



KUNGL. TEKNISKA HÖGSKOLAN

Royal Institute of Technology
Numerical Analysis and Computing Science

TRITA-NA-D9809 • CID-36, KTH, Stockholm, Sweden 1998

Does the Fruit of Technology Benefit Women?

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Report number: TRITA-NA-D9809, CID-36

ISSN number: ISSN 1403-0721

Publication date: November 1998

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Abstract:

Electronic media and new technology have changed the way we communicate and collect information, and this is the case especially if we look at the evolution of the Internet. The phenomenon of new technology is not unexpected and a few decades ago Marshall McLuhan was mentioning the importance the electronic media, and also the global village, would have for the individual and for the structures of power and culture in society. However, one thing he did not consider and evaluate was how women were included in these changes and if the new media would affect their life, situation and position as much as for men. How women perceive new technology and how they are affected is however something feministic scholars think about and try to evaluate. I find indications of that the evolution of electronic media, and the Internet in particular, is equally important for men as for women and also a stepping stone for further emancipation of the sexes.

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INTRODUCTION

“The medium, or process, of our time - electric technology - is reshaping and restructuring patterns of social interdependence and every aspect of our personal life. It is forcing us to reconsider and re-evaluate practically every thought, every action, and every institution formerly taken for granted. Everything is changing - you, your family, your neighbourhood, your education, your job, your government, your relation to “the others“. And they’re changing dramatically.“

(McLuhan, *The Medium is the Massage*, 1967)

Several years ago McLuhan foresaw how the development of technology would alter our perception, and to some extent, also alter the use of today’s society. Many are those who were reserved towards McLuhan’s ideas and arguments and many are those who still see the development of new technological features as an obstacle to avoid rather than a challenge to overcome. However, the development and use of new technology is prevalent and an issue to consider in almost every aspect of our daily life. Today McLuhan is recognized and often quoted in various academic and popular writings. “Much of what McLuhan had to say makes a good deal more sense in the 1994 than in the 1964....“¹ Maybe one of the reasons McLuhan is so interesting today, in the age of Internet, is the rapid development of how and if we use this phenomenon. The technological development has given us new and extended means for communication and it has also given us an alternative way of communicating and socializing, and the use of the Internet puts the individual in a position where we can use the technology for both work and leisure and it is comprehensible to most people.

The Internet presents us with a virtual world which individuals may use to either perform daily work or chores but it is also a representation of a society where one can find others with mutual interests and a will to socialize. In the virtual worlds and in the electronic formats we can see how important it is for the participant to be able to visualise and present a condensed narration in order to take part in the community. One could argue that being

¹ Lewis H Lapham in Marshall McLuhan *Understanding Media*, 1994

able to present stories about the society and the world is becoming more important in order to present our perceptions of it, and its existence.² How we tell stories, and if we tell them, are an important factor in how we interact with other individuals and even how successful we are in relationships. New technological inventions have become means to interact with others, take for instance the telephone which became an important attribute for women to interact and socialize with friends even if they had to stay around the house for various reasons. The telephone was maybe not perceived as a great solution at first, but it helped to form new networks and communities.³ This is where we can begin to think about how women use the technology of the Internet. Does the Internet provide women with the possibility to socialize, and do they find this electronic media useful for this?

An important argument when new technology is mentioned is the discussion about users' age difference and gender difference. One very common reflection and argument is that children tend to use IT, computers and new technology more than adults because it is a part of their upbringing. To some extent the vision is also that men, more easily than women, adapt to new technology and maybe even more easily adapt to new shifts in the paradigm, as some wishes to call the evolvement of the Internet. Hence, men should more extensively and more easily/naturally use new technology such as the Internet for work and leisure time. However, if we would go back in time and look on how Marshall McLuhan perceived the technological changes, he claimed that they would alter and reshape the everyday life and how we interact with technology and its sphere. So, how has this really turned out? We are today presented with a new medium which can provide us with new attributes than previous media, but are women presented in this new era and how can we actually look upon the feministic approach to the development of technology?

² A rather funny coincidence is an episode of "StarTrek Voyager", where the civilisation they encounter on their journey is emphasizing the importance of storytelling and where the whole society is built on how well and to what extent an individual can tell stories. If you can't it is a flaw, but if you can and have the access to story-content you are considered knowledgeable and powerful. This, however, is science fiction but surely we can appreciate the importance of being able to communicate your content in our global and electronic sphere we live in.

³ Spender, p 191-192

There are many questions to be answered when it comes to the area of technology development, IT and the Internet, however, this essay will not focus on the way humans perceive the changes of technology in general, it will rather try to extract some thoughts which Marshall McLuhan put forward about the importance of technological change and then try to embed them into the feministic thoughts and structure and to see how women are positioned and perceive the advances in technology. The approach to this paper can be divided into three major approaches/steps.

