

## The “Second Sex” in Cyberspace: Decoding the Discourses of Techno-Utopianism

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*None are more hopelessly enslaved than those who falsely believe they are free*  
Johann Wolfgang von Goethe Ideological State Apparatuses, according to Louis Althusser, are employed by the ruling forces in society to compel members of the general populace to believe that they have freedom under existing governing bodies when, in fact, they have little or none. Repressive State Apparatuses play a minimal role in keeping the populace in this dream state when political, economic, religious and educational institutions successfully establish the dominant value system as orthodox – that which is both normal and natural.<sup>1</sup> Through symbolic power, these cultural institutions render sacred a version of the world that supports the status quo, thereby permitting those in power “to obtain the equivalent of what is obtained through force....” (Bourdieu 170). Hence, individuals in society naively conceive of themselves as free agents despite their subjugation to the hegemonic forces of the State.

In the technological age, the Internet – originally established and funded by federal government agencies – seems an unlikely vehicle of unadulterated and unquestioned freedom. Rather, its origins lend itself to serving the panoptic desires of a paranoid State. That the Internet could become a semiotic playground, a textual space in which the technically literate could enjoy a Barthian *jouissance* as writers and readers of hypertext, was probably not in the minds of its creators; that it might also produce heretical discourses that would expose and interrogate both Ideological and Repressive State Apparatuses, was certainly the farthest thought from the minds of those more concerned with the safety of the nation than the freedom of the individual (Bourdieu 129).

But such emancipatory activities have proven the norm, particularly amongst hackers who tend to view themselves as members of a socially marginalized class intent on defying intellectual property rights and what they view as other forms of censorship. They seek to undermine the strategies of those in power in the name of freedom, claiming to participate in an epistemological quest that renders knowledge available to all. Refusing to defer to orthodox principles, and even legal edicts, hackers devise and employ their own linguistic code – based on “an ethic of agonistic debate and freedom from rules or imposition” – to infiltrate, disrupt, and destabilize social, political, and financial economies (Herring 1996, 117). If not a techno-proletariat (given the wide ranging socio-economic status of individual hackers), hackers exhibit a Marxist impulse to sabotage or overthrow the superstructure.

Hackers, however, are hardly the only ones using the Internet to participate in potentially liberating activities.<sup>2</sup> Cyberactivists, who often engage in civil disobedience to promote individual or collective freedom, now abound and, as

the title of a recent book suggests, the Internet may well have the “power to turn political apathy into action,” permitting the marginalized and oppressed to maneuver “around corporate control, censorship, and the authorities” in an “anarchistic, somewhat anti-authoritarian manner” (Elin 99,115). While recognizing the “limitations and challenges” of new technologies, Amnesty International, for example, reports that information and computer technologies (ICTs) “have become an integral and valuable element” in the defense of human rights across the globe (Lebert 230).

Cyberspace is, therefore, potentially a digital-scape upon which the discourses of democracy and liberty are written, supporting claims that it promotes freedom of speech, freedom of identity, and the freedom to create unconventional – potentially revolutionary – versions of society. But pronouncements that the Internet is presently a site of wholesale emancipation or purely a means to achieve freedom from oppression are censured by many feminists who find that technological advancements have not necessarily revamped non-digital culture or real life (RL). As Deborah Wheeler observes, “the onslaught of new communications tools does not mean that such tools will be used freely, without contextual constraints” (187, 208). The intimate cultural “connection between men and machines” is inevitable when we consider the patriarchal context out of which these tools – formed and sustained by “male power and interests” – have emerged (Wajcman 137, 162). The most recent research indicates that newly emerging ICTs will continue to be shaped predominantly by males, at least in the West. Sue V. Rosser notes, for example, that female freshmen in American universities are becoming increasingly less interested in Computer Science, pointing to an eighty percent decrease in women seeking to major in the field between 1998 and 2004 (para. 2).

Males, however, do not merely function as the major force in the design of cyberspatial technologies; they also appear to dominate various forms of communication on the Internet. Research on gender and computer-mediated communication suggests that while, in theory, the Internet should stimulate radical identity formation and gender bending, in practice it often reproduces the patriarchal structures and values in which the traditional culture is embedded. Susan Herring’s substantial research in this area indicates that cyberspace is principally “a man’s world” in which domination of female interlocutors, sexual harassment, and anti-feminist rhetoric are commonplace (1999, 162). Herring associates her findings with those of Cheris Kramarae, who found that “virtual-reality video games...tend overwhelmingly to reenact traditionally violent, sexist narratives,” although “in principle” they are able “to create liberatory social worlds” (1999, 164). The current rhetoric of “cyber-utopia,” notes Margaret Wertheim, fails to take into account the exclusionary discourse and authoritarian atmosphere of many interactions on the Internet which she aptly characterizes as misogynistic (293-295). To advance, therefore, that the digital domain serves as a site of egalitarianism – as many hackers do when they claim that their ethic eliminates, for example, sexism, racism and homophobia from their communities

