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Sonia Núñez Puente and Antonio García Jiménez

abstract

This article examines the relationships between gender and technology in Spanish feminist praxis online and argues that different perspectives on online feminist community-building offer distinct responses to cyberactivism, which is considered central to sustaining efforts for social change. To ascertain whether Spanish virtual communities and cyberactivism have the potential to address the challenges posed by the relations between gender and technology, we analyse feminist scholar Remedios Zafra's theoretical proposals, and the different ways in which this theory intersects with the cyberactivism put forth by two feminist web portals, *Ciudad de Mujeres* and *Mujeres en Red*. We will discuss to what degree particular Spanish feminist theory and practice online adapts to or challenges utopianism regarding the liberating potential of technology. We will also examine how, in the face of critical arguments about such liberatory possibilities, two options present themselves for women's effective use of technology: inhabiting or occupying the web through the construction of feminist communities online.

keywords

gender and technology; virtual communities; cyberactivism; new technologies; feminist praxis

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Feminist work on gender and technology over the past decades has shifted between optimism and pessimism about its benefits. This article takes a closer look at these two positions by exploring the relation between gender and technology within Spanish feminist theory and praxis. We examine online feminist community-building and the specific ways in which these communities propose to inhabit or occupy the web and aim to foster and promote political and social action. We begin by looking at existing literature on the diverse and fluid relations between gender and technology, as well as the importance of establishing and developing online communities specifically designed for and by women.

The work of Valerie Solanas in the late 1960s and early 1970s is very optimistic about the liberatory potential of technology. In fact, Solanas's *SCUM Manifesto* (1968) claims that technologies are fundamental for liberating women from their physiological bodies as well as from their economic dependence upon men. In 1970, Shulamith Firestone published *The Dialect of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*, which became a foundational text for radical feminists; from her double position as theorist and activist, Firestone (1970) made an important contribution to new approaches in feminist and information society theory. Firestone argued for the liberation of women from biological tyranny. Her work is influenced not only by the work of feminists such as de Beauvoir, but also by that of information society theorists such as de Daniel Bell (1973), who share Firestone's optimism regarding the role that automation will play in eradicating tedious work and subsequently eliminating gender disparities.

In the 1980s, critics such as Cynthia Cockburn (1985) began a more pessimistic line of thinking in terms of technology's potential for women's liberation. Cockburn, in her work based on an empirical analysis of workplaces, warns that the masculine domination of technical skills and knowledge maintains a gendered division of labour, because for her, technological competence is an act interpreted as expressive of masculine identity. This is the argument Cockburn uses to explain why women demonstrate resistance to participating in masculinized technologies. Cockburn therefore advocates an autonomous women's movement to transform the nature of technology. Thus Cockburn posed the question as to whether women experience technology as oppressive merely because men dominate its use or whether technology is inherently patriarchal. In response, liberal feminists have suggested that men have dominated technology's use and design, and therefore women need to be included more in its development. Radical and eco-feminists locate the source of the problem in technology's patriarchal nature and therefore promote a total rejection of technology. Donna Haraway's *Manifesto for Cyborgs* (1985) intervenes in this polarized debate, reacting in part against radical feminism. The *Manifesto for Cyborgs* affirms that technology is an essential part of our identity. Haraway argues that technology is central to our daily lives and, therefore, it can be

productive to think of ourselves as cyborgs; we can use this conceptualization as a tool for changing the relationships between power, identity and technology. Despite all the contradictions and complex power dynamics involved, Haraway's work opened up new possibilities for feminist and political analyses to engage in a more positive process, exploring the ways in which women's lives are intimately connected to technology (1985, 1991). It is precisely in the vision of technology as a key element for the development of new, potentially resistant identities that feminist theory and social theory intersect (Wyatt, 2000).

In a similarly utopian vein, and attempting to eradicate gender differences, Sadie Plant (1997) carries out a sophisticated use of Luce Irigaray's post-structuralist deconstructivism, emphasizing women's feminine qualities and thereby affirming their radical sexual difference. For Plant, cyberspace is feminine in essence, and is thus a natural space for women. For her, cyberfeminism represents an emergent system in revolt, which includes women and computers working together against the reality of a patriarchy that seeks to subdue them. This formulation stems from the idea that women, in contrast to men, had always unconsciously been preparing themselves for the historic moment of cyberspace's creation. In tandem with Sadie Plant's utopian ideas, Rosi Braidotti (1994, 2006) finds the web to be the logical space to give rise to a mobile, fluid nomadic subject – a subject capable of conquering new freedoms and who explores the web as if travelling in search of new virtual communities. Braidotti posits that, in this model of a nomadic subjectivity, female subjects would theoretically and politically imagine themselves as a collective subject, thus consolidating the communal bond valorized by online feminist practices.

