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Gender, Class, and the Internet

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In line with computational culture, which is a universe designed and programmed mainly by men from privileged socio-occupational backgrounds (Collet & Mosconi, 2010), the internet is a masculine technology positioned at the top of the social hierarchy, and this is even more the case when it comes to the participatory Web (Pasquier, 2018). The same holds true for the algorithmic culture that now prevails on the internet and which, as the product of an oligopoly, is essentially White, heteronormative, socially advantaged, and excludes the diversity of identities (Cohn, 2019). As a mirror of the offline world, the online world is infused with the power relationships of class, age, and race, which are also visible in how the internet is used. Yet, research has mainly foregrounded uses of the internet that are high status, participatory, intensive, active, or creative, while paying little attention to ordinary uses that generally fall to lower-income classes (Pasquier, 2018). This “biased” scientific production has given free rein to numerous fantasies on the supposed emancipatory and liberating virtues of the internet. While women played a vital role in computing and information technology in the early 20th century, their importance decreased after the 1960s and gender disparities have started to appear. Turkle (1986) thus observed that the incorporation of masculine domination into computer objects and programs underlies women’s rejection and phobia of computing. Imbued with masculine characteristics and values such as virile competition, risk taking, and so on, these objects and programs were far removed from feminine identity. According to Turkle, computers symbolize what a woman is not, and seem removed from the ways in which women envision human relations: “being a woman is opposed to a compelling relationship with a thing that shuts people out” (Turkle, 1986, p. 50). However, with the development of digital technology and Web 2.0, the internet has become more fitting to feminine worlds (Jouët, 2011). It has moved away from a computational and technical culture to become more feminized and popularized, notably in the West, although in some traditional African societies it still stands as a sign of social distinction (Sakho Jimbira & Bangali Cissé, 2018).

The growth of the internet of things (smartphones, tablets, smart watches, etc.) has also made it possible to dissociate internet access from the computer; in some

countries, the smartphone has even become the prime means of accessing the internet. Today's digital objects are intuitive and thus obviate the computer literacy required for computing in the 1990s, even though some people still say that the technical difficulty of the internet is an obstacle to using it (Zickuhr, 2013). In fact, while inequalities related to age, household income, and rural residency persist (Zickuhr, 2013), the digital divide no longer designates access as much as uses, which differ depending on gender and class. In line with traditional feminine activities, women use the internet more for social media, communication, health, children's education, and household-related activities, whereas men use it more for information, political news, and leisure activities. Moreover, uses are greatly conditioned by the level of education and social class, across all generations. The production of internet content and the use of digital writing devices also depend on social class and qualifications (Schradie, 2011). Participation in devices that require a more polished style of writing, such as forums or Wiki entries, is reserved for the better-educated, whereas instant messaging devices are more widely used by lower-income classes (Pasquier, 2018). The latter use internet for more limited purposes basically related to entertainment or practical information. Lastly, it is the relationship to the screen that differentiates the more disadvantaged, particularly youth, from ethnic minorities (Common Sense Media, 2015), between parent education and family income, and between both these variables and race/ethnicity, that conditions screen uses (Common Sense Media, 2015).

Going further than the question of accessing and using a technology, the internet also constitutes a space (Bergström, 2016) where people can express performed, imagined, desired, or fantasized identities that go far beyond the identity of their biological sex. In fact, the internet promotes the production and circulation of plural sexual identities. Turkle reflects on Butler's work (1990), stressing that the internet's anonymity, virtuality, and screen, all blur gender as they allow an individual to assume different gender identities and virtually swap her/his gender.