1. The first step will be to look on how Marshall McLuhan predicted the change of everyday life due to the changes in technology and the development of electronic technology and media. McLuhan was predominantly talking about the changes due to the development and intrusion of television, but, there are similar actions and reactions whenever a new medium is introduced which is why I will focus on the development of the Internet.⁴
2. What approach has feminism had to technological development? Is the new technology used today by women, and if so, how? Is it as important to female users as McLuhan thought it would be to everyone? Are women a part of the development of the “global village“ or are they merely a group for which everything already is pre-constructed and should the technology then be used as a tool by them but is decided by others - the male?
3. What has happened today with the development of technology, and here we look at the development of the Internet? A case study of an Internet production is presented.

This paper is not intended to fully cover Marshall McLuhan’s work or the feministic research, even though this would be a interesting and rewarding task. However, this will rather be an attempt to highlight some very current issues in today’s development of the Internet and to connect them to some of McLuhan’s ideas about the global village and the electronic media, as well as trying to find a connection to the feministic thoughts. As I previously mentioned the approach to new technology will here be defined as the evolution - or perhaps revolution - of the Internet. This aspect has been chosen since the Internet’s importance has increased over the past few years and it is at the centre of many thoughts.

⁴ The argument about whether we can define the Internet as a medium or not is a discussion per se which will be presented in a separate paper later on. Here, in this paper, we assume that the Internet can be defined as a new medium.

THOUGHTS ABOUT THE PHENOMENON INTERNET

The “invasion“ of information technology (IT), cyberspace and Internet⁵ has interested many although there are very few, if any, who can describe in general how to approach it or use it. Internet, or solutions for the world wide web, has become one development of technology for which many have been “forced“ to change their strategy on how to communicate and distribute information.⁶ Day by day the computerized world is increasingly becoming an unquestioned part of our daily life, social constructions and conventions. The development of IT, computers, Internet, intranets etc., has changed and to some extent also made information and communication more accessible to the individuals in their professional as well as private life. The use of Internet has a different meaning for men and women, depending perhaps on their variety of needs, the differences in how one interprets a text and content based on cultural constructions, and different spheres for men and women in our society.⁷

There has been a great deal of discussions concerned with whether the reading and interpretation of a text or a visual construction, is the same for a woman as for a man. It could be said that we are raised to develop a behaviour of gender specific reading. Therefore one could argue that there is a gender specific reading constructed in society through ideology and also through experience, achieved in the ideology in which we live. The notion of ideology as a major determinative factor, is based on Althusser's claim that we are born within an ideology.⁸ Ideology produces the identity of the individual and therefore

⁵ "Någon liten fluga är Internet inte längre. Utvecklingen kommer varken att bromsas upp eller avstanna. Antagligen kommer Internet att förändras och anta nya former, det enda vi säkert vet är att användandet snabbt kommer att öka och att Internet är för viktigt för att nonchaleras." from "Internet i Mediemixen", J Marking, P Nordlöv, MediaMarketingGruppen, Projector New Media, Jönköping, 1997, p 18

⁶ Bill Gates, Microsoft, USA, were one of the leading businessmen who had to go from being “against“ the technological development of the Internet to including it into his future strategy. See for instance articles in the Businessweek, Dec 4 1995 & July 15 1996, as well as The Time Sep 16 1996.

⁷ Various research has shown that men use the Internet for services and amusement whilst women want to use the Internet for information, services and to make the everyday life easier and faster to manage.

⁸ Althusser, Lenin and Philosophy, and other essays, 1971

individuals are a product of ideology, to read as a woman is to be constructed by the formation of the woman as a subject within ideology. Experience leads women and men to value texts differently. Through experience the understanding of a text differs between a male and a female reading. This experience is also essential in the choice of the text one prefers to read, which to me is the actual concept of a gender specific reading. According to this explanation and interpretation the gender specific reading should also be present in using the Internet. Women will perceive its content in a specific way and understand the advance in technology as an advance for their use which may differ from how men would use it due to the fact that we are born within an ideology and thus will be a product of the ideology. We are taught how to interpret information and then how to use it. This difference in how texts are understood is also relevant when the actual content is published and presented. Even if men's and women's roles in society, and in the ideology, do tend to more and more embrace each other there are still differences. The reasons and purposes for using different technology and attributes are an answer to under which constructs and predetermined roles we have. The notion about the importance of the individual as a product of ideology is a rather complex one, however, is the ideology we are born into and live in, a definition of how we interpret and use new technology? If this interpretation should be seen as the dominant one we could argue that the Internet was a phenomenon created by men, for men, and question whether it is a phenomenon for the individual, men and women alike, and a possibility to develop a "global village"?

