

# Gender Trouble in Web 2.0. Gender perspectives on social network sites, wikis and weblogs

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## ABSTRACT

The paper deals with gender relations and constructions and with negotiations of gender and queer issues in web 2.0. Following a review of early hopes and fears on the internet in feminist discourses, own findings as well as empirical results of other studies on social network sites, wikis and weblogs are discussed. While an insistence on binary gender roles can be observed in social network sites, wikis open up a stage for tough struggles for relevance of gender issues. Finally, weblogs offer space for diverse identity constructions as well as for queer subject construction and politics without referring to offline identities.

## Keywords

Internet, web 2.0, gender, queer, social network site, wiki, weblog, MySpace, Wikipedia, studiVZ

## FEMINIST DISCOURSES ON THE INTERNET

With the possibilities of weblogs, wikis, podcasting, and social networks like “YouTube”, “MySpace” and “StudiVZ” available today, the internet promises an increase in user participation and new forms of cooperation. Again, hopes of democratization, new public spaces, community building, networks, and a disempowerment of the mass media’s role are arising and celebrating the “web 2.0” as a revolution.

In contrast to the “first” phase of the internet’s development, a surprising calm has now entered feminist discourses. In the 1990s, feminists had very different views on the internet; it was a contentious and negotiated subject within feminist debates [4]:

- One part of the discussion called attention to the internet as a male domain, a “gendered net” [10, 25, 32]. This perception of the internet was decisively influenced by the interpretation of the internet as “technical”. Referring to the close link between technology and masculinity, the delayed access of women to the internet, androcentric content [15] and male-dominated discussions in forums and chats [19] were central reasons cited. The internet was considered

to be riddled with the same inequalities and power relations as the “real world”.

- At the same time, the internet was linked with hopes and expectations of creating solidarity between women, better participation and networking. Plant retold the story of technology and gender, interpreting the net as feminine [27]. Feminists discussed the possibilities for new public spaces and expected changes through the removal of the boundaries between the public and private spheres [8, 29]. In addition, worldwide access to information and ease of communication stoked the hopes of strengthening feminist politics [12, 17, 31]. In this perception, the internet was interpreted less as technology but more as a medium.
- Furthermore, feminists inspired by poststructuralist theories developed utopian projects for a world beyond binary gender relations. In the internet, so cyberfeminists hoped, the boundaries between technology and human as well as between men and women would break down. Visions like Donna Haraways “cyborg” [16] fired the imagination of a world without gender. Particularly the possibility of “bodiless” communication via the internet and “gender swapping” in chats and forums, where identities could be apparently invented anew, made the internet a projection screen for postmodern and deconstructive future designs in which gender relations would be set in motion [1, 3, 34].

After a period of emotional discourses, a great many empirical studies followed. Many of the hopes and fears were relativized. For example, the gender gap minimized in most countries [see, for example, 22]; studies on communication in forums, chats and MUDs showed that gender roles play an unexpectedly significant role in “bodiless” interaction [e.g. 14]. Empirical research on the use and design of the internet in German feminist networks came to the conclusion that the internet is used primarily for finding and providing information as well as for e-mail communication. Exchange, the creation of spaces that allow withdrawal and re-grouping, carrying out political actions and representing interests outside own spaces to



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influence larger arenas hardly took place within German feminist networks at the beginning of the new century [5].

Simultaneously, it would be too simple to abandon all hope. There are a number of interesting examples of use and design of the internet for feminist aims. With the advent of web 2.0 these have changed and diversified, as will be shown below.

### **GENDER RELATIONS IN WEB 2.0 – SOME EMPIRICAL RESULTS**

Although web 2.0 with its new possibilities has the potential to revitalize the feminist hopes and issues on the internet, it has been astonishingly calm in feminist debates concerning weblogs, wikis and social network sites. However, there are a number of interesting and remarkable findings on the “new” internet that I will sketch below. This is to be an update of feminist internet research in times of new technological possibilities.

In doing so, I am interested in the design and use of the internet and the discourses on gender and feminism linked to the web 2.0. I will focus especially on spaces of struggles for gender, the social construction of femininity and masculinity in the web and new definitions of gender identities. I will not cover gender differences in the use of weblogs, wikis and social network sites [as for example 33 for “MySpace”].

#### **Unsuccessful Struggles: Insisting on Gender Binarity in Social Network Sites**

Social network sites such as “MySpace”, “Facebook” and “XING” are booming. In these contact and relationship networks, users present themselves with their own profile. They can use diverse functions for networking, contacts or communication with other members. While the other web 2.0 tools are hardly an inherent part of the daily online routines, 10% of internet users in Germany make a visit to one or more communities every day; gender plays no significant role concerning quantitative use [11].

