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### Digital Spaces, Material Traces : Investigating the Performance of Gender, Sexuality, and Embodiment on Internet Platforms that feature User-Generated Content

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## Chapter Two

### Theorizing Gender and the Internet: Past, Present, and Future

#### 2.1 — Introduction

As early as 1993, well before the proliferation of the web, Susan Herring investigated differences between men and women in their use of language in asynchronous computer-mediated communication (CMC) such as bulletin boards, newsgroups, and discussion lists. Barely 15 years later, research on gender and the internet has burgeoned. The online sphere, with its mixture of information, entertainment and communication modalities and its convergence of audiovisual technologies requires multidisciplinary theoretical and methodological lines of inquiry. Psychologists, for instance, often examine gender differences in the online behavior of women and men; anthropologists and sociologists regularly investigate how women build communities on the internet; feminist political scientists tend to look at the way women use it to mobilize for social and political causes; cultural studies scholars have a recurring interest in the virtual performance of gendered identities in, for instance, online games; and sociolinguists mostly discuss gendered language patterns in various online contexts. Given this plethora of approaches, any attempt to write about this subject is bound to be incomplete and partial. Nevertheless, we organize our account around what we see as the key conceptual contours of the social science literature in this area.

#### 2.2 — Gender as identity

##### *Differences*

Gender differences online have been a central area of concern in studies of gender as identity. In her pioneering study, Herring (1993) identified two separate discourses online: a feminine discourse encompassing a more 'personal' style of communication, characterized by apologetic language use and the

prevention of tension; and a masculine discourse, typified as being more 'authoritative' and oriented towards action, and characterized by challenging and argumentative language use. When these two discourses met in a 'mixed gender' online environment, the masculine discourse dominated: men tended to introduce more subjects and ignored or ridiculed the input of female participants (Herring, 1993). These results led Herring to conclude on several occasions that the internet perpetuates everyday linguistic inequalities between men and women (Herring, 1995, 1996a, 1996b, 1999; Herring et al., 1995). Similar research, like a study of newsgroups by Savicki et al. (1996), concluded that newsgroups with predominantly male participants could be characterized as containing a large amount of fact-related exchange and impersonal speech, while female-dominated newsgroups featured conflict-avoiding speech and high levels of 'self-disclosure'. Jaffe et al. (1995) found that women tend to display textual patterns of social interdependence more than men do in real-name pseudonymous online conferences, while Kendall (1998) demonstrated that the interactions between 'male' and 'female' characters in MUDs (Multi User Dungeons – an early type of online fantasy game) were largely predicated on stereotypical gender relations, even though these dungeons provided what appeared on the surface to be anonymous and disembodied environments. Other research has shown how male dominance is violently reinforced online through the sexual harassment of women in different online contexts (Herring, 2002, 2001, 1999, for an overview see Li, 2005). These studies make clear how gender and sexual identities are mutually constitutive and how, for heterosexual men, the position of the former is strengthened by the oppressive explication of the latter through the use of sexually demeaning language targeted at women.

On the other hand, a detailed analysis by Nancy Baym (2000) of the participants in the online fan community of the US daytime soap *All My Children* reveals that it is not only the gender of participants that explains particular feminine communicative styles, but also the topic of conversation (in this case a soap) and the offline contexts of the participants. Baym's study suggests that gender cannot be considered the sole explanatory factor for 'gender differences' online - a result supported by a small number of others that have found reversed gender patterns. For example, in an experimental study by Jaffe et al. (1999) men abandoned dominant behavior and approached others in a socially aware and helpful way, while Witmer and Katzman (1997) found that women actually uttered more conflictual speech than men. Similarly, Can's (1999) investigation of the language styles in two feminist Usenet newsgroups, *Alt.feminism* and *Soc.feminism*, showed that exclusionary rhetorical techniques can also be found in online environments dominated by women.

Whether these 'difference' studies emphasize the reiteration or the reversal of stereotypical gender relations in CMC, they leave the 'male-female' dichotomy unchallenged because they focus on generalized types of 'male' and 'female' communicative behavior. They find evidence for the claim that the internet reconfirms and exaggerates traditional gender relations. Yet gender differences are not only a source of women's oppression, but are also seen by some scholars as a source of power. Influenced by Donna Haraway's 'cyborg' theory, the radical French feminism of Luce Irigaray, and Freudian psychoanalysis, British author Sadie Plant (1995, 1996, 1997) argues that the 'digital revolution' marks the decline of masculine hegemonic power structures, as the internet constitutes a nonlinear world that cannot be ordered or controlled. Plant's 'cyberfeminist' vision conceptualizes the web as a fractured and diffuse structure - one that is uniquely aligned with women's fluid identities and that deconstructs the traditionally patriarchal character of technology. According to Plant, women have a 'natural' affinity with new digital technologies because they allow them to explore a multitude of gender identities in a virtual environment where the relation between gender and the body is a contingent construction.

