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Paradigms and Perversions: A Women's Place in Cyberspace

by Virginia Eubanks (../eubanks.html)

Brillo is an electronic journal devoted to the inclusion of marginalized voices in the movement towards a global information infrastructure. It's also cranky and witty and feminist and funny, and you can find it at [http://www.virago-net.com/brillo/ (http://www.virago-net.com/brillo/)]. We here reprint the editorial rant from the introductory issue and look back on our experiences with *Brillo*.

> Please, he prayed, now --
> A gray disk, the color of Chiba sky.
> Now --
> Disk beginning to rotate, faster,
> becoming a sphere of paler gray.
> Expanding --
> And flowed, flowered for him...
> (Gibson, from *Neuromancer*, 1984:68)

Silent and inert, she waits patiently for my touch. I stumble from bed, and even before dredging up my first flask of caffeine-laden rejuvenation, I force my numb fumbling fingers to grope the farthest recesses of her firm behind, feeling slowly for her sculpted toggles, languishing between her soft, pliable plugs. Sensations begin to seep up the nerve endings of my farthest extremities, until at last I locate the sensitive enclave of my desire, and she responds to my will. (Publisher's Notes, *Graphic Exchange*, v.5, n.1, 1995)

Whoever brings into the United States, or any place subject to the jurisdiction thereof, or knowingly uses any express company or other common carrier or **any interactive computer service**, for carriage in interstate or foreign commerce - ... (c) any drug, medicine, article, or thing designed, adapted or intended for producing abortion, or for indecent or immoral use; or any written or printed card, letter, circular, book, pamphlet, advertisement, or notice of any kind giving information, directly or indirectly, where, or of whom, or by what means any of such mentioned articles, matters, or things may be obtained or made; or Whoever knowingly takes , from such express company or other common carrier any matter or thing the carriage of of which

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is herein made unlawful - Shall be fined not more than $5,000 or imprisoned not more than five years, or both, for the first such offense. (Clarification of the Current Laws Regarding the Communication of Obscene Materials through the Use of Computers, Sect. 507 - The Telecommunications Act, 1996)

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Several years ago I ended up shelving an article about the representations of women in cyberpunk because I figured that everything that needs to be said about cyberpunk has been said. It was passé, mid-eighties. And I continued to think that for quite some time. However, due to my recent foray into the technological workforce, I've become more aware of the subtle and treacherous ways in which the misogynistic tendencies of cyberpunk have informed how many people think about the ways that women are "supposed" to relate to technology. The genre may be dead, but the metaphorical relationships it helped create have endured.

So let's talk about one of these metaphorical relationships. Specifically, the one that equates women with the body and the white male with the mind. Nowhere is this metaphor more obviously stated as it is in many of the "great works" of cyberpunk, Gibson's novels in particular. In Neuromancer, considered the classic cyberpunk novel, Gibson's major female character is Molly, a technologically enhanced body-for-hire who paid for her "upgrades" by becoming a puppet, or programmable prostitute. She also has sex with the novels protagonist, Henry Case, and acts as his body when he is in cyberspace, the realm of the mind and therefore, the male. Her role as body and tool is very explicit. In Count Zero, the second in the trilogy, the situation isn't any better. Gibson's major female figures are "horses," voodoo priestesses who serve as the conduits for the (male) Loa who exist in cyberspace and Angela Mitchell, whose brain has been replaced by circuitry of her father's design. As my first quote shows, cyberspace is constructed by Gibson as a female region to be used and controlled by men, and is highly sexualized. Only men have access to the fruits of this female region, and they receive their rewards by "jacking in" through their computers.

Women are simply resources, bodies. They are not active agents, nor users of the technology. Exploring this fictional world may seem to be just academic, especially if you think, as I did, that cyberpunk is dead. But look at any issue of Wired, or one of the other currently hip techno-fetish magazines and count the number of Gibson and cyberpunk references. Cyberpunk has very clearly and pervasively influenced the way we think about technology. Of course, I'm not blaming cyberpunk alone for creating this paradigm. Cyberpunk is just a particularly poignant and relevant example of this metaphor as it relates to a discussion of the inclusion of women in new technologies. The Woman=Body, Man=Mind paradigm is an old

standard, and it has given rise to a lot of myths going around about how "we" feel about computers.