However, considering the design of and self-presentations in the communities, we can state a strong relevance of gender. It starts with the registration form. There are only few networks where individuals can become a member without defining themselves as male or female. For example on the music platform “last.fm”, besides “male” and “female” users can choose “unknown”; at the photo community “flickr.com” you find four possibilities, “female”, “male”, “other” and “rather not say”. However, in networks such as “MySpace” or the very prominent German community “studiVZ”, a social network for students, users are forced to position themselves clearly as either male or female. If a “studiVZ” user refuses to choose one of the two alternatives, they are sent to the following statement: “Only female or male entities can register with us!” This is interesting, bearing in mind that other gaps in the registration form do not necessarily have to be filled out. Thus, gender binarity is inscribed into the technology by the developers and administrators. Even discussions within the community with the aim of using gender-

sensitive language have been appeased with reasons which fall back on biologicistic and technology-deterministic arguments (“The two genders are a biological fact” or “It would be too difficult to program more than two alternatives for gender in the registration form”).

These determinations undoubtedly have effects on the users. A positioning as other than male or female is made technically impossible. However at the same time, the users also insist on the category of gender in a remarkable way. Wötzel-Herber comes to the conclusion that users provide a great deal of information about their gender and their sexual orientation voluntarily, even when no information is required by the network forms [37]. The presentations are often sexualized, with a very clear demonstration of male or female gender. Photos show near-naked men under the shower, showing off muscles and tattoos, and women in bikinis pointing their behinds at the camera. Many presentations show heterosexual scenes. Central motivations to use social network sites such as “studiVZ” seem to be flirting and couple formation. Gender, mostly in combination with heteronormativity, can be considered the most important category in the self-construction of the users’ identities. In contrast to previous hopes and findings in internet research, which saw the internet as “identity workshops”, authenticity has now become the decisive norm.

Manago et al. come to a similar finding. They explore the ways emerging adults experience social networking within the cultural context of “MySpace” and point out that male-female differences in self-presentation parallel, and possibly intensify, gender norms offline. Gender roles are constructed for women as affiliative and attractive and for men as strong and powerful. The authors state an increasing pressure for men to display their physical attractiveness on “MySpace” as well as a pervasiveness of sexualized female self-presentation. However, young women negotiate discrepant cultural messages concerning female roles and identities. The study suggests that social networking sites provide valuable opportunities for emerging adults to realize possible selves; however, increased pressure for female sexual objectification and intensified social comparison may also negatively impact identity development [24].

Thus, we can state a strong relevance of gender binarity and validity of stereotyped role models in social networks. On the one hand the technical design of the platforms often does not allow positions beyond male and female and fixes the system of two genders. On the other hand, despite opportunities to realize diverse and non-conform gender roles, most of the users present themselves in a stereotype manner.

#### **Homophobic Deletions on MySpace**

A homophobic incident occurred on “MySpace” in March 2007. MySpace deleted the profile of the Canadian band “Kids on TV”. Citing “contempt of the terms of use”, the site removed all the gay-lesbian band’s data and about

14,000 contacts. Contempt of the terms of use is generally applied to naked pictures or objectionable and violent pictures, covering of the banner advertisement with html codes, harassment of other users, spamming forums or guest books, exaggerating scores or underage users. Large pornographic banner advertising on their sites shows that these rules have been only half-heartedly followed by MySpace in other cases. It is still not clear which terms of use Kids on TV violated or what else was the reason for deleting the profile. After vehement protests, MySpace backed down and put the site back onto the web, claiming a mistake had been made. It is not possible to clarify conclusively why the profile was deleted. Accusations of homophobic motives can be found in discussion forums on censorship, where members mention other deletions of gay, lesbian and queer content.

#### **Bundling and Defending Feminist Knowledge in Wikis**

Such attacks on queer-feminist content as in “MySpace” are not unique to social network sites. In August 2007, the entries on “Ladyfest” and “riot grrrl” in the German version of the “free encyclopaedia Wikipedia” were suggested for deletion. The “Ladyfest” entry was criticized for its lack of relevance, quality and significance. The critics labelled them “free associations”, which were “not objective”. The fact that women and girls are underrepresented in the music industry cited in the entry was doubted. Furthermore, the statement of gender as a social construct was questioned. The proponents of the deletions argued “I always thought gender is concerned with genetics.”

