

Women and the Internet:

Reflections on Cyberfeminism and a Virtual Public Sphere

By

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Introduction

The Internet represents a potentially powerful platform for women's subversion of gender stereotypes and for development of a virtual public sphere that more strongly reflects the values, priorities, desires, and aspirations of women. This optimistic view of telecommunications innovations is undercut by the interests of global capital, which seek to regulate and control cyberspace. The Internet is increasingly policed by corporate interests, as can be seen in the vigorous prosecution of individual file-sharers by the Record Industry Association of American and more recently the Motion Picture Association of America.¹ Equally, women's bodies are a major commodity of Internet consumption, with the pornographic industry a renowned leader of Internet commerce. Indeed, what is more significant than the simple availability of pornographic material on the Internet, is the idea that this pornography is overwhelmingly directed at a male consumer and reflects male fantasies of mastery over women. Ultimately, the cultural forces in the real world have shaped, in large part, the power relations of the virtual world. While the Internet does pose new opportunities to transcend gender and to empower women, its transformative and emancipatory powers are curtailed by the historic and contemporary conflation of masculinity and technology, which conceived the Internet as a military application and has nurtured the Internet in the image of a white, male (American) elite.

¹ The brevity of this discussion precludes an investigation of the file-sharing controversy and corporate attempts to regulate and control the Internet. Suffice to state; these two major players in the American entertainment industry vigorously defend their real-world (and increasingly virtual-world) market interest by lobbying for legislation against file-sharing software and by prosecution of individual file-sharers (primarily students and young people rather than organised piracy syndicates). By August 2004, the RIAA had brought nearly 4,000 suits against file-sharers and in November 2004 the MPAA announced its intention to follow the RIAA's lead in taking legal action against individual file-sharers. See for example, "Justice Department's Operation Digital Gridlock Cracks Down on Illegal File-Sharing of Copyrighted Material", *National Public Radio* [hereafter *NPR*] (26 Aug 2004); *All Things Considered*, "Recording Industry Announces More Lawsuits on Downloaders as Artists Need to Audit Their Labels for Royalty Payments", *NPR* (25 May 2004); and *Day to Day*, "Motion Picture Association of American Crackdown on the Illegal Downloading and Sharing of Movies Over the Internet", *NPR* (8 Nov 2004).

Cyberfeminism tends to highlight the capacity of cyberspace to generate a freer more egalitarian society. In contrast, this paper argues that the Internet's usefulness in women's liberation remains largely latent. Using a case study of the pornographic site, ChickTrick, this discussion asserts that cyberspace is primarily a tool for capitalism, not feminist social change. In addition, this investigation mobilises evidence from my own survey of British and American female computer users to illustrate that while cyberspace may be an important resource for feminist activism, women's day-to-day use of computers is more strongly linked to waged-labour.

Cyberfeminism: What is it?

Cyberfeminism is one of many strands of feminism, such as liberal, socialist, environmental and so on. In common with other feminist ideologies, cyberfeminism emphasises the central role of gender in social relations and the consequent oppression of women. The best-known exponents of cyberfeminism are the VNS (pronounced Venus) Matrix, authors of the "Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century" (1991), and Sadie Plant, author of *Zeros + Ones* (1998).² Cyberfeminism asserts an alliance between woman and new telecommunications technologies. Cyberfeminists emphasise the transformative power of cyberspace, or the notion that the virtual world allows women to transcend gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality and other identity categories to generate a more egalitarian reality within the virtual public sphere.³ Cyberfeminism can be seen as a fresh understanding of the relationship between gender, science and technology; since Victorian and Edwardian 'first-wave' feminism, feminists have debated the nature of this relationship.⁴ In the final analysis, this feminism is premised on an optimistic understanding of technology, or the perception of technology as societal saviour rather than destroyer.

