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## CYBERFEMINISM : WOMEN'S AND CYBER SOCIOLOGY

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### Abstract:

*Cyberfeminism is neither a single theory nor a feminist movement with a clearly articulated political agenda. Rather, "cyberfeminism" refers to a range of theories, debates, and practices about the relationship between gender and digital culture (Flanagan and Booth 2002, 12), so it is perhaps more accurate to refer to the plural, "cyberfeminism(s)."*

*Cyberfeminist practices involve experimentation and engagement with various Internet technologies by self-identified women across several domains, including work (Scott-Dixon 2004; Shih 2006), education (Clegg 2001), domestic life (Na 2001; Ribak 2001; Singh 2003), civic engagement (Harcourt 2000), feminist political organizing (Everett 2007; Sutton and Pollock 2000), art (Fernandez, Wilding, and Wright 2003), and play (Bury 2005; Cassell and Jenkins 2000; Flanagan 2002; Kendall 1996). While there is no consistent feminist political project associated with cyberfeminist practices, within a culture in which Internet technology is so pervasively coded as "masculine" (Adam 2004; Kendall 2000), there is something at least potentially transgressive in such practices (Fernandez, Wilding, and Wright 2003).*

### KEY WORDS:

Cyberfeminism ,Cyber Sociology , various Internet technologies .

### INTRODUCTION:

When Internet communications technologies were in their infancy, they were described as "new media," obscuring Internet capability for being more than just a new way to access news and events. The Internet does provide some media unique to it, but its real power lies in its ability to interconnect people and ideas, as its name implies. Misunderstanding it merely as "new media" means we've missed its capacity to be a dynamic source for networking and activism. It might be more appropriate to call it a new medium, a new means toward feminism's goals.

An initial feminist Internet aim was simply to get women on-line. In 1995, only 15 percent of Internet users were women, but by early 2000, women comprised 50 percent of users (a 32 percent increase since 1999). Yet patriarchy has never been absent. Men controlled the content, men earned the profit. Similarly, a gender gap emerged in how women and men accessed the Internet: men surfed, hopping from site to site; women went directly to certain sites or searched for information on specific topics. Making the Internet more women-friendly required easing the process of associating women with each other and the information they sought. Once "arrived," they'd connect with women's organizations, announcements, and resources, as well as with each other. Linking sites through hyperlinks (plus web rings, list serves, etc.) has become the ultimate in virtual sisterhood: we can steer one another to like-minded sites and organizations in order to better educate ourselves. The nature of the Internet makes being on-line a natural for women: expressing ourselves through words--as we do now in e-mail, list serves, or websites--is an extension of our own tendencies to communicate.

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### DEFINITION :

Cyberfeminism is a postmodernist keyword used to describe the philosophies of a contemporary feminist community whose interests are cyberspace, the Internet, and technology.[1][2] The term was coined in the early 1990s to describe the work of feminists interested in theorizing, critiquing, and exploiting the Internet, cyberspace, and new-media technologies in general.[2]

### Cyberfeminism is considered a predecessor to networked feminism.

The dominant cyberfeminist perspective takes a utopian view of cyberspace and the Internet as a means of freedom from social constructs like gender and sex difference. Cyberfeminism views technology as a vehicle for the dissolution of sex and gender as well as a means to link the body with machines.[1] In a newly emerging society that immerses itself with and within technological devices and advanced operating systems, culture slowly begins to become more oriented through technology. It is with the use of online portals that lead to feminists researching the implications through a gender studies lens, studying how relationships between opposing genders and sexes have transformed.

Typically, the cyberfeminists are not just a carbon copy of traditional feminists, but rather operate from different premises. For example, traditional feminism states that despite the claims of gender being less important in cyberspace, the internet is still a sexist environment and, essentially, the struggle must go on.

Cyberfeminism provides a more optimistic reading and is fairly typical of the enthusiasms generated by the internet. According to cyberfeminists like Sadie Plant, the internet is a quintessentially female technology. First, the values of the internet, like the free exchange of information, the lessening of hierarchy and the nurturing aspects of virtual communities, are female values. Second, networking technology is a final proof that the technology is out of control and that the traditional male quest of control can no longer operate. Hence, she claims that the internet represents nothing less than the death of patriarchy as it is a quintessentially female technology.

### Evolution of the Term "Cyberfeminism"

According to Merriam-Webster, the prefix "cyber" refers to everything is associated with computers and computer networks. Following World War II, Norbert Wiener coined the term "cybernetics," revamping the old Greek term meaning "to steer, to govern"; Wiener used the term in an interdisciplinary context of biological, technical and social systems to investigate their automatic processes (Cybernetics, n.d.). The term "cyborg," a mash-up of the term "cybernetic organism," derives from the early 1960s and is used to describe the relationship between humans and machines.

