personal digital assistants promised to boost sales for the computer industry by complementing or replacing the PC. Depending on the source, analysts forecast that MICT sales would double or triple, or grow exponentially throughout the 1990s and 2000s (Eric Grevstad 1996; Michael Martinez 1999). Claims about the impact of MICTs on work were equally fantastic. Mobile information and communication technologies promised to make work possible “anytime, anywhere.” When MICT markets appeared saturated during the late 1990s, however, the industry again targeted female consumers to reinvigorate sales. Women constituted an untapped market for personal digital assistants (PDAs) in particular, since men bought 90 percent of Palms (the PDA market leader) sold in 1997 and 80 percent of those sold in 1998. Mobile computers aimed at mother held special promise.

As the century turned, the computer industry decided that it was time to feminize and more specifically, matronize what it had worked so hard to masculinize. The remainder of this essay briefly sketches the promotion of 3Com’s PDA for women in the campaign for “Audrey,” launched in 2000. Discussion illustrates the mechanisms that reproduce the gendered division of labor amidst ever changing technologies and the shifting composition of women’s work.

Audrey was unlike other PDAs in that she was clearly intended to work in the kitchen with mother. The new gadget was promoted as an “Internet appliance” and “electronic organizer” rather than as a “PDA.” News reports referred to Audrey as a “countertop computer” that was “intended to be easier to use than a personal computer” (Todd Wallack 2000). Audrey’s design implies her utility as a kitchen aid. Her availability in five colors (“sunshine,” “meadow,” “ocean,” “linen,” and “slate”) complements domestic appliance ensembles. In addition, Audrey was intended for a combination of old and new domestic tasks. According to 3Com’s website: “Audrey can be the family’s nerve-center in no time, handling schedules, phone books, and notes. Up to two Palm compatible devices in your home can sync to Audrey to help centralize your family calendar” (“Aesthetic, Compact, Capable” 2000). Featuring a square screen with knobs running alongside and underneath it for “easy dial [web]channels” and a “wireless keyboard that minimizes clutter,” Audrey appeared and served as a television mother could use to screen out undesirable content. Audrey offered access to “family friendly” (i.e., pornography free) web “channels” like Drugstore.com, the Weather Channel, CNN, and ESPN (“Aesthetic, Compact, Capable,” 2000). Embodying the convergence of a kitchen appliance and television, reviewers commented that she “looks like the spawn of a toaster oven and a small television” (Vince Vittore, 2001). Like marketing for earlier domestic technologies, Audrey’s campaign combined the domestic aesthetic of pastel appliances with the promise of a familiar user interface.

Reviews also emphasized the gadget’s “retro-futuristic look” that “resembles something out of the Jetsons” (Stephen Manes 2001: 136). One *MacWorld* commentator contended that “Audrey bears a vague resemblance to Rosie, the robot maid from the Jetsons—if you can imagine George Jetson finally lost his cool and beheaded his mechanical domestic” (Philip Michaels 2001: 21). Similarly, the *Wall Street Journal* suggested that Audrey “looks less like a PC and more like some fanciful gizmo from a Jetsons cartoon ... like some sort of space antenna from a 1950s science-fiction movie” (Walter Mossberg 2000: B1). Portraying Audrey as a retro-futuristic television for the kitchen ultimately traded on nostalgia to sell the gadget as mother’s aid and as an aid to the gendered division of labor. More specifically, Audrey’s design and promotional literature referenced a time (the postwar era) when mother was expected to stay home to tend to the family.<sup>1</sup>

Reinforcing mother’s proper place in the home, and more specifically, the kitchen, reminds us of just how “ironic” the promotion of new technologies can be when imagined for women’s familial labor (Ruth Schwartz Cowan 1983). When aimed at earlier men’s markets, MICTs promised to “break the chains that had always bound them to their desks” (Cross-Industry Work Team 1995). In contrast, MICTs intended for women are imagined in ways that would reinforce mother’s link to the home. Such links are significant because they, in turn, are articulated in ways that reassert mother’s role as primary familial worker. Mother’s consumption of Audrey adds to her domestic burden: Audrey assigns new tasks like monitoring children’s web browsing, updating the family’s schedule, and uploading it onto the home PC. In a new twist to the old adage that mother’s work is never done, Audrey asks mother to execute a “kitchen sync” after cleaning the kitchen sink. Like earlier domestic ICTs such as the home computer, telephone, and television, Audrey promises “more work for



mother," not less (Marsha Cassidy, 2001; Ruth Schwartz Cowan, 1983; Lana Rakow and Vija Navarro, 1993; Lynn Spigel, 1992).