– is to feign freedom in the face of constraint and to embrace “metaphysical escapism” (Adam, para.10; Robinson, para. 10)

Carol Stable argued some time ago that such constraints have resulted in two radically different female responses to technology – *ecofeminist technophobia* and *postmodern technomania* – neither of which is ideal. While the ecofeminist inclination to connect the female body with the natural world can benefit both parties, it can also serve to internalize the woman-nature connection espoused by *anti-feminists* for generations; such a purely cautionary reaction to technological innovation also prevents women profiting from the social and economic advantages of Internet usage. On the other hand, feminist technomania, which optimistically celebrates freedom from the female flesh in cyberspace, reaffirms the patriarchal notion that women’s skin is worth shedding. The “liberty” granted to a woman to distance herself from, or cast off, her body (and to ignore thereby the material conditions of her existence) via the Internet is hardly an unambiguous act of emancipation, as it necessitates a negation of a fundamental aspect of her selfhood. Feminists should, after all, be wary of adopting the Platonic longing for disembodiment or the Patristic desire to punish and transcend fleshly human nature.

While contemporary theorists argue for a more balanced female reaction to cyberspace, notions about the ways in which women can access or release the liberating resources of the Internet have led to more questions than answers, largely because of the sheer complexity of empowering women as active, authorized agents in digital domains. Radhika Gajjala and Annapurna Mamidipudi highlight the importance of researchers in the field immersing themselves in “multiply mediated and specific contexts” when “designing and inhabiting women-centered technological practices and women-centered e-spaces” to avoid, in particular, imposing Western models on women in developing countries [para. 28]. The policy guidelines that resulted from the project *Strategies of Inclusion: Gender and the Information Society* (SIGIS) also underscore that “[e]ffective tailoring is necessary if inclusion efforts are to succeed in reaching their target groups.” Though many recent studies of gender and ICTs acknowledge the significance of culturally-specific approaches to this subject (especially in terms of making a distinction between women in privileged and less privileged nations), most agree that “nothing less than the transformation of the ICT sector” is required, given its military origins, masculinist frontier mentality, and entrenchment in “historical structures of power and privilege, from the most global to the most local and intimate levels of life” (Long, para. 37).

However, the overhaul of any sector of society is only possible if a series of diverse tactics, rather than a single overarching strategy, are implemented. Michel de Certeau explains in *The Practice of Everyday Life* that while all-encompassing “strategies” can be employed by those with “will and power,” “tactics” are “an art of the weak” (36). Like hackers more generally, women are

capable of wittily navigating the pathways of power through a series of grass-root tactics or projects, ultimately transforming the structure of the society as a whole, as first- and second-wave feminists have demonstrated. Women have already begun to deploy wide ranging tactics in cyberspace, based on individual and collective needs, many of which parallel those used by second-wave feminists (Paasonen, para. 35). Female-only forums, or what SIGIS deems “women-centered spaces,” appear to provide females on the Internet a sense of relative safety. Female hackers have attempted to redefine the hacker ethic by rendering it more “inclusive and politically rounded” according to Alison E. Adam (para. 29). Women also participate in spaces more conducive to “female” forms of communication – for example, blogs and chat rooms – transforming that space to accommodate gender differences (whether rooted in biology or social constructs).

These and other tactics appear to affirm Michelle Kendrick’s belief that there is “space in new media for a feminist form and a feminist content” (para. 21) and, over time, they may allow for the full “inclusion of women in curriculum, pedagogy, design, use, and leadership in ICT,” the final phase of Rosser’s five-stage theory of inclusion. Even Herring, who recognizes that a “feminist revolution” may be necessary for significant social change, can envisage a cyberspatial future in which a “critical mass of women” adopt roles as “computer network designers and administrators,” thereby establishing “the nature and uses of the Internet” (2003, 220-21). While this may seem to some nothing more than another utopian vision, desires for liberty and social integration often begin as a dream, as Martin Luther King Jr.’s celebrated speech reminds us, and even if the dream of freedom remains only partially fulfilled, it is better to “hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope” than to abandon hope of social and cyberspatial inclusion altogether.

### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Louis Althusser draws a distinction between Repressive State Apparatuses (e.g. the penal system, the military) and Ideological State Apparatuses (e.g. the church, the family, schools), associating the former with physical force and violence and the latter with ideological indoctrination, although he recognizes that these categories do, at times, intersect (96-97).

<sup>2</sup> Of course, while hackers and other nonconformist groups (such as Napster in its early years) conceive of their actions as liberating, the establishment seeks to criminalize their actions in order to “reinforce their hegemonic grip on dissent,” according to Sandor Vegh (93).

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