The Internet and the World Wide Web are actively and aggressively hostile to women. We are intimidated by new technology. It's not user-friendly enough for us to understand. We're just not interested. We don't understand how important it is. Any of these sound familiar? None of these assumptions have anything to do with why women are staying away from the Internet in droves. Besides the obvious issue of access - that women still make absurdly lower salaries than most white men and are often pigeonholed into jobs that give them less training with and less access to new technologies - there is a major reason that no one is talking about. The Internet and the World Wide Web are actively and aggressively hostile to women. Not the technology itself, but the attitudes of the people who are using it.

That's where the second quote, from a fairly well-known and well-respected industry magazine, comes in. Here it is in spades. Computer=Woman. Man uses and dominates computer. Therefore, man uses and dominates woman. This is the pervasive and persistent metaphor working barely beneath the patriarchal and misogynist attitudes that poison so many women's experiences with the Internet. This is how the metaphor of Woman=Body, Man=Mind is perpetuated. And it effects how men and women relate to each other on-line. It makes the Internet just a high-tech place for men to harass women. If you think I'm overstating my case here, I'm not. When I began to use the Internet, I had a fairly gender-ambiguous on-line name, Kiai. In a truly naive, newbie style, I went into public spaces, believing that would protect me, and chatted. Within 3 months I had changed my name, quit the service I was using, and had sworn off public spaces for good. Why? Rafts of unsolicited email and instant messages asking me if I "compu-dated" and asking me what I looked like, one in particular including pictures of some guy in his underwear.

Because to talk about issues that are important to women is simply and flatly illegal. If I want to be harassed, I can just go outside wearing a skirt. I don't need it on my computer, too, and I very much doubt that my experience with the technology is the exception and not the rule. Even when women can get past this kind of harassment and begin to use the technology in productive ways, things like the abortion clause of the Telecommunications Act happen to remind us that we are not welcome on the new frontier, and reaffirm that women's voices will not be included in any kind of substantive way on this new medium. Because to talk about issues that are important to women is flatly and simply illegal.

There's a lot of talk these days about how to get women more involved in the Internet and related technologies. A disturbing trend I've noticed is talk about adapting technological training to suit "our learning styles." That is, making the technology

more simple, less technical and friendlier, so that
women will be able to understand it. The concept of
"dumbing-down" and "friendlying-up" technology so
that women will be more comfortable with it is
thoroughly offensive and ultimately counter-
productive. What is at issue here is not the
technology itself but the paradigms surrounding its
use. Technology is simply a tool -- and those of us
in the margins of society need to be taught to use
these tools effectively. But most importantly, the
paradigms that surround the technology, the
metaphors that dictate how women are "supposed"
to relate to technology, must be challenged in
significant and lasting ways.

Women do not stay away from these technologies
because they are somehow inherently intimidated
by the tools, but because they lack access to them,
and even when they do have access to them, the
spaces that exist within the technology, like the
Internet and the World Wide Web, are most often
actively and aggressively misogynistic. This first
issue of Brillo, "Armed and Dangerous," takes as its
task the challenge of these paradigms through the
dissemination of information, tools and strategies.
We hope to show that there are people out there
changing these metaphors in significant and
productive ways. And we're not just talking about
the Internet and the WWW, but about how talented
and brave people are challenging paradigms of all
kinds - paradigms that actively exclude white
women and people of color from a broad spectrum
of cultural activities and pursuits - from religion to
the media to business to electronic resources. And
we hope that we can provide not only ideology, but
practical examples and models of how these
paradigms can be changed and how we can create
useful alliances to effect substantial social change.