In parallel with Braidotti's utopian vision, we find the arguments of other feminist theorists, such as Kember (2003), Paasonen (2005), Krolokke and Sorensen (2006) and Wajcman (1991, 2004). This group sees online feminist practice as the ideal solution to the obstacles blocking women's access to the use of new technology. These writers propose that feminist online praxis should provide theoretical and practical tools through which differently situated women can simultaneously acknowledge their diverse positions and work across national, ethnic, racial and gender lines. In this way, online feminist praxis presents itself as a complex but productive political project in the midst of the highly contradictory digital landscape that offers women both peril and promise. To this end, these scholars advocate an empirical, critical approach to online feminist praxis that eliminates naive expectations about its liberatory potential for women. Thus virtual communities can foster both a critical position and provide agency in terms of cyberculture's politics, economics and culture; however, if such a position is to be successfully sustained, these communities must remain grounded and concrete, embodied and political.

We can see online feminist praxis in the context of the online virtual community-building and activism as explored in the work of Baumgardner and Richards

(2004), Green (2002), Naples (1997), Rheingold (2000), Peizer (2005) and Sohn (2008). Along the same theoretical lines, the work of Manuel Castells is a point of departure for looking at the relation between gender, technology and social theory (1996; 1997; 1998). In his theorization of the relationship between gender and technology, Castells (1996: 1) to a certain degree disregards questions of inequality, in order to focus on the belief that technology has a transformative power over society. As a social theorist, his work can be compared with that of feminists such as Haraway, Plant and Braidotti, who move beyond technology's negative aspects and emphasize the existence of free spaces that allow women to develop new identities by means of technology. Castells's assertion is that, for most social actors in the network society, meaning is organized around one primary identity – that is, an identity that frames all others (1996: 29). From this definition, he maintains that identity, for social actors, is the process of constructing meaning by focusing on a cultural aspect, or set of related cultural aspects, which are given priority over other sources of meaning. For Castells there exist two very different identity-based populations in the construction of virtual communities: the interactors and 'the interacted'; that is, those capable of choosing their own circuits of multidirectional communication and those to whom a limited number of prepackaged options are offered. Who falls into what category will be determined largely by class, race, nation, and, most pertinently for our analysis, gender. In this respect, according to Castells (1996: 225) feminism is becoming increasingly fragmented into a multiplicity of feminist identities. This is not a source of weakness, but rather of strength, particularly in a society characterized by flexible networks and variable alliances in the dynamics of social conflict and power struggles. This article will discuss to what degree particular Spanish feminist practice on the Internet adapts to or challenges optimistic theory regarding technology's liberating potential, and how, in the face of critical arguments about such liberatory possibilities, two options arise for women's effective use of technology: inhabiting or occupying the web through the construction of online feminist communities.

The present study's theoretical argument will show a gradual oscillation from a utopian to a more activist approach in feminist Internet practices in Spain, and analyse the ways in which this change relates to the interesting and contradictory intersection of praxis and theory (Andrews, 2006). We will examine the activist proposals of two of the most important web portals for online feminist praxis in Spain: *Ciudad de Mujeres* and *Mujeres en Red*. The first part of the analysis will look at the creation of the *netiana* concept developed by Spanish feminist scholar and activist Remedios Zafra; we will see how Zafra's approach presents an alternative, fragmented and subversive model of online identity. We have chosen Remedios Zafra's work because it reflects the position of a group of Spanish feminist theorists, including Ana Martínez Collado and Ana de Miguel, who use Rosi Braidotti's work as a point of reference.

1 <http://www.ciudaddemujeres.com/Matriz/Index.htm>, last accessed 5 June 2011.

2 <http://www.mujeresenred.net/>, last accessed 5 June 2011.

3 <http://www.fundacionmujeres.es/>, last accessed 5 June 2011.

4 <http://www.lopersonalespolitico.com/>, last accessed 5 June 2011.

