

Chapter 6

Women, Big Ideas, and Social Networking Technologies: Hidden Assumptions

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ABSTRACT

The assumption that women are not capable of generating big ideas is entrenched in the mainstream consciousness and may appear in many guises. In the current mainstream discourse on women's use of social networking technologies, similar assumptions implicitly presuppose that, compared with men's use of the new social networking technologies, women's ideas and activities on the social Web are deficient and less serious. To open further the conversation about women's empowerment on the social Web and enhance feminist global collaborations using new social networking technologies, the authors problematize seven hidden assumptions in both the academic and popular discourse about women's ideas, interests, and practices on the social Web and raise more questions about women, ideas, and social networking technologies. The analysis reveals that until gendered assumptions about women's ideas and social networking are examined, digital inequities cannot be adequately addressed.

INTRODUCTION

The literary critic Germaine Greer recently posed a disturbing question: “Why don’t women write Big ideas books?” and has evoked a hot discussion online and off. Her own response toward the question is that women are “more interested in understanding than explaining, in describing

rather than accounting for” (as quoted in Guest, November 14, 2008).¹ What disturbs us about this discussion is that the why-question seems to entail a widely held unspoken assumption: Women have not been capable of generating Big ideas.²

This assumption is wide-spread and deep, and may appear in a variety of guises. In the current academic and popular discourse about women's

ideas, interests, and activities on the social Web, a recent innovation of the Internet that features networked individuals and user-generated content, we have observed (behind the statistics³ and generalizations suggesting a closing “gender divide” on the access and use of new technologies in many places in the world⁴) similar assumptions which implicitly presuppose that, compared with men’s use of new social networking technologies,⁵ women’s ideas and activities on the social Web are deficient and less serious.

Even when women in some locations are seen as somehow catching up to men’s better efforts on the social Web, women are not seen as equals in creativity, or as offering many valuable ideas and examples of how the new social networking technologies can work. Kaliya Hamlin, who has founded a women’s-only technology conference, has observed that of the fifty “brilliant thinkers” recognized at Ideas Project, a site on big ideas of the future of the social Web and collaboration, only seven are women (July 27, 2009). Our own experiences at conferences and workshops on new technologies have confirmed her observation: In most sessions, women are encouraged to be primarily listeners and women’s issues are rarely singled out as topics for discussion.

Certainly local, national, and global networking technologies can help women generate ideas for new strategies and possibilities. Their ideas, Big and small, will continue to illuminate, inform, and provoke. However, until gendered assumption about women’s ideas and networking are examined, digital inequities cannot be adequately addressed.

In an effort to open further the conversation about women’s empowerment on the Web and enhance feminist global collaborations using new social networking technologies, we look at some of these usually hidden assumptions about women’s ideas, interests, and practices—assumptions that are carrying, knowingly or not, anti-feminist sentiments online throughout the world, and, if left unscrutinized, can result in very limited notions

of what access, equality, and interactive cultures are. We also offer a number of questions to challenge ideas about future possibilities.

Of course, feminist collaboration started long before the emergence of blogs, wikis, and social network sites such as Facebook, MySpace, and Ning. As part of our critical look at these assumptions, we will first trace the kinds of collaborative work involving the many “small ideas” that have added up to, despite the enduring inequalities and sexist assumptions that continue to shape societies on and off line, the feminist principles and actions that have flooded into most countries of the world and have resulted in many social changes.

WOMEN AS HISTORICAL LESSER THINKERS?

“Big ideas” are often associated with such topics as politics, philosophy, law, history, religion, and science, areas of study and practice that are considered to involve higher levels of thinking and abstraction and have not been particularly welcoming to women. Dale Spender, in her large volume on women of ideas in the West, has pointed out that the belief that women are incapable of making worthwhile creative or intellectual contributions is deeply entrenched in academic and popular literature (1982, p. 41). While there are all kinds of ideas named after men—Confuciusism, Darwinism, and Marxism, just a few examples—it is hard to think of ideas or isms named after women. Spender writes that “Our existence as women in a patriarchal society is one of interruptions and silences” (ibid, p.14); our history has so often been ridiculed, hidden and disappeared. She points out that it is not that women have not contributed to knowledge but that men of authority have “doctored the records” (p.13). Even for the very few ideas connected with women’s names, what ideas of theirs are recorded and passed down in history are often associated with the needs for sustaining traditional authority voices and systems

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