

Review Essay: Gender and the Internet

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Hanging Out in the Virtual Pub: Masculinities and Relationships Online. *By Lori Kendall.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002. 301 pp. ISBN 052023038-8.

Reload: Rethinking Women + Cyberculture. *Edited by Mary Flanagan & Austin Booth.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002. 581 pp. ISBN 026256150-6.

Women and Everyday Uses of the Internet: Agency and Identity. *Edited by Mia Consalvo & Susanna Paasonen.* New York: Peter Lang, 2002. 322 pp. ISBN 0820461415.

Gender Scripts and the Internet: The Design and Use of Amsterdam's Digital City. *By Els Rommes.* Enschede, the Netherlands: Twente University Press, 2002. 300 pp. ISBN 9036517745.

Several books examining various facets of gender and the Internet have been published recently. These various works encapsulate the different trajectories feminist research on and about the Internet have taken in the past decade. Early research on gender and the Internet focused on the interpersonal dimensions of CMC (computer-mediated communication), with a tendency to utilize discourse analysis in order to unpack the power relationships between men and women interacting online. Identity—how it was transformed or explored via the appropriation or construction of different genders—was also a key motif in early research. Cyberculture, as manifested in popular culture (films, books, television) was another focus, with feminists analyzing the masculinity of so much of this work, with its emphasis on “console cowboys” hacking the “electronic frontier.” More recent work has looked at the tension between feminist uses of the Internet versus the feminization of the Internet, as corporate interests actively staked out the women audience, creating commerce-oriented content. Another trend in feminist research has been to look at the everyday uses women are making of the Internet—their interactions with their family and work, and their content creation. Yet another tendency has been to look at the actual design of network communities to see how

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they have been gendered, and how technical design has influenced social interactions.

Hanging Out in the Virtual Pub is Lori Kendall's ethnographic account of a MUD (a text-based interactive on-line forum) she calls BlueSky. MUDs, referred to as "multi-user dungeons," "multi-user domains," or "multi-user dimensions," were created in the late 1970s but became popular in the early to mid-1990s, particularly on university campuses in North America, England, and Australia, where students were able to enjoy unlimited network access. There are diverse MUDs: some are role-playing scenarios derived from fantasy or science fiction, while others, such as BlueSky, are virtual communities where users adopt MUD names but their on-line identity remains the same as their "real life" identity. Kendall's foray into BlueSky as an active participant for several years, where she also met and engaged in real-life social events with many of her informants, provides a compelling and fascinating look at issues of virtual community-building, on-line identity, and the negotiation of gender roles.

Kendall contends that BlueSky is a gendered environment, reinforced by "patterns of speech, persistent topics, and a particular style of references to women and sex" (p. 72). It is also, she argues, despite the number of women present, a space of masculinity, because both BlueSky participants and their conversations tend to revolve around computers and their extolling of technical expertise. This is not particularly surprising given the pervasiveness of computers in work and leisure activities and the occupation of many BlueSky members in "new economy" firms. However, rather than adopt hegemonic masculine roles, BlueSky members, Kendall found, are often ironically positioned with respect to this, with in-jokes surrounding levels of "nerdiness," although heterosexuality is assumed.

One of the strengths of Kendall's work is in her discussion of identity: how do members of BlueSky situate themselves in terms of class and race? Not surprisingly, she finds that BlueSky members are university-educated, upwardly middle-class, and homogeneously white. On-line interactions merely reinforce their social status. This is unlike the accounts provided by Sherry Turkle, in which she found that many of her young university-educated informants either replicated their middle-class backgrounds while being employed in "downwardly mobile" positions or engaged in gender-bending activities. Kendall concludes that forums such as BlueSky not only provide a new form of social space, but that "people continue to view their identities as whole and consistent" (p. 224).

Reload: Rethinking Women + Cyberspace is a tantalizing collection of previously published and excerpted feminist science-fiction stories combined with critical articles about feminism and new media that explore issues such as ethics, identity, and sexuality. Flanagan and Booth's motivation for compiling this collection was to address the gap in scholarly books that consider both female and feminist produced cyberpunk, alongside issues of gender and technology from a critical and theoretical perspective. To this end, they have assembled a great collection of often difficult-to-find feminist sci-fi, from old classics (Anne McCaf-

frey and James Tiptree Jr., a.k.a. Alice B. Sheldon) to contemporary cyberpunks (Melissa Scott, Octavia Butler, and Amy Thomson). These cyberfictions are characterized by what Booth describes as an emphasis on “questions of embodiment and subjectivity in a more complex cultural context of race, history, sexuality, nation, and class” (p. 25). Critical pieces are offered by some of the newly emergent voices, including Alison Adam, Lisa Nakamura, Kate O’Riordan, and Theresa Senft.

The book is divided into three sections, “Women Using Technology” (focusing on women as technological users, rather than female cyborgs); “The Visual/Visible/Virtual Subject” (explorations of how the relationships among gender, technology, and subjectivity are extolled in sci-fi films, cyberfiction, and computer games); and “Bodies” (relationships between virtual embodiment and disembodiment).

Several of the critical essays stand out. Alison Adam’s “The Ethical Dimension of Cyberfeminism” argues that cyberfeminism needs to become more politically engaged, and in particular would benefit from an attention to ethical issues. She suggests applying feminist ethics “rethinking and revising aspects of traditional ethics that devalue the moral experience of women” (p. 167) to Internet issues such as cyberstalking, pornography, and hacking. Julie Doyle and Kate O’Riordan analyze historical medical representations of women’s bodies to contemporary digitized imagery exemplified by the Stanford Visible Female and the Brandon Teena on-line exhibit. On-line cybertyping, wherein race and gender are stereotyped, is the focus of Lisa Nakamura’s essay, which also looks at how commercial sites have co-opted race and gender. Mary Flanagan examines feminist subject positions in cyberculture through a critical look at computer games, including the bounteous Lara Croft.

