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The Digital Life Style for Women

by Dale Spender

In Australia and the USA there are now more female undergraduates--right across the board, except in computer science and engineering, which is an issue we need to address --than there are males

And it's partly as a result of the pressures of the information revolution.

Suddenly corporations--and nations--need all the bright/creative people they can get. They can't afford to ignore half the resources! And for the first time in history, women are free to use their brains!

[Peter Drucker--the business guru--has stated categorically that corporations are now in competition with each other for the scarcest resource--bright/creative individuals for the information workforce--and lo! Even some of the most masculinist institutions have suddenly started to woo women, and to urge them to develop and use their intellectual range--to the full.]

Not much has been made of this cultural shift--but it's pretty significant, and it's going to make a great difference to the patterns of women's work and achievement in the future. There's been much talk in the western world about the feminisation of the workplace--and this is one factor which is going to contribute to that reality. The intellectual/creative arena is becoming more of a level playing field, and women are keen to see how well they can do.

As a result of the women's movement of the past decades, young women have been led to believe that they can have anything, and do anything, and many are becoming "ambitious" (a term of abuse if applied to a girl, more thirty years ago). They are venturing into new areas--though not enough are going into computer science, a point which needs more attention.

Women are, however, getting on the net, in increasing numbers. In 1995, I wrote that it was estimated that less than 5% of net users were women; in 1999 the estimate is that more than 50% of net users are women. And this is a revolution.

Now that the net is seen as a social/communication medium- less as a "superhighway" (remember that?) and more as a village square, where people meet, talk, learn and trade-- women are making it their own. And moving into a digital life style.

This isn't the only thing that women have got going for them. As the list grows, of the characteristics that are relevant for the digital age, women are seen to have more than their share of the necessary qualities.

If there is one salient characteristic of the Information

What's inside...

Revolution it is the pressure and pace of change. Change is now the modus operandi and there's a great deal of evidence which suggests that women are much better at coping with it it.

Some researchers believe that it's because women have less vested interest in the status quo that they are much more open to change. Others look to the changes in women's lives-- biological and social. Until relatively recently (and still in some contemporary cases) women's lives were altered drastically by marriage and motherhood, while men's adult lives could remain much the same. Women are more accustomed to change--in this context.

Then too there is the enormous change in women's role over the last 30 years; women know from direct experience that habits can be transformed--that people who have for centuries been told that paid work was not for them, for example, --that they should stay home and provide services--have turned this around in the space of one lifetime. They now support themselves--and families. (Though too few have reduced the burden of domestic work; women in general are just doing more.)

For since the 1960's women have revolutionised their lives. The women's movement represented a conscious decision to change society and to make changes within one's individual life. This is why it can be said, thatt o some extent, women have been preparing themselves for the 21st century--across class and ethnic divisions (in the developed world). Women have decided what attributes will work--and what won't . Sure, much of the change has been foisted on women, by economic necessity--but much of it is also chosen.

Women's values have also changed and are consistent with a digital life style.

"Ten years ago, women's priorities were more likely to be relationships, home and family... and that's still basically what you see on the news stand. But today, women's priorities are more about work, family, health and money..." (from Netwatch--Internet Research Analysis)

This gives rise to some interesting questions about women's changing sources of information and entertainment.

... the same research shows that 50% of women online watch less television, and 35% read less (including women's magazines--also in a state of decline). "Women are shifting their eyeballs away from traditional media faster than men have" according to the report. Sports will keep men on TV forever. Women are a different story...

It's enough to make you ask whether men might indeed be disposed to be the "spectators" of the future--the ones on the receiving end of the one-way broadcast medium. While women become the active on-line meaning makers. It's not such a sci-fi scenario as it might first appear--and its one of the best measures of rapid and radical change that we could cite at the end of the 20th century.

Taking up the internet so dramatically means that women have decided the it is not such a risk (indeed, many report that it's the safest activity women can engage in). And women have also changed their priorities in keeping with their changing role-- they are more interested in work--and in health and money. And this has sent them in search of new sources of information.

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As we move from the superhighway to the village square, it is not so much the pipes that are dominating the discussion- but the importance of communication and content. And again this is of significance for women

America OnLine has recognised this. It's helped to get hundreds of thousands of women online by marketing communication capacities. Grandmothers are encouraged to keep in touch with their grandchildren by email. In Australia, a significant number of mothers reported that they got internet connections in order to keep in touch with kids--and family--who are backpacking or stationed overseas.

So women's role as communicators makes the net an obvious medium for them to exercise their skills, but there are other attributes of women's life which are also proving to be beneficial in the digital environment.

For another salient feature of the new technologies--is the ability to handle **MULTI**MEDIA, to take on **many** things at once; and we don't have to look too far to find the group that is known for its ability to do more than one thing at a time. And its not male.

"In the knowledge society of the future, self management will be a valued characteristic. Along with flexibility, multitasking, and the capacity to constantly check things out--and re-evaluate. Not to mention the facility for colllaboration.