In the 1980s, world-renowned cyberpunk author William Gibson coined the term "cyberspace," which implies a spaceless virtual world of electronic networks, an ethereal space of, as he calls it, "consensual hallucination" (Cyberspace, n.d.). In this non-physical space, the concept of the body as we know it has vanished, with the flesh taking the form of a conductor. This approach in his fiction indicates holistic, sometimes sexist, fantasy, because, for the most part, women are treated as fem-robots ("fembots") and cyberbabes. (Similar concepts have been explored in such foundational science fiction films as *The Matrix* and *Blade Runner*.) Gibson's use of that term has exploded into numerous combinations such as cyberbody, cybersex, cybermoney and many other permutations.

In the feminist context, the addition of the prefix "cyber" to feminism-creating cyberfeminism-has created an association between feminism and computer technologies. Cyber-hype and its attachment to feminist movements in the early 1990s created enormous potential-based on its status as synonym for the exciting new computer technology and its aura of euphoria, it inspired new territories for contemplations and redefinitions of both gender and feminism in general. The very concept of Donna Haraway's genderless cyborg, with its fluid nature that lives in the consensual hallucination of the computer matrix and which is neither/ nor (i.e., male/female), releases women from their gendered stereotypes, opens up new territory to both men and women, and creates many opportunities for women to grow as individuals in equal measure with men.

It is interesting to note that the choice fell on "cyber"-and not, for instance, on "techno-" or "virtual"-to indicate an innovative approach to feminism. "Cyber" has the role of differentiating the new theories and practices within the framework of new technologies from the earlier feminist movements that were not associated with computers and technologies. How much has been accomplished since its implementation is yet to be seen, but one thing is certain: it has created a new life.

**REVIEWS OF RESEARCH :**

Within our technologically advanced society, we would like to believe that the virtual space and the internet have opened up the potential for women to break out of the boundaries imposed on them through decades under the rule of masculine power. The internet has been hailed as a liberating, democratic space, open to everybody, devoid of gendered, charted territory; unfortunately, that has not been the case. To take a global perspective, it is clear that those in industrialized nations are more likely to own computers and have Internet access than are those in developing societies (Norris 2001). The material reality of the global political economy is that women remain the poorest global citizens; the digital era has not shifted this in significant ways (Eisenstein 1998). However, aggregate-level country-specific data show that women have increasing rates of participation online, often at faster rates than men (Sassen 2002, 376). It is not surprising that women lag behind men globally in computer use and [End Page 105] Internet access, given that these are so clearly linked to economic resources (Bimber 2000; Leggon 2006; Norris 2001). What is intriguing is that despite women's place at the bottom of the global economic hierarchy, their Internet participation is rapidly increasing.

Conceptualizing digital technologies exclusively in terms of either economic oppression or lack of access is overdetermined and does not allow for women's agency with regard to the Internet. Gajjala recognizes this agency by pointing out that the very people who are excluded from mainstream society want to include themselves in these new technologies on their own terms so that "they can see themselves as protagonists of the revolution" (2003, 49). For many women, including themselves in these new technologies means including themselves in internetworked global feminism.

Within the context of a global political economy, internetworked global feminism can and does bypass national states, local opposition, mass media indifference, and major national economic actors, thus opening a whole new terrain for activism that addresses gender and racial inequality (Sassen 2002; Earl and Schussman 2003; Everett 2004; Kahn and Kellner 2004; Langman 2005; Sutton and Pollock 2000). [End Page 106]

For women of color who want to connect globally across diasporas—what Chela Sandoval refers to as "U.S. third world feminism" (2000)—the cyberfeminist practice of online organizing and discursive space takes on added significance. Gajjala's (2003, 2004) writing about South Asian diasporas online is a case in point. Her work combines critical, theoretical analysis with years of hands-on practice building e-spaces, such as SAWnet, the women-only South Asian Listserv. Gajjala points out that if cyberfeminist agendas are to "produce subversive countercultures or to succeed in changing existing technological environments so that they are empowering to women and men of lesser material and socio-cultural privilege the world over, it is important to examine how individuals and communities are situated" within the global political economy (2003, 54). For women of color who have been systematically excluded from mainstream civic engagement on the basis of race and gender, the political online organizing of African American women both in the United States and globally around the Million Woman March provides another example of cyberfeminism. As Anna Everett writes: "The sistahs of the march recognized the value of new technologies to further their own agendas and to promote their brand of activism, which did not require choosing which liberation struggle to fight first, gender or race oppression".