Although Plant's utopian view certainly serves as an encouraging theoretical source for young women who are increasingly immersing themselves in new technologies, it also has a rather peculiar way of combining conceptions of femininity as universally different from masculinity with a view of female identity as fragmented and diffuse. In an awkward effort to merge the two notions, Plant reconciles her version of biological essentialism with the technologically determinist claim that the internet constitutes the key to women's liberation because it allows female multiplicity to flourish. This tension leads Wajcman (2004) to oppose this position, suggesting that by claiming that internet technology is essentially feminine, Plant pre-empts the need for feminist political action.

#### *Experimentation*

In an effort to break out of this traditional gender binary and further investigate the liberating potential of 'cyberspace', another strand of research shifts the focus from gender differences to gender experimentation. In early research about 'gender bending' the absence of the body in text-based CMC played a central role. Due to the fact that cyberspace offers an environment in which gender can be disconnected from one's physical body, the possibilities for creating different gender identities were believed to be abundant. Studies by Reid (1993) and Danet (1996) examined the construction of gender at the moment in which

participants enter 'virtual space'. For example, Reid (1993) argued that IRC users construct their gender identities through the choice of their nickname. 'Nicks' may express masculinity, femininity or even gender ambiguity. 'MUDders' are able to choose gendered, gender-neutral, or gender plural characters when they join. This provides them with an opportunity to actively create their gender (or lack thereof) in virtual space.

Perhaps the most influential examination of gender bending online is Sherry Turkle's *Life on the Screen*. Turkle contends that the internet has become "a significant social laboratory for experimenting with the constructions and reconstructions of self" (Turkle, 1995: 180). In contrast with other studies, Turkle approaches this from a socio-psychological perspective, by investigating the participants' personal reasons for engaging in experimentation with gender and sexual identity, as well as the social context in which these performances take place. This approach places strong emphasis on the relation between online and offline selves. In Turkle's view, online experiments with gender and sexuality are useful tools for the rethinking not only of one's 'virtual' gender identity, but also of one's 'real life' gendered and sexualized self (Turkle, 1995). This last point is made especially clear in the book's chapter on 'cybersex', in which it is argued that cyberspace offers a risk-free environment where people can engage in the intimate relationships they desire but are afraid to initiate in the real world. The possibilities of online gender bending fit well with poststructuralist theories about identities as non-essential discursive performances which open up space for negotiation (Butler, 1990). In addition, these notions have helped the political struggles of feminists trying to escape the 'prison-house of gender'.

Yet, notwithstanding its theoretical and political popularity, several empirical studies have suggested that gender bending is uncommon or is most often conducted for fun or specific game-related advantages, rather than to break out of the gender dichotomy (e.g. Wright et al., 2000; Van Doorn et al., 2008). A further problem with these theories is that their focus on escaping the offline confines of gender causes them to ignore the impact of embodied everyday experience on online performances. Turkle herself believes that ultimately the gendered self is rooted in the physical, offline world, even though cyberspace provides us with profound experiences that can lead to 'personal transformation' and a reconfiguration of how we perceive our selves (Turkle, 1995).

This concern about the offline self is shared, for example, by Jodi O'Brien (1999), who also stresses the importance of embodied experience. O'Brien argues that "gender categories evoke a deeply entrenched cognitive-emotive script for who we can be and how we should relate to others", and these make it doubtful whether "cyberspace will be a realm in which physical markers such as sex, race,

age, body type and size will eventually lose salience as a basis for the evaluative categorization of self/others” (O'Brien, 1999: 77). Through a reliance on “classification schemes”, which cause one to make continual references to the body as connected to the self even though this body is not physically present, the body provides us with a common point of reference that structures our disembodied communication and gives it meaning (O'Brien, 1999). From this perspective, the internet could hardly be considered a site that facilitates the creation of totally fluid gender identities [see chapter three].

Despite their different perspectives, both the ‘difference’ and the ‘experimentation’ approaches focus on gender as identity: a discourse in which individuals engage and through which they assume agency while being simultaneously shaped and disciplined by it. The ‘difference’ studies distinguish between feminine and masculine language patterns and behaviors and conclude that the internet does not change traditional relations of dominance between women and men, femininity and masculinity. In these works gender is perceived as a foundational property, with its internal truth or logic located in the sexed body. It is what makes women and men who they are and it determines human interactions, even in an online context. In contrast, the ‘experimentation’ research implicitly perceives the internet as the determining force, since its facilitation of disembodied communication is said to enable individuals to break out of the traditional confines of socially constructed gender relations. Not only are both perspectives thus rather determinist (favoring either gender or technology as the deciding factor) they also tend to ignore social contexts and structures. One reason for this is that empirical studies on ‘gender as identity’ have mainly focused on the interpersonal online practices of CMC (chat, bulletin boards, online gaming and so on) while mostly discarding the socio-economic framework in which these practices take place. Although these studies have at times incorporated a notion of embodiment, this is rarely related to a focus on the actual lives of users in everyday social contexts - with the notable exception of Turkle’s study. In other words, gender as a social structure that situates women and men in particular roles in society is usually ignored. We now turn to another field of research that has examined how the internet is incorporated in the negotiation of socio-political positions by women and men.

