

Homepage: Internet Activism and Women

Sarah Considine

The anthropological relevance of the emergence of the internet in the 1990's cannot be underestimated. As usage of the World Wide Web inflated towards the end of the decade and the repercussions of its capabilities were visualised, the internet began to form an almost utopian fantasy. It illustrated a new world in which anything was possible: 'Promises touted by corporate advisers, politicians, and cyberfanatics alike were staggering: empowerment, convenience, global democracy, wealth, communities unfettered by geography, mutable identity, and even the erasure of gender and race.'¹ These early utopian hopes of the World Wide Web have long been contextualised to an interface that, in many ways, mirrors or supports the reality of the 'real-world'². Around a decade later, we are coming to terms with the strengths and limitations of the internet and notably its role in political debate, community and strategy.

¹ Christa Erickson, 'Networked Interventions', in Bingaman et al. (eds.), *Embodied Utopias: Gender, Social Change and the Modern Metropolis* (London: Routledge, 2002), p.225.

² While it is important to note that new technologies like the internet are very much 'real', for the purposes of this essay the terms 'real-world' or 'real-life' refer to the physical, place-based actions.

Activism on the Internet

Traditionally political activists have been fervent in the usage of new technologies and means of communication. The internet is a relatively recent addition to a long list of new devices, like radio, TV and newspaper print, that activists have used to communicate, raise awareness and subvert.³ As a 'new media' and new communication technology, it is important to highlight the internet's capabilities as a device for change: 'It is not only instant and transspatial but multilateral, including many participants and connecting many different activist groups.'⁴ This connectedness and inclusiveness of the internet has huge implications on the principles of community, collective identity and democracy. Politically speaking, the internet has the potential to transform politics, not least through its vast ability to store information and user's ease of retrieval, that 'destroy(s) the monopoly of knowledge that the governments too often hold.'⁵ The politics of the internet is mainly issue focused. Where the likeminded don't have a physical space, virtual space congregates political and social communities, consolidating an identity and creating a new form of online democracy where web space is power.

Online political activism and internet based strategy can be loosely categorised into two forms. Firstly, there is internet activity that supports 'real-life' activity. This may be sites that organise and facilitate 'real-life' protest, for example the Climate Camp website⁶ that instructs and informs protestors on everything from the practicalities of dates and locations of protests, to guidance on direct action techniques. Or this could be the web presence of a political group with an established real-life presence, for example Greenpeace's website⁷ which is largely used to report on real-life activity. Secondly there is internet activity that can be classified as protest in its own right. This can take the form of viral messaging, infiltrating of computer programming or 'hacktivism'⁸. In Naomi Wolf's online lecture at the Hudson Union Society, she highlights the importance of disruption and disturbance in activism and protest. 'For a protest to be effective, you have to stop traffic... For a protest to do anything, you have to disrupt business as usual, I don't mean violence, I mean dissent'⁹. 'Stopping traffic' is of course possible online as it is in the real world. With 'the repressive powers of technocapitalism'¹⁰ dominating cyberspace, there is scope for inventive subversion and disruption. The internet has formed such a highly integrated part of our lives, for socialising, shopping, banking, entertainment, that disruptions to these services and the inconvenience that this causes is the new form of 'traffic stopping'. Of course, the distinction between these categorisations is rarely clear, and is often a culmination of the two.

Women Online

Men talk more often, they talk for longer periods, they adopt 'centring' positions (forcing females to hover around); men define the topic, assume the legitimacy of their own view, and override women who do not see the world in their terms... The only difference between the real world and the virtual world is that, if anything, male domination in cyberspace is worse!¹¹

The presence of women on the internet is, in many cases, discouraging at present. Considering the high hopes of women (alongside many disenfranchised races, communities and cultures) that the internet presented a fresh start against deep-rooted oppression, meaningful female and feminist contributions to cyber-politics have been scarce. This encourages the question: what attributes of internet activity discourage

³ Martha McCaughey and Michael D. Ayers (eds.), 'Introduction' in, *Cyberactivism: Online Activism in Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2003), p.4.

⁴ Ibid., p.5.

⁵ Kevin A. Hill and John E. Hughes, *Cyberpolitics: Citizen Activism in the Age of the Internet* (Oxford and Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), p.1.

⁶ Camp for Climate Action, <http://www.climatecamp.org.uk>, [accessed 2009].

⁷ Greenpeace, <http://www.greenpeace.org>, [accessed 2009].