Mia Consalvo and Susanna Paasonen’s edited collection, *Women and Everyday Uses of the Internet*, stemmed from their involvement with the Association of Internet Researchers (AOIR). Their goal is to go beyond the precept that “gender matters” when studying the Internet, to determine how it matters, what factors influence its development, and how feminist theorizing can enrich and respond to this challenge. Organized into four sections, the collection is successful in highlighting the various topics feminists are addressing and the different methodological ways they are exploring issues. These range from content creation by young girls and “cam girls” to the development of women’s commercial portals and the social construction of the Internet by the popular media to the impact of information policy on communities and nations. Given that there is such a broad range of topics and issues addressed by an international cast, many readers, particularly young scholars, will find this collection valuable.

Part 1, “Defining Gender,” looks at how gender has been conceptualized on the Internet. Paasonen synthesizes and analyzes the early writings by Sherry Turkle and Sandy Stone that explore on-line “gender play” and identity. Kate O’Riordan looks at the technology and social uses of personal Web cameras by women; not commercial sex sites, these are sites where women display their

mundane existence to whomever wishes to log on. The self-representations of female Internet professionals in Austria is the topic of Johanna Dorer's chapter, while Noemi Sadowska examines the design motivations behind the creation of a U.K. women's magazine portal. The commercialization of the Internet and targeting women as viable consumers is the focus of Part 2. Consalvo surveys early media accounts of the Internet that either included or excluded women in its discourse. As she documents, media accounts went from portraying the Internet as a dangerous place for women to mid-to-late 1990s entreaties of empowerment via e-commerce. Oprah Winfrey's forays onto the Internet are the focus of another chapter, particularly her attempts to construct community on Oprah.com through her message boards. This theme is continued in Karen Gustafson's chapter, which looks at the maintenance of community norms on several popular commercial sites, Oxygen.com, Women.com, and iVillage.com.

Everyday uses of the Internet by various groups is the focus of Part 3. Young girls have also become intrepid Internet users, and Virpi Oksman shows how one group of young girls in Finland has created a vibrant community centred on "virtual stables," wherein one can buy, race, sell, and take care of make-believe horses. The Internet has also become, according to Jennifer Tiernan, a venue for a supportive interpretive community legitimizing the largely unrecognized women Vietnam veterans. The lesbian community and its use of chat rooms is the focus of Jamie Poster's ethnographic study. Most fascinating are her discussions of a virtual kiss-in, wherein members of the lesbian chat group "infiltrated" a Christian chat room incognito, and then, in third-person narrative form, described several passionate physical actions amongst themselves.

The last section interrogates agency as conceptualized in national information society programs. Elizabeth Bird and Jane Jorgenson analyze a U.S. program that seeks to address the digital divide by providing computers for low-income families and their children, in order to encourage better communication between teachers and parents. They found that gender and class were highly relevant to how their informants regarded the Internet, a finding that is at odds with popular-media and policy conceptualizations of the digital economy. How a women's information technology group in Finland used the Internet has been the focus of Marja Vehviläinen's work for the past several years, and here she provides a look at this alongside a discussion of Finnish information policy aims. Interviews with young Dutch couples and their use of interactive television is presented by Liesbet van Zoonen and Chris Aalberts. They are interested in industry pronouncements of how this new technology will be used versus the actual reality of how couples negotiate both individual and collective uses in their domestic lives.

In her recent study of a community-based computer network in Amsterdam called the Digitale Stad (Digital City), *Gender Scripts and the Internet*, Els Rommes has theorized the concepts of user-representations, gender-script, and domestication as entry points to describe its gendering through design. What is valuable about her work, particularly for Canadian readers, is her incorporation of European theories of technology (actor-network theory, social constructivism)

with gender. This is a theoretically rich study that provides a benchmark for future studies on design and the Internet.

Her main question is to look at how the Digitale Stad was gendered and how it contributed to the inclusion or exclusion of women as users and designers. Rommes argues that when designers conceive a technology, they construct an “ideal” user for these technologies. She differentiates between explicit and implicit user-representations: explicit-user representations are those “in which statements are made of persons, of potential, embodied users or in which target groups are mentioned,” whereas implicit user-representations refer to “neutral choices . . . that contain references to characteristics of users, which imply certain users and not others” (p. 46). Technological scripts are defined “as the assumptions about the use context that are materialized in the technology, which pre-structure the use of technology . . . they attribute and delegate specific competencies, actions, and responsibilities to their envisioned users” (p. 15). When these scripts reveal gendered patterns, they become gender scripts, which “may emphasize or hide, and reinforce or diminish gender differences and gender inequalities” (p. 18). Domestication refers to how technology is incorporated into the everyday patterns of the users, and has been used by feminist scholars to study the ways in which users and families negotiate communication technologies within the household. Alongside these valuable conceptualizations, she also provides us with the techno-biographies of several Digital Stad users, wherein they reveal how and why they incorporate the Internet into their daily lives.

Taken individually or together, these books provide exciting ventures and differing feminist theoretical perspectives and methodologies on women and the Internet. Both emergent and established scholars working in this field will have much to build upon because of these books and their fresh voices.

