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Introduction to the Special Issue

Queer Webs: Representations of LGBT People and Communities on the World Wide Web

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With more and more lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQQueer) people "coming out" and narrating the stories of their lives on the Internet, it is worth asking how computer technology is being used by queers[2] to communicate, make contact with others, create community, and tell the stories of their lives.[3] Certainly one of the great advantages of contemporary Internet technologies is the overwhelming wealth of information and connectivity it brings. Some young queers, for instance, have taken up the mantra, "We're Teen, We're Queer, and We've Got E-Mail," the title of a frequently anthologized piece by Steve Silberman (1997) on the power of the Internet to dispense information and foster contacts about subjects, such as homosexuality, that continue to have little wide-spread currency or validation in public discourse. According to Silberman, young Internet-savvy teens can "follow dispatches from queer activists worldwide, hone [their] writing, flirt, try on disposable identities, and battle bigots—all from [their] home screen[s]" (p. 59). And indeed, gay chat-rooms, queer Web Rings, homo-themed synchronous (real-time) and asychronous (time-delay) communications platforms abound, as queers of all ages "come out" on the Infobahn to tell their stories and make contact with one another. Indeed, online queer communities seem to proliferate in cyberspace at light speed, and Internet savvy organizations, such as Digital Queers, have surfaced to provide "technological support to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender organizations

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[2]As shorthand, I will use the term "queer" to describe the diverse conglomerate of individuals clustered under the LGBTQQueer umbrella. Queer, then, is not meant to imply any attitude or philosophy vis-à-vis sexual orientation, identity, culture, or politics.

[3]For more information on the growing number of queers using the Internet, see "Visibility 101" in *The Advocate*, September 29, 1998. Further, *The Advocate*, *Out*, and other national gay community magazines regularly publish updates on the Internet and the Web, detailing how and why queers, primarily in the United States, are using particular sites and electronic forums.

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and individuals [with the goal of] spearheading efforts to educate and equip the lesbian and gay community with computers and on-line communications" (http://www.glaad.org/glaad/dq/index.html).

Such information sharing and exchange has not gone unnoticed by critics and scholars. Christopher Mele (1999) asserts that "Computer-mediated communication and networking is a useful mechanism for disadvantaged groups in their efforts at collective action and empowerment" (p. 292), and, speaking more globally, editors Marc A. Smith and Peter Kollock (1999) maintain in *Communities in Cyberspace* that "Technology has its most profound effect when it alters the ways in which people come together and communicate" (p. 4). For instance, in "Lonely Gay Teen Seeking Same," Jennifer Egan (2000) notes that more and more gay teens are using the Web to make contact with others, to find role models for their fledgling lives as gay people, and even to establish romantic and sexual relationships. Many of these kids are in rather isolated areas, and they want to know that they are not alone in the world:

> For homosexual teenagers with computer access, the Internet has, quite simply, revolutionized the experience of growing up gay. Isolation and shame persist among gay teenagers, of course, but now, along with the inhospitable families and towns in which many find themselves marooned, there exists a parallel online community—real people like them in cyberspace with whom they can chat, exchange messages and even engage in (online) sex (p. 113).

Egan also quotes experts who cite studies that suggest that gay teens are coming out at younger and younger ages—perhaps due to the availability of information, and interactivity, offered by the Internet. And the impact on queer youth is perhaps matched only by the uses to which older queers are putting the Internet. As only one example among many, award-winning gay author John Gilgun (2000) has become an advocate for the liberatory power of the Internet to connect queers and their thoughts and ideas with one another, and he enthusiastically reports that he "use[s] it [the Net] to do the work I was born to do as a gay writer and a gay educator, my life's work" (personal email).

Approaching the use of such technologies globally and from many different disciplines, scholars have also been speculating about and analyzing the impact of Internet technologies on our conceptualizations of self and society. As early as 1993, Michael Heim could summarize one of the principle questions posed by the increasingly pervasive simulation of self and experience via computer technology:

> In virtual reality, traditional philosophical questions are no longer hypothetical. What is existence? How do we know? What is reality? Who am I? . . . [These questions] are certainly not remote or esoteric, give the possibility of creating artificial experiences that are as compelling as the real ones (p. ix).

