

Chapter XLVII

Virtual Political Office Where Gender and Culture Meet

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ABSTRACT

Based on the underlying assumption that gender is a social construct, this chapter explores the World Wide Web home pages of key political figures in the USA and Ukraine focusing specifically on what the content posted to these sites and their structure suggests about gender and cultural peculiarities in constructing political identity on the Web. The personal page is rendered as a virtual political office—a peculiar meeting point between the site owner and its potential audience, electorate, and citizenry providing an excellent working place to be constantly in touch with the electoral body from anyplace and in anytime. All data are analyzed according to four parameters: male, female, Ukrainian, and American. The main result highlights the intersection across culture, gender, and computer-mediated communication (CMC) influencing the virtual identity formation. The intersectional approach towards viewing gendered virtual identity is proposed. The data obtained lead to suggestions for the creation of sites that are more in line with the potential provided by the Net to facilitate political communication.

INTRODUCTION

CMC and Virtual Office

The notion of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) is the term that covers popular applications of the network, including electronic mail, electronic bulletin boards, Web pages, and so forth. CMC presents the class of computer-based technologies (including the Internet) to assist people in getting in touch with each other. The Internet is more versatile than any other interactive medium currently available to us. The net enables us permanently to communicate

with closed friends or with total strangers, with individuals or with large groups, using our real names or remaining totally anonymous. Jennifer Carpenter declares that:

the Internet is not simply a medium, like the telephone or snail mail system—it is also a place, a virtual environment where people meet, engage in discourse, become friends, fall in love, and develop all of the relationships that are developed in physical communities. (Carpenter, 1998, p. 1)

Nevertheless the ways that people work and communicate via the Web destabilizes a great

number of conventional social categories. For example, one can refer to “social lives at work and at home” as if ones apply to distinct places as well as webs of social relationships. However virtual offices and activities realized through them enable people to work routinely while they are in their homes, and blur the boundaries between office and home, private and public, virtual and real (Kling, 1996). It has raised the additional problematic area for the Web research about the boundary renegotiations provoked by the net.

There are four fragmentations as it is claimed in CMC theory viewing the Internet as a new social domain “where physical-world boundaries or those of prior domains of convention have not yet been developed” (Katz & Rice, 2002b, p. 268). They cover the public-private distinction as revealed in online self-presentation, since the boundary between *private* and *public* on the net is rather blurring. Simultaneously the boundary between *professional* and *personal* on the Web also does not pronounce intensively. The *social* and *technical* boundary initiates the critical distinction between the priority of construction and social understanding and the individual construction and extension of self as an artifact of technology (Katz & Rice, 2002b, p. 269). The fourth boundary issue lies between the *real* and the *virtual*. It initiates the disappearance of conventional reality from the world outside the computer into the virtual world expressed within computer (Katz & Rice, 2002b, p. 270). The Internet presents a boundary-shifting medium that carries over into physical domains. Nowhere are the social challenges of the Internet so pronounced as in the virtual workplace. The Internet breaks down a lot of different social barriers. As a result, subordinates acquire nearly as much communicative power in the “virtual workplace” as their own superiors. Virtual workplaces are beginning to replace the traditional office environment of cubicles and office buildings. Individual virtual workplaces vary in how they apply existing technology to facilitate common activity. There are three approaches prevailing in this area:

- **Telecommuting** (the availability and use of communications technologies, such as the Internet, to work in an offsite location);
- **Hot desk environment** (individuals are not given separate desks; rather each day employees are allocated to a desk where they can access the Internet, e-mail, and computer network files);
- **Virtual team** (the collaboration of individuals working closely together and in constant contact who are physically located in different parts of the world).

Virtual workplaces are advantageous in an information age where technology is expanding rapidly and people need to meet across the globe. A virtual workplace enables individuals to work from anyplace at anytime in the world. Virtual workplaces streamline systems from multiple facets of work into a single unified unit easily accessible. They decrease costs as well as increase efficiency, due to the single system, is an instantaneous advantage. A virtual workplace is easier for individuals because of opportunities to travel without restrictions, consolidates services, and assists in the communication processes. Simultaneously “there are many challenges associated with the implementation of virtual workplaces, and if not carefully analyzed, organizations can be threatened by not fully realizing the enormous benefits that can be achieved through virtual workplaces.” More and more CMC gurus argue the lack of human contact and increased sensitivity to communication, and interpersonal and cultural factors present the main pitfalls for effective functioning of virtual working places and offices. However many of these challenges can be overcome by having good management applied to the virtual workplace. Good workplace management has been said to increase the probability of success in virtual workplaces and within virtual community whatsoever.

The personal pages of politicians are rendered in this study as their virtual political offices. These offices provide all logistics to sustain professional

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