⁸ The term 'hack' does not only refer to its popular reading of illegal trespassing of computer based systems, but rather any appropriations of technology: 'If you wanted a cup of tea and did not have an electric kettle, but did have a coffee maker and used it to heat water for your tea, this unexpected use of a coffee maker is a hack.' Tim Jordan, *Activism! Direct Actions, Hacktivism and the Future of Society* (London: Reaktion Books, 2002), p.120.

⁹ FORA.tv, 'Naomi Wolf at the Hudson Union Society' (Jan 2009), http://fora.tv/2009/01/16/Naomi_Wolf_at_the_Hudson_Union_Society, [accessed 2009].

¹⁰ Arturo Escobar, 'Gender, Place and Networks: A Political Ecology of Cyberculture', in Wendy Harcourt (ed.), *Women@Internet: Creating New Cultures in Cyberspace* (London: Zed Books, 1999), p.31.

¹¹ Dale Spender, *Nattering on the Net: Women, Power and Cyberspace* (Melbourne: Spinifex Press, 1995), p.193.

¹² Marisa Belausteguigoitia Ruis, 'Crossing Borders: From Crystal Slippers to Tennis Shoes, in Wendy Harcourt (ed.), *Women@Internet: Creating New Cultures in Cyberspace*, (London: Zed Books, 1999), p.23.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Chyng Sun and Miguel Picker, *Price of Pleasure: Pornography, Sexuality & Relationships*, DVD (Media Education Foundation, 2008).

¹⁵ Daniel Miller and Don Slater, *The Internet: An Ethnographic Approach* (Oxford: Berg, 2003), p.32.

¹⁶ Sohail Inayatullah and Ivana Milojevic, 'Exclusion and Communication in the Information Era', in Wendy Harcourt (ed.), *Women@Internet: Creating New Cultures in Cyberspace* (London: Zed Books, 1999), p. 81.

¹⁷ See Case Study Section, 'War Zones' which gives examples of some of the milder responses to Maggie Hadleigh-West's posted video (see next page).

¹⁸ Monika Merkes, 'Do Women and Men Use the Internet and E-mail in Different Ways?', *PC Update: Magazine of the Melbourne PC User* (July 2001) at <http://www.melbpc.org.au/pcupdate/2107/2107article13.htm>

¹⁹ Internet activists are defined by positive responses to the question 'Do you 'blog', 'post' or 'chat' messages of a political content?'. See Hill and Hughes, p.29.

²⁰ Ruis, p.23.

female participation? Marisa Ruis, author of 'Crossing Borders'¹², believes that men have written the rules for the internet and as a result women lack control or real access. This refers to the languages of technology and its obstructions to accessibility. Ruis views the internet as a male, repressive 'master', who's 'instrument' of domination is an exclusive language:

The master's cybertool needs to be deconstructed and dismantled in order to be used not only by female cyborgs expert in technical languages, but also by subjects that are capable of interpreting multiple systems of mediation, translation, impersonation and representation of the voices of 'others'.¹³

If this is an accurate interpretation of virtual gender disparity, a key 'tool' of repression is the sexual degradation of women on the internet. There is an 'estimated 420 million pages of pornography online'¹⁴, which accounts for an overwhelming 60-70% of web-surfing time¹⁵. The internet's incessant display of women as sexual objects serves to 'immortalize the product of a distorted view of sexuality within patriarchal societies...'¹⁶. The alarming levels of misogyny (alongside appalling racism) that can all-too-regularly be found on the comment pages of interactive websites like YouTube¹⁷, serve to illustrate the darker side of freedom of speech in combination with anonymity. Search results for 'feminism' show more cases of mocking and undermining the movement than genuine feminist activities. These observations of the image of women on the internet certainly support Ruis' claim that the internet projects a repressed and traditionalist view of women.

Monika Merkes' study of gender differences in internet use clearly outlines a number of distinctions between male and female patterns. Firstly, women see the internet as a 'tool for activity', whereas men see it as a 'technology to be mastered' and are also more likely to view internet usage as a play-thing or a gadget. This suggests that women are less likely to use the internet as a past-time or form of entertainment. Secondly, Merkes suggests that due to the female tendency to use the internet for specific purposes, women are less likely to carry out long internet trails or 'stumble-upon' web content. Merkes also observes that in mixed-sex public discussion forums, women are far less likely to contribute, and when they do, they are less likely to receive a response¹⁸.

Differences in internet usage could be partly explained by the computer's location in the home. For many cultures, the domestic environment is traditionally a women's place of work. Gender orientated territories within the domestic environment regularly exclude both women and men, and the computer is most likely to be in a traditionally male space like an office.

