Gender Identity: Is Cyberspace the Great Equalizer?

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Many people who frequent online communities consider Cyberspace to be the "Great Equalizer." In this "space" all people would seem to have an equal opportunity to communicate and explore new ideas regardless of race, ethnicity, disability, or gender. It appears as if the very nature of Cyberspace helps to promote the notion of equality. Anyone who has a modem, or access to one, can go online with relative anonymity. In addition to anonymity, Cyberspace also provides the user with the ability to interact with people around the world. "It [Cyberspace] is today a place where people can cross without limit, where borders are not boundaries, where the essence of the architecture of cyberspace is open" (Lessig). The loss of spatial boundaries coupled with the apparent ability to speak without fear of discrimination based on physical attributes leads many people to believe that everyone has an equal voice online. "But it is important to remember that virtual community originates in, and must return to, the physical. Even in the age of the technosocial subject, life is lived through bodies" (Stone 113). Regardless of the technical nature of Cyberspace, people, not the computers that comprise the network, conduct online communication. These same people are often guilty of discriminating against women, minorities, and the disabled in real life. The methods of communication change rapidly, but the attitudes and ideas of the people who use these methods change much more slowly. People carry their per-

sonal and societal beliefs with them wherever they go, and Cyberspace is not an exception. This paper will focus on the false premise that Cyberspace provides women with a gender-neutral atmosphere in which to communicate.

Undeniably, computer mediated communication (CMC) provides online participants with a degree of anonymity. There is no-eye contact and no body to peruse in CMC as there is in a face-to-face conversation. According to Cyberspace researcher Allucquere Rosanne Stone, however, virtual communities are "incontrovertibly social spaces in which people still meet face-to-face, but under new definitions of both 'meet' and 'face'" (85). The absence of a physical form should serve to eliminate the possibility of gender bias. Unfortunately, this is not always the case; as science and technology writer Wendy Grossman asserts, "although physical objects don't accompany you into cyberspace, your personality and your experience of the real world do" (103). Women and men both have a unique perspective on life that carries over into their online communication. Susan Herring, a respected researcher, has conducted several studies regarding the online communication styles of men and women.

Herring found that while women often respond apologetically when expressing a differing opinion, men are aggressive and often sarcastic when expressing themselves (Herring). In many cases, men exhibit a sarcastic and aggressive attitude with a response known as a "flame." Flaming, the practice of criticizing or humiliating another user online for asking a useless question or for expressing an unpopular opinion, is most often done by men (McGraw). David McGraw, a JD candidate at Georgetown, further states that while flaming can be seen as a form of behavior control on the Internet, it "is also considered a sport, a means of showing off one's ability to come up with a witty and biting response." Based on Herring's studies, women online will often respond to this aggression with submission or withdrawal rather than with confrontation. The "highly aggressive language patterns" men exhibit online may cause a reduction in women's participation (Truong). Herring's studies of online communication receive support from

observations made by *Nattering on the Net* author Dale Spender. Spender relates that "men talk more often, they talk for longer periods, they adopt 'centering' positions (forcing females to hover around); men define the topic, assume the legitimacy of their own view, and override women who do not see the world in their terms" (193). These findings pertain to real life communication, but apply to CMC as well, and garner support from numerous studies regarding online participation levels between men and women. In an article written for the January 1998 issue of *Information Society*, Leslie Regan Shade quotes four recent surveys done for commercial and market research. The findings of these surveys indicate that while the gender gap in online participation is decreasing, women only represent 31 to 37 percent of all online participants (Shade). Additional studies have been conducted by Gladys We, a graduate student at Simon Fraser University, regarding women's participation in Usenet, the largest public newsgroup on the Internet. We found that even in feminist newsgroups, women's participation levels hovered around 13 percent, far below the number of posts submitted by men (We). Women's lack of online participation has its roots in a variety of social norms and economic factors that result from societal perceptions of women.

