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Gender Issues in Online Communities

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The Internet is imagined as an all-inclusive technology that will allow everyone, regardless of social status, gender, or ability, to communicate equally. The full title of a recent book is _The Control Revolution (http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/1891620193/computerprofessi) : How the Internet is Putting Individuals in Charge and Changing the World We Know_. But has the offline world really changed? Or is what is happening online merely a reflection of real-world power structures and communications?

One possible answer is: the world has changed because online communities allow geographically diverse people to form relationships, whereas previously the mere accident of living in the same town or some other artificially constructed border conferred a sense of belonging.

Another possible answer is that nothing has changed. The same people who hold power in the real world do so online as well. They are the same people who created and control the technologies that make up the Internet. Only when other groups have a say in how and which new technologies are implemented will the world begin to change.

A combination of these two answers leads to this examination of gender issues in online communities. The physical isolation from peers felt by many women leads them to explore new technologies as a way of reaching others. The environment they discover in the traditional Internet forums is, in many ways, hostile to their interests and discussions.

Should women learn to adapt to the prevailing style of discourse online? Alternatively, should they instead strive to create their own spaces, whether specifically women-friendly or women-only? Are online communities of any sort better than traditional, public areas for gender-equitable discussions?

I will discuss theories of online communications as they relate to community and gender, what makes an online community different from other areas on the Internet, my own experiences in various online communities, both women-only and mixed-gender, and will examine my experiences in relation to the theories, and attempt to draw some larger lessons.

There is extensive literature on gender issues in online or computer-mediated communications (CMC). In addition, much has been written about online communities. While there is some common ground, there is not much recent literature concerning gender issues in online communities.

The information available on gender issues in online communications can be divided into two major theories. The first theory maintains that online communication is more equal, that women (and possibly other marginalized groups) are able to participate and complete thoughts, in effect "softening social barriers." (Shapiro 1999) One man, responding to a survey on gender issues, wrote, "Women get heard more because they can finish a thought without being interrupted. In addition, men tend to deal with the content of what women say rather than dismissing it because it comes from a woman. ...I see women taken more seriously than I think they would be if the communication were face to face." (We 1993)

The second theory is that online interaction is merely a reflection of real world conversation where men dominate. Men introduce more new topics, ignore topics introduced by women, and provide most of the traffic in a mixed-gender environment. (Herring 1993 and Herring 1994) Herring cites research that "men (and to a lesser degree, women) perceive women as talking more than men at a time when women actually talk only 30% of the time." (Herring 1993)

Herring summarizes gender characteristics in online interactions with a comparison between the language used by women and men:

Women's Language	Men's Language
Attenuated assertions	Strong assertions
Apologies	Self-promotion
Explicit justifications	Presuppositions
Questions	Rhetorical questions
Personal orientation	Authoritative orientation
Supports others	Challenges others
	Humor/sarcasm

Finally, Herring concludes than there is no possibility of gender-neutral communication, since gender-cues are scattered through online communications. Therefore, the ideal of free and equal participation is impossible. (Herring 1993)

However, all of this research was done regarding public spaces on the Internet: Usenet newsgroups, open electronic mailing lists, and Internet Relay Chat (IRC) channels. No one has addressed issues specific to online communities.

What's An Online Community?

The following appeared as a job advertisement on the DC Web Women electronic mailing list in May 1999:

> womenCONNECT.com seeks Community Builder -- helping to manage bulletin board and chat discussions, scheduling chat guests, writing opportunities with opportunities to grow as a writer.

The Netpreneur Ad/Marketing list frequently has discussions on community building and increasing traffic to web sites. The perception is that a feeling of community will bring repeat traffic to the web site and result in additional revenue. Toward that end, many commercial sites such as e-bay now provide newsletters and chat opportunities. WomenCONNECT is a content-driven site, depending on advertising for revenue. Demographic information captured during the course of community participation is useful in attracting new advertisers. However, community building is proving to be an elusive goal for many sites.

What differentiates a community from any other space on the Internet?