Optimistic Versus Pessimistic Approaches to Technology

The (Western) history of technology is broadly divided into two discursive camps. Firstly, the optimist view, which understands virtual reality as the remedy for late-modern Western societies' loss of social capital. Secondly, the pessimist view, which less enthusiastically accepts the

² See VNS Matrix (n.d.), *Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century*, retrieved Nov 2004 from Cybertribe-Archive website: <http://www.sterneck.net/cybertribe/kultur/vns-matrix/index.php>. See also Sadie Plant, *Zeros + Ones: Digital Women + the New Technoculture* (London: Fourth Estate Limited, 1998).

³ For some useful discussions of cyberfeminism, see Laura Hand (23 Apr 2001), *Cyberfeminism: Virtual Activism, Real Change*, retrieved Nov 2004: http://projects.ups.edu/honors_thesis/lhandy/cyberfeminism%20frames.htm; Rosa Braidotti (3 Jul 1996), *Cyberfeminism with a Difference*, retrieved Nov 2004 from University of Utrecht Women's Studies website: http://www.let.uu.nl/womens_studies/rosi/cyberfem.htm; and Faith Wilding (c1997), *Where Is Feminism in Cyberfeminism?*, retrieved Nov 2004 from Old Boys Network website: http://www.obn.org/cfundef/faith_def.html.

⁴ For a concise discussion of the history of feminism with particular reference to science and technology, see Judy Wajcman, *Feminism Confronts Technology* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991; reprint 2000), Chp. 1.

redeeming potential of technological innovation.⁵ As mentioned above, cyberfeminism emphasises the positive potential of digital culture to act as a platform for a broad-based, egalitarian global democracy. While cyberfeminists have recognised the importance of the Internet as a vehicle for the interests of capital⁶ – significant for the role of capital in the oppression of women world-wide (as in the wide-spread exploitation of the labour of women and girls in the developing world) – this paper supports a more pessimistic view of the Internet as an agent of female liberation. Evidence from the pornographic industry demonstrates that, at this stage, the Internet is more a vehicle for consumerism and capitalist enterprise than for feminism or transnational democracy. This discussion accepts that the Internet is pregnant with feminist potential in terms both of women's access to networks and of opportunities to mould a feminist-inspired virtual public sphere. Nonetheless, the overwhelming use of the Internet as a marketplace and the real-world circumstances of female computer use suggest that virtual- and real-world feminist activism must co-ordinate in order to birth that potential.

The Internet as Marketplace – Pornography

Women's bodies are a central commodity of the cybermarketplace. The pornographic industry was the first to recognise, to exploit and to sustain commercial success on the Internet. Pornographic material is the largest category of paid online content, and by 2003 there were 260 million pornographic web pages on the Internet.⁷ While there is no consensus among feminists about pornography – is it or is it not 'degrading to women'; can women make a 'choice' to participate in pornography within a patriarchal society;⁸ does it encourage violence against women; is it sexually liberating for female consumers and producers of pornography and so on – in the view of this discussion the pornography most available on the Internet commodifies women's bodies, represents women as mentally inferior to men and reflects most strongly a (white, American) male fantasy of mastery over women. An investigation of ChickTrick.com illustrates this point.⁹

⁵ Wajcman also presents a cogent and balanced critique of major scholarship coming from the optimist perspective. See, *TechnoFeminism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), Chp. 3.

⁶ Personal cyberfeminist web sites provide evidence of a nuanced understanding of the Internet, for example see Karen (21 Oct 2004), *Is This Cyberfeminism?*, retrieved Nov 2004 from: <http://www.geocities.com/karenbiz/cyberfem.html>.

⁷ Jessica Ong (7 Oct 2004), *M/Cyclopedia of New Media: Pornography and Internet Technologies*, retrieved Nov 2004 from Creative Industries Faculty, Queensland University of Technology website: http://wiki.media-culture.org.au/index.php/Pornography_and_Internet_Technologies.

⁸ Feminist scholars have debated the usefulness of the term patriarchy. Here, I use this term because it is most widely used and understood outside feminism to mean male social/political/economic dominance.