As a kitchen aid, Audrey makes room for the changes in mother's work demands under the gendered division of labor at the turn of the twenty-first century. Audrey's promotion offers to reassure its audience that the kitchen, one of the primary sites of mother's labor under industrialized capitalism, remains so. However, although Audrey's campaign illustrates how tenacious unequal workloads are under the gendered division of labor, it also highlights the system's instabilities. The illusion that working mothers and mother's work is contained within the home has been shattered. Thus, we feminist media scholars find ourselves at a crucial point in the fabrication of the gendered division of labor. It is up to us to unearth the vulnerable points in the system, those points that arouse anxiety and contradict the very foundation on which the system is built. Perhaps then we can influence public discussion on the impact of ICTs and their promotion, while also providing socially constructive alternatives to their use in perpetuating an inequitable division of labor. One place to start would be working toward the mobilization of mothers as unpaid workers on an endless shift.

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### Notes

1. Such was the ideal picture of motherhood for middle-class white women—the very demographic 3Com sought for its Audrey.

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## **Masculinities@work: Gender Inequality and the New Media Industries**

*Lisa Pitt*

Despite their egalitarian image, *new* media industries—like *old* media and other

creative industries (DfES 2002: 39)—are marred by the persistence of gender inequalities. Such imbalances are worrying if only because they may well have serious implications for users and consumers of products and services, which have been designed by (predominantly) men, and thus arguably for men (Catherine Beavis 1998; Leslie Haddon 1999; Ann-Katrin Bäcklund and Åke Sandberg 1999). However, addressing this situation is important not only for consumers, but for those working there too.

Based on a qualitative study of the founders and members of Untold, a London-based support group and community aimed at those working in and around digital design, this essay challenges some of the often too facile assumptions of empowerment and opportunity offered in the new economy, by examining gender inequality in new media environments. The study is part of an ongoing European project, SIGIS, exploring gender inclusion in Information Society and provides an example of a grassroots inclusion strategy for women in technology.

### **New media: new equality?**

The existence of groups like Untold provides a rich illustration of the persistence of inequalities in the so-called “new economy.” The Untold network grew out of an online exhibition of female digital designers, and a public debate designed to help explain and address women’s invisibility in new media. This invisibility is defined by women’s under-representation in the field as well as their sense of exclusion from the “informal male-dominated networks” (Celia Stanworth 2000: 24) or the “new boys network” (Michelle Gamba and Brian H. Kleiner 2001: 102) found in these new industries. Importantly too however, Untold’s work reveals the more complex ways in which gender is constructed in new media work environments and the ways it disadvantages women in particular. Much of Untold’s powerful understanding of these situations comes from the fact that its founders and members work themselves in and around digital design, and are therefore able to draw on their personal stories and experiences in an attempt to make new media more inclusive and to bring to the fore critical, yet poorly understood, factors creating imbalances in the sector.

The new media workers, both male and female, interviewed as part of the SIGIS project, described their industry as *very male* dominated. New media and creative companies themselves were depicted as usually set up and run by young men. Such gender gaps are not however confined to new media, rather symptomatic of entrepreneurialism generally, at least in the United Kingdom. In a recent survey (Rebecca Harding 2002) of the United Kingdom’s TEA (Total Entrepreneurship Activity), it was found that men are almost twice as likely to set up a business. Fear of failure by women is seen as a contributing factor to this situation, so is the “anti-female bias in the business sector in the United Kingdom: this puts women at a disadvantage in relation to access to capital, training and support” (Harding 2002: 40). Venture capital finance appears to be channelled predominantly into companies set up by men, partly because of established networks and partly because these venture capitalists are “traditional city boys of the old school network” who are inexperienced at working with women (Lucy Atkins 2000).

