

Social Learning and Self-Inclusion Through Women's Web Magazines

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What do users/readers of women's web magazines learn and how do they learn this? In this paper, women's web magazines will both be seen as a source for repeating and reinforcing heteronormative gender differences and as a tool for empowerment of their users. Most of this paper will focus on the processes through which the female users of women's web magazines acquire digital skills, get self-confidence and learn that the Internet is a place where they can feel 'at home'. They learn this through processes of 'assisted inclusion': through the design of websites, self-inclusion and social learning can be encouraged. Learning is considered to be a process of co-shaping of user and magazine, which takes place at both a material and a symbolical level: what gendered subjects are being produced by women's web magazines and what computers/Internet are users of web magazines producing?

Traditional women's magazines target middle class, middle aged, white heterosexual women, using and reinforcing traditional stereotypes of the attractive heterosexual partner, the productive modern housewife, the caring mother and supportive friend. Whereas women's web magazines repeat and reinforce these same stereotypes, e.g. by offering information about beauty, fashion and relationships, they at the same time stretch the traditional stereotypes of women to include the modern, computer competent and independent woman. Hence, they may help in breaking down some of the traditional stereotypes of femininity. Similarly, they can challenge the gender binary of women/serious/functional use versus men/fun/pleasure use. Or by allowing women to discuss their everyday life interests on a public forum, traditional binaries of women/private place versus men/public space may be loosened up. Finally, these stereotypes could have been loosened up by for instance presenting such a traditional, female connotated medium as a women's magazine on a, certainly at the time of conception of these web magazines, male connotated computer and Internet environment, giving them the incentive to use the Internet and facilitate self-inclusion in that respect.

To study what users of women's web magazines learn, creators and designers were interviewed and sites and discussion-threads were studied of the Norwegian web magazines 'Femme', the Irish 'eVenos', the Dutch 'Libelle' and Italian 'Donna Moderna'. In addition, two self-help mailing lists were studied, the Dutch Women On the Web ('WOW') aimed at women who start their own business or who want to develop their ICT competences and the Italian 'Sensa Maschera', aimed at people with 'Lupus', a serious illness that is more common amongst women than amongst men. In addition, surveys were held amongst users of Sensa Maschera, Donna Moderna, WOW and eVenos and (online) interviews were held with users of the latter two. All magazines had an early web-presence as they came online between 1996 and 2000. We can assume that the early web presence of these websites targeting women has contributed to the image of the Internet as it is now, a place where a diversity of users can find information they like. Arguably, this image has contributed to more equal statistics regarding the number of men and women that use the Internet. In and of themselves, these web magazines certainly attracted variable but high numbers of women. Whereas, for instance, the Irish web magazine eVenos is accessed by 790 visitors per month (MacKeogh, 2003), the Italian web magazine Donna Moderna attracted for instance an estimated one and a half million readers (Fortunati, 2004: 235) and Dutch web magazine Libelle had 13 million page views in a year (Slooten, 2003). In all these cases, a majority of users was female.

SELF-INCLUSION: COMMERCIALITY WITH A TWIST

What were the motives and intentions of the creators of the women's magazines we studied to 'go on line'? All four web magazines operated commercially. They hoped to directly earn money through advertisements on the Internet and indirectly

by going on line as that would give their paper magazine a more modern image, again leading to (new) advertisers aiming at a younger audience and possibly to more buyers of their paper magazine. The magazines were founded in the period before the dotcom crash, in the same period that in the US and Canada 'active courting of the 'elusive female audience' began in earnest' as a result of some studies that showed that women 'accounted for 55% of web shopping' (Shade, 2000: 220). Hence, the creators had high expectations of huge growth rates and possibly even 'rolling out over Europe', as the creators of the Norwegian web magazine 'Femme' called it (Hestflatt, 2003).