Another important approach interesting to the new "sphere" of Internet are the, by now, very well known thoughts from Habermas about the public sphere. In these discussions there is an important notion of the roles of the individuals in the media exchange. Could we perhaps consider the Internet to be a definition of a Public Sphere, as defined by Habermas? Habermas (1988, in the Swedish translation of his original work *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*) talks about a "Bürgerliche Öffentlichkeit", a generalised and systematised category based on an eclectic approach to various disciplines. He describes a public sphere which is an autonomous arena for discussions open to everyone and through which the public opinion is created and then imposed onto the ruling system. In its ideal form the public sphere is governed by the public reasons of the private citizen. A

reasoning public gives a rational public opinion through critical reporting from the media (press is the word Habermas uses). However, the "Bürgerliche Öffentlichkeit" is not open to everyone, it is restricted to the group with money, the people with a previous knowledge, who own land and who rule the economy. These are the people for whom the "Bürgerliche Öffentlichkeit" is of use. Instead of consensus the decisions are based on compromises and, as with everything else, the people with power gain the most. It could thus be argued, with regards to the background of Habermas thoughts, that one could also see the development of the Internet as a newly positioned "Public Sphere". This new media is open to those who have the access and share the interest of the phenomenon, and the wish is that this should be everyone in the near future. To be a part of the arena should be a privilege for every citizen, however, this is not the case today. Even here one could argue that those with the money have the possibility to influence the development and the access and control the availability and access to the sphere. McLuhan was perceptive to see the electronic media's possible impact, on the individual and on the society in general, several years ago and this is also where one could begin to question women's possibility to be a part and a power in its structure and development. Could we perhaps with the Internet, be talking about a new sphere, one for women?

However, if there are differences between men and women when we are talking about interpretations and spheres one could ask whether gender differences are embraced and taken into account in the technological development of the Internet? In order to argue further about the pros and cons of the Internet for women one should present some statistics concerning the user of this new media. Women have, for a long period of time, been somewhat the secondary users of this technology and its services, however, one can see a clear increase in the female users of this media. The globalisation of our society gives everyone extended access to information and communication. However, the possibility for women to take part in the development has yet to be extended. This can be argued as a result of looking at the users of the Internet today which to a vast majority are male.

Internet was established in the US as a communication and information distributing net for the military. Over the years it has turned to be used mainly by Universities and scholars until

a few years ago when it became a commercialised reality. However, it has also had a vision of being mainly for men. The Internet, computer magazines and magazines about the Internet is often considered being more male than female. Dawn Dietrich discusses why magazines about cyberspace like *Wired*, can be perceived as mainly being for men: "In large part this is due to the fact that most cybernauts are white males between the ages of 15 and 45. Not surprisingly, then, the rhetoric of these print texts tend to reflect white, heterosexual male perspectives, desire(s) and idealizations. Further, at the cyberspatial sites where many of these techno-journals are inscribed textually and graphically, the narratives tend to be gendered in a binary fashion, yet often lack markers for racial, ethnic and class difference."⁹ This is an argument for why *Wired*-magazine readers are male and also an argument to the division of Internet users. We can see that the Internet user is still mainly male, however recent research has shown the increase of female users.

The Internet users in Sweden were in September 1997 2,2 million in the ages between 15-75. 37% of these were female, however only 27% of the regular Internet users were women. In the US the share of the female user is about 40%, but then the Internet as a commercialised fact has there been present longer. (According to TEMO in Sweden) The average Internet user is not a teenager looking only for entertainment and games, it is a male 35-year old, well educated and usually with a higher income than the average. The share of female users is constantly increasing although men are still using the Internet more.

Besides looking at how the Internet is being used amongst men and women there is also an important factor about how, and if, it changes the structure of society, organisations and traditional hierarchies. McLuhan once said: "In an electrically configured society all the critical information necessary to manufacture and distribution, from automobiles to computers, would be available to everyone at the same time. ... Culture becomes organized like an electric circuit: each point in the net is as central as the next. Electronic man loses touch with the concept of a ruling centre as well as the restraints of social rules based on

⁹ Virtual Culture, p171

interconnection. Hierarchies constantly dissolve and reform¹⁰, and further about the loss of specialism: “The person who gives over his life to electronic services, whether he is merely a participant in a cable system or an information manager, will lose the security that proceeds from specialism. ... The specialist can always be seen to have one salient characteristic: he is quite willing to trade his freedom of action for the security and the stability of a closed system.”¹¹ The traditional organisations and hierarchies would not be self evident, but instead one should see a loss of the power concentrated to merely a few and instead a whole group of people would be able to take part in the electronic systems development and its content. And even if McLuhan argued that maybe some specialists rather give up their freedom for a more closed system, the elaboration and decrease of a few specialists to many, involves more people and also men and women and is also the way companies tend to try to organize their structure. Hence, is the development of technology thus a force which to some extent redistributes the power in society, diminishes the hierarchies and thus to some extent also creates a smaller platform for the traditional patriarchy? This is a major issue to consider when we look upon the pros and cons of technological development.