The feminist web portal *Ciudad de Mujeres* (*City of Women*)¹ started a trend in Spanish feminist virtual communities which has continued on web portals such as *E-mujeres* or *La ciudad de las Diosas* (*The City of Goddesses*). The site *Mujeres en Red*² essentially reflects a political stance that other sites – such as *Fundación Mujeres*,³ *Lo Personal es Político* (*The Personal is Political*),⁴ and other feminist sites – have adopted, especially in the form of blog-based political actions. Taking the relationship between gender and technology as a point of departure, we will explore the possibilities for agency of feminist virtual communities as true interactors in online feminist praxis in Spain. The article will discuss whether the fragmented, fluid, ironic and nomadic identity described in Remedios Zafra's work in fact constitutes a strength, or if Zafra's theory has weak points that force us to ask questions like: Are women really interactors, that is, subjects with real options for political activism and identity construction, forming part of new feminist communities online as Zafra maintains? Or do women continue simply to be interacted subjects with closed options due to their real situation in society? We will attempt to analyse the theoretical projects presented by the founders of *Ciudad de Mujeres* (*City of Women*), and *Mujeres en Red* (*Women Online*), María José Moreno López and María José Sánchez Hernández and Montserrat Boix, respectively. We argue that this new online Spanish feminist praxis not only concerns itself with debates about and the consequences of constructing new identities online; it also explores approaches to feminist praxis that seek women's inclusion in (traditionally masculine) fields such as the creation of networks, programming and even hacking. Finally, the article discusses the two options represented by Spanish feminist praxis online for incorporating women into technology production and making them effective interacting subjects in online communities: occupying the web or inhabiting the web. We will see how one part of Spanish feminist praxis centres on discourse and political action seeking to *occupy* the web, that is, take possession of a space that they consider to be, or potentially to be, a space of activism and conquest for feminist virtual communities. On the other hand, we also find a position that seeks to *inhabit* the web; that is, consolidate one's own space for the development of new sites of identity and relation. 'Inhabiting' the web would thus entail seeking, and finding, one's own space without the need to conquer it.

the *netianas*: being born (making) a woman on the Internet

Remedios Zafra is one of the most important feminist scholars in Spain today. A writer and the director of the feminist research group 'Gender and Cyberspace', she has worked intensely to sustain a new configuration of female identity online: the *netiana*. She has received various prizes for her research and writing on feminism and digital culture, and is the author of numerous essays and theoretical works on cyberfeminism and the relationship between gender and

technology. Zafra also runs the web portal *2-red.net*,⁵ which offers a number of articles and theoretical documentation on the construction of a new female identity online. The website also includes links to different online projects such as *Habitar en (punto) net*, which we will discuss later in our analysis.

⁵ <http://www.2-red.net/mcv/>, last accessed 5 June 2011.

Formulating a vision of a liberatory utopia in relation to questions of gender and technology, Remedios Zafra articulates her position in her essay *Netianas: N(h)acer mujer en Internet (Netianas: Being Born (Making) a Woman on the Internet)* (2005). The essay centres on the creation of 'netianas', heirs of Haraway's cyborg and of other feminist political fictions. For Zafra, *netianas* define themselves as new, mythical creatures who are desirous and productive and who inhabit the web through the constant exercise of imagination and irony. Zafra makes use of irony in putting forth the netianas as representative post-human, imaginary subjects, displaced from traditional structures, who perceive the Internet as offering an opportunity for diversity and creation of new forms of continual re-creation, as well as ways of transgressing hegemonic discourses and destabilizing gender categories. However, the *netiana* is conscious of the fact that cyberspace is symbolically charged by a structure that reproduces heteronormative behaviours, conduct and values, and sometimes reinforces them, as is the case of video games. The *netiana*, takes as a point of departure the utopian positions developed by Haraway, Plant and Castells, among others. However, it is necessary to point out that, despite the fact that the *netiana* describes herself as a utopian ironic myth, she also represents a position that is critical of the assumed liberatory possibilities technology holds for women. The advance of high technology does not entail a leap in human imagination aiming to create new images and representations. According to Zafra, this shows that something more than technology is necessary in order to truly change models of thinking. The *netiana* myth, the construction of a political-poetic fiction, comes across in Zafra's discourse as an ironic proposal for post-corporeal and imaginary beings; however, it does not reject the symbolic weight present in the sociocultural construction of gender identity on which the myth is based. Under this demand for ironic and utopian transgression, the *netiana* myth is born.