Some research streams highlight the internet's performative (Allard, 2009), expressive, liberating, and emancipating potentialities that help shift the dividing lines in power relationships, break with the assignment of a fixed lifetime status, and redefine hegemonic gender norms. A survey of seniors in France has shown, for example, how using the internet has empowered women, helping them create their own autonomous recreational space that is free and outside the sphere of the couple, or even free themselves from androcentric supervision. After a marital breakdown, the interruption of a career, a life path that overinvested in the role of mother or wife, ownership and proficiency on the internet are part of rebuilding a life, bolstering the will to let go of the past and organizing new individual temporalities. For women from low-income groups, this new digital skill is a way of moving beyond a gender role sometimes reduced to naturalized skills, and of feeling more equal to their spouse. In societies where women face acute gender segregation, as in Saudi Arabia, for example, the use of the smartphone and expressive applications (e.g., Snapchat) offers them an unprecedented space for expression, empowering them to circumvent the all-pervasive traditional and religious gender norms. In the case of teenagers, an expressive digital device like a blog can enable them to depart from the imperatives of virility, as if the formats and frameworks of this technical device authorized them

to subscribe to a model infused with feminine culture (Balleys, 2017).

Yet, does the internet really allow the subversion of gender roles or does the transformation of roles only involve highly specific publics (Arvidsson & Foka, 2015)? Or, on the contrary, does the internet tend to maintain gender roles, particularly for the less advantaged categories of the population? Several studies show that, despite the possibilities offered by the internet, it reproduces patriarchy's mechanisms and stereotyped representations of masculinity and femininity (Carstensen, 2009). It may even exacerbate the heteronormativity of gender and gender differences, as shown by the toxic discourses disseminated online and amplified by platforms such as Twitter. Even in the free culture movement, which nonetheless defends the diversity of identity, sexism is salient. Yet, it is at certain stages of life and more often among the lower-income classes that gender roles and norms become reinforced. In adolescence, young people adhere strongly to a binary gender model: it is now popular for boys to display their masculinity on YouTube (Balleys, 2017). On the lower-income fringes, gendered roles and practices in communication technologies are even more visible. For these social categories, gender thus constitutes an aggravating factor for women and men alike. A man from a low-income class who is not internet-savvy may feel even more discriminated against when his gender identity fails to match up to the digital skills that men are presumed or expected to have. In reality, social class determines uses more than the gender variable. The uses of internet clearly reveal the same inequalities as those observed in the sociology of cultural practices. The internet does not enable individuals to develop their sociability or open up to new cultural tastes (Pasquier, 2018). In low-income classes, internet is limited to utilitarian, noncreative and family-centric or domestic uses. In this respect, observation of their Facebook accounts shows that the traditional conjugal model prevails in these families: a war of the sexes that clearly illustrates the naturalized division of gender roles and their overinvestment can be seen. The same holds for how individuals relate to digital applications: email accounts are often shared in low-income families and may serve as a tool for controlling women (Pasquier, 2018). More generally, the study of digital writing devices shows that the traces of internet users categorize them within the social hierarchy depending on their spelling, expression, or "quality" of their content (Pasquier, 2018). Less educated individuals write less and participate less in these writing devices. When they do so, many are aware that they will be judged negatively and perhaps excluded from a possible meeting on an internet dating site (Pasquier, 2018). Alternatively, men with a high social position impose themselves more easily, as reported by Kendall (2000) in her study of interactions on an online forum largely dominated by a discourse embodying masculine hegemony.

Finally, the internet is not a space separated from the traditional social world. It is an actant that materializes the social relationships of gender, race, and class, while at the same time helping these evolve. As a divisive technology, the internet is full of paradoxes. On the one hand, it "works" to defy the systems of gender and class and transform them (Arvidsson & Foka, 2015). As such, it can help concretize an identity-based

project, even virtually, and bypass or shift gender and class systems. On the other hand, in line with other domestic technologies (Wajcman, 2016), the internet contributes to reproducing the division in gendered roles. It then helps produce and reproduce relations of oppression.

SEE ALSO:

Big Data and Gender-Biased Algorithms; Digital Divide; Feminism, Media, and the Public Sphere; Gender and Technology; Gendered Identities Online; Mobile Cultures and the Asia-Pacific; Online Identities and Gender Norms; Social Media: Complexities and Contradictions; Social Networks, Gender, and Political Participation; Women, Technology, and the Gender Gap

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Further Reading

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