Such questions also seem particularly pertinent to queer people, whose existences have often been called into question and even threatened or destroyed in the "real"

world. In "Queer 'n' Asian Virtual Sex," Daniel C. Tsang (1996) notes that, in cyberspace, "For once, you are in total control of your sexual identity, or identities, or at least what you decide to show the outside world" (p. 311). Cyberspace offers, then, the opportunity to explore and play with identities that are otherwise often prohibited IRL ("in real life"); and, in the process, critical questions about those identities arise for examination.

Some gay scholars have waxed enthusiastic about those identities. Speaking generally about the Internet, Ken Plummer (1995) excitedly hailed the possibilities offered by the Internet for telling stories about sexual identity:

> [A] wholly new way of telling personal stories based upon virtual reality may be in the making: encased in computer technology, our bodies may enter three-dimensional fictional worlds where we can invent our own stories and live them out in real-life fantasy! (p. 136).

Beyond connecting individuals and information to one another across geographic divides, Internet technologies offer individuals—and groups—revolutionary ways to represent themselves by combining texts and images, linking to other sites of interest or import, and experimenting with different modes of representation.

In particular, Web technology—based on hypertext, the connection of individual text- and image-based sites through multiple linkages forming webbed networks—offers once undreamed of possibilities of self-representation, storytelling, and even meaning making, as texts are dizzyingly assembled, reassembled, and interconnected to create dense sites of meaning and representation.[4] Indeed, relatively easy access to the Web in first-world nations has fostered the development of hundreds of thousands of personal homepages whose principle aim is the narration of life-stories and interests.[5] In many ways it is easy to see why personal homepages might attract queer people. Writing generally about homepages, Charles Cheung (2000) notes that ". . . by using the expressive resources of the personal homepage, authors can choose which aspects of their multiple and contradictory selves they wish to present" (p. 45). As such, queers can—and often do—highlight their sexuality and its importance to their lives in ways that are more difficult to do "in real life" without seeming potentially inappropriate or politically

[4]Other definitions of hypertext include the following: (1) "Hypertext: A Multidimensional, nonsequential, interactive text" (http://www.tnellen.com/ted/hypertext.html); (2) "What is hypertext? Hypertext is simply a nonlinear way of presenting information. Rather than reading or learning about things in the order that an author, or editor, or publisher sets out for us, readers of hypertext may follow their own path, create their own order—their own meaning out of the material" (http://www.umassd.edu/Public/People/KAmaral/Thesis/hypertext.html#what is hypertext).

[5]By using directory documents, such as Gayscape (www.gayscape.com) or The Queer Ring (http://home6.inet.tele.dk/zennaro/queerring.html), one can easily locate thousands of gay-themed homepages, usually listed with captions alluding to the content of each specific page. As such, the sheer number and diversity of queer homepages make readily available specific cases for studying how LGBT peoples narrate their lives, and several authors in this special edition begin their analysis with critical examinations of personal Web sites.

grating. As such, Cheung sees personal homepages as "emancipatory" for two reasons:

> First, personal homepage production "emancipates" the author because it allows a much more polished and elaborate delivery of impression management compared with face-to-face interaction. . . . Second, the personal homepage is emancipatory for those who want to present "hidden" aspects of themselves—things they are cautious to reveal in "real life" because of fear of rejection of embarrassment (pp. 47, 48).

The personal homepage then seems an ideal forum for the individual wishing to explore a queer identification but fearing personal and political reprisals for doing so in the "real" world.