### 2.3 — Gender as Social Structure

#### *Marketing 'the feminine' online*

A number of feminist researchers have interrogated the internet's commercial spaces. Women online are now routinely addressed in their traditional role as consumers (Van Zoonen, 2002). Market research is producing ever more studies about the online differences between women and men in order to find ways to promote women's online consumption (e.g. Parasuraman and Zinkhan, 2002; Rodgers and Harris, 2003; Van Slyke et al 2002).

Feminist scholars have looked upon these developments with suspicion. Leslie Regan Shade (2002), for instance, warns against the increasing tension "between e-commerce applications directed towards women as consumers and the usage of the internet as a locus for citizen-oriented activities" (Shade, 2002: 10). According to Shade, digital capitalism's rising interest in women as a viable consumer market has decreased the number of online spaces where women can engage in non-profit cultural or political practices, while corporate websites that aim to profit from women's supposed needs and interests have proliferated (Shade, 2002). Similarly, Gustafson (2002) explores the 'feminization' of community online through the interrogation of three popular commercial women's sites (iVillage, Oxygen, and Women.com). Gustafson suggests that "while women are a growing internet population, they are being discursively constructed on the internet as community-seekers and as consumers - traditionally feminine roles" (Gustafson, 2002: 169). Consalvo (2002) also suggests that community and consumption have been coded as 'feminine' traits in metaphors used in popular discourse about women and the internet. And while women are now equal to men in their online consumption, they remain far behind when it comes to the production and design of the web and other information technologies (Whitehouse, 2006; Wajcman, 2004).

#### *Internet pornography: from the abject to the everyday?*

While women are increasingly targeted as consumers in many of the web's commercial spaces, the single largest commercial enterprise on the internet is still mainly directed at a male audience. The porn industry was one of the first to take its business online and since then has expanded exponentially in size and profit, simultaneously figuring as a further catalyst for the technological innovation that facilitated its growth and pervasiveness (Lane, 2000; Cronin & Davenport, 2001; McCreadie Lillie, 2004). According to McCreadie Lillie, there are four general perspectives from which 'cyberporn' has been addressed. First, behavioral-psychological studies have examined uses and addictions, and have

established an agenda for research that describes a range of 'healthy' and 'unhealthy' online behaviors, while providing possible remedies for 'compulsive' uses of online porn. Second, the 'effects' tradition of empirical media research has mainly concerned itself with the exposure of children to cyberporn. This has usually recommended policies on increased parental guidance and surveillance or filtering software. The third perspective adopts a political economy approach, studying the many facets of the online porn industry and its development in a broader social context, while the fourth focuses on how different social groups use cyberporn in their everyday lives and is mainly indebted to the traditions of cultural studies and CMC research. Feminist analyses of online pornography were initially structured around the polarizing debates between radical 'anti-porn' feminists and liberal 'free speech' or 'pro sex' feminists, which took place during the 80s and 90s, mainly in the United States. The most well-known anti-porn feminists of this time, Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon, have argued that pornography functions as a system for male domination, where male power is established through the violent degradation of women. Thus, the goal for feminist activists is to dismantle this system of domination (Dworkin, 1981). In contrast, next to the rather obvious free speech arguments that have been raised, 'pro sex' feminists have applauded pornography for undermining and subverting our culture's repressive attitude to sexuality in general, and female sexuality in particular. What these debates make clear is how discourse about pornography is inextricably linked to conceptions of gender, sexuality and power (Allen, 2001).

Yet for all the theoretical and ideological discussions concerning pornography in general, there is remarkably little feminist scholarship on online sex. The few studies that do exist generally align themselves with the 'established' areas of media research. Feminists working within the 'media effects' and 'political economy' traditions have tended to center on the hazards of internet pornography for women and children (e.g. Adam, 2002; Burke et al., 2002; Hughes, 2004, 2000), while those with a cultural studies background have focused their attention on online cultures and how they may be redefining the standard gendered codes of porn and sexual practices (Waskul, 2004; Kibby, 2000; Kibby and Costello, 2001).

This last area of feminist scholarship has been gaining currency over the past few years, with studies extending the scope of analysis by paying specific attention to the situated and everyday contexts of internet porn consumption. For instance, Lillie has argued for a need for 'porn reception' studies that investigate "the truths of the architecture of knowledge and technologies of sexuality, which pornography as a participant in the construction of the subject's



desire and sexual identity works within” (McCreadie Lillie, 2004: 53). An important location for these kinds of studies would be what McCreadie Lillie terms “the moral economy of the networked home” (McCreadie Lillie, 2004: 58).