The discrepancy in the number of women setting up businesses presents particular considerations in addressing inclusion and equality in new media, which the founder of Untold described as “quite a networky, drinky kind of environment.” The way this type of environment tends to “discriminate against women” (Rosalind Gill 2002: 83), coupled with the “non-linearity and connectivity” (Andreas Wittel, Celia Lury and Scott Lash 2002: 208) of the new media sector, challenges traditional approaches to inclusion, where emphasis may be placed on career choices or skills. A skills-type approach may be less effective here than in other fields of work, because by and large new media workers tend to be “highly educated” (Gill 2002: 78), and skills are therefore not really an issue, at least for the Untold participants interviewed. Being part of the new boys network is key. Yet, it was found in the study of Untold and its members that exclusion processes and practices in new media are also exacerbated by the appointment of *businessmen*, who often come from outside the industry, and have been brought in precisely because some of the young people who set up new media companies do not have the business skills to run their own companies. These men often come from the old boys network, which means that the situation is worsened by having side-by-side the co-existence of *old* and *new* boys networks. The new boys network, having set up the companies, are joined by those venture capitalists and other business people from the old boys network.

The over-representation of men in creative, managerial, or technical roles leads to imbalances at all levels of the industry, as well as essentialist notions of gender whereby women are allocated particular types of work considered more feminine. Besides often working in administrative or support roles, women in our research described being approached to design websites for children or other “softer” genres. Such gender labelling might limit work opportunities offered to women and reflects a genuine ignorance of women’s abilities.

The current situation in digital design was also seen as particularly hostile towards women as there is within *individual* companies—rather than the sector as a whole—a laddish culture. This culture built around masculine values and interests often disadvantages women, who feel uncomfortable or even excluded through the formation of male groups. One example provided by a female designer in the research was of men in her workplace emailing each other pornographic and offensive pictures, but not sending them to her. Although she did not have any particular interest in the photos, she was *de facto* excluded from socialisation in the workplace because she was a woman. The fact that there is a gender imbalance in the sector means that the laddish culture is able to thrive, something that might not be able to happen in more established areas of creative work, such as the audio-visual sector.

This lads’ culture, apparently formed during young men’s time at college or university and directly transported into the companies they set up, is however more than a new boys network or process of socialisation in the workplace. It is also a way of working—for instance, long or unsociable hours—something that is valued and seen by men as forming a culture of creativity. This work ethic is reminiscent of the cultures of masculine juvenility found in advertising and described in Sean Nixon’s (2002) work, where brutal competition and pressure draws young masculine cultures in the creative industries. Long working hours are obviously not a problem specific to this industry, yet this does appear to

have a particular significance and merit here, something that also seems to exist in other male-dominated areas of work.

Interestingly, such practices can impact not only on women, but on men too. As this lad's culture provides (men) a route to socialisation and inclusion into the life of a company, non-participation by a man leads to similar processes of exclusion to those suffered by women. Yet as one interviewee pointed out, even if it may be exclusionary for men, for women it is exclusionary *and also* offensive and even threatening.

### **Conclusion: rethinking gender, inclusion and technology**

Most of the negative aspects for women working in new media appear to be related to the gender imbalance and gender insensitive working practices therein. Yet the informality of the sector also points to the need for bottom-up inclusion strategies, like that of Untold, which seeks to re-educate and further the understanding of the relationship between gender and technology in the hope of creating a more egalitarian working environment. Such initiatives also highlight the tension between feminist and post-feminist discourses, as there is within the work of Untold (and other women's support groups in technology, cf. WITI<sup>1</sup>) a clear avoidance of portraying women as victims, rather one centred around choice and opportunity. This conception is perhaps different to that found by Gill (2002), where gender was not seen by new media workers themselves as significant. The work of groups like Untold highlights how gender is a core issue in technological environments, which can nonetheless be treated in a more neutral manner, thus not necessarily problematised or seen in essentialist terms. Even if not gender neutral, technologies might appropriately be seen as "flexible, gendered within particular spaces, contexts, institutions and practices, thus entangled as much in the micro as the macro" (Lisa Pitt 2002). Such a conceptualisation is perhaps useful to avoid any deterministic assumptions of the impact of technologies on people and the sweeping generalisations so often found in discourses surrounding the Information Society.

### **Note**

1. Women in Technology International. See <http://www.witi.com/center/aboutwiti/> (accessed 21 November 2003).

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## Gender Discourse and Practice on the Internet: Some Thoughts

*Sarah N. Gatson*

Discursive images of the Internet abound. Most familiar is that of "net geeks" (read as male) isolated behind their computer screens. However, much recent research notes the increasing presence of women in the Internet arena as well. In assessing gender on the Internet, what needs emphasis is that people take both their present embodied identities with them onto/into the Internet, as well as the available cultural understandings of those identities. Expressing gender through discourse, in voicing the *status quo* as well as in challenging it, people known as women and men (to at least themselves) enter a new space that is thus already gendered. What they are doing, and will do, there may or may not be up for grabs.