Zafra also makes use of her web portal, *2-red.net*, to deliver the theoretical position and praxis articulated in her essay *Netianas* to web surfers. Zafra's web portal presents itself as a women's own space, which she calls *habitar en (punto)net (Inhabiting (dot) net)*, and where excerpts of her work *Netianas* are available. The portal's different sections take shape around its fundamental defining principle, defined by Zafra as an online project that proposes possible social and political changes for women.⁶ In an attempt to maintain the same theoretical position on her web portal as in her essay, *Netianas*, Zafra's web portal sets itself up as a sort of habitational space for women, for the new *netianas*, who need to inhabit a space within technology. Through different readings of the Internet, this online project explores the singular nature of the

⁶ Zafra, R. (2008) 'E-identidades-loading-searching-doing', <http://www.2-red.net/edentidades>, last accessed 1 March 2009.

7 Zafra, R. (2008) 'Habitat en (punto)net' 2-red.net, <http://www.2-red.net>, last accessed March 2009.

web, as well as recurring questions in feminist discourse, such as: online identity; the breakdown of the public and private spheres; the creation of collectives online; the dislocation and dematerialization of the subject; clichés and realities about female technophobia; and women's political action in the media.⁷ The project's organization is based on three forms of inhabiting that are significant in relation to women and the Internet: inhabiting the margins (by inhabiting the margins a new epistemological and political stance is born, in which the Internet announces a post-bodily subjectivity, an image of the split identity of the body's image); inhabiting the home (a space where the public and private spheres mingle); and inhabiting the web (as a political space charged with hopes and fears).

If in a large part Zafra's theoretical position is based on an optimistic vision of the interacting subjects that constitute feminist virtual communities, in the end Zafra does not forget the dual nature of the Internet in relation to women's liberation through technology. Immersion in the virtual world has its price, according to Zafra. The Internet, in her words, can be as unique as it is repetitive, as heterogeneous as it is homogenized, as violent as it is boring, because beneath the appearance of the Internet as an eminently democratic medium, the same dominance of one part of humanity over another is present (Zafra, 2005: 162). Therefore, the *netiana*'s goal is to create new relationships between women and technology through developing virtual communities based on imagining new fluid and ironic identities that will end masculine domination of technology. Such communities and identities would promote new relations in which women as social actors can create new spaces online where accessibility and collective participation would be an achievable reality (Zafra, 2005: 162).

In order to successfully construct true virtual feminist communities made up of interacting social actors, Zafra proposes, both on her web portal and in her essay *Netianas*, modifying the relationships between gender and technology. Such a change could be brought about through women's infiltration into the strategies of technology's very definition, and through arguing for women to abandon their traditional role as mere users of technology in favour of active participation. This would be the key for the *netiana*, who demands the presence of women not only as users of technology, but also as special participants in the politics of production and distribution of hardware and software, and its social and educational uses (Zafra, 2005: 162). An example of such a project is *E-dentidades-loading-searching-doing*,⁸ which appears within Zafra's 2-red.net. It presents itself as a theoretical experiment, a type of creative reading of the conditions in which subjectivity is produced and the involvement of feminist virtual communities in technological production. The project's goal is to alert women to the online construction of new female identities and communities, through effective strategies of infiltration in the technological realm like, for example, active participation on activist blogs. In this respect, it is necessary to

8 <http://www.2-red.net/edentidades/>, last accessed 5 June 2011.

point out that Zafra's proposition does not ever manifest itself in a literal sense, given that she does not have a blog on her webpage. However, and in our opinion this constitutes the greatest weakness in Zafra's argument, it is never made clear how women can make effective use of these strategies of subversion through politically grounded activist actions.

By problematizing Zafra's concept of the *netiana*'s multiple, fragmentary and ironic identity, we can take a productive and complicated view of the type of subject that can develop in cyberspace. However, in other areas, Zafra's theoretical model comes across as weak. Her analysis of online community-building tends to be less cogent than in other areas, for example, and pays little attention to the ways in which gender is inflected by different social contexts when actors attempt to form communities and use technology. The true strength of Zafra's work is located in the novelty of introducing a new utopian, mythical fiction, the *netiana*, although this utopian figuration may not find means of materialization in a virtual community. Nonetheless, despite their weaknesses in terms of a practical model of more grounded feminist activism, Zafra's theoretical arguments are certainly suggestive. They insist on the fact that an ironic and fragmented female subject – one constructed over multiple axes of self-identification and experience – can still make a commitment to promote positive aspects of female difference and collectivity by establishing virtual communities by and for women.

ciudad de mujeres: the non-utopia of feminist activism

The first of the Web portals we will analyse, *Ciudad de Mujeres (City of Women)*, was founded in 2004 by María José Moreno López and María José Sánchez Hernández. *Ciudad de Mujeres* is a self-financed, non-profit feminist web portal. The portal's founders explain that they chose the name in honour of Cristina de Pizán, the first woman to live off her own literary production, in the fifteenth century; in her work *City of Women* (1405), she defended women's autonomy.