But in many other ways, queer personal homepages are more than just "personal"; although they often focus on the specific interests of one individual, the publication of these pages may highlight the movement of the personal into the political—and vice versa. For example, queer-themed pages attest to the presence of sexualities that, in many cultures, have been censored and denied representative validation and affirmation. Moreover, the communication between individuals enabled by the presence of these pages speaks to the continued expansion of the queer community across national borders, building on the development of gay ghettos and communities formed when queers began moving into cities during periods of urbanization throughout the twentieth century.[6]

Further, the sheer diversity of queer representation and identity construction/performance on the Web belies the relative stability of most every identity category associated with the LGBT/Queer community. To some extent, this variety is enabled by the Web medium itself, whose flexibility allows for a great diversity of self-expression, self-fashioning, and even self-experimentation in terms of representation. Specifically addressing how queers use the Web, Gregory M. Weight (1999) notes in "queer wide web?" how gay authors can use the hypertextual possibilities of the Web to craft their own unique, poly-vocal narratives of identity and experience:

> [T]he Web, if it is anything, is a space of nomadic travel, which constantly subverts paradigms of dominance, especially two key binaries: author/reader and text/image. With often unlimited choices of how to create their own narrative by using links to other sites, Web viewers become their own authors, using bits and pieces of what the "original" Web authors provide and discarding others. The authority of the author is thus destabilized, with the author and viewer being able to construct narratives that are never stable, and often unable to be recalled (http://www.english.udel.edu/gweight/prof/web/queer/form1.html).

Such possibilities, as well as such enthusiasm, invite a number of critical questions. How do queers "come out" on the World Wide Web? How do they "write" their stories using Web technology? What do hypertext narratives of queer sexual orientations and identities look like? Does the Web offer new possibilities of narrating the story of one's queerness? Are traditional "modes and genres" of LGBT

[6]For an overview of how urbanization assisted the development of LGBT and queer culture, see McGarry and Wasserman (1998), *Becoming Visible*, especially the first section, "Social Worlds."

representation, such as the "coming out" story, challenged and changed? More provocatively, how might the Web foster transformations of queer consciousness, reflected or enabled in the stories queers tell about themselves digitally?

More globally, we should be asking how representations of queers, as well as self-conceptualizations of queers to themselves, might be questioned or altered by coming into contact with queers from across the world. Further, what might such increasing representation—and specifically *international* representation—mean for LGBT/Queer social, cultural, and political organizing? The diversity of representation begs for an analysis of how queers negotiate both identities and communities across the Web frontier, which (arguably) has exposed queers to greater varieties of representation and identity performance than ever before. And finally, we need to examine to what aims and purposes such representations are being put, as well as if the Web (and the Internet in general) is fostering the kinds of community and coalition building that its supporters have claimed it can.

Unfortunately, the scholarly study of such questions is only just now getting underway. As David Silver's review of *Cybersexualities* points out later in this special issue of the *International Journal of Sexuality and Gender Studies*, the critical exploration of how sexuality and cyber-technologies interact and impact one another is still in its academic infancy; and even collections of essays that *seem* to offer work in that area are either misleading or unsatisfying (*Cybersexualities* being a case in point). Moreover, such studies have also often been limited by their focus on particular identities and their constructions in cyberspace. In her introduction to cyberqueer studies, Nina Wakeford (1997) says, correctly, I think, that "The construction of identity is the key thematic which unites almost all cyberqueer studies" (p. 31). The obvious question posed by such studies is, how can we understand (and critique) the identities being constructed and represented in cyberspace by queers? At the same time, though, another, more politically pressing question is implied here: What is the purpose to which these constructed identities are being put? This is where I think the field of "cyberqueer" studies is going—and should go, if it is to be both academically rigorous *and* politically useful. Indeed, thinking critically about queers telling their stories and connecting with others on the Internet is fundamentally to ask questions about representation, which is inevitably a political endeavor for at least two reasons: first, we examine how representations of queers are constructed, disseminated, and consumed within various interlocking personal and political contexts; and, second, we can examine what impact such representations have on our ability to connect, create coalitions, and affect the socio-political landscapes we inhabit—and which inhabit us.

In general, as this collection will make clear, at least one thing is certain: queers from around the world have used the Internet to reveal and represent the diversity of their experience in ways that are challenging to static notions of both identity and identity politics. Such varieties suggest the need for alternative notions of both community and social agency, and these varieties of representation—at both the local and at the global level—speak to us not just about the diversity of what it

means to be queer, but also about how individuals are attempting to connect with others to create a sense of community, perhaps even of political purpose and social agency across those differences and through those varieties. As such, I argue here (as I think this collection as a whole asserts) that we can examine and question queer usage of the Internet in terms of three interlocking modes: varieties of representation, community formation, and the movement for social change.