Postscript: Looking Back at *Brillo*

For many years, I have believed that what is good for women is
better for everyone. It was that assumption, along with our
frustration with the cult and culture of the Silicon Valley, that
led Wendy Bryan and me to start *Brillo* back in 1995. We were
suspicious of the common claim that the Internet somehow
provides a level playing field that erases concern about gender,
class, race, sexuality, and culture. We were neither convinced
that such a level playing field was attainable, nor that it was
necessarily desirable. What the rhetoric of equal opportunity
through ASCII often obscures is what *Brillo* writer Eleanor
Mason called **Erase-ism**: the idea that a civil and democratic
information society is best attained by erasing difference, not
by celebrating diversity .

Perhaps, Wendy and I thought, a feminist sensibility--one
chastened by important lessons learned in the seventies about
our own cultural and class blinders--was just what the Internet
needed to shape up, clean up, and open up. Now, several years
later, the gap between male and female users on the GII has
narrowed, cyberfeminism has flourished, and nothing much on
the Net has changed.

As an editor, I stand by everything that went into *Brillo* (I
especially like the Paper Tiger interview, "Fear of a Black
Language," and "Resisting Erase-ism on the Net"), but I think

that as activists, we were somewhat naïve. The problem is deeper, darker, and more pernicious than Wendy and I--starry-eyed with the promise of a new communications tool--ever wanted to believe. The latest version of NTIA's report, "Falling Through the Net" confirms that fear. While the gender gap is closing, the digital divide has actually **widened** for many groups since we published the first issue. Compared with whites, both African-Americans and Latinos are worse off, and between 1997 and 1998, the divide between the highest income category and the lowest has widened by nearly 30%.

My initial reaction--as an editor **and** an activist--is to begin to formulate plans for including as many of these underrepresented people as possible in the push to a global information infrastructure. Using existing concepts like universal access to phone service, we should push to make Internet service available to rural and inner-city communities at rates comparable with those in the 'burbs. We should sponsor grassroots initiatives--like human-supported community access centers--to create compelling content for diverse groups of people. But in the back of my head, I'm starting to think strict parity in representation, though a perennial political favorite, is not enough to ensure that the Internet becomes a vibrant and heteroglossic communications forum, instead of cable television with a billion more demographically-targeted channels.

The problem may lie with a metaphor. Since the turn of last century, Americans have conceptualized their sexiest new communication or transportation technology as **the frontier**. Stick with me now, it's not as trivial as it seems; the metaphor comes with a certain set of icons and historical cliches, like homesteading and gunslinging and gold rushing, which help dictate how the technology will be socially integrated. American frontier rhetoric, in both its historical and contemporary incarnations, is both deeply contradictory and shockingly consistent. On one hand, it professes the ideals of self-determination, democracy, individual freedom, universal possibility and connectivity. On the other, it authorizes selfishness, profiteering, lack of community responsibility, colonialism, and violent conquest. This two-faced rhetoric was deployed to justify many of the gross injustices of the geographical frontier; my concern is that it is justifying similar (albeit more subtle) behavior on the Internet.

If the frontier metaphor is dubious, what would it mean to conceptualize the technology differently? What would it mean to see the GII as a public utility, a community resource, or, in a truly mythological turn, as the town well? Instead of locating the Internet in the boundaries of civilization, these metaphors put communications technology in the center of our communities. They provide for governmental distribution of a public resource, they waylay the speculator on his way to the bank and provide that, in a true democracy, we all have the right to be **producers**, as well as informed and comfortable consumers, of new information networks and technologies.

Maybe, after all, Wendy and I were right. A feminist sensibility tends to see the very real, and often unjustly ignored, work of developing and maintaining community ties as more progressive and revolutionary than this kind of lone-man-on-the-range-pioneering. We must remember, though, not to congratulate ourselves prematurely for strides made on the Internet. Feminism is in the affiliations, and until all different kinds people are represented online, we have failed to complete our task. It's harder, dirtier, more mundane work to foster and maintain community than it is to be first on the frontier. But the

promise is also greater.

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