The introduction of the paper concludes in a cascade of questions which separately could be the dominating issue for a paper. I have for instance mentioned the issue about ideology and power, gender specific reading and how the Internet is being used, by who. The ideology we are born into gives us a framework of how to interpret texts and entities. This framework is also a determinative factor of how new technology is accepted and used, however, it does not have to make the difference if for instance women are accepting and using new technology. Even though there are differences between men and women one can also wonder if we live in different spheres and if the Internet is a sphere built for individuals in general or for men, or for women. All of these issues could really be built into the issue of how women accept and use new technology, but firstly, a brief description of how Marshall McLuhan’s thoughts can be intertwined into the development of the Internet and the female use thereof.

¹⁰ McLuhan, 1989, p 92

¹¹ Ibid, p 96

MARSHALL McLUHAN AND THE INTERNET

“A new medium is never an addition to an old one, nor does it leave the old one in peace. It never ceases to oppress the older media until it finds new shapes and positions for them. -1964 “

(Essential McLuhan, p 278)

As mentioned previously, Marshall McLuhan can be seen as a person ahead of his time when he was talking about the evolution and impact of technology. Marshall McLuhan was emphasizing the importance of technology and the electronic media as well as the growth of a “global Village“. Technology has always been important and has had a great impact on the human, which is nothing revolutionary *per se*, but to talk about the impact new media would have on us, was something which some people thought was a bit far fetched. For Marshall McLuhan the media was not only what we today call the traditional media (i.e. Television, Radio, Newspapers and books) or the new media (such as the Internet, electronic media of various kinds etc.) but rather an extension of anything which involved the human body and senses: “ ... my definition of media is broad: it includes any technology whatever that creates extensions of the human body and senses, from clothing to the computer.”¹² He also argued that the advance of technology had an impact which overshadowed the rest of society, and whenever a new media appeared it was perhaps an overdramatized event in society. One can say that there will always be the development of technologies in our society but how we perceive and react to them is a different issue.

Electronic media has a great impact on society, how we live, perceive it and how we react to it. McLuhan has argued the following; “And a vital point I must stress again is that societies have always been shaped more by the nature of the media with which men communicate than by the content of the communication. All technology has the property of the Midas touch; whenever a society develops an extension of itself, all other functions of that society tend to be transmuted to accommodate that new form; once any new technology penetrates a

¹² McLuhan, Zingrone, p 239

society, it saturates every institution of that society. New technology is thus a revolutionizing agent. We see this today with the electric media and we saw it several thousand years ago with the invention of the phonetic alphabet, which was just as far-reaching an innovation - and had just as profound consequences for man.¹³ This quote can fortify the argument which is prevalent for the concerns about the impact of the Internet. The Internet has become a phenomenon adapted by the society as something revolutionary and crucial to survive. To use the Internet is more or less compulsory to be successful (or this is the argument) which really divides the population into two groups; the ones who know how to use the Internet and use it and the ones who don't, the successful and the unsuccessful.

Another aspect which is central for McLuhan and his arguments is the notion about the "global village". McLuhan established the phrase as a way "to describe the effect of radio in the 1920s in bringing us in faster and more intimate contact with each other than ever before in human experience."¹⁴ The society is growing, becoming more complex but yet as a contradiction in terms, with the aid and contribution of IT and the advance in technology, it is becoming more accessible and in some ways more narrow. The formation of the electric society brings us the knowledge and awareness of the complete society in which the consciousness is created and established. The citizen is becoming more dependent on the machines provided for daily use in the society. As McLuhan said: "The new electronic interdependence recreates the world in the image of a global village."¹⁵ and further, "As electrically contracted, the globe is no more than a village. Electric speed in bringing all social and political functions together in a sudden implosion has heightened human awareness of responsibility to an intense degree. It is this implosive factor that alters the position of the Negro, the teen-ager, and some other groups. They can no longer be contained, in the political sense of limited association. They are now involved in our lives, as we in theirs, thanks to the electric media."¹⁶ The world could be said to diminish, we are

¹³ McLuhan, Zingrone, p239

¹⁴ Eric McLuhan, "The Source of the term, 'Global Village'", McLuhan Studies, Issue 2, http://www.chass.utoronto.ca/mcluhan-studies/v1_iss2/1_2art2.htm

¹⁵ McLuhan, Fiore, Quentin, p 67

¹⁶ McLuhan, 1994, p 5

today more of a global village than even when McLuhan initially was talking of such. The access to the world and different societies is today a lot easier to achieve, but has this given the different genders the same access to the information, communication and power? Has the role changed for women due to the explosion of the new media or is it merely a change into a new medium with the traditional divisions and structures of power?