Among the portal's objectives is the aim of providing visibility to the creations and successes of those women whose thinking and achievements left their imprint on history, and those who we imagine will continue to contribute to equal rights and opportunities for women. In the section of the portal entitled 'we' (in the feminine), the founders show that they hope to contribute to the feminization of the web not only by incorporating progressively more women, but also through feminism. *Ciudad de Mujeres* distributes different kinds of information – political and social – with the aim of promoting a feminist community online and framing individual actions as an important part of feminist activism online. *Ciudad de Mujeres* is organized structurally through the symbolic architecture of a virtual

city. In this sense, the portal's architecture is articulated around different spaces in a city such as agoras, work spaces, leisure spaces, *et cetera*. This intention is made explicit even in the portal's founding manifesto. The fundamental goal of the portal is, according to its founders, to promote exchange, coexistence and civility among women through the creation of spaces for community-building and political organizing in a new virtual space: the Internet. This entails constructing an online feminist virtual community that, in challenging patriarchy, attempts to carry out a truly liberatory project through the use of technology. Some of the core sections of *Ciudad de Mujeres*, such as 'Articles', 'Femipedia' y 'Femieteca' offer resources on different theorizations of feminist praxis. These sections on feminism, in particular, contain a series of texts relating to cyberfeminism and online feminist praxis, as well as links to other online pages dedicated to feminism. In this way, the distribution of texts which can serve as a source of empowerment to other women is a clear priority of *Ciudad de Mujeres*. The texts offered on the portal express a theoretical vision of the possibilities the web offers for situating feminist problems in a new, visibilizing space: the Internet. Other Spanish feminist websites, such as *Dones en xarxa/Women online*; *Tertulia feminista les comadres/Intellectual Feminist Gathering*; or *Xarxa feminista/Feminist Net(work)* share this ambition.

Nevertheless, despite the importance of the sections dedicated to texts on feminism and cyberfeminism, *Ciudad de Mujeres* primarily presents itself as a city created by and for women. On the site, the real and metaphoric space of the web is literally taken over by a series of sections aiming to provide information and useful resources on feminist praxis and activism both online and off. The portal contains 'Forums' or 'List Serves', which foster and carry out political action through discussion lists. *Ciudad de Mujeres*, in the spirit of providing tools for communication, makes its distribution lists available to any women interested in them. Specifically, this information is available in two sections. One of them is entitled 'Information', and it provides the women who subscribe to the distribution list with general news relating to women. The other section is called 'Activism', and distributes news about online and offline activism. The campaigns that *Ciudad de Mujeres* has supported appear in the page history of the 'Activism' section. These campaigns have been centred on social acts of reclamation, such as 'Let's feminize our libraries!' (2009). It proposes that, in order to avoid a dearth of books on feminism or feminists in libraries, women go to their city's library and ask for the acquisition of books that are not there but should be. Other campaigns have a more political bent, such as the call to action 'Sign for new legislation on abortion' (2009, 2010). This campaign asks readers to sign a letter asking that one of the first actions of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero's government be the development and presentation of a law to reform legislation on voluntary termination of pregnancy, which should be dealt with in the sphere of public health rather than the penal code. Some of these campaigns are also visible in

the section 'Video Channel', which presents videos of women's activities carried out by *Ciudad de Mujeres*, which are grouped together on a YouTube channel.⁹

Following the structure of a metaphoric city, the portal also offers a section entitled 'Cities', which includes links to specific *Ciudades de mujeres* (*Cities of Women*)¹⁰ that distribute information on feminist activism in different Spanish cities. This fact is highly important for understanding *Ciudad de Mujeres*'s activist orientation. The portal is thus not only a space for the distribution of texts and theoretical proposals on female identity online, but rather organizes itself as an online tool for relationships between women, allowing them to organize around a true virtual community based on feminist activism. *Ciudad de Mujeres* not only sends out information through lists but the portal also incorporates these lists into larger networks of progressive action on a national level through the links included to different cities' pages, using electronic distribution as a very potent tool for political work. The focus of *Ciudad de Mujeres* distances itself, to a certain degree, from Zafra's theoretical model of the *netiana*, avoiding a fragmentary and fluid female identity in favour of the sum of individual efforts that make up a virtual community of female interacting subjects. The emphasis is then, on the 'we', on the community, as we see in the founding manifesto of the site included in the section 'Nosotras' ('we' in the feminine form). Here it explicitly states that *Ciudad de Mujeres* is a sum of individualities that reclaim the space that corresponds to this 'we'.

