

The Trouble with Access

Some Thoughts
on Internet Access and
Women's Empowerment
Ellen Balka

Often statistics about men's and women's use of the internet are used as an indicator of whether or not the internet can be used for the achievement of democratic empowerment by women (see for example Herring's (2001) *Gender and Power in On-line Communication*,

www.europaforum.or.at/HomepageITECHwomen/haupframe.htm). Such material tells us little about how new forms of communication fit into women's everyday lives, and leads us towards a technological determinist trap of sorts by failing to consider whether or not the existing technologies of the internet are well suited to alternate social goals, both of which have important implications for the democratic potential of the internet.

Herring (2001) notes that in the U. S., recent surveys have found that just over half of internet users are women, and that the digital divide is being bridged in terms of who logs onto the internet, but that "women and men still do not have equal access to the creation and control of what takes place on the internet. "Noting that ordinary users – including women – are empowered to create content to a greater extent than with traditional media such as newspapers and television", Herring concludes "that women have ready access to computer-mediated communication and the web," from which she concludes democratic empowerment follows.

Although the percentage of women using the internet and world wide web has grown, assessing the democratic potential of the internet in terms of equality of use is problematic. It fails to account for important deterrents to internet use, such as what I call the materiality of access, as well as important social aspects of use, such as whether or not existing technologies support democratic ends. Below I reflect on these two points.

Access Reconsidered: Material and Social Aspects of Access

In stressing gender based equality in internet use, important points are glossed over that may have a bearing on emergent patterns of use. For example, there may be differences in early and late internet users. Although a measure of gender equality may have been achieved amongst current internet users, relative to the population of non-users, current users are likely to be financially well off and highly educated. Rather than using current gender breakdowns of internet use as an indicator that some sort of equality of access has been achieved, we need to learn more about those who remain excluded from internet use. We cannot assume that equality of access amongst the privileged will translate into

Internet und Gleichberechtigung

Elisabeth Schiemel

Statistiken über den Gebrauch des Internets durch Männer und Frauen sagen isoliert betrachtet wenig über den Beitrag aus, den das Internet zur Gleichberechtigung der Frauen leisten kann. In den Vereinigten Staaten sind nach einer Studie von Herring (2001) knapp mehr als 50% der Internet-User weiblich. Männer und Frauen haben aber noch nicht in gleichem Ausmaß Gelegenheit, digitalen Inhalt zu produzieren und im Internet zu veröffentlichen. Da der Zugang zur Veröffentlichung von Inhalten in computerbezogenen Medien aber im allgemeinen weit leichter ist als in den traditionellen Medien, schließt Herring, dass das Internet ein Instrument der Gleichberechtigung darstellt.

Ellen Balka, die Autorin des vorliegenden Artikels, hält dem entgegen, dass trotz der wachsenden Zahlen von weiblichen Internet-Usern die Einschätzung des demokratisierenden Potentials nur auf Grund der Log-on-Zahlen problematisch ist. Aus der Tatsache, dass die gegenwärtigen User (zum Großteil relativ wohlhabend und mit guter Schulbildung) hinsichtlich der Geschlechter gleich verteilt sind, kann keineswegs geschlossen werden, dass künftige User aus der großen Masse der Unterprivilegierten einen ebenso geschlechtsneutralen Zugang haben werden, welcher die Gleichberechtigung der Frauen fördern würde.

Die Autorin zitiert eine eigene Studie (Balka u. Petersen, 1998) über den Internetzugang in einer öffentlichen Bibliothek. Zwei Drittel der User waren dort männlich, 40% waren unter 15 Jahre alt, weitere 24% zwischen 16 und 20, nur 8,5% waren älter als 36. Die Aussagekraft dieser Arbeit erscheint aber sehr relativiert durch die Einschränkung auf einen einzelnen Beobachtungsort mit sehr spezifischen Bedingungen: eine öffentliche Bibliothek in einem sozial benachteiligten Bezirk, welche von vielen Eltern als öffentliche Kinderbetreuungsstätte missbraucht wurde.