New communication technologies have played a crucial role in the production, distribution and consumption of pornography, both as visually explicit material and in terms of the accompanying discourses of gender, sex and sexuality (Paasonen, 2006, 2007; Attwood, 2002; Cronin & Davenport, 2001; O’Toole, 1999). To a large extent, the internet can be credited for spreading a “diversity of pornographies” (Attwood, 2002) in today’s media environment, contributing to the omnipotence, normalization and increased acceptance of sexualized imagery in mainstream cultural production [see chapter six]. In fact, this trend is slowly positioning women as another viable consumer market for pornographic content, however unlikely this might seem (Cronin & Davenport, 2001; McNair, 2002; Schauer, 2005). It is in such environments, both on- and offline, that sexuality and gender are performed and negotiated, and this makes them a primary target for further feminist research.

#### *Web of empowerment*

Despite the previously mentioned efforts to commercialize the concept of ‘community’, it has also played an instrumental role in a variety of feminist activities to empower women in their everyday on- and offline lives. Many women’s groups and feminist activists have approached the internet as an international platform for such diverse goals as creating support networks, challenging sexual harassment, discussing feminist politics, creating spaces for sexual self-expression, and rallying against social injustices. In this sense, community is strongly attached to a commitment to social change, and resists commercial appropriation by market actors.

Feminist scholars have devoted considerable attention to these social movements, documenting the everyday efforts of women to exercise their rights as citizens in an online environment. Aside from offering a critical look at the efforts by multimedia conglomerates to ‘feminize’ the internet in order to exploit women’s consumer potential, Shade (2002) also provides an overview of how women have used the same internet for feminist communication and activism. She describes, for instance, how mailing lists were one of the earliest and most successful tools for building international women’s networks, creating hundreds of online discussion groups covering a multitude of topics related to feminism and women’s everyday lives. More specifically, Shade illustrates how the internet was used to organize and coordinate the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995, and how it enabled Zapatista women to wage a social ‘net

war' against the Mexican government and inform and educate the Western world about their cause. In a similar vein, Kensinger (2003) presents a critical perspective on how the internet was used for promoting social activism and solidarity with women in Afghanistan during the Taliban regime and the subsequent war in the region.

Aside from investigating how the internet can be used for organizing feminist social activism in various 'offline' contexts, scholars have also paid attention to women's and girls' online strategies for cultural criticism and self-expression. The so-called 'cybergrrls' movement has been the subject of extensive academic enquiry. Of particular interest is how techno-savvy young women negotiate and deconstruct the consumerist messages encoded in their everyday pop cultural environment (Driscoll, 1999; Kroløkke, 2003; Yervasi, 1996). However, according to some critics, a focus on this kind of 'postfeminist' cultural renegotiation neglects basic gender inequalities concerning internet access and work-related issues (Wilding, 1998).

As some scholars have pointed out, an important area where women have been working to empower themselves is in the internet sex industry, where they have become increasingly visible as active consumers and producers of pornographic content (Podlas, 2000, Cronin & Davenport, 2001; Attwood, 2002; Smith, 2007). Through this process of emancipation, women are gradually redefining the idea of pornography as an exclusively masculine domain in which women are treated as passive sex objects, in favour of a realm in which they enjoy porn on their own terms and in which they are in control of their sexual practices. This is not only taking place on a symbolic level, for instance through the resignification of 'female sexuality' in live webcam shows or in pornographic stories produced and published by women, but also on a material level, with more female entrepreneurs starting their own online business and making profits from pornographic productions (Podlas, 2000; Ray, 2007). Thus, while the porn industry has so far remained a predominantly masculine environment, and sexist representations of women are unlikely to decrease in the future, the internet is for some a tool for women's sexual and economic freedom.

These studies all share a concern with women's agency in relation to the internet, whether it is through the creation of networks for political activism, producing female-friendly pornography, or the feminist reappropriation of digital capitalism's consumer culture. While some see this agency as eroding due to the increasing dominance of male corporate presence online, others emphasize women taking matters into their own hands, effectively using the net to engage in various forms of socio-political action. More generally, internet research that

approaches gender as a social structure is effectively concerned with the material-semiotic relation between gender and power at a macro level. Meanwhile, the internet itself often functions as an unbiased, ahistorical and gender-neutral technological instrument that can be used by and against women in the struggle for material and symbolic power. At the same time, gender also appears to be a stable entity in the majority of these studies, principally aligned along the man-woman binary and seemingly untouched by the technology that facilitates these feminist practices. Thus, the biological essentialism and technological determinism witnessed in the 'gender as identity' approach tends to resurface here once again in the context of the 'gender as social structure' debates (Wajcman, 2004).