Five minutes later, one of the persons involved also suggested the deletion of the “riot grrrl” entry. He also questioned the relevance of this entry and the male dominance in the music industry with the argument “When I listen to the radio, I have the impression that I hear more women than men.” He also criticized the relevance by characterizing the bands mentioned as “not really famous music bands” and the cited literature as “articles in magazines with still very very narrow readership”. He ends with the statement: “I can’t help getting the impression that something is being blown up out of proportion that hardly anyone ever took any notice of.”

Many people intervened and campaigned for the preservation of the articles with solid, vehement and well-founded arguments, and fought for the relevance and the quality of the entries. However, this example shows that feminist issues still have to be defended and justified, perhaps especially in fields where knowledge is jointly produced such as in “Wikipedia”.

On the other hand, we can find very interesting feminist uses of wiki technology. Students in Berlin developed the project “Gender@Wiki” to collect and link information, developments, knowledge and actors in women’s, gender and queer studies. Users can find entries on different terms and concepts in the field of women’s, gender and queer studies. Here, the use of gender-sensitive language is a

matter of course, and there is an extended article about “Ladyfest”.

Attempting to draw a conclusion, wikis offer possibilities for collective supply of knowledge, which can be used for creating feminist spaces where knowledge and resources can be combined, while at the same time the characteristic that everybody can participate in writing and creating knowledge leads to hard fights for the relevance of gender issues.

#### **Female Weblogs?**

Finally, considering weblogs from a gender perspective, we come across the fascinating finding that the percentage of female authors is much higher than that of male authors. Especially in the group of teenagers, girls form the much larger part; Harders/Hesse for example come to the conclusion that nearly 85% of the teenagers and at least 67.4% of the entire group in their sample of German bloggers are female [18]. The hitherto existing studies show a trend over the long term: Older American studies came to the finding that only 45.8% of bloggers were female [20]. With the emergence of the blogosphere the percentage of women has increased. The medium appears to be particularly attractive for women and girls [18].

On the one hand, the increasing normality of the internet as an aspect of everyday life may be one reason for the high participation of women. The more widespread the internet is, the less it is perceived as technical. As a consequence, the interpretation of the internet as a male domain vanishes. Schönberger on the other hand interprets this result against the background of writing diaries as a cultural pattern that is female dominated and finds its continuation in weblog diaries, in both form and content [30]. With the expansion of broadband, it becomes easier to realize different means of communication as pictures, audio and video can be integrated into texts and therefore make complex communication processes possible. Thus, weblogs greatly resemble diaries and especially friendship books in their functions.

However, Herring et al. as well as Hesse point out that despite the female dominance among weblog writers, the so-called A-bloggers – the most-read weblog writers – are almost 70% male [20, 21]. The main reason is the choice of the topics written about in weblogs. While a large part of the women and girls write personal weblogs, adult men write journalism-orientated filter blogs on “political” issues, which dominate the public sphere and attain much attention. In the sample of Harders/Hesse 63.2 % of all weblogs are online diaries, 75.9% of those written by all female bloggers and only 37.1% of all those by male bloggers. On the contrary, at least 24.2% of all weblogs written by men are focussed exclusively on information, while only 1% of all weblogs written by women concentrate on information without references to the everyday life of the author. The possibility to mix both types and write a weblog with political as well as personal topics – and break down boundaries between private and

public spaces – is only used by 29.5% of the blogging men and 10.3% of the blogging women [18]. Thus, traditional mechanisms of gendered public spaces still have an impact on digital publics. The hierarchical dichotomy between public and private remains relevant and a result of negotiation processes.

Another study on Dutch and Flemish weblogs focuses on how weblog authors present their online gender identity [9]. Van Doorn et al. conducted a qualitative content analysis, focused on the use of images, the use of hyperlinks, choice of topics and language use, including use of emoticons. These aspects function as different dimensions in which gender identity can be expressed. As a result, they state that different versions of femininity used to create a heterogeneous interpretation of female gender identity can be observed: sexualized images and descriptions of domestic work at the same time, but also displays of technical proficiency; a “pony girl”, identifying herself with the group of girls passionate about horses; references to the own female body “modified” by breast cancer and the experience of how it feels to live with only one breast. At the same time the authors also observed more implicit presentations of masculinity, showing a typical portrayal of a man as tough and composed, professional, loyal to his work and interested in aviation.