Der rein physische Zugang zum Internet kann problematisch sein, wenn zu wenig Terminals vorhanden sind. Der Zugang muss von konkurrierenden Bewerbern ausverhandelt, eventuell sogar erstritten werden. Im häuslichen

Bereich ist die räumliche Positionierung des Internetzugangs oft von strategischer Bedeutung für die Zugangsmöglichkeiten der Familienmitglieder. In beiden Settings – öffentlicher Bereich und Familie – kann es zu einer Benachteiligung der Frauen kommen.

Wenn man künftige Internet-User in Betracht zieht, erscheinen mehrere Bedingungen für den effektiven Internetgebrauch erforderlich: Lese- und Schreibkenntnisse, Beherrschung der englischen Sprache sowie ausreichend Freizeit, um sich mit den erforderlichen Techniken vertraut zu machen. Der Internetgebrauch muss hier im Zusammenhang mit den übrigen geschlechtsspezifischen Verhaltensmustern der künftigen User gesehen werden (*social situated-ness of internet use*).

Welche Arten von Kommunikation möglich sind, wird durch die Wahl der speziellen Hardware- und Softwarekombination der Netzwerkbenutzer festgelegt. Beston (1988) spricht von der Technologie als einer „*Sprache für Aktion und Selbstdarstellung mit unterschiedlichen Fähigkeiten der Geschlechter, diese zu benutzen*.“ Wenn neue Technologien entwickelt werden, ändert sich das zur Verfügung stehende Vokabular.

Obwohl die Forschung über das Internet in letzter Zeit großen Umfang angenommen hat, steckt die Forschung über sein demokratisierendes Potential noch in den Kinderschuhen. Um den Gewinn für Demokratisierung und Gleichberechtigung festzustellen, genügt es nicht, freien Zugang mit Demokratisierung gleichzusetzen. Gleiche Log-on-Zahlen von Männern und Frauen sollen nicht das letzte Ziel der Demokratisierung des Internets sein. Eingehende Analysen der *non-user* und des alltäglichen Internet-Gebrauchs werden erforderlich sein, sowie die ernsthafte Beschäftigung mit der Frage, ob die gegenwärtige Form des Internets am besten dazu geeignet ist, die Gleichberechtigung der Frauen zu fördern.

(Das Wort „*user*“ ist hier wie im Englischen als geschlechtsneutral zu verstehen und ist deshalb nicht durch „*UserInnen*“ ersetzt worden.)

equality of access amongst the less advantaged, or that equality of access will lead to democratic empowerment for women (though it may be a pre-requisite for democratic empowerment).

Much remains to be learned about barriers to internet access. For example, our 1999 study (Balka and Peterson, in press) of internet use at a branch of a public library found that two thirds of the users of the terminals we observed were men or boys, and one third of the internet users were women or girls. We also found that nearly forty percent of internet users were under fifteen years old, and an additional 23.7% of users were between the ages of sixteen and twenty – just under two thirds of internet users were younger than age twenty. Only 8.5% of internet users were age thirty-six or older. Clearly, the internet

terminals at the library we studied served a largely male, adolescent and young adult population. To the extent that public access sites may be accommodating the next wave of internet adapters, our data suggest that gender based issues related to internet access may be far from resolved.

The Materiality of Internet Use

Data from our study of library internet use also shed light on what I call the materiality of internet use. When access to computers is scarce (as may be the case in both households and public access sites), access to computers has to be negotiated in spatial settings and between bodies. We observed several instances of competition for access to internet terminals at our study site, where men and boys both subtly and not so subtly prohibited others from gaining access to computers. Ba-

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kardjjeva-Risova (2000) has addressed spatial aspects of internet use in domestic settings, where she found that spatial arrangements surrounding internet use in domestic settings often reflected gendered patterns of space allocation within family settings.

Although use of the internet propels users into virtual worlds, gaining access to the internet remains a material undertaking. Access must be negotiated between competing users (often men and women, boys and girls) in real, material settings. In addition to being mediated by access to financial resources (for purchase of computers and internet access), access to the internet through public sites may also require freedom from other obligations that allow one to go to a location and use a public access site, and a sufficient sense of self to negotiate access in highly gendered settings, such as the predominantly male adolescent setting characteristic of the library we observed.