#### **2.4 — Situated practices and spaces**

In response to these shortcomings, some feminist research on gender and the internet has started to shift its emphasis from the 'identity vs. social structure' dichotomy to the manifold interactions between gender and internet technology, paying special attention to their situated offline/online articulations. Some authors in the field of science and technology studies (STS) have argued that because the experience of our selves is so thoroughly mediated through our everyday interactions with technological artifacts, we cannot meaningfully study gender without taking into account its intricate relationship with technology (Akrich, 1995). Influenced by this notion, feminist scholars have approached gender as something that is both shaping and shaped by technology. This 'mutual shaping' approach generally looks at the intersections of gender and technology on three different, yet interrelated, levels: structural, symbolic, and identity related (Harding 1986; Cockburn and Ormrod, 1993). Mutual shaping research investigates how these three dimensions of gender are articulated within the web's techno-social spaces, which are themselves gendered in the process. According to this approach, these spaces are not only shaped by their use, but also through the design and production of their technological infrastructure (Wajcman, 2004, 2007). These practices are dependent on many different socio-technical factors, like the interplay of commercial and institutional interests. Technological change, then, is never the linear result of 'techno-logical' decision-making, but the outcome of a contingent process.

Research that follows this approach ideally takes into account the whole techno-cultural circuit including the design, development, marketing, consumption, and domestication of specific technologies (e.g. Cockburn, 1992). However, in practice STS scholars mostly conduct detailed case studies that focus on specific elements of this circuit. We will now briefly discuss three such

studies, two from a Dutch perspective and one situated in the Norwegian context.

Els Rommes (2002) examines how implicit presumptions about gender roles among the design team worked to exclude and alienate women as users and designers of Amsterdam's *Digital City* - one of the first Dutch experiments with the internet in 1994. Adopting a 'gender script' approach, she demonstrates how the desire of the predominantly male design team to experiment with state-of-the-art technology made it hard for less tech-savvy users to participate in the Digital City. Rommes calls this a typical example of the 'I-methodology' found among ICT developers, or taking one's own preferences and capacities as the starting point for designing technology. Since most ICT workers are male, user scenarios implicit in ICT production are thoroughly gendered. The masculine gender scripts that informed the design and development of the Amsterdam Digital City produced a pioneering online space that received international acclaim but it did not attract a diverse group of users. Ultimately, Rommes suggests, the masculine gender scripts implemented in the Digital City's techno-social fabric contained a set of normative assumptions that favored high-tech male users, while alienating other, especially female, users. Only those who already owned a computer with an internet connection, or who had sufficient financial and social capital to purchase one, could get access to the Digital City. Since ownership of a computer and internet access were, and still are, unequally distributed along gender lines in Dutch society, this favored male users (Rommes, 2002). Further, Rommes shows that while women did have access to a computer in their home, they often did not use it because they viewed the device as something that belonged to their male partner.

While Rommes' study centers its attention on the design/development side of the mutual shaping process, other mutual shaping studies focus on how the gendered meanings of the internet arise in the context of usage, and how usage interacts with everyday constructions of gender. Van Zoonen (2002) examines how internet technology is domesticated within everyday practices in Dutch households. Contrary to common claims that the internet constitutes an essentially masculine or feminine environment, gendered meanings of the internet arise, especially at the moment of domestication. Through in-depth interviews with young couples she demonstrates how the 'social', 'symbolic', and 'individual' dimensions of gender interact with the everyday negotiations of technology use among heterosexual partners living together. Four types of negotiations among the partners emerged from the interviews, constituting 'traditional', 'deliberative', 'reversed', and 'individualized' use cultures. While male usage primarily determines these types, the interviews show that this does

not automatically result in the construction of a masculine domain in the household, but instead opens up space for shared and feminine appropriations. For instance, a 'deliberative' use culture involves explaining the negotiation of domestic computer use in collective terms and is instrumental in constructing a sense of togetherness among the partners: a shared techno-social domain (Van Zoonen, 2002). Technology is effectively gendered through the process of domestication as masculine- and feminine-coded practices mutually add meaning to the artifact. At the same time, the computer and the internet present the members of a household with a techno-social environment in which their gender roles can be renegotiated. This can occur when the computer is identified with work-related tasks, as is shown in some of the study's interviews. In these cases, work or studies are more valued than surfing or gaming and thus get prioritized. In effect, this priority turns out to be male-biased in the context of Dutch households, where men are still the main 'provider'. As a consequence the domestication of the computer in the household leads, in these cases, to a reiteration of traditional gender roles.