Internet activists are overwhelmingly male (according to the Pew Centre survey 71.8% of internet activists are male and 28.2% are female)¹⁹. While many feminist and women's groups have websites and blogs (linear forms of online activity), very few have adopted more imaginative uses of the internet. This could, in part, be explained by the 'language' barrier, or technical barrier that Marisa Ruis describes in 'Crossing Borders'²⁰. Advanced computer literacy could be seen as the perfecting of a hobby or pastime, a luxury that women traditionally don't have time for in the domestic environment. However, this would insinuate that it is female inadequacies that deter more in depth forms of internet participation. It is also very possible that this absence is a conscious choice, based on feminine attributes like a common value that women place on 'face-to-face' or real life communication.

Female reluctance to maximise the internet as a tool for and a site of women's progress and activism could be explained by the direct

²¹ Michael D. Ayers, 'Comparing Collective Identity in Online and Offline Feminist Activists', in Martha McCaughey and Michael D. Ayers (eds.), *Cyberactivism: Online Activism in Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2003), pp.145-164.

²² Escobar, p.32.

comparisons that have been made between 'face-to-face' and 'screen-to-screen' communication, rather than by considering the two as interdependent. In the essay, 'Comparing Collective Identity in Online and Offline Feminist Activists', Michael D. Ayers compares two separate experiences of women's groups—one which uses a simple form of website and one which continues with real life, physical meetings. Unsurprisingly, Ayers concludes that the predominantly 'face-to-face' group and the predominantly online group have very different characteristics²¹. It is this 'either/or' mentality and failure to understand and appreciate the complete interdependency between the real and the virtual world that alienates female web users. Truly successful internet activism is reliant on a duality of approach or 'an ongoing taking back and forth between cyberpolitics (political activism on the internet) and ... place politics, or political activism in the physical locations at which the networker sits and lives.'²²

Cases of Female Contribution

It is important at this stage to highlight notable contributions by women to online activism. This serves to illustrate that while these contributions are fewer in quantity, successful content does exist. They demonstrate innovative ideas and aspirations, but also show a grounding or connection with the real world. Noting that three of these examples are film-based, it is possible to draw a link between female desires for face-to-face or more human forms of contact, and successful internet coverage. The following case studies signify a variation of forms of online activism and political communication, used by women.

Each case study forms an example of one of the many ways in which the internet can be focused for specific political strategy or used as a key activist tool—direct action, communication, education or public journalism. While these terms are not an absolute or finite categorisation of activist tools, they form a basis for highlighting the goals of internet activism. 'Direct Action' refers to the 'stopping of traffic' previously considered. It uses disruption of everyday activity to highlight and draw attention to issues. Communication, in this context, refers to the role of the internet in uniting the like-minded. Webspaces create environments in which disenfranchised groups can communicate and share ideas. Education refers to the important role that the internet has in storing information and creating usable forms of information retrieval. And Public Journalism refers to the ability that the internet has to break the monopoly of mainstream media journalism as forms of activism. While these examples are to some extent chance findings, they demonstrate key areas of internet protest.

Direct Action

'War Zone' by Maggie Hadleigh-West



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EHIW9iRMSqY>

'War Zone' is a short film that presents public space through the eyes of a woman, highlighting the everyday harassment and intimidation that women are subjected to by men. Through the simple act of walking the streets, Hadleigh-West not only demonstrates her experience but also attempts to reclaim space that she feels has been taken out of the public realm by the actions of her 'abusers'. Hadleigh-West retaliates against common forms of sexual harassment through the use of a camera, her 'weapon', directly filming and questioning the motives of her harassers. The film offers an empowering glance at the effect of her refusal to accept the 'natural order' of the streets and her refusal to underestimate these actions.

Hadleigh-West's form of online protest is, in many ways, typical of female participation online. While the notion of 'stopping traffic' or causing disruption has no doubt been achieved, Hadleigh-West uses the 'real-world' as its site and cyber-space as its portal of projection. She uses real human interaction as the central point of topic, and the internet is merely a circulation device. This is a very successful technique. Hadleigh-West is in no danger of removing her cyber-protest from a contextual grounding, but rather places herself, her camera and the viewer at the centre of the issue.