Social Aspects of Internet Use

Keeping in mind that assertions about equality of access to the internet focus on current users of the internet rather than those who currently lack access, and that we cannot assume that use of the internet by equal proportions of men and women in the U. S. will be indicative of patterns of use amongst future groups of adapters, consideration of a range of social factors that may influence use warrant additional consideration. Other issues warranting attention include literacy (a pre-condition of internet access), competence in English (the dominant language of the internet, which, it can be argued, is also a pre-condition of access), and access to the leisure time required to learn and use internet technologies. Internet use is situated, and occurs within larger gendered life patterns of women and men and girls and boys. Indeed, it is not surprising that our study of library use of the internet (Balka and Peterson, in press) found differences in age patterns amongst male and female library internet users, which we suspect reflects important differences in male and female life patterns and access to leisure time.

Gender and the Internet in Everyday Life

Among the age/sex variations in internet use we found at Vancouver Public Library (Balka and Peterson) was significantly lower internet use amongst girls under 10 years old than amongst boys of the same age. One reason for this may be that in the library branch we observed internet use is in a comparatively poor neighbourhood, and our observations yielded an understanding of the library as a substitute for day care services amongst many families who instructed their young children to go to the library at the end of the school day, where they played on the internet until a parent retrieved them at dinner time. One explanation for the lower proportion of female internet users under age 10 is that parents may be more hesitant to send their unaccompanied female children to the library than their unaccompanied male children of the same age. In other words, gender differences in internet use patterns amongst 10 year olds in the library we observed yield a picture of the library-as-surrogate-child-care-provider, while simultaneously reflec-

ting stereotypical views of gender (boys are tougher and less susceptible to dangers, and thus can be left unaccompanied in the public space of the library).

An understanding of the social situated-ness of internet use is an area warranting further attention in debates about whether or not the internet is contributing to gender equality or democracy. Important work has been undertaken that addresses a range of aspects of both everyday internet use, and the ways that internet use contributes to the broader activities of citizenship. (See for example submissions to the recent conference "*Information Technology, Transnational Democracy and Gender*" at <http://www.iar.bth.se/itdgl>).

Technology as a Vocabulary for Social Action: Internet Design and Social Possibilities

In choosing to communicate via a particular hardware and software combination, network users are selecting systems that support some forms of communication, and not others. Benston (1988) pointed out that technology can "*be seen as a 'language' for action and self-expression with consequent gender differences in ability to use this language*" (Benston, 1988 p. 14). She argued that widely available computer networking systems are not the only ones that could have been created, and that other systems might have been developed had system designers had different objectives. In the case of technology, one must use the available tools and techniques in attempts to carry out particular actions, which are constrained by available technologies. The 'language' for social action provided by available technologies must be understood "*as one that imposes limits on what can be 'said'*" (Benston, 1988 p. 19). Many actions or expressions of self are not possible if a supporting technology is not available. As new technologies are developed, our vocabulary for action changes (e. g., the graphic interface of the world wide web has made new forms of representations possible in computer mediated environments), but does not necessarily expand our options (e. g., even with the significant changes to the internet that have occurred in recent years, tools that support group communication still lag behind development of tools that support one-to-one and one-to-many communication).

The structure of computer networks and the software and infrastructure that compose them influence the types of communication possible in computer mediated environments. Although ample feminist theory concerned with the nature of technological change suggests that social values are brought into the design process and that the design of technology has important implications for its use, the importance of this insight and the implications it has for the possibility of creating new vocabularies for social action, has received little attention in discussions about whether or not women can achieve democratic empowerment through information technology.

Conclusion

In spite of recent growth in research about the internet, research about the democratic potential of the internet is still in its infancy. Realizing the gains many have claimed about the potential of the internet to contribute to

democracy and gender equality will require moving beyond simplistic associations of equal access with democratic empowerment. Though monitoring of use patterns will remain important, equality in log-ons between men and women should not be used as a proxy for the use of the internet for democratic ends. Indeed, gaining an understanding of whether or not the internet is contributing to democratic empowerment for women will require more extensive analyses of non-users, everyday use of the internet, and a serious engagement with questions about whether or not the current form of the internet is the most suitable for democratic empowerment of women.

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