While Van Zoonen's study focuses on the gendered domestication of technology in the home, Lægren (2004) examines internet cafés as 'gendered techno-social spaces'. Influenced by the actor-network theory of Bruno Latour (2005), she considers technologies, spaces and gender as mutually constructed in situated processes that involve material and symbolic articulations, as well as both human and non-human actors. Following Latour, technological artifacts are seen as 'actants', which are able to acquire agency in the production of space by means of how they are integrated in actor networks. By extending the concept of agency from human to non-human actors, Lægren opens up new possibilities for the analysis of gendered spaces and technologies. Through the inspection of the relation between the two, and by considering both as agents producing meaning alongside human actors, she is able to analyse the material-semiotic processes in which technology and spaces are reciprocally gendered in a physical realm. Instead of creating a space where the masculine connotation of ICT can be deconstructed through the material and symbolic presence of feminine use cultures, internet cafés favor one culture over the other (usually the masculine culture). This leads Lægren to conclude that the internet café, with its female visitors largely invisible, remains 'just another boys' room'. While mutual shaping research usually takes into account the multiple dimensions in which gender interacts with technology, this study draws our attention to the interrelations of gender, space and internet culture on a symbolic level. This is effective in showing how offline spaces acquire meaning as a gendered realm, an

area that is generally overlooked in traditional research on gender and the internet.

As the three examples above show, mutual shaping theory necessitates a case study approach to examining gender and the internet, in which the manifold dimensions that make up particular gendered practices can be studied in detail. The phenomenon of I-methodology (Akrich, 1995) in the design phase has been taken up as a useful concept in diverse case studies, such as the gendered design of digital games (Kerr, 2002), smart-building projects (Aune et al., 2002) or gendered ICT use in the workplace (Sefyrin, 2005). Also, the concept of gendered domestication has been well developed in theoretical terms (e.g. Cockburn and Fürst-Dilić, 1994) and has been applied in several studies of old and new media use (Haddon, 2006).

#### **2.5 — New web, new questions, new outcomes?**

Having discussed the main areas of research on gender and the internet, the question for the future is to what extent the existing approaches can function as adequate theoretical and methodological tools for the investigation of new developments such as the emerging era of Web 2.0, typified by an increasing number of users producing and sharing digital content.

According to many, Web 2.0, with its non-hierarchical modes of content production and dissemination, has replaced the top-down structure of the so-called Web 1.0. As part of this Web 2.0 buzz, *Time* magazine named ‘You’ their Person of the Year in 2006: a tribute to the “common people who transformed the way we socialize, gather information, and do business on the internet” via rapidly-growing web applications and platforms such as MySpace, Facebook, and YouTube (Grossman, 2006). While we should not lose sight of the fact that user-generated content of all kinds has long been a feature of internet culture, it is worth exploring the implications of Web 2.0 for gendered online practices.

Given the fact that these new web applications have only recently become the focus of gender-informed research, any attempt to predict outcomes is necessarily precarious. Nevertheless, we can theorize how the previously discussed approaches might be able to provide new and interesting insights in the field of gender and internet research. How are the existing approaches able to come to terms with the present internet landscape, dominated by applications that facilitate both novel and existing forms of user-generated content?

Dealing first with the ‘gender as identity’ approach, it is most likely that studies investigating gender differences in internet use will continue to find these differences in the way that men and women design their weblogs, provide

information on their MySpace profiles, or contribute to a discussion about a video posted on YouTube. These gender differences find their origins in the embodied everyday experiences of internet users and are thus unlikely to be easily altered by any specific ICT application. For this reason, we contend that this kind of 'difference' research runs the risk of continuously reinventing the wheel.

Turning to 'experimentation' research, it does not seem plausible that future studies will find much evidence of gender experimentation that transcends or disrupts binary gender discourse. Contemporary internet applications incorporate new and improved visualization technologies which constitute both a response to and a perpetuation of our preoccupation with the exhibition of everyday embodied 'reality'. Whereas some scholars believed the 'virtual' realm of 'cyberspace' to be an alternative to the reality of everyday life, a space where users could engage in disembodied communication and gender bending, Web 2.0 has definitively collapsed this dichotomy. People all around the world are uploading an increasing number of photographs and home-made videos onto the web, transporting the 'real' and 'authentic' into online spaces. One of the realms in which this phenomenon is evident is the 'reality porn' niche, which has expanded significantly over the past few years (Barcan, 2002; Ray, 2007) [see chapter six]. In response to YouTube's policy of not allowing nudity, websites such as PornoTube and RedTube are now providing a platform where users can upload pornographic video material (either actually home-made or purporting to be) to which other users can respond by leaving comments. Most of these videos focus on the everyday reality of people engaged in sexual practices. Consequently, this dynamic has strongly reaffirmed the 'real body' on the screen, which can now be visually linked to its 'physical origin'. It thus seems unlikely that Web 2.0 will cater to much gender experimentation, with continuous visual scrutiny making users extremely aware of their bodies and those of their peers.