To be a community, rather than merely a group of people, there must be a way of excluding others and a feeling of belonging. (Watson 1997) Alternately, "to be an 'Us' there must be a 'Them.' " (Horn 1998) In addition, there must be rules of accepted behavior, preferably 'home-grown' or self-imposed. (Watson 1997) In many cases, a community is solidified by a threat, whether internal, such as the Rape in Cyberspace (Stefik, 1997), or external. Ideally, members act for the good of the community and come to identify with the community goals. (Thomsen et al 1998 and Dyson 1998)

A feeling of community is also enhanced by private spaces and a lack of anonymity. (Horn 1998 and Dyson 1998) A feeling of security -- a "safe place" to express ideas -- is also vital. (Borg 1996) Finally, some real world or face to face interaction often solidifies virtual communities. (Anderson 1996)

Building online communities is difficult, because leaving does not entail moving to another physical location, but merely surfing the Internet to find another group. The main challenge facing communities is that if members do not like the rules, they can easily leave. In a community, traditionally, the ultimate punishment is banishment. Members of the community must fear ostracism; such fear is difficult to evoke when leaving is so easy. (Dyson 1998)

How do real online communities compare to the theories?

From my own experience, community comes from a combination of private space and lack of anonymity. On Echo and the Well (two of the best known Internet communities), a basic credo is "you own your words." Real names of all users are easily obtained while on the systems. This limits the number of pure flames, while increasing vigorous discussion in an open atmosphere. In addition, both the Well and Echo are open only to subscribing members. In effect, one must "move" into the community in order to take part. This solidifies feelings of community. Since there are few transients, everyone present has a stake in making the community pleasant and livable.

In addition, a user is not considered a true "Echoid" (member of Echo) until she has attended a face to face gathering. Echo provides numerous possibilities for this including meetings at their offices, museum discussions, happy hours, open mike nights, bands, and a softball team. (Horn 1998 and Echo discussions)

DC Web Women provides private spaces for members as well. Posting to the electronic discussion list is possible only for members. Special Interest Groups, with topics ranging from Cold Fusion programming to organizing play groups for single mothers, are also closed to the public. Face to face monthly meetings, workshops, networking and purely social events provide a "real world" completion to the community. Another perceived community building feature, off-topic posts, are used to advertise concert tickets, apartments needed or for rent, recommendations for hairdressers, car repair shops, and doctors, as well as other daily life conversation. The group's membership chair recently found her new job, new apartment and furniture from such posts to the list. However, at over 2000 members, the community is beginning to show the strain. A recent, heated discussion over off-topics posts has resulted in the creation of a social list solely for off-topic postings. It remains to be seen how this will affect feelings of community.

Tae-Bo is a commercial site that has given rise to an online community. Again, there is no anonymity in posting. While aliases are allowed in the threaded discussions, registration is required to participate. The feeling of identity comes from enthusiasm for the Tae-Bo videotapes. Many participants are also dealing with health and weight issues that provide a common ground for their discussions. While there are currently no face to face events planned, members share the daily event of working out with their tapes and use this as a bonding experience, similar to that gained from real world group interaction.

MenWeb provides a forum for men's issues with articles, interviews and resources. There is apparently a related discussion area that I was not able to access. There are face to face events that help reinforce the feeling of community the web site attempts to build. However, the lack of private space makes it questionable how much community actually exists.

How does gender figure in such communities?

While Echo is closed to 'outsiders' or non-members, there are additional private spaces available within its boundaries. There are separate discussion areas for different age groups as well as for men and women. Such a structure allows a further retreat and a provision of safe space to vent, ask for advice, or test out new ideas. I am not privy to the discussions in the men-only area of Echo, and so cannot

comment. However, the mixed-gender discussion areas of Echo are not dominated by men. Anyone can start and pursue a discussion -- indeed many discussions have been continuing for years. Echo, however, may be a unique case since it was founded by a woman, Stacy Horn. Horn has strived through the years to maintain a near equal balance of men and women. In addition, she provides training and mentoring to women who wish to participate. (Shade 1993 and Echo discussions) Therefore, Echo has gained a reputation as a women-friendly space while not resorting to women-only membership.

DC Web Women is a women-only forum. As a result, Herring's gender cues discussed earlier are particularly obvious in those discussions. (Herring 1993) Even though they are not attempting to placate flaming men, women use the communication styles of attenuated assertions, support and questions. Many posts to the electronic discussion list contain such phrases as "I'm sorry if this has been asked before;" "I had the same problem and here is how I fixed it;" and "This worked for me, but I'd be interested to hear what others think." In addition, questions are often accompanied by detailed explanations of why the information is required. Indeed, a man lurking on the list was unmasked by his strong assertions and rhetorical questions. This supports Herring's claim that gender-neutral communication is impossible. There are discussions about allowing men to participate in the electronic mailing list. If it comes to pass, it will bear watching to see if men adjust their communication style to the accepted norms of the list or if they follow traditional gender-cued styles.