Terry Leahy's (1994) discussion of the uses to which women put discourses of femininity presents an excellent way to assess the practices of gender on the Internet. Using Dorothy Smith's and R. W. Connell's understandings of the concepts of femininity and "emphasized femininity," Leahy offers an under-

standing of a “patriarchal set of public texts that women accept, negotiate, or resist in practice,” as well as the dominant cultural practice to which there are resistant subcultural responses (Leahy 1994: 48, 49). Gendered subjects’ justify participation in non-mainstream femininity and make choices from “a range of socially available discursive positions, molding and creatively adapting discourses as they act” (Leahy 1994: 48).

Leahy departs from Connell in that he understands compliance and resistance to mainstream/emphasized femininity to be more fragmented and ubiquitous. Resistance is not a “coherent unified ‘culture’ but arises from *practices* occasioned within a variety of discourses” that encompass “a range of subject positions” (Leahy 1994: 49; emphasis in original). Leahy argues these positions “may well contradict each other in a particular situation” as people engage in the work of self-presentation crucial to community-building (Leahy 1994: 49). In Leahy’s analysis, the primary overlapping and contradictory discourses are those of femininity (both emphasized and marginalized—“good” girls versus “bad,” or resistant, girls) and adolescence. Often in Internet environments, there are several other discourses involving some overlap with a primary discourse of femininity. These are: (1) gender, including femininity/masculinity, and sexuality; (2) Internet/technology; (3) violence, including discourse of danger/safety/privacy; and (4) community, including discourse of Space/Place, and control and freedom (see Sarah Gatson and A. Zweerink 2000: 106; A. Zweerink and Sarah N. Gatson 2002, for discussions of points 2–4).

Discourses of vulnerability and dangerousness overlap with those of femininity and masculinity. “Vulnerability to violence is a core component of femininity, but not masculinity. Relatedly, potential dangerousness is associated with masculinity, but not femininity ... these ideas are pervasive, widely shared, and constructed through ... routine patterns of behavior and communication that replicate and reinforce existing ideas about gender” (Joyce A. Hollander 2001: 84). Fear of sexual assault and sexualized harassment are dangers specifically defined by their link to femininity.

There is a heightened perception of vulnerability and dangerousness in the Internet atmosphere. Hollander’s assertion: “Despite the reality of violence against men ... vulnerability is not part of shared cultural conceptions of masculinity” highlights the difference between perceptions and reality. There is not yet enough research on Internet interactions to know if it is actually an especially dangerous place, or if this perception is merely replicating discursive positions and cultural myths.

The discourses of gender and space merge in Laura Miller’s (1995) essay on how talk of danger on the Internet raises the specter of censorship and condensation towards adult women who inhabit the net. Miller (1995: 51, 54) denies cyberspace as a real space and place peopled with real bodies at any level. She does not challenge or recognize situated gender identity as does Schafer’s analysis of the VNS Game Girls (Kay Schafer 1999), nor does she acknowledge anyone else’s bodily or spatial experiences of their Internet interactions or communities. Instead, she denies the existence of gender and power inequality from the horizontal organizers and inhabitants of the Internet, laying the blame for hysteria at the feet of top-down outsiders who are “male owners” using the tired “women as victims” and women as bringers of “civilization” to control this “amorphous medium” (Miller 1995: 53, 52, 50).

Despite Miller's dismissal of the possibility of rape and harassment in the Internet environment, Pamela Gilbert (1997) presents a convincing case of both stalking and harassment made possible only through the technology of the Internet, and a series of bodily experiences during that extensive experience. If, however, culture generally and gender specifically are situated and performative, Internet sites are rather situated as part and parcel not only of the particular persons using them (through textually presented selves), but also of the historically developed geographical cultures and communities extant offline as well, characterized by a "dynamic simultaneity" (Doreen Massey 1994: 1, 3–5, 177–210, 255–60).