The use and impact of media is discussed as much today as it was 30 years ago. However, the development of IT and the computerized world has given us a new perspective to talk about reality, consumerism and consciousness. Computers can today be seen as being a “new medium“ and especially with the explosion of the Internet and its users. However, no new (or traditional) media stands alone, there are the people behind them, the user as well as the producer, who are the developers and establishers of the content, the context and the actual consciousness. “In the case of any medium whatever, whether of language or clothing or radio or TV, it is the user alone himself who is the content, and it is the user alone who constitutes the experience of that service. No matter what is on the TV, if the user is Chinese, it is going to be a Chinese program, just as surely as a movie on the TV is experienced as a TV-show. -1974“¹⁷ The world (or net) of computers are more global for each day. To see and read the information and communication creates a global point of view and a global perception of issues. The world is given a certain standard and thus a world consciousness is created. Or as McLuhan stated; “The computer is the first component of that hybrid of videorelated technologies which will move us toward a world consciousness.“¹⁸ One could question whether this world consciousness is one based on men's thoughts or perhaps general ideas in the society.

Further McLuhan has been talking a great deal about the “new media“ which for him was the concept of television and its development. “Television demands participation and involvement in depth of the whole being. It will not work as a background. It engages you. Perhaps this is why so many people feel that their identity has been threatened. This charge

¹⁷ McLuhan, Zingrone, p 280

¹⁸ McLuhan, Powers, Bruce R., p 103

of the light brigade has heightened our general awareness of the shape and meaning of lives and events to a level of extreme sensitivity.¹⁹ Although this is an argument which McLuhan presented about the television, we can perhaps say the same about IT and Internet. We have begun to look at the television as an apparatus which does not involve the user as much as the interactive new media of today can be perceived as doing. The computer and the Internet creates a more interactive environment and can be seen as having a greater demand for participation and involvement than television today. If one expects to be a part of the Internet community one has to be engaged and involved in the development of the content. Information one can find easily, but interactive communication is where the involvement from the user becomes crucial.

The Internet has evolved rapidly from being a resource for the defence in the USA in 1970, to be a commercial medium in the 1990's. The content has to a great extent been developed by the users themselves, perhaps a further reasoning of McLuhan's arguments, where the user is not only the receiver and interpreter of the content but also the actual producer.²⁰ Is then the Internet a new mass medium? According to McLuhan a mass media is an indication not of the actual size of their audience, but of the amount of people which get involved in the media at the same time.²¹ Does this constitute the Internet to be a mass medium? One could argue that this is not the case. Even though the user is extensively involved in the development of the content and the use of the Internet includes a significant amount of users involved at the same time, I personally feel that today the involvement from women is not extended enough for the medium to be classified as a mass medium.

The electric media creates a new environment and transformation of our culture, our perceptions, values and also our attitudes. The culture surrounding us changes and where hearing was believing previously, visions and visuability is of a greater importance today in our society. Media is relying more on visual impact today, and whether it is an issue of artefacts or a java-programing on the Internet, the visual impression and understanding is

¹⁹ McLuhan, Fiore, Quentin, p 125

²⁰ "...it is the user alone himself who is the content...", McLuhan, Zingrone, p 280

²¹ McLuhan, 1994, p 349

by which we understand and perceive things. When these visions alters and creates a new environment for the consciousness our perception also changes. As McLuhan expresses it: "Media, by altering the environment, evoke in us unique ratios of sense perceptions. The extension of any one sense alters the way we think and act - the way we perceive the world. When these ratios change, men change."²² Media has the power to give us a new perception of reality and the way in which we understand our society. Maybe not consciously, but unconsciously.

Information is by which the individual creates his/her reality, it is through the understanding of information which one also can configure the rules and power structures in our ideology. McLuhan was emphasizing the importance of information and its position in our more global society

"Real, total war has become information war. It is being fought by subtle electric informational media - under cold conditions, and constantly. The cold war is the real war front - a surround - involving everybody - all the time - everywhere. Whenever hot wars are necessary these days, we conduct them in the backyards of the world with the old technologies. These wars are happenings, tragic games. It is no longer convenient, or suitable, to use the latest technologies for fighting our wars, because the latest technologies have rendered war meaningless. The hydrogen bomb is history's exclamation point. It ends an age-long sentence of manifest violence!"

(The Medium is the Massage, p 138)

A conclusion to be drawn from Marshall McLuhan's thoughts and vision is that electronic media was truly important and would alter our lives in various ways. Marshall McLuhan was a spokesperson for the technological impact and its impact on the society and its individuals. To be the holder of information and the distributor of such has a tendency to become even more important in the electronic and global world. However, has the changes in technology been a positive alteration of society for women and has McLuhan's

²² McLuhan, Fiore, p 41

perceptions been of importance for women per se, or for the society as a whole, or mainly for men who are the main producer, distributor and user of Internet? In order to discuss this there will next be a brief presentation about feminism, the perception and understandings of texts and women's attitude for new technology.