All web magazines except Femme were magazines that already existed on paper, so their target users were somewhat younger but basically similar to that of their paper magazine, whereas the Norwegian magazine aimed to look similar to Cosmopolitan. In short, they all aimed at middle to upper-class women, which is not surprising 'given that advertisers want the most bang from their bucks' (Shade, 2000: 221). They tried to attract these women by addressing similar issues as they addressed in their paper magazines. According to sociologist McRobbie (1991), rather than dividing their target group according to interest, as is done when the target audience is male, girl-magazines 'assume that all girls are interested in romance, make-up, physical fitness, cooking, and fashion' (McRobbie, 1991). Indeed, the designers based many decisions on stereotypes rather than on user-research: as a Norwegian designer said 'certain things just belong to being a woman and to being female' (Hestflatt, 2003). Some designers also followed the so-called 'reflective I-methodology', as they assumed that their own interests would reflect those of the target users (Rommes, 2006), but perhaps most of all, they made their choices based on what they thought their potential advertisers would want to be on their site, which in the case of the Italian web magazine 'Donna Moderna' explained the attention paid to beauty topics.¹

One of the common perceptions expressed by the producers of web magazines was that many women needed assistance to become web users. Generally, this was not based on a perception of female users as poor with technology, but in most cases it was felt that either women had no time for technology (Donna Moderna, eVenos) or had the ability but lacked the confidence (Women on the Web). For whatever reason, all the producers approached the user with 'kid gloves'. In particular, producers felt that the technology had to be 'easy to use' or 'user-friendly'. For example, the editor of Libelle felt very passionately about the importance of ease of use, and suggested that navigation should be: 'super, super simple; always visible, always knowing where you are, always recognizable ... I would give my life if necessary to make sure that those requirements were met' (Slooten, 2003: 179). Hence, for the web magazine sites clear, traditional, fixed frames were used, explanations about how to use the site were given and the sites were made accessible at multiple platforms, e.g. also by Macintosh users and by not using flash.² So even though they did not think about their female users as incompetent, their websites could easily give that impression, especially if it is compared with similar web magazines for men.

All in all, these magazines used and reinforced traditional heteronormative stereotypes of women being interested in private and household issues and who are incompetent and need help in their use of the Internet. Whereas the users of magazines that targeted men and that were founded in the same period of time learned about a wide variety of ICT gadgets (Hestflatt, 2003), female users of these web magazines learned about how to make themselves more beautiful, how to improve their relationships and how to make a good meal. This reproduction and reinforcement of traditional stereotypes by commercial websites, web magazines, soap operas and games for girls has been extensively criticized by feminist researchers (Brunsdon, 1995; Cassell & Jenkins, 1998). Although many women

were clearly interested in the topics presented in these magazines, the success of the non-commercial websites *Sensa Maschera* and *Women On the Web* shows that other topics, like health, computer use or starting an enterprise were at least as popular. For a long time, *Women On the Web* was even the largest Internet community in the Netherlands (Drost & Jorna, 2000). Moreover, it seems that one of the most successful parts of the web magazines was not the content produced by the creators, but rather the communication and information exchange between the users of these sites on the many discussion boards that these sites hosted.

Although there is a lot to say against the repetition and reinforcement of stereotypes by these women's web magazines, they can also offer support and recognition in dealing with everyday life events, including how to deal with a gendered unequal society, and validation for undervalued female-connotated characteristics (Lovell, 1980). From a feminist standpoint position and from a diversity perspective, there is every reason to encourage an increase in female connotated values and topics on the Internet, and the main problem with these web magazines is that these topics are so clearly directed at 'women', rather than 'for everybody interested in these topics'. In a sense, these web magazines helped in constructing the Internet as an object of desire for users with a wider variety of interests, something that was clearly needed, looking at the historical roots and development of the Internet as 'a toy for the boys'.

Moreover, women's web magazines give the message that you can be a computer competent and confident woman and at the same time adhere to heteronormative requirements for women in present day society. These websites may attract female readers by offering the motivation and the opportunity to become familiar with the use of the Internet, e.g. they encouraged learning by doing, and several web magazine sites offered help for instance by offering an alphabet of 'technical terms'. 'Self-inclusion' thus flows from the relevance of the content of the magazine, the motivation this creates to be online and by reducing the amount of 'inclusion-work' by the users by connecting closely to the situation in which the user is, in terms of their everyday life experiences and their access to technological facilities, knowledge and skills. But even the large majority of women that is disinterested in women's magazine topics may experience that the creation of such 'places for women' or the addition of explicitly 'feminine' topics on the Internet gives the (implicit) message that the Internet is a place for women as well as for men.