Away from the mainstream, however, the general increase in internet access in the Western world, coupled with considerably lower thresholds for creating personalized content online, do certainly open up possibilities for marginalized gender and sexual identities to be exposed to a larger audience. The visualization technologies that may reaffirm gender and bodily norms in a mainstream context could also be used by queer and transgender people to deconstruct traditional images of gender, embodiment and sexuality, in addition to simply increasing their visibility. This could cause a grassroots disruption of what counts as 'the real body' [see chapter six]. Thus, contemporary research on gender as identity should further examine how gender, sexuality and embodiment are experienced and performed through visualization technologies

such as the webcam and internet video software. A relevant question would be how this 'body-technology' constellation is affecting our conceptions of embodied gender and the ways it can be mediated online.

When considering the 'gender as social structure' approach it is clear that this perspective will remain valuable. As previously noted, multinational corporations have collectively jumped on the Web 2.0 bandwagon and have bought into the current hype around user-generated content. Surely this will have repercussions for how present and future Web 2.0 applications can be experienced and used, as their design is now under increasing corporate control and marketing divisions are eager to benefit from the possibilities of new personalized advertisement techniques. This raises the issue of the increased prevalence of pervasive marketing schemes directed at specific groups of female users, in addition to a more general concern about privacy issues. On the other hand, the previously mentioned low thresholds for participation and production that characterize Web 2.0 could have positive effects on the level of women's participation in political activism and opinion formation online. As research in this novel area is still in its infancy, future studies need to investigate the dimensions of women's political efficacy in these new social spaces. However, even if the number of politically active women grows over the next few years, it seems unlikely that the gendered inequalities identified by Herring and others will dissolve solely through an increase in women online.

Further questions in this area revolve around the extent to which users actually have control over the content they are encouraged to produce and how this may be delimited by corporate design strategies. To what extent do these new user communities allow for women to engage in politically radical activities, when the cultural environment of websites like MySpace and YouTube seems to be predominantly concerned with the consumption of entertainment and lifestyles? How 'political' can a book discussion on Amazon.com be? Does the type of interaction taking place on the most popular Web 2.0 sites require a reinterpretation of what it means to be 'politically active'? These are by no means new questions, but it is vital to reformulate them in the different contexts of a constantly transforming landscape in which economic, cultural and political interests will continue to shape the way that people use the internet.

Mutual shaping research on the relation between gender and the various techno-social spaces of Web 2.0 will prove to be an important tool for showing how situated practices of gendered users are related to their everyday lives and concerns, with the internet constituting an extension of everyday practices rather than a disruptive alternative to it. Future studies should continue to focus on the occurrence of the I-methodology in the design of current websites featuring



user-generated content, as well as examining whether and how traditional gender patterns are reinstated in the domestication of popular Web 2.0 applications. In our own research on the gendered constitution of blogs, for instance, we argued that they are on the one hand extensions of the traditionally feminine practice of diary writing, while they on the other hand redefine this practice as a 'technological' skill, enabling men to contribute as 'bloggers' [see chapter four]. This case study shows the mutual shaping process of gender and technology, with repercussions for the traditional relationship between women and technology, as well as between men and affective self-expression. Nevertheless, we also observed male and female bloggers making gender stereotypical choices of blogging content, mode of address, lay out and hyperlinks in order to create clear masculine and feminine spaces (Van Doorn et al., 2007). The mutual shaping of gender and web 2.0 is, and will continue to be, a fragmented process contingent upon a multitude of situated practices featuring a constant interpellation between particular groups of users and the technologies with which they interact.

## **2.6 — Conclusion**

We started this chapter by acknowledging that the different academic disciplines each have their own perspectives on the articulation of gender in relation to the internet. We identified two initial approaches: 'gender as identity' and 'gender as a social structure'. The internet has been shown to both confirm existing differences between women and men and to enable transgressions of the stereotypical codes of femininity and masculinity. Research has also demonstrated how internet marketing exploits women's social positions by addressing them merely as consumers, while other studies have shown how many women use the net to engage in activism and feminist networking. Whichever of these contradictory possibilities occur depends very much on particular practices of design, development, use and users that take place around internet applications. We therefore discussed the mutual shaping approach, which assumes that gender and technology mutually influence each other, with neither gender nor technology as the determining force. Gender and technology are considered 'actants' in a network of users and producers whose continuous negotiations and contestations propose specific articulations of gender and technological artefacts. Studies of gender and the internet conducted from such a perspective have identified influential processes such as the I-methodology in the development of internet applications – in which designers and developers (mostly men) adopt their own preferences and capacities as the standard for creating new technological applications – and the domestication process, which

refers to the way the internet is integrated in the everyday gendered lives of domestic users.

We concluded by anticipating some research questions that the three approaches could produce when applied to the current social spaces of Web 2.0, and argued that the 'gender as identity' studies should focus on the performance and experience of embodied identity as the nexus of gendered techno-social practices; that the 'gender as social structure' studies will find an increasingly interesting research field that demands an emphasis on the tension between user agency and commercial interest; and that the mutual shaping studies will enable a more thorough understanding of the situated and diverse articulations of gender and technology in the context of Web 2.0 applications that facilitate user-generated content. Rather than causing a schism in the established research tradition on gender and the internet, the social and technological features of Web 2.0 are more likely to evoke questions similar to those asked before. Yet these will require a reformulation commensurable with the current socio-technical environment and its foundation in today's political economy.