Thus, it can be stated that weblogs are able to facilitate multiple and diffuse gender presentations, although referring to “real life” and everyday experiences. Furthermore, bloggers can present different interpretations of their gender identity on the same weblog. The bloggers in this study present their gender identity in relation to their offline lives, using images, hyperlinks or discursive invocations of their everyday experiences. They do not “play” with their gender identity, but are constantly performing their gender as they post new entries. “While weblogs facilitate a mode of gender presentation that remains closely related to the binary gender system that structures people’s daily lives, they also offer a ‘rich’ environment (through the various technological features that weblogs are able to combine), resulting in multiple heterogeneous performances of gender. In practice, these bloggers present themselves as ‘men’ and ‘women’, but this presentation is achieved through various performances of ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’, incorporating both discursive and visual means to create an image of a gendered self whose embodied identity is shaped offline” [9]. The authors resume that instead of creating another masculine sphere, the weblog is introducing diary writing to a group of men looking to express themselves online. This practice could open up space for an expansion of “feminine” discourse on the web.

Furthermore, we can observe a wide range of weblogs from queer-feminist contexts. Conservative estimates dating from as long ago as 2006 refer to 240,000 feminist weblogs [6]. Two examples are the German “mädchenblog” and the “Genderblog”, which both enrich web 2.0 through feminist interventions. The “mädchenblog” describes itself as an

open feminist community project and aims to broach issues such as the body, sexuality, love, politics and pop culture in a different way from traditional girls’ and youth magazines. In the “Genderblog”, authors and readers discuss the new equality law, parenthood, queer politics or the question of why we still need gender. Books are presented and recent issues or newspaper articles are discussed. Both weblogs are spaces for involved discussions about feminism, they detect sexism and criticize anti-feminism. Furthermore, they provide a large number of links to other weblogs and websites, which show a well-linked and active community of feminists in web 2.0.

Landström also emphasizes the possibilities of the internet from queer perspectives. In the web, lesbians and gay men have created new, non-heterosexual spaces, in which identity has proved not to be determined by the past of an individual, but by their future. Subjects are produced in different ways online and offline. She argues that this experience erodes the causal link between individual biography and political subject, and sees this as offering huge chances for queer politics: “Grounding political struggle in a desire to open up new possibilities for subject production (rather than re-enacting what is already established) clears space for thinking differently about identity and the human. In contrast to identity politics, that argue for equal rights for subjects that are already stabilised, politics for the subject multiple would aim to create spaces where subjects never seen before could be produced, in ways that do not repeat previous mistakes of defining, excluding and policing subject positions believed to derive from singular identities” [23].

Considering weblogs from a gender perspective, we can come to a heterogeneous result, which ranges from the reproduction of gendered structures in public spaces, to enthusiastic female bloggers, to chances for creating various gender identities and even political subjects for queer politics.

## CONCLUSIONS

I would like to conclude with some theses about the characteristics of web 2.0 from gender perspectives. If we remember the early feminist hopes and fears, firstly it appears that male dominance is no longer a problem in web 2.0. In contrast, many weblogs are written by women, especially in the group of teenagers. The internet can no longer be considered a male technology – whether it has become a female medium as Plant suggested is open to doubt, however. And if we remain with the example of weblogs, we also have to state a reproduction of patriarchal mechanisms in public spaces, where weblogs written by men earn more attention because they deal with “political” issues, while blogs written by women contain primarily “private” issues.

Further, we find a number of examples of good networks, solidarity and participation in the field of queer-feminist politics. More than ever, web 2.0 technologies support mutual linking and reciprocal references and invite

collaboration, cooperation, comments and discussion. Web 2.0 seems to be an appropriate place for queer-feminist projects which work together closely and strengthen each other.

These results are thus similar in some respects to earlier findings on feminist use of the internet, which showed that most of the investigated feminist websites contain link lists and refer to each other [5]. However, much more than in 2003/04, the internet is now being used for co-operative work, discussion and opinion-forming. Working together on a common text or statement in wikis, or discussing, commenting or criticizing current issues in weblogs is now common practice. The potentials of the internet for feminist politics which were assumed in early years have been slightly more achieved since the advent of web 2.0.

An interesting question is on the correspondence of queer politics and web 2.0, as we can observe intense and visible use and design of weblogs in particular in queer contexts. It has yet to be proved whether queer internet sites have increased with web 2.0 and are more visible now. If this applies, possible reasons could be that weblogs are not as static as websites. A thesis could be that while websites represent a closed and finished presentation of an institution, group or person, weblogs are much more transitory, spontaneous and elude categorization. They allow users to position current issues quickly and briefly and to form temporary alliances via comments and blogrolls. On one day bloggers can support one opinion or stream, on another they can show their solidarity with someone else. On a traditional website, however, the list of links is not usually changed very often, but shows relations of permanent closeness and relatedness. These characteristics could be one reason for the extensive use of weblogs in queer contexts in contrast to earlier uses of internet tools. And, as Landström argued, weblogs offer possibilities for multiple subject construction where political subject and individual biography are no longer inevitably linked.