FEMINISM, WOMEN AND NEW TECHNOLOGY

How women perceive different issues and developments and in what way their attitudes could differ from men's, has become an important issue for academics as well as for business developers. Feminism has become an area which is increasing in interest and knowledge. To discuss the issue about gender or power, which are two key elements often referred to in discussions regarding feminism, is becoming more and more relevant especially concerning media and mass communication. However, feminism is an area of studies which can be divided into several theories - for example the radical and the liberal feminism. For liberal feminism women are essentially the same as men but not equal; for radical feminism women are essentially different from men and not equal. Men and women are equal but certain constructions divide the genders and ascribe them to features which may not always be determined by their gender but rather by their personality and expectations in the society. To use a quote; "The issue, then, is no longer how to promote a certain type of femininity as in radical feminism, or how to dismiss femininity and masculinity altogether as in liberal feminism, but rather to analyze how and why particular constructions of masculinity and femininity arise in historical contexts, how and why certain constructions gain dominance over others and how dominant constructions relate to the lived realities of women and men."²³

Feminist cultural studies is not a unitary discipline but interacts with other studies and sciences. Psychoanalysis has played an important role in feminism. The psychoanalysis used has been primarily the re-interpretation of Freud made by Lacan and then various

²³Liesbet van Zoonen, in Curran, Gurevitch, p 38-39

interpretations and uses have been developed from his theories of psychoanalysis in conjunction with linguistic thoughts structured by Saussure. The notion about the unconscious and the notion about woman have been central ideas and used further to understand the concept of woman or whether there is anything like a woman, women or a female, or whether this is a social biological or linguistic construction or definition. How our gendered subjectivity is constructed or formed is the issue, and this has various interpretations and theories. However, this is not intended to be a presentation of the psychoanalytic thought and its role within feminism but rather to acknowledge the discussion about consciousness, subjectivity and ideology which are all central. Psychoanalysis has in this aspect also come to play an important part in the work of Sherry Turkle who has presented many ideas concerning the subjectivity and consciousness of the Internet user.²⁴

The connection to a patriarchal construct, a social and cultural structure determined by a patriarchal order has for example been used in feminine literary criticism. Fetterley, Millett and Radway all describe in their analysis the issue of power present in literature and how it is the power of the male which dominantly is portrayed. The proclamation of patriarchy may be conscious or unconscious but it is still there and thus becomes a means for maintaining the patriarchal power structure. According to Millett the oppression of patriarchy is "hidden" in our culture, ideology and unconsciousness. This is a conclusion I find can be used in the area of studying culture and the role of technology. How new technology should be developed and for what use could be seen as being a construction of what men need, desire and ask for. The domination of patriarchy may be hidden in the constructions made of new technology. Women, however, use new technology in the same way as men at work but it is in the private sphere women may differ from men. The development of the Internet, which is a phenomenon used both in the private as well as the business sphere, raises many questions as for whom the content is published, who is the dominant power in the production process and who is the user.

²⁴see for instance "Life on the Screen" by Sherry Turkle

All the above arguments, coming from different researchers within the field of feminism, seem to all give the same concluding argument; feminist studies approach the role of the woman from a role of challenging political actions and strategies in order to challenge and change the determined roles of the patriarchy. Looking at women's representation on television, for example, presents us with a majority of male representations and also the image of stereotypes and taken-for-granted ideals of women. Television provides us with the positions for women approved and valued by society. Economic inequalities and pre-determined constructs of gender roles in society has situated women as dependent, powerless "or simply subordinate".²⁵ However, this is in many ways the way in which women have been situated, but what have the advantages of technologies offered women, and how has it changed the already positioned thoughts and determinations?

Feministic studies often emphasize the body per se, from the masculine gaze to the self-perception of the female body. One could also argue that there has been a different perception of the human body in the technological environment. The machines have become dominant for the human and McLuhan suggests that people have begun to simulate machines instead of machines simulating humans. Or as Donna Haraway has said; "By the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs."²⁶ This is, however, to look into a very interactive use of for instance computers. Possible, but not completely the full picture of humans when using the Internet. Internet still demands activity from the user and is merely a means for the humans.

The difference between masculine and feminine use of new technology is not as definite today as it could be seen as being before. Today both men and women use new technology to make everyday life and work easier. The needs tend to be the same, or similar, and according to Joshua Meyrowitz the differences between male and female behaviour and needs are more a result of society's construct and the expectations established how men and women

²⁵ McRobbie, p 174

²⁶ Haraway, Donna

should behave and what they should need. Joshua Meyrowitz puts forward an argument concerning masculinity and femininity; "Current arguments and research strongly suggest that while obvious biological differences exist, many of the traditional behavioural distinctions between men and women have been arbitrary and due more to socialization than to psychological determinants. What the arguments and research often obscure, however, is that the revolution concerning male and female roles, is just that, a battle over social *roles*, not necessarily a movement toward the 'natural' ", and further; " ... recent trends toward the merging of masculinity and femininity and suggests that the changes in conceptions of gender roles may have something to do with the merging of male and female information-systems through the widespread use of electronic media." ²⁷

