Cyberculture : Making Rooms of Our Own

Sojourner
1997

Cyberspace is an on-line arena that is both an actual entity -- the Internet -- and a metaphor for computer-mediated communication; generically, the arena is also known as the "Net". The Net as communication tool is what everyone from activists to marketing mavens are discussing; and it is in the tension between the interests of corporations and everyone else, that the future significance of the Net will be determined.

In the United States, it is an inescapable fact that business interests are endeavoring to make the Net a market-driven force. And if you follow mainstream media, you might think that what the Net offers amounts to who has the best publicity : the corporate behemoth Microsoft; America Online's (AOL) investing advisors, the Motley Fools; Playboy's designated Women of the Internet; or anyone doing a technology-related stock IPO (initial public offering). In these contexts, cyberspace is about image and acquisition, and women are largely absent or only present to the extent they inform the role of a man. A Utah newspaper headline, for example, reads "HUSBAND : Internet Helped Kill Marriage".

Behind the media gloss, however, lurks a Pandora's box. Originally developed by the military, the Net has not rid itself of the vestiges of its early culture when it was populated by the academics, university students, and researchers who had the luxury of having usually free access; many these of early adopters of the technology (almost entirely white and male) imagined that the Net's norms and culture was theirs to dictate.

Now, while there are no reliable statistics about how many individuals are using the Net or for what reason, it is pretty clear that the general profile of who is using it remains white, male, and monied. It is this audience that business ventures such as CNet : The Computer Network or Wired Ventures, Inc. (whose products include Wired magazine) seem to cater. Other businesses, small and large, target this audience and look to capitalize on the growth markets of women and minorities. You can find corporations' on-line efforts to reach women -- Tampax.Com ("A Place You'll Want to Visit More Than Once a Month") and Lifetime Online ("The Internet Site for Women and the People In Their Lives"). Microsoft has a trademark on Underwire, its new "women's on-line entertainment and information magazine show".

Content and need determine the efficacy of the Net in the lives of potential users; is there useful information available and does one need to access that information ? As a user, finding quality content can be a hit or miss prospect with businesses creating content aimed at a monolithic female Net user they imagine we all are. Businesses with deep pockets throw money and people into content development; they are enamored with the prospect of using the Net to gain more customers and brand loyalty. Other businesses just buy content created by others and relabel it and brand it as their own (see the grassroots Queer Resources Directory, now also available from PlanetOut). Still others develop partnerships. For example, working with start-up companies and existing corporations, AOL, the largest on-line service, now sponsors a variety of content areas aimed at gays and lesbians (PlanetOut), women (Style), and African Americans (NetNoir). Such content suggestions were earlier rebuffed by management. But today, attracting new users is essential to survival on the Net.

Many will identify the creation of Wired magazine as an important cultural signpost of the on-line world's arrival. Wired seemed to be on the cutting edge; one of its founders was a woman. Its content examined technology's impact. Its layout was colorful and vibrant. Its philosophy was to go beyond "PCInfoComputing-

CorporateWorld iteration of [the computer 'press'] ad sales formula cum parts catalog to discuss the meaning or context of social changes". Its audience was those of us who had grown up with technology as a normal part of our lives. Almost four years later, it is easier to dismiss Wired's corporate boosterism and its glorification of the digerati, those libertarian boys with the high-priced toys. Out of the icons placed on Wired's covers, a woman has graced them only twice (both white, author and professor Sherry Turkle and musician Laurie Anderson); similarly only two people of any discernible color have appeared (both male, Yahoo, Inc., cofounder Jerry Yang and hacker John Lee). While these figures are important, the lack of diversity on the covers is indicative of a larger closed world view contained within its pages and which perpetuates the self-importance of the digerati and the companies they own or for whom they work or from whom they buy products.

Alternatives to the hip-techno-fetish lifestyles of the digerati as well as the corporate advertising-driven model of content and the boys-in-the-locker-room dreck (e.g., "Babes on the Web") do exist. The individuals behind these alternative Net resources view cyberspace to be an excellent medium for their message, whether personal or political. In this mode, the Net is an obvious successor to the desktop publishing revolution which also facilitated easy transmission of images and words to a larger audience.

Many of the alternatives began as labors of love ("Distinguished Women of Past and Present"), barely yoked to any idea of politics (The CyberMom : a Home on the 'Net for Moms with Modem); others are overt in their stance ("...because we know that 'Bitch' means Being in Total Control, Honey!" -- Heartless Bitches). What unites the women involved in these projects and many others is that they created content that they wanted to see and that reflected their world view. The content is all over the radar, from "Stupid [Relationship] Spats" (at the CyberMom site) to "Converts and Conceptual Lesbians" (at the Heartless Bitches International site).