Finally, the portal shows feminist activism to be its essential objective. On the home page, the site is defined as 'a women's space that is not a utopia, because a utopia is a non-place, and precisely what we seek is to construct a place of one's own that is tangible, corporeal'. Through this corporeality *Ciudad de Mujeres* seeks to reinforce the effectiveness of feminist activism undertaken in a virtual community, in a city of women made up of social interactors. Therefore *Ciudad de Mujeres*, constituted as a meta-space of personal relationships, calls for a politics of technology that goes beyond hardware and software, involving physical bodies and human agency.

mujeres en red: hacking the patriarchy

Mujeres en Red (*Women Online*), the second of the web portals we will analyse here, represents the least utopian variant of Spanish feminist praxis on the Internet in terms of its stance regarding female liberation through technology. This position also forms the backbone of other websites such as *Lo personal es político/The Personal is Political*; *Ciberdona/Cyberwoman*; or *Espai de dones/Women's Space*. *Mujeres en Red* started in Spain in August 1997 with the objective of creating a meeting point online, a true virtual community that would facilitate the exchange of information, strategies and contact among groups of women and feminist groups

⁹ <http://www.youtube.com/user/CiudadDeMujeres>.

¹⁰ <http://www.ciudaddemujeres.com>, last accessed 5 June 2011.

throughout the world. The support of *Nodo 5067*, an alternative Spanish server whose priority is counter-information and the use of the Internet as a communicative tool in civil society, was crucial to the development of this Spanish-speaking space conceived as one which would bring together disparate online resources dealing with feminism and gender. After years of work, *Mujeres en Red* consolidates, in one reference portal organized by themes and countries, access to practically all women's web pages on the planet. Monserrat Boix, the founder, understands feminist praxis as social transformation through access to new technologies, she actively promotes their acquisition of skills in new media. The site is organized into different sections; on the distribution of texts on feminism and cyberfeminism, on the promotion of feminist political action campaigns, and finally, ones that host different forms of online communication such as forums, list serves and a space for the feminist blogosphere. The portal also has specific sections for resources dedicated to training, education, women's rights, globalization, health, technology and gender-based violence.

Through *Mujeres en Red*, Montserrat Boix takes utopian spaces, the virtual communities online devised by feminist praxis, and brings them closer to the social reality of women. She exploits the actual architecture of the page to benefit the content offered; a liberatory use of technology prevails over the more utopian accounts. Given her stated objective, Boix proposes to encourage the incorporation of different women's experience in the new virtual communities, present in various portals. The sharing of these experiences facilitates empowerment, visible in sections such as 'Join the network' or the various blogs that seek to unite women from different backgrounds through shared experience. Boix argues, in this sense, that the texts which *Mujeres en Red* publishes or hosts can – and should – constitute a common nexus that clearly shows the diversity of women's issues around class, gender, race, ethnicity and sexuality. Thus *Mujeres en Red* hosts and publishes numerous essential texts in order to reflect on feminisms and work for the defence of women's rights with the further objective of recognizing, taking advantage of, and sharing resources. Boix affirms that women cannot allow themselves the luxury of rejecting or simply not knowing the thoughts and experiences of other women, who have confronted similar situations and developed reflections or strategies which might serve other women as a starting point to move forward.¹¹ In this sense, the use of technology and virtual communities appears to be indispensable for Boix herself; in one of the texts available on the site, she asks women not to miss all the opportunities that electronic networks offer us as a tool for social transformation (2005: 24). Going one step further, she considers the inclusion of women in the masculine sphere of programming and information science to be a vital necessity. Boix encourages her readers to research and participate in the development of free software, as well as to collaborate outside the system in the process of technical creation of networks to foster connection and communication among women (2005: 25). This