SOCIAL LEARNING: WARM EXPERTS WITH A TWIST

As we have seen above, web magazines may be important instruments for assisted inclusion by providing for some relevant content, by facilitating more diverse learning methods than just learning by doing, and in symbolically transforming the meaning of the Internet to something that women feels fits with them. In addition, websites may assist inclusion by providing interactive mail lists, chat rooms and discussion boards where technical matters can be discussed and where users may develop social bonds and communities. This latter way of assisting with inclusion we will call 'social learning'. As with self-inclusion, however, the skills and knowledge that is being passed on between people is only a minor part of what needs to be learned. The symbolical and identity-work is at least as important, through which not just the perception of women as computer competent is changed, but also the perception of computers and the Internet as being relevant, fun and interesting is transformed.

In general, social learning is one of the main ways in which people learn to use new technologies and especially interactive ICTs (Rogers, 1995). People learn not just skills but also the relevance or entertainment-value of new ICTs from so-called 'warm experts': family members, friends or acquaintances who already have experience with the technology (Bakardjieva, 2001). A warm expert can 'translate' the usefulness of the technology and the language and skills needed for it in a way that fits with the everyday life experiences of the new user and can gear information towards specific questions and level of skills of users on a 'need to know' basis. This is hardly possible in manuals or during more formal learning settings. As many of the users of the women's web magazines remarked, however, such a 'warm expert' can also create an unwanted dependency relationship. One of the users of *WOW* said: 'I want to manage and maintain my own computer without being dependent on others'. Having a warm expert help may in fact increase the feeling of incompetence by the person being helped and even reinforce gender hierarchies (Rommes, 2002). Moreover, warm experts may not have time when needed or they may give wrong or unhelpful information.

The help women gave each other on-line had all the advantages of warm expert knowledge without the disadvantages. Answers were being checked by many other

users, who would often provide additional information and the information was seen as more 'trustworthy', as they did not perceive any hidden agendas of the helpers. (Gendered) power-relations were absent as they were not in a personal relationship with the other users of the boards and almost all users were women. Most importantly, reading about personal experiences with technology but also with other recognizable stories of dealing with illness, discrimination or a (male) partner gave many of them more self-confidence in life and in dealing with technologies: they felt 'at home' on the Internet. As a user of *WOW* remarked: 'It gives me the feeling that I belong to it and because of this, I have started taking myself more seriously in the area of computers. Nowadays, I follow a master education media design'. In short, women would empower each other by being role model to each other. As two users of the mailing lists remarked of *WOW* and *eVenos* remarked: 'I have become so stubborn, I think: if others can do it, then why should I not be able to do it?' and another user said: 'by reading how others deal with computer problems (...) I get the sense that I could also learn it!' As we have shown in earlier research, being a role model for each other is one of the main advantages of women-only education in general (Rommes, Faulkner, & Slooten, 2005).

All in all, as a result of the self inclusion and social learning that was facilitated by the women's web magazines, both the female users of these websites as well as (perceptions of) parts of the Internet changed. Women perceived themselves as being computer competent and 'belonging' to the Internet. Simultaneously, the perception and content of the Internet changed. The Internet was no longer seen as a 'toy for the boys', but also discussion boards and topics were added and interfaces were changed as a result of requests by female users. Moreover, the female users of the discussion boards and mailing lists changed the discussion culture of the Internet, the 'Netiquette', at least for the boards and lists they were using. Rather than pasting short answers inside another woman's mail or replying 'RTFM' ("read the fucking manual") to questions, which had been the dominating discussion style on many mailing lists before, the discussion style on all discussion boards and mailing lists we studied was one of supportiveness, 'there are no stupid questions' and one in which women took time and space to answer questions elaborately and often illustrate them with personal stories and experiences (Herring, 1994). This chapter has shown the importance of changing both gender and technologies as a way of including gender in the information society, and it has shown ways in which this can be done.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Similarly, in the development of a new electronic toy for girls, the designers based their final decision about the color of the toy on what they expected the parents of the girls would like, rather than on what they knew the girls they had studied would like (Rommes, Stienstra, & Oudshoorn, 2003).
- ² This is an often underestimated aspect of software, as e.g. Star noted: 'It seemed the difficulty was not in the interface (...) but rather in infrastructure - incompatible platforms' (Star, 1999: 380)

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