⁹ Readers should note that the constraints of space allow for only the crudest evaluation of pornography. While this area has been the subject of an impressive body of scholarship, what this discussion focuses on is the idea that

ChickTrick.com's slogan is, "We find a chick then play a trick".¹⁰ Each free sample scenario follows two white, American men as they cruise their California suburb in search of supposedly unsuspecting women to 'fool' into a sexual encounter. The appeal to a male consumer is enhanced by the filming methods. The narrator/cameraman (who may or may not participate in the sex act) plays the role of documenter. In this way the male viewer is invited to identify as co-conspirator or, perhaps to imagine himself as the filmmaker. Thus, the male consumer of ChickTrick is 'in on' the joke. For instance, in the 'Sharon' video the male protagonist shares a note with cameraman stating, "I'm gonna bang her", followed by sniggering. This example is particularly revealing, and highlights the orientation of ChickTrick to the American male consumer.

Another important element in the appeal of ChickTrick is the representation of women as easily manipulated and mentally inferior to men. Though the acting in ChickTrick is largely unconvincing, the viewer is encouraged to believe that the female character is 'really' fooled into a sexual encounter. These situations appear absurd as in the case of 'Roxanne', the pizza delivery-woman who accepts an invitation to forsake her delivery duties in order to hang-out and have a beer with a group of unknown men and then enter a bedroom of the house where she commences vigorous masturbation in response to the promise of a tip. Similarly, 'Amy', under the false impression that she is participating in a student documentary, requires little convincing before agreeing to remove her clothes and perform oral sex on her 'boyfriend' as two unknown men film her. This emphasis on 'getting one over on' women may well be a symptom of what Susan Faludi and others have discussed as a 'crisis of masculinity', but it is equally an expression of a male fantasy to subjugate women.¹¹

ChickTrick objectifies women's bodies. In just over half of the seventeen free sample ChickTrick scenarios a woman's body and sexuality is explicitly conflated with monetary exchange. 'Cindy' uses sex to gazump a room in a house-share; 'Daisy' exchanges oral sex for a lift to San Francisco; and 'Terri', a pool cleaner, is offered a list of 200 potential clients in exchange for sex. ChickTrick's representation of sexual activity reduces women to receptacles for the penis (through camera focus on the vagina and anus); as objects desiring penetration (with an emphasis on vaginal and penetration); and as objects for the display of virility (with an emphasis on the so-called cum shot or facial, where men ejaculate over women's faces). Certainly

pornography is more about power and less about sex. This paper further takes as a premise that in the context of cyberspace, pornography consistently represents female powerlessness in the face of male dominance.

¹⁰ Impulse Media Group (c2001), *ChickTrick*, retrieved Nov 2004 from ChickTrick.com website: <http://www.chicktrick.com/t1/pps2=typein/index.html>.

¹¹ See Susan Faludi, *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man* (New York: W. Morrow and Co, 1999).

ChickTrick is only a single site, and cyberspace does cater for the gamut of sexual proclivities, yet it remains that ChickTrick's representation of male superiority seems to reflect the dominant form of Internet pornography. This being the case, it follows that the virtual-world is strongly characterised by the patriarchal relations that dominate in the real-world. In this light, cyberfeminist visions of the Internet appear unconvincing.

Feminist Alternatives for the Internet

While I believe that the Internet is largely a site of patriarchal and capitalist expression, feminists have mobilised the Internet to serve women's needs and desires. Importantly, the Internet is a portal to a wide-range of women's health information. VaginaPagina.com offers a safe and welcoming environment where women can explore, discuss and share information about women's health and alternatives to conventional medicine, and the Philadelphia-based Student Environment Action Coalition includes a Tampaction Campaign: "... a national, youth led effort to replace unhealthy, unsustainable tampons and pads with sustainable alternatives and positive attitudes towards menstruation, menstruators' bodies, and the environment".¹²

The Internet can also facilitate women's organisation and women's public expression of their feminism. Cynthia Cockburn has indicated the advantages (and pit falls) of e-networks and email communication in the work of the Hands Across the Divide, a bi-communal women's organisation working for peace in Cyprus.¹³ Likewise, assuming access to computers and a knowledge of programming, women may and do create and maintain websites as platforms for feminist activism.¹⁴ Regardless, leaving aside women's uneven access to the tools and knowledge that make this sort of activism possible, as Wajcman suggests, ultimately cyberfeminism is intertwined with Western capitalism as it, "... requires for its performances the latest free-market American capitalist gizmos".¹⁵

What Some Women Get Up To Online

¹² See VaginaPagina, (28 Nov 2004), *VaginaPagina*, retrieved Nov 2004 from VaginaPagina.com website: <http://www.vaginapagina.com>; and Student Environment Action Coalition (2004), *TampAction*, retrieved Nov 2004 from Student Environment Action Coalition website: <http://www.seac.org/tampons/>.