Many women in and out of global feminist political organizations view Internet technology as a crucial medium for movement toward gender equality (Cherny and Weise 1996; Harcourt 1999, 2000, 2004; Purweal 2004; Merithew 2004; Jacobs 2004). Wendy Harcourt, an Australian feminist researcher with the Society for International Development, a nongovernmental organization (NGO) based in Rome and the author of *Women@ Internet: Creating New Cultures in Cyberspace*, is a leading proponent of this view. She summarizes this stance when she writes that there is "convincing evidence that the Internet is a tool for creating a communicative space that when embedded in a political reality can be an empowering mechanism for [End Page 107] women" (1999, 219). The notion that the Internet is a "tool" to be picked up and "used" by women for "empowerment" is a metaphor that is employed repeatedly in the literature about global feminist organizations and the Internet. The evidence to which Harcourt refers is written primarily by women working in NGOs that focus on gender equality in their local regions and globally, a focus some have referred to as "glocality" (1999). The mobilization of global awareness and opposition to the repressive Taliban regime by the Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan (<http://www.rawa.org>) is just one example of the effective use of the Internet by a global feminist organization (Kensinger 2003). Another example comes from Mexico, where a number of feminist NGOs have used the Internet in their efforts to cross national frontiers to establish a system of global support and exchange in pursuit of a more gender-equitable society (Merithew 2004). And global feminist networks begun in South Asia have fostered a challenge to gender-specific abortion, or "son selection," as some refer to the practice of terminating pregnancies in which the fetus is female (Purweal 2004). Lauren Langman

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(2005) refers to these kinds of global social movements organized online as internetworked social movements, or ISMs. These organizations, and the women writing from within them, make a strong case that information technology facilitates transnational feminist networks and indicate a measure of success for global feminism (Jacobs 2004). Sassen enumerates dozens of women's organizations online and argues that women's presence in and use of the Internet has the potential to transform a whole range of local conditions and institutional domains where women are key actors

Many individual women outside any formal political organization experience the Internet as a "safe space" for resisting the gender oppression that they encounter in their day-to-day lives offline. In her edited volume *On Shifting Ground: Muslim Women in the Global Era*, Fereshteh Nourae Simone (2005a) includes essays about the importance of global information technology for women living in and resisting repressive gender regimes. Nourae-Simone's description of the importance of the Internet is noteworthy: "For educated young Iranian women, cyberspace is a liberating territory of one's own—a place to resist a traditionally imposed subordinate identity while providing a break from pervasive Islamic restrictions in public physical space. The virtual nature of the Internet—the structure of interconnection in cyberspace that draws participants into ongoing discourses on issues of feminism, patriarchy, and gender politics, and the textual process of self-expression [End Page 108] without the prohibition or limitation of physical space—offers new possibilities for women's agency and empowerment.

Cyber Feminism is a Philosophy Which acknowledges, firstly , that there are differences in power between women and men specifically in the digital discourse ; and Secondly , that cyberFeminists want to change that situation (...) Cyberfeminism is political , it is not an excuse for inaction in the real world , and it is inclusive and respectful of the many cultures that women inhabit.

The Internet certainly isn't immune to sexism--and hatred of women and feminism has definitely replicated itself in cyberspace--a raw hatred, with little self-censoring. Moreover, in addition to furthering feminism, the Internet advances the causes of anti-woman, pornographic, and ultra-conservative, Right-wing groups. There are many degrading, hateful sites which, protected by the First Amendment, have no restraints to prevent them from expressing violent misogyny in deeply disturbing ways.

#### CONCLUSION :

If cyberfeminism has the desire to research, theorize, work practically, and make visible how women (and non-women) worldwide are affected by new communications technologies, technoscience, and the masculinist, capitalist dominations of the global communications networks, it must begin by formulating its political goals and positions clearly. Cyberfeminists have the chance to create new formulations of feminist theory and practice which address the complex new social conditions created by global technologies. Subversive uses of the new communications technologies can facilitate the work of a transnational movement which aims to infiltrate and infect the networks of power and communication through activist, feminist, projects of solidarity, education, freedom, vision, and resistance. To be effective in creating a politicized feminist environment on the Net which challenges its present gender, race, age, and class structures, cyberfeminists need to draw on the researches and strategies of avant garde feminist history and its critique of institutionalized patriarchy. In order to disrupt, resist, decode, and recode the masculinist structures of the new technologies, the tough work of technical, theoretical, and political education has to begin. Cyberfeminists must resist utopic and mythic constructions of the Net, and strive to work in activist coalitions with other resistant netgroups. Cyberfeminists need to declare solidarity with transnational feminist and postcolonial initiatives, and work to use their access to communications technologies and electronic networks to support such initiatives.

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