The predominant social issue that presents a barrier to women's online participation begins in the education system. Numerous studies have been conducted that show gender is an issue as early as the primary school level, and that high schools are guilty of gender bias as well. Boys receive encouragement from educators to pursue math and science, while the social sciences and English are the standard choices for girls. Teachers are more apt to address their discussions toward the boys rather than the classes as a whole and in some cases ignore the relevant questions posed by girls (Truong). The most disturbing aspects of this issue, however, can be seen at the collegiate level. According to the *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1998,* in 1995, women earned almost half of the 2.2 million degrees conferred by institutions of higher education (199). However, in the field of computer and information sciences women received only 28.4 percent, 26.1 percent, and

18.2 percent of the bachelors, masters, and doctoral degrees respectively (200-01). The scarcity of women in the computer sciences at the collegiate level directly translates into a scarcity of women employed in the field of computer analysis and programming. In 1997, women comprised only 28.6 percent of the workforce in the position of systems analyst (417). This gender bias at the most basic of educational and employment levels translates into further issues of marginalization in online communication.

The tendency of schools to discourage and, in some cases, actively prevent women from pursuing computer proficiency at all levels puts women at a disadvantage online. Women are less adept when going into cyberspace for the first time because of societal norms that decrease women's access to the acquisition of technical skills. In many cases, other women and men view women who do pursue computer mastery skills as unfeminine because "everyone knows that girls are not as good as boys--with machines!" (Spender 185). Many view computer proficiency at the programming and analysis levels as "men's work" in much the same way that the military, construction, and medical fields were once the exclusive domain of men. Laura Miller resolutely argues against this premise in Wired Women: "Women have always participated in on-line communications, women whose chosen careers in technology and the sciences have already marked themselves as gender-role resisters" (57). However, an argument can be made that women are fighting the same gender-role battle in a new arena. The battle is against "The social biases established early in education, which separate women from the disciplines of math and science, [that] represent deeply embedded cultural prejudices" (Dietrich 177). The arena is the Internet, where "knowledge or the communication of information operates as the new 'capital'" (Dietrich 177) and where "we now make sense of the world" (Spender 168). Women can not afford to allow social pressures or unflattering labels to keep them from a field of study that is the future of "status and wealth" (Spender 171).

Compounding the barriers to online usage presented by a lack of technical skill are the realities of women's real life social

roles. Women earn less than men, engage in a heavier load of "second-shift" work, and are often responsible for the primary care of children. This puts many women in a position of having less money to invest in computer equipment and less time to spend learning to use any equipment that they may already own (Spender 170). In a survey conducted by CompuServe, the leading factor cited as a barrier to women's online participation was a lack of free time (Grossman 110). This effectively places additional burdens on a segment of society that is already overburdened. Women are finding themselves in a vicious circle. A lack of skill compounded by a lack of free time to increase existing skills discourages women from actively participating online. Less participation by women creates a masculine atmosphere that further inhibits women from becoming computer literate.

Computer usage by women is slowly increasing in spite of the barriers to entry that women experience prior to engaging in CMC. Once in Cyberspace, however, "women encounter a social environment and behavioral norms formed largely by men" (Kendall 211). This masculine atmosphere is in many ways a continuation of the real life difficulties women encounter in face-to-face communication. The first question often asked of participants in MUDs, chat rooms, and Bulletin Boards is gender. In the case of subject-dedicated newsgroups, the participants often know each other in real life, or engage in a discourse where names are associated with status and knowledge. In either case, "gender, in fact, has a great deal of meaning online" (Kendall 221).

Therefore, women who access a virtual community or newsgroup using a feminine name are subject to the same "rules" that apply in real life communication. As Susan Herring points out, "With gender identity known, gender stereotyping and gender-based discrimination carrying over from the 'real world' are free to operate" (2). In many cases, women encounter offers of "netsex" and getting naked with male participants. There is a dual nature, however, to this attention. Because of societal customs that assume women are less technologically proficient, they may, in some cases, receive help in a more congenial manner when asking questions

of a "newbie" nature. Where a man would be flamed for asking a question whose answer is in the FAQ, women often receive the answer without repercussions, solely based on gender. In addition, because there are fewer women online, the appearance of a feminine persona online often creates instant interest. This interest, however, is often for the purpose of flirting (Herring), and can "give one the sensation of being the first female to have arrived at a frontier since pay dirt was struck" (Truong). Rather than receiving treatment as an intellectual being, women become a means of entertainment. This further marginalizes women and can lead to a loss of credibility in online communication.