11 Boix, M. (2005) 'Entrevista a Remedios Zafra' *Mujeres en red*, <http://www.nodo50.org/mujeresred/spip.php?article154>, last accessed 1 April 2011.

line of thinking corresponds to that expounded by literature with a more critical vision of the liberatory use of technology in which it is made clear that the power of the web is not inherently distributive. That is, the web, in the hands of multinational corporations and capital markets, is liable to concentrate power in the way opposite from that which the utopian approaches of some feminist theorists, among others, would have us believe. Boix shows that she is aware of these limitations of the web, and makes it explicit in one of the texts available on *Mujeres en Red* where she encourages women to research, for example, free software, or the possibility of changing programs so that their language is less sexist. She also encourages women to participate in communities of free knowledge, sharing and developing knowledge that is less sexist, definitively inspiring them to reflect and act using the possibilities that syndication offers women to create collective spaces.¹²

Boix's discourse thus connects with that of feminist scholars who, in a critical approach to the utopian vision of the Internet's liberating possibilities, position online feminist praxis as an uneasy but productive political project. Boix, in agreement with this critical vision and orienting herself towards political activism, underlines the fact that the so-called digital divide produces new forms of social exclusion. For Boix, then, it is fundamental to promote politics capable of reducing the disparities in Internet access, as well as acquiring the technical abilities required to use new technology. Boix's stance takes a step beyond the discourse of the digital divide to point out the connections between gender and other forms of inequality that persist in the broader political and economic systems that underlie and develop technology and which therefore inform its characteristics.

We note, for instance, that technology is codified with gendered signifiers, which mould its design and use. During the design process, the programmer or developer produces a planned use of the technical system, keeping in mind the user the designer intends. In this respect, Boix again points out that the predominance of men in design processes has a notable influence on the direction of technological innovation such as the use of the masculine singular in Spanish for default usernames and tools (2006: 5).¹² This masculine predominance situates women as subjects who respond to technologies that were designed without their active participation. Through *Mujeres en Red's* section 'Technology', Boix urges women to make use of new feminist praxes as a powerful instrument for change; but she puts special emphasis on the effort (which for her is essential) to share knowledge, to democratize the use of technologies, and to transform women's situation starting with the process of technological development (2006: 3). She argues that generic technology manuals are addressed to an audience that fits the profile of an Anglo-Saxon man between the ages of 25 and 35. Therefore, she believes that women need to be educated in new technologies. But beyond teaching, it is necessary to analyse whether what is offered is interesting for all

12 Boix, M. (2006) 'Ciberfeminismo social como experiencia' Nireblog, <http://montserratboix.nireblog.com/post/2006/08/01/ciberfeminismo-social-como-experiencia>, last accessed 1 March 2009.

citizens. European statistics verify that more and more women are connected to the Internet, but there remains a notable difference with respect to men's use. According to Boix, perhaps in these studies we should ask why women connect to the Internet. We need to know if women do not use the Internet as much because they do not know how, or because the services it offers do not interest them, because they do not respond to women's everyday needs. Therefore, it is key for women to take a leading role in the generation of technology and content, rather than just being consumers thereof.

What Boix is attempting is a strengthening of feminist praxis through the appropriation of technology. To this end, she makes recourse to hacktivism, which she presents as an alternative at least capable of offering the necessary tools to enable effective social change (2005: 25).¹¹ In the case of hacktivism, Boix, following theoretical interventions on this issue (Himanen, 2002; Castells and Himanen, 2004), proposes using it as an effective tool of social, political and cultural protest. In order to illustrate this point, we will briefly explore the first hacktivist action undertaken in 2003 by *Mujeres en Red*, the first such action by a feminist network in Spain. It was entitled 'I also want to be excommunicated'. Through this action, the site disseminated information on the conflict over the case of Rosa, a 9-year-old Nicaraguan girl who was raped and whose parents demanded the right to an abortion. The church threatened to excommunicate anyone who helped Rosa; the conflict was then publicized by various international networks including the *Latin American and Caribbean Women's Health Network*, which is also connected to *Mujeres en Red*. In Madrid, they took up the case and initiated a national campaign in coordination with other international feminist networks. In the end, these different national and international actions succeeded in exerting enough pressure that Rosa was given an abortion. This first hacktivist action began a long series of activist campaigns that can be found on *Mujeres en Red*'s homepage. The international character of this action marks a difference from other examples of feminist work we have analysed, from Zafra's to the praxis of *Ciudad de Mujeres*, as both were only developed at a national level. Faced with the national bent of the demands of *Ciudad de Mujeres*, *Mujeres en Red* connects the space of Spanish political action with international networks, especially those coming out of Latin America and the Mediterranean.