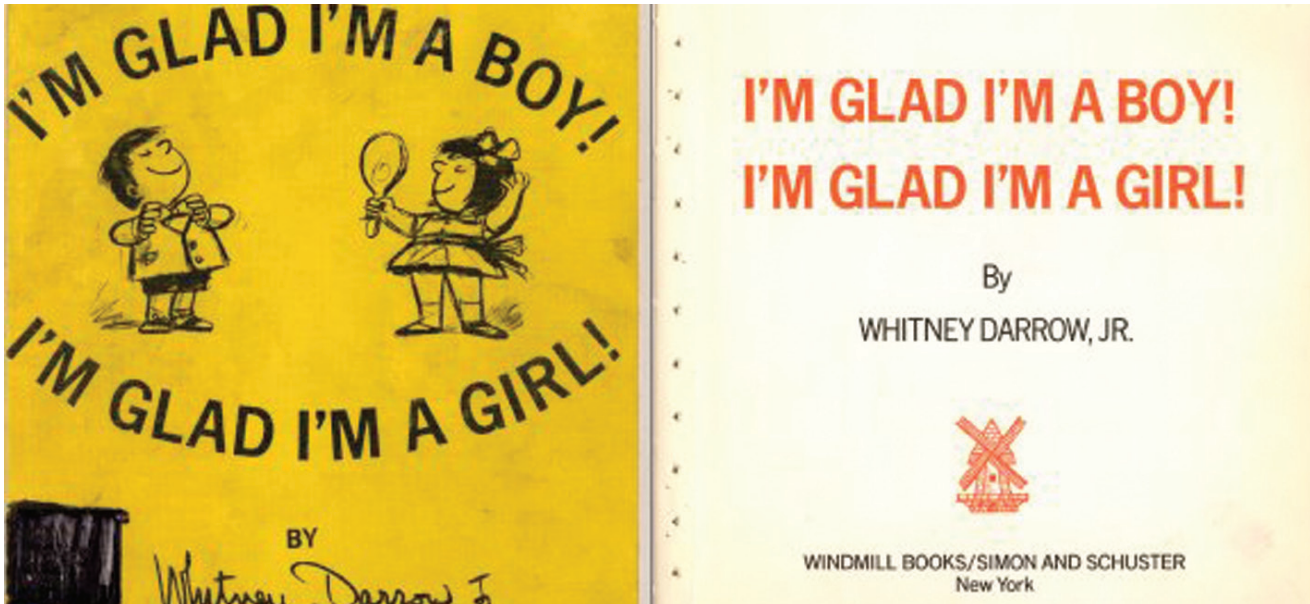
Further to this simple strategy, its online presence gives the issue a real-time context. The anonymous comment pages of YouTube serve to illustrate exactly the objectification that Hadleigh-West illustrates in her film. With such comments as 'don't worry, in 10 years time no one will stare... and you can live the rest of your precious life in peace free from the oppressive stares of men'²³ and 'if she doesn't want to be looked at then why the hell is she wearing such revealing clothes?'²⁴, the correlation between Hadleigh-West's physical streets and the virtual spaces of the internet, are blindingly clear. She has succinctly exposed the issue of male street-harassment and used the internet to not only circulate that issue but to demonstrate its constant undermining.

²³ A comment on, Maggie Hadleigh-West, 'War Zone', at YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EHIW9iRMSqY>, [accessed 2009].

²⁴ Ibid.

Communication

Young Feminist Forum



<http://spacefem.com/forum/viewtopic.php?f=28&t=38360&sid=1bfe1fd15a9a3854d07d9141e8aed281>

This young feminist forum or 'chat-room' is one of a few on the internet. Whilst the format is very much low-tech, the significance of these sites is vast. This particular forum offers young women and men the opportunity to address 'other' ideas of gender in a media that is largely used to project single images of gender roles. Discussions and ideas on the site are broad, ranging from which cartoon characters are most admired to questioning 'why Facebook's default image is a white male'. As one user writes, 'feminism is about asking questions' and the site facilitates the simple act of uniting young people with similar questions at an influential age.

This form of online participation draws upon Ruis' view of female internet participation being highly restricted by technical language barriers²⁵. By using such low-tech formats, the site greatly increases its inclusiveness. It also reduces any predisposed format or topic structure, allowing users to pose questions and create new 'threads' easily. While it could be argued that this linear format has a number of inadequacies regarding the limitations of its use, this is merely a side-issue to its overall aim—to provide a format in which like-minded people can communicate without language-barriers.

²⁵ Ruis, p.23.