Studies done by Susan Herring and Margie Wylie (Spender 197) find that both sexes respond to women's statements or arguments differently than they do to men's statements. Even after fighting the initial onslaught of sexual innuendo and the question of gender-biased technical proficiency, women often find themselves in a position of not having their words taken seriously. Herring found that in subject-dedicated discussion lists and newsgroups women "introduce fewer successful topics of discussion, and receive fewer public responses than men." Women and men are both guilty of prejudging a message based on the feminine name rather than the intellectual merits of the argument. In an area that most would assume promotes the free flow of ideas, gender and power are actually essential issues. This "illusion of a level playing field" is in reality a misunderstanding of how power works (Stone 118). The people who control these "intellectual" sites are often in a higher position in the social hierarchy in the field associated with the discussion. Online, as in real life, a woman's opinions and ideas are often considered to be less worthy and reliable than a man's, even when the woman possesses the same education and credentials. This is a form of gender bias in its most basic sense. Karen Coyle, a computer systems developer, proposes that "what needs to change is not the activities of women and men, but our attitudes toward them" (53) because women who attempt to assert themselves online often receive names such as: "domineering, bossy, aggressive - even castrating" (Spender 243).

Men seem to resent any efforts by women to increase their participation levels. "On the Internet, as in life, men dominate the discussions about women" (Camp 115). Men comprise the majority of participants in chat rooms and MUDs and post responses more often than women on newsgroups and bulletin boards. Susan Herring's studies of a newsgroup and a chat room provide evidence of the type of treatment women often receive from men online. In a chat room several women experienced direct sexual invitations by a systems operator and were "kicked-off" the connection when they responded negatively. Far more disturbing were the methods used in the newsgroup setting. Since there is no recourse for men to pursue in actively removing women from the setting, they instead resorted to intimidation and intellectual humiliation. When one woman posted a response that was outside of the accepted "male" perception, gender became the issue of debate, rather than the merits of her argument. The female participant responded to the attack with a clarification of her argument and received further gender based flaming. "The fact that similar harassment dynamics take place in two such different CMC modes is especially revealing--and ultimately damning--for what it says about the behavior of some men," (Herring). In many cases, women will withdraw from the discussion entirely, "coerced and exhausted by repeated harassment designed to punish their nonconformity" to "male views and male norms of interaction" (Herring).

The definition Herring uses for harassment in this instance is "unwanted contact that targets individuals with offensive message content by reason of their gender." In many cases, regular users admit that sexual harassment exists in CMC, "but think new users should be less sensitive and adapt to the online culture" (McGraw). Women are expected to "adopt and maintain some degree of macho to become part" (Coyle 43) of the online culture. There are differing opinions regarding the viability of this argument. Not all women online experience harassment of this nature, and resent the implication that "women merit special protections in an environment as incorporeal as the Net" (Miller 57). Miller further states that women who do "engage in 'masculine' activities like

verbal aggression, debate, or sexual experimentation [are] mark[ed] as insufficiently feminine, or 'bad' women" (57). However, the premise for this paper is that cyberspace is not gender-neutral and the fact that harassment is an issue online at all is proof that gender plays a significant role in online communication, just as it does in real life.

Rather than withdrawing completely, some women will assume a gender-neutral online persona to combat harassment. "However, this solution leaves intact a status quo in which being female, especially if you are new, means being hit on" (Kendall 211). The fact that women have at their disposal gender-neutral names and personas creates the illusion that they can participate on an equal footing with men for the first time. This, however, is a false assumption. Women are in effect being silenced and marginalized in a setting that should promote the free flow of ideas and knowledge. By assuming a gender-neutral name, and therefore a level of anonymity, women are decreasing their apparent participation levels online. "[A]nonymity is isolation, a level of invisibility" (Camp 120), and this helps to maintain an environment that continues to be hostile to women.