Conclusion; feministic studies have often emphasized on the studies of power relations, ideology constructions and the perception of the body and the consciousness. These are all aspects which are clearly relevant for the notion of how new technology influences our lives and reality. McLuhan was talking about the importance of new technology for the individual and this is regardless whether we discuss male or female users of new technology. Thus, the essence of discussing electronic media, a global village and the male and female role is to; "analyze how and why particular constructions of masculinity and femininity arise in historical contexts, how and why certain constructions gain dominance over others and how dominant constructions relate to the lived realities of women and men."²⁸

²⁷Meyrowitz, J., p 187-188

²⁸Liesbet van Zoonen, in Curran, Gurevitch, p 38-39

CASE-STUDY

I would like to present an example on how technology is moved into and has interacted with, the “female sphere“. The example which comes into mind is the Internet site Passagen which initially was Telia’s meeting and marketplace on the Internet. An example of how Technology and feminism - women - are put together with all the preconceptual knowledge about how women interact with technology.

Passagen²⁹

Passagen was a project which began during 1995 at Telia at which time the Internet was a hardly a known phenomenon in Sweden. There were not very many users on the Internet and the services which were provided were more focused on information *per se*, such as reports, e-mail, etc. These were more an example of how to use the medium for distribution and presentation. Another important focus for the use of the Internet was to provide a platform for entertainment of various kinds, games, MUDs, chats, etc. The user of www was mainly male and female users were not very common.

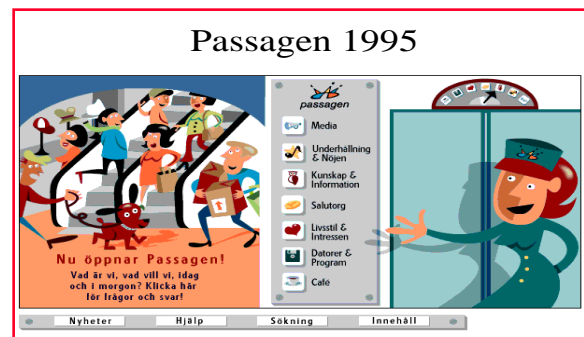
With this information in mind the development of Passagen was being emphasized on the www-aspects and the possibility of interactivity which this “new medium“ could offer. These aspects should be provided along with the more traditional services used for information and communication. Another important and specific definition of the service was the will to establish a possibility for women to get more involved in the usage and the production. This is why the main target group for the service was presented as being women who were interested in technology and the usage and its possibilities.

Two main focuses of the production development were thus emphasized; the design and the content. As McLuhan said “ In the case of any medium whatever, whether of language or clothing or radio or TV, it is the user alone himself who is the content...“³⁰ To establish the

²⁹ This information is based on experience and screen images from the address <http://www.passagen.se> at different dates.

³⁰ McLuhan, Zingrone, p 280

design and the content with the help of women was important and in the case of this new medium the content *is* the user him/herself even if a framework may be provided. This initial design had a “softer“ appearance and strived towards being more interesting for women:



Picture of Passagen as presented on the www September 1995

The content provided was meant to make women’s lives easier. The content provided should make the user able to access the net and various newspapers and news, find out crucial information about events, to be able to communicate with other people at the familiar environment of a café and so on. A shopping center was also presented to provide the locale for regular and irregular (?) shopping. Donna Haraway has argued for the independence women has attained because of the new technology; “The homework economy as a world capitalist organizational structure is made possible by (not caused by) the new technologies. The success of the attack on relatively privileged, mostly white men’s unionized jobs is tied to the power of the new communications technologies to integrate and control labor despite extensive dispersion ... decentralization. The consequences of new technologies are felt by women both in the loss of the family (male) wage (if they ever had access to this white privilege) and in the character of their own jobs, which are becoming capital intensive ...”³¹ The Internet, as one of the new technologies, also gives the possibility and opportunity to manage the private economy as well as planning the everyday work. Everything should be

³¹ Haraway

presented as a “plug and play“ application so the technology shouldn’t be an obstacle to avoid, rather a challenge to overcome.

However, the technology wasn’t quite ready for the shopping-solutions presented due to legal and technological reasons. And, unfortunately, the use of this new technology wasn’t extended to women - yet. One can see the increase of women using the www today, and although Passagen has taken on a more traditional look, the idea of using the www for solutions directed towards women are becoming increasingly apparent.



Passagen 21/10/97

The use of electronic shopping is also an area which increasingly is focused more on. Electronic shopping between consumers and companies is a way of intertwining marketing and selling for many companies and this is a solution they look happily on. Another interesting aspect is that many see the increase of women using the Internet also as a possibility to increase shopping services. How this will develop is for the future to present.