### **2.7 — Guide to further reading**

While this chapter has presented the reader with an overview of the past, present, and possible future of research on gender and the internet, it is by no means an exhaustive account. Shade's (2002) feminist analysis of the opportunities and threats that women face when engaging with the internet serves as a solid introduction to the socio-political aspects of women's internet use. Consalvo and Paasonen (2002) also focus on the politics of women's everyday interactions with the web, but broaden the scope of their book through the additional investigation of more 'cultural' issues such as identity construction, embodiment, and discourse. More generally, Poster (2001), Bell (2001), and Trend (2001) all provide insightful analyses on gender identity and the internet from a critical cultural studies perspective, while Schaap (2002) and Campbell (2004) offer two of the most interesting and detailed case studies in this area of research.

For those looking for an elaborate discussion of the relationship between science and technology studies and feminist analysis, Judy Wajcman's *TechnoFeminism* (2004) is an indispensable work, as is the collection of Norwegian case studies edited by Lie (2004). Though it might now be considered somewhat dated, Cockburn and Ormrod's (1993) classic book is sure to remain of interest to anyone curious about the multidimensional relations of gender and technology. Turning to technology's connection to sex and sexuality, O'Toole's *Pornocopia* (1999) offers a vivid account of how porn is consumed and the technological innovations that foster its consumption. Likewise, Waskul (2004)

presents a collection of essays which will prove to be of great use to those with an interest in the political and cultural dimensions of sexual practices in the online environment. These are just a few suggestions for further reading, which will help the reader navigate a path through the growing landscape of gender and internet research.

*Postscript to chapter two: Reviewing the literature review*

In this first postscript, I want to do two things: 1) attend to the context in which the literature study presented in chapter two was conceived, and 2) address the study's relationship to the empirical case studies that are presented in the following chapters. Since the purpose of this section is to critically reflect on my own work, I will primarily focus on the way in which this relationship could have been strengthened.

After returning from a long summer holiday at the end of September 2006, the reality of life back in Amsterdam quite immediately struck me: I was unemployed (for an account of the circumstances that led to this situation, see postscript to chapter five). My depleted bank account necessitated a quick resolution, so I registered with a temp agency and accepted a number of administrative functions at different financial institutions. Yet I also kept in touch with Liesbet van Zoonen, who was then heading the Communication Science department at the University of Amsterdam and had previously functioned as my supervisor during my time as a junior researcher at ASCoR (see postscripts to chapters three, four, and five). At the start of November 2006, Liesbet invited me to co-author a book chapter on the existing scholarship about gender and the internet, which was commissioned by Routledge and would become part of their *Handbook of Internet Politics*. I, of course, agreed and for the next months I spent my spare time researching the enormous corpus of literature and writing new drafts of the review. The first six months were not quite so productive, given the fact that I could only spend evenings and weekends on the manuscript, in addition to my day job. However, I had in the meantime also developed and submitted a proposal for a PhD position at ASCoR, which was accepted in May 2007 (see postscript to chapter five). From then on, I could devote considerably more time to my research and writing as a fulltime PhD student, and by the end of August the final manuscript was sent to the editors. The chapter was eventually published a year later, in August 2008.

As stated in chapter one, the main purpose of the review chapter is to introduce the reader to the key ideas and issues that have been developed in the existing research landscape on gender and the internet up until the advent of 'Web 2.0'. In this way, it provides a historical backdrop to the four case studies that investigate gender performances in user-generated content. Initially, the review concentrated heavily on studies located in the field CMC research, but as my analysis of the literature progressed its focus expanded to other areas such as studies on internet porn and work that approached the relation between gender and the internet from an STS or political-economy perspective. While this expansion extended the scope of

the review by including a large variety of gendered internet practices, there is one area of research that retrospectively should have received a more thorough treatment. In order to align itself more directly to the subsequent case studies, the review would have been strengthened by a discussion of scholarship dealing with the relationship between bodies, embodiment, and new media technologies such as the internet. I am particularly thinking of the work by authors such as Balsamo (1996), Hayles (1999), Wegenstein (2006), White (2006), and Munster (2006), in which the material interconnections between physical and digital forms of embodiment play a central role<sup>1</sup>. Although not all of these works explicitly deal with gendered or sexualized bodies, their attention to the digital mediation of embodied practices would have provided a more solid background to the recommendations for future research made at the end of the review, which pointed to the importance of studying performances of embodiment in the specific techno-social environments of Web 2.0. Likewise, such a discussion would have figured as an apposite prelude to the next chapters in this dissertation, which follow up on some of these recommendations.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> In the final chapter of this dissertation I do engage with some of these authors.