Miller's sharp break between text and bodies in her assessment of gender underlies her reading of the Internet. In contrast, Robyn R. Warhol's (1999: 91) analysis of an America Online (AOL) bulletin board for soap opera fans, set within ethnomethodology and performance theories of gender, takes on Miller's assumption that " 'there are only minds,' " not bodies on the Internet.<sup>1</sup> Warhol argues that because gender is inherently performative, the opposition between reality and artifice does not work anymore, if it ever did: "The Internet detaches individual subjects' gender performances from the perceived sex of their bodies and places those performances clearly on view within the text on the computer monitor" (Warhol 1999: 91–92, see also 93). While "detached," Warhol finds persons engaged in understanding themselves as gendered, presenting themselves to a stable group of others as gendered subjects. However, Warhol continues to set the Internet up as an anonymous space, asserting that her subjects are "persons whose nominal sex cannot be known" and "studies of Internet fan groups can only rely on posters' self-representation (and on self-perpetuating stereotypes of the masculine behavior of men and the feminine behavior of women) to draw conclusions about the sex of persons who write Internet messages" (Warhol 1999: 94, see also 98, 101). At the same time, Warhol (1999: 98–99) explicitly accepts all else about people's constructions of themselves in their profile packets, including their ages.

In Kendall's examination of an Internet community based in MUDding,<sup>2</sup> she finds a longstanding Internet community that is male-dominated in membership (73 percent men) as well as discourse (Lori Kendall 2000: 258). It is a non-anonymous place, where members have met face-to-face. It is perhaps this latter experience that leads Kendall to assert: "Online participants assume that other participants do have bodies and that those bodies, if seen, would reveal important information" (Kendall 2000: 260). Combining an understanding that successful self-presentation includes fulfilling expectations of others as well as choosing among available cultural signifiers, symbols, and discourses to construct those presentations, Kendall successfully conveys the reasons why gender keeps popping up in "frontier" settings.

In answering O'Brien's question of how likely it is that relationships developed on the Internet complicate and open up the practice of gender, we need a much firmer grasp upon just how Internet users practice gender (see Jodi O'Brien, 1997, 1999). In both anonymous and non-anonymous ways, in both casual and extended Internet usages, we cannot make definitive assertions about whether the Internet opens up or reinforces hegemonic gender practices. We need to pay close attention to particular situations and contexts across the range of Internet behavior in order to gauge the history and current state of gender on the Internet.



## Notes

1. Warhol (1999: 99) analyzed an *As the World Turns* bulletin board (BBS) at AOL, where 6 out of 36 members present themselves as men. A previous analysis by Nancy Baym (1993, cited in Warhol 1999) cites an *All My Children* newsgroup as more than 25 percent men, out of a population of 492 (Baym 2000: 48). Baym asserts that these men "abide by a value system traditionally associated with women" (Baym 2000: 207; see also Warhol 1999 citing Baym 1993: 101). Warhol lurked at the AOL BBS, while Baym participant observed and surveyed her subjects.
2. A MUD is a Multiple User Dungeon, a computer-mediated communications environment in which several users may interact in an area, or "dungeon."

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## Mum, Can I go on the Internet?

*Jane Osmond*

We should face the facts of life about pornography ... because it's old as the hills and here to stay. Pornography instructs the young as to the what and how of sex, if not the why of love. (Brian Sewell 2002)

In the academy, and indeed elsewhere, there are any number of women (in which I include myself) who cannot help but arrive at a position where we know that the male gaze (Laura Mulvey 1990) defines how we internally and externally conduct ourselves on a daily basis. Therefore our behaviour is shaped by the constant need for negotiation between our femininity and our feminism. Our lived experiences of the male gaze are reinforced by the ubiquity of pornography available in the media, as illustrated by the above quote from the *London Evening Standard*. A quick glance at any newspaper rack confronts the eye with an array of front-page images of women displayed in poses that would not look out of place in "top-shelf" magazines. Similarly, billboards feature women in various stages of undress, as do magazine adverts and late-night television shows: indeed, it is difficult to name a form of popular culture that does not employ a visual discourse that sexualises women.

Recently, I caught my 14 year-old son searching for pornographic images via the Internet on the family computer. In disgust, I sent him to his room and confronted the fact that here was yet another issue to deal with on the teenage battlefield. Yet rather than a simple battle of wills, here was something which raised a serious challenge in developing strategies to cope with an inquisitive adolescent masculinity. As a single parent who has raised a son alone from the day he was born, I have watched him grow with a bemused fascination. I have acknowledged that, despite the debate focusing on nature versus nurture, my son has displayed typically "male" characteristics from the toddler stage—playing with guns, high energy bouncing around the house, wrestling with male friends, being competitive at all stages. Comparing his behaviour with friends' daughters, it became obvious to me that—whether they are socialised into their behaviour or whether they are born to it—girls and boys act differently.