Of course, there is an implicit assumption in such questioning: Derek Foster (1996) puts it nicely: "As more people gravitate to this new means of communication, concomitant changes in the conception of both community and identity will inevitably change" (p. 24). And if there is one thing that I think most of the authors included in this special issue would agree on, it is the notion that a critical examination of queer representation on the Web reveals that conceptions of "both community and identity" among queers—both locally and globally—are being challenged, and in some ways altered, by Internet communications. For instance, Bettina Heinz, Li Gu, Ako Inuzuka, and Roger Zender introduce us to the possibilities of studying "global gay identities" by examining multiple Web sites with significant "queer" content in the U.S., China, Japan, and Germany. In the process, they describe how localized identities "take part in, support, negotiate, and resist" more globalized (and globalizing) trends in queer identification.

In addition to these larger, more global trends, the authors here seem drawn to the ways in which individuals and smaller groups negotiate online and offline identities, particularly as online identities come into contact with a dizzying array of identity and communal representations and constructions. In "Virtually Belonging: Risk, Connectivity, and Coming Out On-line," Sally R. Munt, Elizabeth H. Bassett, and Kate O'Riordan examine a lesbian on-line community, available through a Website, and a large part of their critical endeavor is to query both the construction of online lesbian identities *and* to explore the "relationships between on-line and off-line locales." Similarly, Jane E. Hegland and Nancy J. Nelson, in "Exploring the Internet as a Tool for Expressing Gendered Identity," discuss how male cross-dressers represent themselves on their Websites, as well as how they use such sites to negotiate their desires with their real-world identities. Reminding us that such negotiations occur around the world, Mark McLelland's "The Newhalf Net: Japan's 'Intermediate Sex' On-line" looks at a Japanese transgender identity formation and how it plays itself out on the Web in complex ways. Perhaps what's most striking here is McLelland's description of the radically different construction of these identities as opposed to what Westerners are familiar with, even those of us familiar with the purposefully open and shifting rubric of transgender. McLelland argues well for more local *and* global study of such identity construction.

Thinking even more directly about online/offline identities, Donald Snyder's ethnographic study, "'I Don't Go By Sean Patrick': On-line/Off-line/Out Identity and SeanPatrickLive.com," moves the discussion to Webcams and unpacks the ways in which a gay life, led online, intersects with (and makes productive "trouble" for) a real-world identity and life.

Finally, Robin Mathy's "Suicidality and Sexual Orientation in Five Continents" and Bella Chatterjee's "Razorgirls and Cyberdykes: Tracing Cyberfeminism and Its Use in a Legal Context" take us away from the Web and explore practical ramifications of using the Internet to study—and to push the boundaries of our understanding of—sexuality. Mathy's work ingeniously uses the Internet to begin corroborating more precisely the link between homophobia, social pressure, and suicide, while Chatterjee explores, theoretically, the ways in which cyberfeminism has—and could—help us ensure that the Internet is guarded against homophobic and heteronormative legal constructions and restraints so that is kept open as an exploratory space for queers of all stripes.

As I look back on these essays, two things strike me. One is the diversity of methodologies represented, which I think speaks both to the attractiveness of examining cyber-sexualities across disciplines *and* the possibilities afforded by encouraging more interdisciplinary studies and critiques. But more than this, perhaps what's most interesting about these pieces is the hopeful tone that permeates them: we recognize the Net as a reality in how we communicate and represent ourselves; we are ever more attuned to its limitations, but we continue to hold hope for shaping it to our particular political purposes. Ultimately, these essays concur with Berry and Martin (2000): ". . . the net is neither a substitute for nor an escape from real life. Nor is it simply an extension of existing offline communities and identities. Instead, it is part of lived culture, informed by and informing other parts of users' lives" (p. 80). Tracing the mutual interconnectedness of those lives—communicating, commiserating, and creating (and recreating) both community and identity in the process—is the central critical endeavor in this special issue.

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