Education

'Killing us softly: Women in Media' series, by Jean Kilbourne



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=svpMan9cWyo>

Jean Kilbourne's online lecture series represents an opportunity for women to critically consider the image and objectification of women in the media. By recording and analysing the methods that the advertising industry have used to typecast the female image, an overriding trend appears. Kilbourne often uses humour to highlight the ridiculous nature of the pressures that the media place on women to achieve a prescribed ideal appearance. By posting this lecture series on an easily accessible site like YouTube, the ideas are made public to a greater number of users and as a result enter the public forum.

Similarly to Hadleigh-West's film, Kilbourne uses the internet to circulate ideas rather than to formulate them. The nature of the catalogue of visual information that Kilbourne uses relates well to film format, while her own presence retains the sense of face-to-face communication. She educates her audience through the process of heightening the senses to the forms of gender pressure that are so common in the media that we need to relearn how to see them.

Public Journalism

Arab Women's Speak Out: Profiles of Self-Empowerment



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XnqL-ocObXs>

This project was conceived as a device to communicate ideals of self-empowerment to the repressed women of the Arabic nations, notably Palestine, Lebanon, Egypt, Tunisia and Yemen. The documentary is a collaboration between the Communications Program of the John Hopkins University and 30 Arabic female 'role models'²⁶. While the format of the documentary is simple in nature (a number of interviewees describing their paths to success and the obstacles they had to overcome), the ready availability of this material on the internet is key.

²⁶ Virtual Activism (2009) <http://www.virtualactivism.org/articles/arabwomen.pdf> [accessed 2009].

²⁷ Lamis Alshejani, 'Unveiling the Arab Woman's Voice through the Net' in: Wendy Harcourt (Ed.), *women@internet* (London: Zed Books, 1999) pp.214- 218.

As Lamis Alshejani illustrates in her article 'Unveiling the Arab Woman's Voice through the Net'²⁷, the greatest difficulty in unlocking Arab women's online potential as a site of liberation, is the technical language barrier. However, this documentary uses the internet in the most basic manner to highlight the human voice. Journalism has played a highly important role in internet activism. Considering the limitations and corporate pressures on mainstream sources of journalistic media, the internet offers an open forum for the dissemination of information. The case of Arabic women is particularly significant. Considering the limitations of communication and expression that many of these women would have experienced within their homelands, the internet forms a kind of free state. 'Arab Women's Speak Out' demonstrates how key pieces of journalism can bring to light women's rights issues that are all too often ignored by the mainstream media.

Female Prospects on the Internet

With the internet forecasting itself as a permanent aspect of human culture, the place of women and the role of gender on the internet is a key issue for activists to address. As a site for political change, perhaps the most important question is: Does the internet encourage political apathy? Is an easier and more convenient internet activism, or 'activism at a distance'²⁸, slowly replacing an activism that requires greater commitment, and as a result demands greater attention? 'People feel like they're doing something useful when they push the send button, even though spam like petitions and e-mailed chain letters have not been proven effective...'²⁹.

²⁸ Escobar, p.31.

²⁹ McCaughey and Ayers, 'Introduction', p.6.

At what point does online activity make an impact on the real world and when it does, is its impact reduced by its origin? Successful internet activism and social change is achieved by ensuring that the connection between the virtual action and its real-life motive is strong. For women, this connection between online activity and physical realities may still seem fragile.

For many communities that seek the internet as a site of equality, the internet forms a kind of a 'sand-box', or a world in which aspirations can be tested in a free environment with limited consequences. However, this image of the internet is an illusion. As a site of political protest and a tool for communication, it is important to ground the capabilities of the internet within its limitations. There are issues of inclusiveness with internet use – namely its Western bias, and its exclusivity to computer owners and the computer literate, eradicating vast socio-economic groups and cultures from the debate. The disparity between rich and poor is as prevalent in the cyber world as it is in the real world³⁰. It is also important to remember that online activity can be and is monitored and censored. Many countries have national firewall's that block access to foreign websites and search engines, for example China's 'Great Red Firewall'³¹. But most fundamentally the internet is shaped around the physical society from which it is created. For women and those affected by assumed gender roles, the internet reflects this patriarchal society. Language barriers, gender directed lifestyles and traditional domestic roles ensure that female online activity is reduced. The modern role of the internet is to arm with knowledge and to make ideas accessible, but until the internet is a truly accessible facility, this optimistic notion is in jeopardy.

³⁰ Erickson, p.225.

³¹ See, Alfred Hermida, 'Behind China's Internet Red Firewall', BBC News, 3 Sept 2002, Technology Section, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/2234154.stm>, [accessed 2009].