At this point it is necessary to make explicit that the tensions in Spanish feminism between theorists and online activists resolve themselves through a frequently productive dialogue between the two types of feminists. Some, like Boix, seek to maintain a virtual community oriented toward political action; others, like Zafra, work to develop theoretical discourse based on the construction of new, virtual, ironic figurations of feminist identity. This is reflected in the intense dialogue and debate established on the blog portions of portals such as *Mujeres en Red*, where there are active discussions taking place about the real possibilities of action by mythical figurations such as the

netiana, and how these figurations can create a space for action in women's everyday lives. In this sense, we must point out the recognition that activists such as Boix¹³ pay to theorists like Zafra, thereby showing the dialogical relationship between Spanish online feminist theory and its praxis.

Finally, it is essential to point out that, according to its founder, *Mujeres en Red*'s fundamental praxis is to occupy the web through a process of community-building, a central strategy for developing and sustaining activist political action to achieve social change. This occupation of cyberspace seeks to be effective through generating collective thought, reflecting on the use of technology, preparing political strategies to find concrete solutions in defence of women's rights, and establishing links and alliances between different feminist groups and groups of women. In short, *Mujeres en Red* attempts to occupy the web through the texts and resources dealing with online communication and political action generated on the portal, both at a national and international level (Boix, 2005: 28). This last aspect is what differentiates the project of *Mujeres en Red* from the intention of *Ciudad de Mujeres* or Zafra's theory of the *netiana*; these last projects seek to inhabit the web, while *Mujeres en Red* proposes to occupy it. The semantic difference between the terms 'occupy' and 'inhabit' gives us a clear and precise idea of the evolution of the finer points of Spanish feminist praxis online, particularly in relation to virtual communities' functioning and development, the issues that concern them, and their modes of action.

13 Boix, M. (2009) 'Hacking el patriarcado' *Mujeres en red*, <http://www.mujeresenred.net/spip.php?article880>, last accessed 1 April 2011.

conclusions and discussion: how to inhabit or occupy the web

The different approaches to the utility and use of new technologies, enabled by the new social spaces created on the Internet, offer various visions of Spanish feminist theory and praxis online. These visions oscillate between: (a) a clarified utopian vision of the relations between gender and technology and the ways in which they foster the development of new, multiple, ironic female identities; and (b) a project to promulgate women's creation, use of, and access to new technologies through the construction of virtual communities, as proposed by feminist praxis of a more socially and physically grounded nature. In this article, we have attempted to show that Spanish feminists view the Internet a socially constructed space that is neither utopian nor dystopian; for them it is also a space subject to the same inequalities and hopeful possibilities as other virtual feminist communities. Using this first observation and Remedios Zafra's theoretical framework as a point of departure, we have observed different moments in the orientation of feminist virtual communities in Spanish online praxis.

Spanish feminist praxis attempts to combat a view of the Internet as being distinct and distanced from the problems of the social reality into which new

technologies are integrated. Thus, *Ciudad de Mujeres* and *Mujeres en Red*, both of which embrace more critical positions, warn of the risk of exaggeratedly utopian visions of cyberspace that cast it as the ideal location for the development of innovative subjectivities that challenge existing categories. These websites challenge such utopian visions either by inhabiting the web in meta-spaces or virtual cities or by turning to strategies of occupying the web, through tools of feminist activism such as hacktivism.

The main question addressed in this article is the way in which the construction of fluid, multidirectional, ironic identities such as Zafra's *netiana*, who aims to inhabit the Internet as a new space, enters into dialogue with feminist praxis online in Spain in two different but complementary ways. The first method is constituted by the incarnate and non-utopian vision of the web exemplified by *Ciudad de Mujeres*, which promotes the construction of a true network of cities of women in cyberspace through activism and political action. The second method is that proposed by *Mujeres en Red*, which goes a step further, promoting the use of protest tools such as hacktivism in order to undermine the social structures of patriarchy. Thus Spanish online feminist praxis interrogates certain theoretical formulations of the relation between gender and technology, and demonstrates processes of establishing new feminist identities and virtual communities, through a more political, activist-oriented and grounded use of new technologies, whether by inhabiting or occupying the web.

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