The Tae-Bo site, the most public of the examples, is also geared toward weight and fitness issues, traditional female concerns. As a result, most threads are started by women. In addition, due to its focus this community may be atypical. It is offered as a support system for Tae-Bo users. Therefore, the main thrust of discussion is supportive and encouraging. Achievements such as moving from the basic to the advanced tape are celebrated by all participants. In such an environment there is little room for the challenging and self-promotion Herring finds in men's online communications. It is likely that people with such a style would not bother to participate in this discussion.

MenWeb provides articles and interviews by and about community members and activities. Most articles are written in line with Herring's gender-cued communication. The prevalent style is making strong assertions and presuppositions from an extremely authoritative orientation. There is little room to question the content or conclusions. However, without accessible chat or threaded discussion areas, it is difficult to judge the interaction between members.

Are women-only communities the only way to give women a voice?

From the literature and the real world experience, the answer is a qualified no. However, there is a difference between women-only and women-friendly spaces. Where there are no women-friendly spaces, women-only forums may be the best alternative.

Women-friendly spaces consist of an equitable mix of genders and actual participation in the discussion commensurate with their numbers. At Echo, half the members are women; in addition, half of the discussion moderators are also women -- the common model is for each discussion area to have a male and female moderator. This helps ensure equitable participation and even-handed enforcement of the rules. (Horn 1999)

In the context of technology-based groups, there is substantial evidence that women-only groups are beneficial to the participants. Truong writes that for members of Berkeley Mac Women, "the all-women format has proven to be a more comfortable environment for women computer users to ask questions." (Truong 1993) In her justification of women-only group, "Why Systers?" Borg points to the working world isolation many female computer scientists feel -- they are often the only women in their workgroup and have no professional social contacts with other women. Therefore, Systers provides what is otherwise missing from their professional lives. (Borg 1996)

DC Web Women was founded for similar reasons. Three women who were working in Internet development were the only women in their respective offices. By reaching out for support, they began the DC chapter of Webgrrls, which has now grown into DC Web Women. It is precisely the nurturing environment not provided by "mixed gender" groups (which in technology groups are de facto men-majority if not men-only) that led to the explosive growth of Webgrrls International, Systers, Spiderwoman, San Francisco Women on the Web and DC Web Women. It is ironic that once these groups become successful and are perceived to be providing valuable resources they are forced to defend their women-only status.

So, what about gender issues in online communities?

The majority of issues in existing research regarding equitable gender communication online concern Usenet newsgroups and other public discussion areas. This is largely a result of the public nature of the discussions and the feelings of anonymity. It is easy to flame someone you do not know and will never know or see in person. In addition, IRC suffers from its impermanence. Something said on IRC is gone with a scrolling of the screen. This leads to a tendency to say things that would not be said if a record of the interaction were being kept, such as on a threaded discussion board. A true community, with its common goals, private spaces and revealed users, does not suffer from the same gender-based difficulties that hinder other forms of computer mediated communications.

Commercial sites face more difficulty in building community, because by their nature they are public spaces. However, by providing private discussion areas (not merely chat) some feelings of community can begin to form. Care must be taken that communication is not dominated by men, thereby silencing female members. In addition, moderators or other authority figures must be sensitive to gender communication issues. This can be done as simply as encouraging discussion on topics introduced by women.

However, groups that have a non-commercial purpose or activity in common must be careful not to compromise what gives the community its identity. If a women-only community is thriving because of its

gender-based membership, it is extremely difficult to surrender the "us" and "them" aspects and have the community survive.

Recently the necessity and desirability of women-only groups has been questioned, even within my own group, DC Web Women. However, there are ample mixed gender groups available in all fields, so the existence of a few women-only groups does not threaten or truly exclude anyone. As Borg succinctly stated, "I have not addressed whether a forum such as Systers would be necessary in an ideal and egalitarian world or even in a world similar to our own but with many more women in computing. When we get there, we can make that decision." (Borg 1996)

Conclusion

I believe that allowing women to find their own voices in a women-friendly and/or women-only environment will leave them better equipped to face mixed-gender online communications, whether in other communities or in the more public areas of the Internet. By gaining confidence and experience in a safe environment, women will later be able to hold their own when faced with flaming and challenging men. In addition, by learning to see other women as experts in the closed communities, women will value their input more in mixed-gender discussions.

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