¹³ Cockburn notes that email allowed women of the Cypriot diaspora to participate in Cyprus-based peace activism as well as women's communication across the Green Line. However, in the sensitive context Cyprus, the limitations of e-communication (e.g. the absence of body language) could generate misunderstandings and antagonisms between women. Moreover, individual women did not use the emailing list in the same ways, and controversy within Hands Across the Divide over the regulation of the emailing list highlighted (class-based and generational) variation in women's access to the Internet and knowledge of its use. See, Cynthia Cockburn, *The Line: Women, Partition and the Gender Order in Cyprus* (London; New York: Zed Books, 2004).

¹⁴ Two examples used here are Handy, *Cyberfeminism*, and Karen, *Is This Cyberfeminism*.

¹⁵ Wajcman, *TechnoFeminism*, 73.

Certainly, cyberfeminism has a valuable contribution to make to feminism, and the virtual public sphere has important potential for the creation of a more egalitarian society, but my own informal survey of female computer users supports Wajcman's conclusions that most women's use of the Internet centres on work-related activities and consumerism.¹⁶ Seven female computer users, both British and American, submitted diaries that outlined a day's use of the computer. These diaries included information on when and where the computer was used and what websites were visited. This sample is admittedly small and flawed, however the information from these diaries is meant as a justification for this paper's acceptance of Wajcman's conclusions, rather than as a substantive contribution of quantitative research.

The diaries support the idea that female computer use is predominately work-related, with email a fundamental element of daily computer use. It emerges from the diaries that email and word processing are embedded in women's daily lives, particularly for women in waged labour. Judy writes, "... I tried to start keeping track of when I was using the computer and it became impossible because my computer activity is so integrated into my work processes". Similarly, Laura keeps her office computer on all day, primarily in order to be aware of incoming emails. The essential integration of computers into women's working lives is particularly evident in the case of Jennifer and Grace, both telecommuters. Grace maintains two PCs at home, one devoted to telecommuting, and she is a partner in an online retail business. While Jennifer works part-time at the local primary school, she also manages a successful home-based graphic design company. In both her incarnations, Jennifer is heavily dependent on computers for earning her income. E-communication also facilitates public work apart from main work duties. For instance, Judy, based in the United States, uses email to liaise with another woman with whom she is organising a conference in Britain.

Conclusions

While cyberfeminism has provided feminism with a new approach to gender and technology and makes an important contribution in seeking to challenge the conflation of masculinity with technology, ultimately its optimistic view of the Internet is compromised by the overwhelming use of the web for capitalist enterprise. More importantly, the great success of Internet pornography and that industry's preoccupation with demonstrating men's mastery over women suggests that patriarchal power relations extend from the real- to the virtual-world. Thus, in my opinion cyberspace is not an inherently liberating public sphere for women, and as James

¹⁶ Wajcman notes that the sites most often visited by women in the US are pampers.com, avon.com and oilofolay.com. *TechnoFeminism*, 74.

Bohman has argued regarding global democracy and the Internet, cyberspace is only 'democratic' to the extent that people use it in a reflexive and consciously democratic manner.¹⁷ Therefore, the feminist potential of the Internet is only as great as women's consciously feminist use of cyberspace. Cyberfeminism is a partial solution to women's oppression, and as with other feminisms, bridges must be built between this largely Western and privileged form and the feminisms of minority and Third World women.

¹⁷ James Bohman, "Expanding Dialogue: The Internet, the Public Sphere and Prospects from Transnational Democracy", in *After Habermas: New Perspectives on the Public Sphere*, eds. Nick Crossely and John Michael Roberts (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 140.

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