

Postmodern Feminism

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INTRODUCTION

Since the 1970s, researchers have been using gender as an analytic category to study information technology (IT). In the decades since then, several questions have been raised on an ongoing basis, such as: How is gender constituted and reproduced in electronic spaces? Can the Internet be a place where there is no gender, a place where gender becomes fluid and malleable? How are identity and the politics of identity constructed online? Some scholars studying these questions have relied on feminist standpoint theory to frame and inform their inquiries into these issues, which foregrounds the differences between men's and women's experiences in electronic spaces and computing in general. However, others, particularly throughout the 1990s, have found postmodern feminist theory to be not only more accurate for explaining the actual practices of electronic communication and behavior, but also more conducive to the achievement of feminist political goals. The sections that follow will explain the general principles of postmodern feminist theory and its use in studies of gender and computer-mediated communication.

BACKGROUND

What is known as postmodern feminism is often associated with the work of Judith Butler (1990, 1993) and is marked, in part, by a "linguistic turn," a view of gender as a discursive construction and performance rather than a biological fact. These theorists criticize the conflation of sex and gender, essentialist generalizations about men and women, and the tendency to view gender as fixed, binary, and determined at birth, rather than a fluid, mobile construct that allows for multiple gender expressions. The gender dichotomy of man/woman so pervasive in Western culture can be understood in terms of the

cultural imperative to be heterosexual and a history of biological determinism in Western philosophy. Postmodern feminism rejects a dualistic view of gender, heteronormativity, and biological determinism, pointing to the inseparability of the body from language and social norms. Medical professionals can, for example, conform to and reinforce social norms by surgically transforming an infant with ambiguous genitalia into a culturally intelligible girl proper whose clitoris is a socially acceptable size (Butler, 1990). Medical technological intervention is also responsible for sexual reassignment surgery, making the materiality of gender malleable and blurring the boundaries between "man" and "woman." Postmodern feminists argue against the assumption that all women share a common oppression; this assumption has, unwittingly totalized and naturalized the category of "woman" into a white, heterosexual, middle-class, able-bodied, young- to middle-aged norm. Moreover, avowing political categories such as "woman" or "queer" as part of one's identity, what is called "identity politics" is both intellectually and politically misguided. Identitarian terms, such as "transgender," according to the postmodern school of thought, emerge into discourse at certain points in history, and it is important to keep this point in the foreground. Ignoring a term's history can end up reifying the term and reinforcing its place in a discursive hierarchy.

From this body of work, the theorist whose work has been particularly influential to scholars of gender and IT is Donna Haraway. Haraway (1985) argues that in a culture of high technology, the boundaries are no longer clear between human and animal, animal and machine, or human and machine. While not a new observation, Haraway recasts it as a windfall for feminist theory; hierarchical dualisms such as man/woman, heterosexual/homosexual, and white/black are no longer stable in high-tech culture. High technology is embedded so deeply in politics and knowledge (examples include artificial intelli-

gence, genetic modification of organisms, and reproductive technologies) that the technologies are no longer tools deployed by agents in positions of power but now, to a great extent, they construct those agents. New technologies prompt redefinition of such concepts as literacy, work, nature, reproduction, and culture. Haraway argues that taking the cyborg, a figure without boundaries that is both human and machine, as a metaphor for socialist feminist theoretical interventions can be useful for feminist theory because it can help feminist theorists imagine a world that is not seen in or confined to hierarchical dualisms. The cyborg resists and eludes final definitions, as should feminist theory to avoid totalizing the category of “woman.”

Braidotti (2003) suggests three potential ways to use the cyborg metaphor as an intellectual tool. First, the cyborg as an analytical tool “assists in framing and organizing a politically invested cartography of present-day social and cognitive relations” (p. 209). Second, the cyborg functions in a normative mode to offer a more complex and nuanced evaluation of social practices (see Selfe & Selfe, 1996). Third, we can use it as a “utopian manifesto” for imagining ways to “[reconstruct] subjectivity in the age of advanced technology” (p. 209). Also, with its focus on the organic and technological body, the cyborg metaphor keeps the body in view; one charge against postmodern feminism is that the materiality of the body “on the ground” gets lost in theorists’ preoccupation with discourse.

POSTMODERN THEORY AND IDENTITY IN CYBERSPACE

When the World Wide Web became popular and commonly used, some wondered if the Web could become a truly democratic place, where discrimination on the basis of race, class, or gender could be eliminated. As much research has shown, however, and indeed as anyone who happens upon racist and misogynistic Web sites can attest to, the Web is not a utopia. Feminists have responded to gender inequalities online in several fashions, but Hall’s (1996) study of women’s experiences online makes a useful distinction between what she calls “liberal cyberfeminism” and “radical cyberfeminism” in online discussion practices (see also Wolmark, 2003). What

Hall terms liberal cyberfeminism is “influenced by postmodern discussions on gender fluidity by feminist and queer theorists, imagines the computer as a liberating utopia that does not recognize the social dichotomies of male/female and heterosexual/homosexual” (p. 148). Radical cyberfeminists, on the other hand, are concerned with everyday online problems: homophobia, harassment of women and pornographic representations of women, and they seek to create safe spaces for women only (see Herring, 1996).

Liberal cyberfeminism corresponds with a postmodern feminist view of gender as mobile and performative, not necessarily tied closely to identity. In online spaces, identity is constructed in communities with certain discursive norms, and identity is based on conversations and credibility established in those conversations; as such, only the community decides whether they accept the user as a woman, a disabled person or the like. Turkle (1995) and Stone (1995) use postmodern theories that problematize the humanist subject to show that online heightens the sense that identity is shifting, fluid, de-centered, and multiple; online, identity is a series of fictions and textual play—“*personae* all the way down” (Stone, 1995, p. 81). Turkle (1995) claims that computing is taking us “from a modernist culture of calculation toward a postmodernist culture of simulation,” from “centralized structures and programmed rules” to “a postmodern aesthetic of complexity and decentering” (p. 20). Turkle (1995) agrees with Haraway that “the computer is an evocative object that causes old boundaries to be renegotiated” (p. 22). One such boundary is that between “man” and “woman.”

Turkle (1995) cites netsex as one such simulation that allows for the flexibility of identitarian categories, with what she suggests is rampant “virtual gender-swapping” (p. 212; see also Bruckman, 1993). Turkle describes several cases of gender swapping and finds that “a virtual gender swap gave people greater emotional range in the real” (p. 222). Not only does this kind of gender play give users a space in which to express masculine and feminine aspects of their personalities, virtual gender-swapping also lets users explore their sexuality. For example, women can play men to have netsex with other women, and men can play women to have netsex with other men. Heterosexual women can play lesbian and bisexual

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