The difficulty of the Net is that you do not necessarily know when and where women are involved. Many women are the technical writers putting out books about how to create content for the Web; others are designers behind innovative sites with corporate sponsors. It was only when looking deep into the FolksOnline site that I learned that it was an outgrowth of a virtual company Yinspire, Inc., founded by women. Once again, this Web site's developers created what they could not find when they arrived on the scene, a place for "the nontechnical majority" -- women, seniors, families -- to share their true tales about using the Net.

The collaborations involved in creating these new Net communities rely on varying degrees of technological sophistication. A site that is political in its mere Net presence is Planet Peace, "a Native American Internet Project", whose content includes updates about legal battles and reports from the vantage of a HIV-positive woman. Andrea Thein, who maintains the space, reports that she creates content from faxes, e-mail, and notes from long distance calls. Sometimes, a friend tells her his view, which she types into the computer. Thein feels Planet Peace is important to Native Americans and their supporters but also notes, "It's often ridiculous to imagine the Net being of any importance to these [indigenous] communities. They have existed for thousands of years and the Net is really meaningless to their survival".

The Net is both useful and problematic. While the technology revolution has been sweeping the world, there are many for whom technology has never been a significant part of their lives. Many other issues are confronting communities, yet no one deserves being left without the convenience and opportunities that Net technology can bring. In many urban and rural U.S. communities, libraries and schools have been the only potential places to share these technologies; new initiatives are looking to diversify further where and who uses the Net.

Two projects that are examples of efforts to change the Net are the Youth Voice Collaborative (YVC) and Community Technology Centers' Network (CTCNet). YVC is a media literacy and technology initiative involving the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the Boston YWCA, and three other youth-serving agencies. In addition, to training youth to teach computer technology to their peers, this initiative sent youths to the Democratic and Republican conventions as reporters; their experiences and stories are now available on the

Net for anyone to see and use. CTCNet offers "technology access and education to people who might otherwise not enjoy such opportunities". Among CTCNet's 100-plus affiliates across the United States are eighteen Housing and Urban Development "Neighborhood Networks" centers which make computers and Net technology available to residents of low-income housing.

Increasing the numbers and types of informed Net consumers will ensure that the Net does not become the domain just of the monied elite. Furthermore, with increased Net access and the skills to use, more individuals can take advantage of the wealth of government and grassroots resources increasingly available online, which can often be made more locally accessible than having to go across town to an office.

Answers to why there are not more women on-line have boiled down to :

1. Socialization :
   - As adults we are not as enamored with technology and see it only in terms of its practical application.
   - We are intimidated because there were no good computer games for us as young girls.
   - We are too polite for the rough-and-tumble "male" world of the latest frontier.
2. Time : we are too busy juggling family and career.
3. Money : we have less disposable income.
4. Fear of on-line harassment : it begins at "Top 75 Reasons Why Women Should Not Have Freedom of Speech" and goes downhill.

While studies indicate that there is some kernel of truth in each of these reasons, the women who enjoy the Net (and there are many) do not let real or perceived problems define their participation.

Women's Access to Electronic Resources (WATER) in Austin, Texas, and Virtual Sisterhood, are multifaceted proactive approaches to involving women using Net technologies. WATER is a multimedia center that trains women to work in several media (radio, video, and electronic). With more skills, more individuals can sit at the virtual table. Virtual Sisterhood uses the Web and e-mail to connect activists globally as they strive to break down the barriers to effective use of Net technologies by women.

In its early days, the Net was more fun for the knowledgeable few. Those were the days when no one was determined to quantify the population, there was a perceived consensus about what constituted netiquette, business interests were virtually silent, and no one was asking if women will civilize the Net. However, in the aftermath of an AOL disk arriving every day in the mail and politicians giving token nod to universal Net access, the point and purpose of the Net is evolving.

The supposed pitfalls of the Net (its chaos, the unfettered exchange of information) have to be witnessed in the context of living in an age in which the potentiality for danger exists everywhere and computers proliferate and bring information. We have to acquire the skills to appreciate and to successfully use the Net. Nefarious possibilities exist; left- and right-wing hate groups will use the Net to proselytize and communicate just as they all used previous technologies such as the printing press and the copier. The Net is just the latest forum for fighting old battles about representation and diversity.

So, there is no one essence to how or what women are doing online. Some opinion makers, would rank the "All Men Must Die" and the Romana Machado's "Peek of the Week" sites, as being as offensive as the existing and future incarnations of "Babes on the Web" sites. The answer lies in the content -- and interpretation for each individual reviewing these resources. I have to admire the women, young and old, who have refused to let the men set the agenda. They grab the available tools and transform all of our realities. As Thein eloquently states, "It's important to keep doing what we're doing, adding to the collective pool of giving not only for ourselves, but for others and for our future, and as long as this infrastructure's around, we intend to use it". The open-ended

question is what framework is required to ensure that everyone who wants and needs to can be a participant on the Net.