Gender-neutral names can in fact provide a level of anonymity for both women and men, and are "trivially easy" (Grossman 103) to create. "Yet as Cyberspace becomes more populated, it increasingly resembles society at large, in all its complexity" (Shenk et al. 142). Participants in cyberspace are finding ways to identify gender online that are relatively effective. "It's not the gender-bending...that go[es] on in cyberspace that attract[s] the attention, so much as the general communication habits. You can't get away from gender even in the most mundane interchanges" (Spender 244).

The experience of one MUD participant, however, can be called anything but mundane. "And thus the woman in Seattle who had written herself a character called 'exu', with a view perhaps to tasting in imagination a deity's freedom from the burdens of the gendered flesh...suffered a brand of degradation all-too-customarily reserved for the embodied female" (Dibbell 15). The online per-

sona of the MUD participant was purposefully neutral, but this did not save her from "rape by voodoo doll" (12). Wendy Grossman claims that "the really extraordinary thing is how instantly recognizable...people become online once you're used to their psychological profile and posting habits" (142-43). This example provides evidence that women have no guarantee of anonymity online even with the use of a gender-neutral name. Therefore, gender-neutral names do not provide for true online equality.

There are further implications of online anonymity that many women experience. "Anonymity isn't reserved for women. Men can also 'benefit'. It has been pointed out that it is the very anonymity that allows some men to behave abominably on-line, in a way that they never would in real life" (Spender 245). The feeling of being an anonymous, and therefore, untraceable person can lead people to say things they normally would not dream of saying in face-to-face conversations. Often women are the targets of this lack of inhibition. Women often encounter blunt, sexually explicit proposals and flaming in Cyberspace. Rather than proceed "with some veneer of civility" (Dibbell 16) as most men do when meeting a woman for the first time, the anonymity of the Internet allows many men to feel as if they can say anything with impunity. Unfortunately, in many cases they are right. The "situation on MUDs, and online generally, is more a symptom of wider social problems than a cause in itself" (Kendall 222-23). Cyberspace is duplicating the larger cultural and societal issues of an often-sexist society. It should not then be surprising that women are confronted with issues of sexual harassment online, as in real life. "Sexual harassment is not new, but the expansion of computer networks has seen a new form of communication develop that current law is ill-equipped to confront" (McGraw). The issues of law and the Internet are seen by many as diametrically opposed, and any type of regulation of conduct is viewed as censorship. However, a balance needs to be reached between censorship and the occurrence of online harassment (McGraw).

The loss of spatial boundaries online provides an open forum for conversation; however, the loss of boundaries and the rel-

ative anonymity of participants complicates the process of adjudication. At least one online community attempted to set standards for acceptable behavior. In the case of "rape by voodoo doll," the community of LambdaMOO created a "petition system, a process through which the players...could enact legislation for themselves. This petitions process has brought a flourishing, though contentious, fledgling democracy" (Mnookin 2). While every participant on LambdaMOO is accountable for his or her actions based on this system, the question begs to be asked: Does it work? The members of the community who have a personal stake in their online personas can be viewed as "disciplined members of the community" (3). However, "a person who does not take the community seriously may be like a cloud: solid-seeming, but impossible to grab hold of. Without recourse to the body, to the person typing words upon a keyboard, how can LambdaLaw be enforceable and social order maintained?" (3). The essence of the laws enacted on LambdaMOO is personal accountability for the "speech" of a community member. However, rather than take into account the issue of "bodies" vs. "minds," and "speech" vs. "actions," LambdaLaw instead seems to be "mirroring real space" (Lessig 4).

The harassment did not stop because of the laws the community enacted; in fact, the perpetrator of the harassment found a way to circumvent his punishment entirely (Dibbell 26). Wendy Grossman points out that "if a system of social, as opposed to technical, government ever evolves on the wider Net, we will have to find a better way of handling the misfits who inspire its formation" (149). As in real life, further laws or "a set of morals of any kind" (Stone 94) will not stop harassment online; the basis for conduct will be found in slowly changing cultural norms. Vicki Bell and Denise de La Rue raised a thought-provoking question in the course of their research into "Gender Harassment on the Internet."