However, web 2.0 obviously is also a space for tough struggles for meanings of gender. Anti-feminist, sexist and homophobic comments question the relevance of gender politics and feminism every day. Besides social changes which lead to increasing doubt in the importance of gender issues outside the web, this phenomenon could also be technologically caused: In contrast to former times on the internet, in web 2.0 these contrary opinions are confronted with each other in a much more obvious way. In the days of websites, forums and chats, every subculture had its own separate place in cyberspace, not linked or connected and often unaware of the others. Now, "Wikipedia", "MySpace" and "studiVZ" are popular places where people of different attitudes, religions, hobbies and not least political opinions come together. As a result, gender issues are not only discussed in (queer-feminist) niches among like-minded people, but in large communities. Feminist perspectives have to be defended, and struggles for the relevance of gender issues and an understanding of gender

as a social construction have to be managed on a permanent basis.

Considering the early hopes for identity experiments on the internet, we can observe a strong comeback of insisting on performing a "real" gender identity. While older studies on communication in forums, chats and MUDs already showed that gender roles play a significant role in "bodiless" interaction [e.g. 14] because they are an important orientation even in anonymous situations, we can now observe that in places where users present themselves with their "real" identity, gender is also deliberately displayed in an extraordinary way. Especially in social networks, the binary of gender is central. This concerns firstly the design of the platforms. Thus, as gender and technology studies has shown previously [e.g. 7, 35], once again gender relations are inscribed into technology. Secondly, it is also the users who perform and construct gender as a biological fact. Instead of a breakdown of gender, we can observe a new reinforcement of exclusively male and female gender identities and their significance. It might be interesting to discuss this desire for authenticity and this insistence on gender binarity in web 2.0 on the one hand as a turning away from postmodernity, which corresponds with social changes and rollbacks "outside" the web, and on the other hand as effects of the technological developments of the internet. Thus, a perspective on technology and gender as co-constructed remains promising.

To sum up, we find a heterogeneous picture of gender relations in web 2.0, which ranges from a reinforcement of stereotyped masculinities and femininities to slight experiments with various gender identities to possibilities for queer politics without recurring to singular identities. Furthermore, we can observe a great many struggles, attacks and defences of gender issues as well as strong networks, links and communities of queer-feminist politics. As pointed out, every web 2.0 tool shows different effects and corresponds with different social practices, constructions and negotiations of gender relations.

I would like to close with one last important aspect: the connection between self-government, self-control, self-management and web 2.0, which has recently been discussed in other, non-feminist, debates. Among others, Reichert shows how far social network sites, weblogs and e-learning tools correspond with requirements for the subjects to practice successful self-presentation, flexible self-management, self-framing and self-reflection [28]. Referring to Foucault's studies of governmentality, the moment of self-government is decisive for today's neo-liberalism [13]. By calling the subjects free, autonomous, enterprising individuals, they can be governed not through state control or moral standards under a religious mandate, but through structuring the possible field of action in which they govern themselves, to govern them through their "freedom".

The ambivalence of freedom and self-government in contemporary societies is also a relevant point for Boltanski and Chiapello [2]. They argue that autonomy, self-realization and creativity, which in the 1968 generation represented counter-models of social movements against all kinds of hierarchical power relations, have lost their critical impetus, and are now principles of the new capitalism. These aims, once meant as critique, are suited very well for the ideological justification of the neoliberal redirection of economy, state and society. What Boltanski and Chiapello showed using the example of artistic critique can be transferred to feminist claims of the 1970s, for example for occupational equality and equal access to the labour market. These liberal feminist ideas were collected and put into practice by mainstream politics and economic interests and thus instrumentalized, losing their critical potential [36].

The internet and especially web 2.0 can be considered a prototype of liberal governing technology [28]. The discourse of self-reflection and self-presentation demands everybody's willingness to learn, control and develop the new forms of medial self-control. Thus, self-presentation in social networks is a remarkable example of managing gender identities.

Transferred to feminist use and design of web 2.0, the following has to be considered: While on the one hand important and valuable tools are available for queer-feminist politics, which support networking, communication, empowerment and solidarity and realize feminist demands, on the other hand these feminist issues have now been merged into neoliberal politics. Feminist activists who use web 2.0 willingly and enthusiastically should be aware of this dynamic and reflect to what extent they follow the same principles of subjection to hegemonic norms while networking, presenting themselves and empowering, and thus practice exactly that which is expected [see also 26]. Feminist politics should not content themselves with the use of network technologies, but must also prove consistently and critically which calls for self-government and government by others (Foucault) are conjunct with web 2.0 practices, and try to develop subversive and critical opposite strategies, countercultures and alternative ways of design and use (or disuse) again and again.

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