Recognising this reality has caused me problems, sometimes I think that my son has missed not having a consistent male role model who could discuss "boy stuff" with him, and I have let some issues go because of it. However, this latest "issue" is causing a serious problem. As a 41 year-old feminist, I abhor pornography and all that it stands for: for me, pornography perpetuates the view of women as second-best, sexual objects and presents our, "bodies as commodities for [men's] consumption" (Germaine Greer 1999: 239).

In my view, the harms caused by pornography to women are many and varied, ranging from the perpetuation of the subordinate place of women in society, to the rape, torture and mutilation of women on screen, and the possible consequences of this for real women in society. Although there is no empirical evidence that proves a causal connection between sexual assault and pornography, it could be argued at the very least, that when scenes such as "a women

being fucked by dogs, horses or snakes ... gang rape and anal rape and throat rape" (Andrea Dworkin 1994: 26) are offered as entertainment, there is an implicit message that violence against women is within "acceptable" societal limits.

Given my repugnance, my initial response to my son's developing interest in pornography is to restrict his access, but where do I start? With the kind of magazine I found underneath my Dad's bed when I was growing up? What about page 3 of *The Sun*, the front page of the *Daily Star* or top-shelf magazines? Or Christina Aguilera's recent video for the song *Dirrty*? What about soft porn previews on digital television or, what started this whole thing, pornography on the Internet? And my son does not even have to pay to look on the web as most sites offer free "teaser" pictures (Mick Underwood 2003) that are far more hard-core than *Playboy* or *Hustler* would be allowed to publish.

Moreover, it is precisely its ubiquity, its pervasiveness that makes Internet pornography so dangerous and qualitatively *different* to its other forms. My son can freely consume images that I find disturbing. Recently I found myself following a link from a feminist website that led me to a web page featuring naked women. Spam emails containing pornographic images are proliferating on the Internet and seem resistant to even the most sophisticated filters. In March 2003, the *Guardian* published an article about "porn blocks" being developed for the latest generation of "Internet-ready" mobile phones so parents can control their children's access to explicit websites, suggesting that:

[T]he sex industry remains the driving force of new technology, fuelling everything from the rapid expansion of the Internet—where "sex" is still the word most commonly typed into search engines—to pay-per-view cable, a spin-off of the hotel subscription porn channel. And analysts estimate that the market for sex services delivered direct to mobile phones could be worth £1 billion by 2005. (Gaby Hinsliff 2003)

However, if I choose to restrict his access to the Internet, not only will this cause problems in relation to, for example, homework assignments, but also in terms of the powerful phenomenon of peer pressure. This is the second time I have stumbled across evidence of the sites he has visited: after the first time, I pointed out to him that the pornography industry is run for profit by men for men, and that often the women featured are coerced or drugged and made to perform, despite the pretence of "enjoyment." Notwithstanding this conversation, I found him once again logged on to a porn site, but this time checking the history file resulted in no site records of his visit. I can only assume that he obtained the information needed to delete the history file from his school peer group and that trading information about pornography on the Internet is part of the young male culture in the same way as accusing friends of being "gay" is used as an insult, which I find equally abhorrent.

I fear that restricting his access or talking to him in more depth are equally problematic: the former will teach him nothing and the latter may be defeated by his need to conform to what it means to be "male" in Western culture. If I choose to confront him and successfully convey my abhorrence of pornography and he resists its lure, I may actively compromise his identity as a "normal" male in a patriarchal society. And yet I have no hesitation in conveying my displeasure of other macho behaviours such as heavy drinking and fighting,

perhaps because my view is supported on health grounds and generally reinforced by the media. In contrast, thirty years on from second-wave feminists defacing sexist posters on the London Underground, we continue to be surrounded by an ever-increasing plethora of sexualised female images and "vastly more pornography disseminated more widely than ever before" (Greer 1999: 234).

The Internet is an extremely efficient vehicle for the distribution of pornography and by association, for perpetuating the hegemony of the male gaze. Set against this background, what on earth can I say to my son that might shift his thinking? My struggle to tackle the subject of pornography with him is not just the usual parental horror of discussing sex with offspring, but also about my (in)ability to convince my son not to do something that obviously gives him a buzz, not least because my objections are dismissed by a culture that mostly sees women's challenge to pornography as kill-joy feminist ranting.

Until I have a better way of dealing with this, I am resorting to an action that he and his friends will at least understand: "I will not have that filth on my computer, you are now barred from the Internet." Very unsatisfactory ...

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