

Chapter 34

BOLD Ideas for Creative Social Networking: An Invitational Discussion

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ABSTRACT

To further open the conversation about women's empowerment and global collaborations using new networking technologies, this chapter problematizes some prevalent ideas about creativity and social networking, notes suggested change that carry anti-feminist sentiments throughout the world, and suggests a number of ways that women and men can all benefit from an opening of queries about innovative ways of working together online. With the suggested expansions, the authors welcome more inclusive and invitational discussion about future digital media research and development.

INTRODUCTION

We are aware of dramatic technological changes, as more and more of us live in media-saturated cultures. The innovative practices of designers and practitioners of digital media technologies have provided millions of people with new and valuable means for obtaining and exchanging information and skills, and for building networks across many geographical and social boundaries. We read and hear about, and often experience, so-called “revolutionary” changes in social networking practices that enable increasing number of people to share and process information in innovative digital forms. And yet, according to several recent reports, women's representation in technology continues to be low in general, and even the small number of women in technical fields are often isolated from influential social networks (Simard & Gammal, 2012). Given these barriers, we wonder just who is listening to whom, and we wonder if some critical “revolutionary” ideas are being refused or ignored.

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In the current mainstream discourse on women's use of social networking technologies, we find prevalent assumptions that presuppose that, compared with men's uses, women's ideas and activities on the social Web are deficient and less serious. The assumption that women are not capable of generating creative and Big Ideas (about anything) is entrenched in much mainstream consciousness and unconsciousness, and appears in many guises. This fundamentally serious problem has been, for several decades, stated, illustrated and reiterated by feminists, without much, if any, fundamental changes. This is a discouraging situation, for everyone. If this situation is to change, for the benefit of all, women will need to be included, at every level, in the discussions and design of the digital media technologies. But not just included, in a perfunctory, numerical way, but in ways that acknowledge the complex history of gender inequalities in digital media work, and that acknowledge the challenging, creative and bold offerings women can bring to the work. At the moment, in terms of the recognition of their creativity, women seem to be hidden online.

In an effort to further open the conversation about women's empowerment on the Internet and global collaborations using new social networking technologies, we look at some of the ways that some current narrow ideas, usually unexplored, are carrying anti-feminist sentiments online throughout the world. If left unscrutinized, the misleading ideas can result in very limited notions of what access, equality, and interactive cultures can be. Here, we are not going to review and explore all the studies of creativity and gender. Rather, we problematize some prevalent ideas, stress that the social climate is an important element of what is accepted as creativity, and suggest a number of ways that men and women can all benefit from an opening of queries about innovative ways working together online. With our suggested expansions below we offer a number of thoughts about how to encourage fresh ideas about future digital media research and development. While not the only areas that need to be spotlighted, they can provide beneficial beginnings of more inclusive and invitational discussions.

IDEAS, EXPANSIONS, AND INVITATIONAL DISCUSSIONS

Can We Expand Prevalent Ideas of Online Creative Practices?

Women have a slight edge over men in terms of group communication skills; when women are included they generally improve the collective intelligence of a group (see studies cited in Kamberidou, 2013). In explaining the rising collective intelligence in groups with more women, Woolley and Malone (2011) point out that women are more inclined to "listen to each other. They share criticism constructively. They have open minds. They're not autocratic" (p. 2). Despite all these values women bring to innovative practices, women have not been widely recognized as having Big Ideas or of being creative in general (see the review in Zhang & Kramarae, 2012). 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 about how the new social networking technologies can work. Kaliya Hamlin 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 were women (July 27, 2009). Our own experiences at conferences and workshops on new technologies confirm her observation: In most sessions, women are encouraged to be primarily listeners, and women's issues are rarely singled out as topics for discussion. As media critic Soraya Chemaly (April 18, 2013) summarizes, "The technology

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