In other words, tunnel vision, fixation on a future goal, and a desire to do it on your own and to dominate, will not be helpful attributes in an online environment

Women's ability to "go with the flow" (often a disadvantage in hierarchical and assertive/competitive society) and the ability to do many things at once (also seen as an absence of single minded ambition) can be the strengths of women, in an information economy.

Then too there is the move from a manufacturing to a service based society,

And traditionally, women have had the service roles in society (again, these roles have been devalued and much maligned in the past--but they are now becoming the favoured forms of occupation.)

It is a measure of how much our culture is changing that "service" is now becoming the be-all and end-all--that the manufacturing/industrial goods mentality, and the values of the factory floor, are being replaced by the ability to recognise the needs of individuals--and then to provide them with the appropriate services.

It's because there has been such a decline in the manufacturing industries in developed countries--and such an extraordinary rise in the delivery of services--that the recent patterns of female/male employment have changed. While men have been losing jobs, women have been gaining them (with figures such as up to 80% of the new jobs going to women according to Australian figures).

This is why there is so much talk about the future being female.

And there's just one more factor to consider:

According to all the corporate gurus, learning is going to be the

biggest business of the 21st century. There will be no such thing as a discrete student population--learning is something everyone will have to do. All their lives; and not just in the typical information industry

Learning too, will be a service industry--with learning managers (not academics!) having the greatest job security. And once more we can confront the question--who are the people who, traditionally--or currently--have been seen as the ones who provide learning?

Career Path

Not so long ago the ideal employment/career patter was uninterrupted time in the workforce--and an employment trajectory that stayed within the same industry--for forty years.

People who took "time out" from the workplace were usually disadvantaged--whether they were female or male (this was the case in Sweden for example, where men and women took leave with the birth of children). But as we move to an information economy, these patterns are also changing. For the trend is towards contract/ part time--working from home --portfolio careers. Interruptions overall, and during each day, are to be expected in these circumstances: they can even be a positive.

It isn't just that work is changing so quickly that we have to think in terms of serial careers (and I'm sure everyone here has heard the new wisdom--that most of the jobs the young will do, have not been invented as yet--and that anyone under the age of 30, will have to think about having three to four complete career changes, within a lifetime).

Even more important, however, is the notion of finding your own particular skills--of developing your own portfolio--and selling your "services" in a global market place. It's less a case of getting a job and more one of "getting a client".

Of course choosing a portfolio career, is only a beginning. It's not enough just to do it on your own--women are increasingly becoming commercialised--and starting their own small businesses.

More small businesses were started by women in the last 3 years than by men. More of them were successful. More were started by women over 55 years of age--and more women's businesses were more likely to use the internet as part of their business structure--than were those of men.

There's more of course.

That more women wanted to start businesses that were of service to their community, that were socially responsible--and helped to provide employment. That more women started businesses because they "had a good idea" (Men were more likely to think in terms of power or profit) and more women wanted to start their own businesses, because this was the way to self fulfilment!

And this brings up an issue for me. For while I've attended many careers counselling events for girls--I've never heard them encouraged to start their own business. It's always about encouraging them to fit into existing categories--as doctor, lawyer, teacher, social worker--rather than telling them that satisfaction can come--from starting a business of their own!

But being in charge of their own work will be a much bigger part of women's digital life style.

And this gravitation of women to small business sets up another area to be explored. For the last 10 years I have known all the figures on women in top management and I have even done my bit to get women on the board of some of the major corporations. Always--the conventional wisdom has been that women don't make it to the top--because of the glass ceiling. And that so awful and distressing is the male macho culture at the top corporate level, that women cannot tolerate it--and decide to leave!

But perhaps there is another interpretation of this absence of women from the higher echelons--that they find the prospect of a small business exciting and enticing. And that they also understand that in these days of corporate downsizing--the future for females--and for the society--lies in the establishment of small businesses. That rather than a glass ceiling- they prefer to have a house of their own.

So it is more likely that they leave in hope-- than that they are pushed!

But where do women start these businesses? And the answer is that a good many of them start in the home. And this is the issue I would like to conclude on.

For more than a century women have been urged to leave the private sphere and to take a more active role in the public sphere (including that of paid work). Now the "good sense" is being urged of women going back into the private sector--and taking the paid work with them. There has been no public discussion on this dramatic change in work/family relationships for women, apart from the suggestion that this is a "solution" in a difficult context where women--who have taken up a new role of earning a living without being relieved of the old one of family maintenance--can manage all the many demands.

This could be the beginning of women's return to the isolation of the home--with an extraordinarily increased work burden; or it could mean a better balance for women in having access to home-making, child raising and income earning (as it was in the cottage industry time before the industrial revolution).

But no matter what the reality is, there is a need to look more closely at this change in direction to women and home work. There is a desperate need for the development of social policy associated with information culture.

The information revolution provides great opportunities--but it doesn't do away with the possibilities of exploitation, oppression, injustice. (You only have to look at the problem of access and equity to realise how much inequality and injustice has already been created). And while women are eminently equipped to make the transition to the information society--the question remains about their digital life style?

Will it be -- for better or worse?

This is why we have to both take on the information society-- and take up the issues of its implementation. The culture is changing--but power, and disempowerment, remain much the same. It's the challenge for clever women in the 21st century.

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