Conjecture; how women would use new technology was an issue when Internet became a phenomenon in our tradition. The fact that women used Internet less than men was of importance in producing sites and content for female users. However, the main concern was how and for what women would use the Internet, it was not an issue whether or not they would use it. It was also an issue how the design of the interface would be done, but this is a

reality for many areas in our daily life. McLuhan's argument about the importance of electric media for mankind in general, could thus be seen as being a relevant observation.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

I believe I have above argued for that the Internet is a medium well suited for children, as well as for men and women. How to use the Internet and for what purposes is very individual and may be very different when we consider variables as age, gender and social status and work. However, the main issue here was to see if McLuhan's thoughts could be applicable and used by women when we talk about the Internet and the development of new technology.

Whether women take an active part in the technological development or not, is an issue which has interested many. How can we then intertwine the thoughts of McLuhan with the feministic thought about how women perceive and use new technology? What conclusions can be drawn from looking at McLuhan's thoughts about the electric media and the global village, the feministic thoughts about new technology and a case-study of how the new technology was approached?

McLuhan had much to say about technology and its impact on the individual. He once said: "Computers will, in the long run, dramatically alter the social environment of the workplace as we know it."³² and I would like to alter it slightly by saying; Computers will dramatically alter the social environment of the society as we know it. Computers will aid us in many ways and also provide us with means needed to be a part of the more information and communication dense society. Everything is changing rapidly due to the electric technology. Is the Internet perhaps a natural community in which women can develop and flourish. Sherry Turkle said in an interview in Wired³³: "Men's lives, especially, have been

³² McLuhan, Powers, Bruce R., p 104

³³ Wired, April 1996

socially constructed along unitary lines, which, she speculates, may be why so many of them are having a hard time just now. But women today are trained and have already had experience in negotiating multiple roles. Certainly tens of thousands of women recognized themselves in Mary Catherine Bateson's book *Composing a Life*, a study of the way successful women do not plan but compose their lives improvisationally, shifting from role to role. So, women can be perceived as being more flexible, they have had to encompass and to find their role in the already existing ideologies, composed and continuously formed by men. This is also why we could argue that new technology and its importance, as McLuhan stressed, is not a phenomenon applicable only for men but also for women.

The development of new electronic media tend to be important both for men and women. Even if the male user of the Internet is in majority as of yet, the amount of female users has increased and is increasing in every survey made in Europe as well as in the US. Hence, the importance McLuhan wished to give electronic media has proven to be important for men as well as for women as well as the fact about the "global village". McLuhan stressed the futuristic thoughts of a global village where distances between people would not be as crucial any longer and these are thoughts we can find in feministic readings. Women are becoming members of a greater whole, a global village, and how technology and science is interpreted and used is not only a male vision any longer but also an important ingredient for both men and women in their daily life. Women are often perceived as not wanting to get involved or use new technology (a very generalistic perception). However in these examples one can discover a wish to move away from this perception. Women will use new technologies of today and my argument is that when it comes to the Internet women have a personality developed and formatted for the use of this "new media". Although, men and women are not the exact same product, there are gender differences, and men and women perceive information and communicate in different ways. This has to be considered when it comes to producing content on the Internet.

Feminism has emphasized the discussions about power, gender roles and the body and the consciousness. All of these issues have proven to be as important when discussing women's move towards the use of new technology, for instance the Internet. Our culture is changing

and so is the ideology within it. Johan Fornäs has said: “Technical modernisation includes industrialism and computerization, the invention and spread of agricultural, manufacturing, warfare, information and communication techniques which feed people and create wealth while simultaneously threatening survival on earth by ecological pollution and accumulated overkill capacity. Technology is extremely forceful within modern culture, but is no ultimate cause of modernization processes. It is no primary ‘basis’ for social and cultural ‘superstructures’, but as much a product of those social and cultural conditions that give it significance. Still, this aspect exists and has important repercussions on culture.”³⁴ The new communication technologies become fundamental in our every day life and thus also change the way we perceive society but it is not the only or major fundament of how we perceive and structure our reality. New technology and the digital reality, here the Internet, has changed people’s way of socializing and communicating to some extent, but it is still merely an extension of the analogical reality.

Internet sites like Passagen or similar ones wish to give the individual an easier way of dealing with everyday chores and duties (or is it merely a new marketing tool? - a different discussion...). Professor Michael Joyce has said; “ Perhaps the most underreported aspect of our time is that the most compelling and serious discourse about new technologies and cultural change proceeds from women.”³⁵ The new medium of Internet is expanding rapidly and there is a potentially substantial role for women to play. However, will women take this opportunity to shape this new medium into something different than yet another male sphere and a male power structure? So, the Internet has not quite levelled the playing field between men and women but is still a stepping stone along the path of emancipation.

³⁴ Fornäs, p 41

³⁵ Wired, April 1996, p 109

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