> Even with the potential that women could be dissuaded from online participation, become offended by inappropriate and explicit sexual inquiries, or even become frightened by hostile messages, the

question becomes whether the problem is significant enough to make the next step–government control or censorship.

The answer in most cases, from both sexes, is a resounding "No!" "Hopefully, these same forces" who are so opposed to government regulation "will work just as diligently at achieving the internet's potential for being gender-blind and equally accessible for all" (Bell and de La Rue). However, until online society permits the free flow of communication without regard to gender, women will continue to use alternate methods of dealing with the marginalization and harassment perpetuated from real life into virtual life.

Women in many instances will migrate to gender specific areas on the Internet to lessen the effects of harassment. They are more inclined to participate in an environment designed by women and devoted to women. However, this places women in the position of either ignoring the rude or exclusionary behavior in the mainstream areas of the Internet, or escaping from the behavior entirely. By segregating themselves, however, from the men who inhabit the vast majority of online spaces, women are allowing themselves to be intimidated and, consequently, are in danger of being left behind. Rather than standing up for the right to express themselves in an open forum, women abdicate and set up a separate but equal area. This reeks of discrimination; even more discouraging is that in some cases the segregation is self-imposed.

Although women may organize an area of the Internet around a topic that is not necessarily feminine in nature, by segregating themselves from the body of the Internet women are excluding the entire male perspective. Many will argue that only by setting up separate but equal spaces can women guarantee themselves equal time and attention. However, the studies done by Susan Herring show that even in communities set up for women by women and dedicated to women's issues, men still comprise the majority of responders. L. Jean Camp, a Ph.D. candidate in telecommunications at Carnegie Mellon states, "I find that all the groups formed for women quickly become swamps of men's bile" (Camp 115).

Journalist and editor Laura Miller, however, takes a strong stance against women who attempt to seclude themselves from the harassment of men. "Withdrawing into an electronic purdah where one will never be challenged or provoked, allowing the ludicrous ritual chest-thumping of some users to intimidate us into silence–surely women can come up with a better response than this" (Miller 55). Noted Cyberspace aficionado Judy "yduJ" Anderson expresses a similar opinion: "There is a place both for small communities and for larger societies where any and all may join. But I resist strongly the desire to close lists solely based on gender" (129).

Obviously, for women, segregating themselves is a double-edged sword. In one instance, segregation provides additional support; on the other, it further marginalizes and removes women from the mainstream of communication and information sharing. Women are in need of mentoring and support when faced with decisions regarding career, education, and relationships, but by removing themselves from the mainstream, they are foregoing the possibility of acquiring a powerful mentor. Because educational media often support men in areas that are historically "men's work" and discourage women from attempting to enter those fields, it is often to a woman's advantage to seek support from women who have already broken through the men's club-only barriers. "But the voices of men who cannot be silent even in a space ostensibly devoted to women means that there are no public spaces for women to talk about and to other women" (Camp 115).

Women in Cyberspace lack technical proficiency, do not participate as often as men, and confront societal norms carried over from real life. To combat the effects of harassment online, women withdraw, use gender-neutral names, or segregate themselves into women's discussion groups. These statements are generalizations, and, like all general statements, there are specific instances in which the generalization is untrue (Anderson 129). In the vast majority of cases, however, gender identity online is an important and controversial issue. Rather than experiencing the "Great Equalizer," women instead encounter an old battle on a new

front. There is simply nothing new about online communication between men and women – they are merely "mirroring gender-based ideologies that circulate in the larger culture" (Dietrich 180). Granted, the loss of boundaries and the availability of gender-neutral names do create new issues, but overall the issues are societal, not spatial in nature. Women continue to encounter barriers created by gender in Cyberspace as in any other facet of life. Cyberspace, therefore, is not a "Great Equalizer" for women. Cyberspace is merely a new front in the battle for equality. Simply put, "issues involving gender politics and representation cut to the core, and many women are simply tired of buttressing the same fronts time and time again" (Dietrich 178).

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