

Chapter 11

Cyber Identity: Our Alter–Ego?

Ana-Cristina Ionescu

Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Romania (CCIR), Romania

ABSTRACT

The realities of our world are imperatively legitimated by the complex relationship between media, technology, and society. Whether we deal with old or new Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), the content of the message delivered by the media assumes a fundamental role. The adherence of a large number of individuals to a common idea facilitates the formation of media-enabled personalities and communities within the virtual space. The emergence of Web 2.0 solves the tension from the '90s, when the public opinion decomposed into an amalgam of informal opinions of private individuals not entirely convinced by the formal ones, issued by publicistically effective but one-way communication media. While today the Internet provides the most inclusive forum of public deliberation, where communication is negotiated between cyber-women and cyber-men with equal rights, healed of the social diseases of the outer world, an important gap in our knowledge is whether Web 2.0 reflects our existing reality or whether it constructs a new environment, one that is devoid of the old biases. I would like to fill this gap in information, by exploring whether virtual communities represent a continuation, by technical means, of the pre-existing, face-to-face, geographic, stereotyped interactions, or whether they enabled the establishment of substantially different structures with their own intrinsic features and dynamics, where women have access to and control information.

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INTRODUCTION

Women's access to ICTs depends on class, ethnicity, caste, race, or age, which interact with gender. Their empowerment varies depending on how gender relations as a cultural process are being negotiated and contested, in relation to the technology environment. Differences between men and women have to do more with our own implicit gender stereotypes and less with neurological differences, as thoughts and attitudes often disagree with consciously held beliefs (Fine, 2010).

Yet, once women are on-line, gender differences are minimized. Access to information and the use of technologies can significantly contribute to reducing poverty, increasing productivity, and stimulating the economic transformation of women: better jobs and better living conditions (Fredriksson, 2011). Via web 2.0, women build strong networks to combat social exclusion and the stereotypes of the outer male-dominated world. While e-commerce supports women entrepreneurs to enter the global markets through the Internet, health educators use TV, radio, and the Internet to communicate information related to women's sexual and reproductive health. Moreover, topics like gender that even today are considered taboo in some parts of the world are tackled on-line in forums created by women. Communication through e-mail and online newsletters has been of major importance, starting with mid-nineties, to raise awareness on women's rights both in the real and the virtual world.

The belief according to which computer mediated communication (CMC) is nothing but a reflection of the outer social reality, is valid nowadays just for third world countries not connected to the Internet, where technologies have been historically a male preserve and women lack access to basic communication means.

To set the background on the theme of this chapter, a thorough literature review (with specific focus on the research theme) on the relation

between media and reality, ICTs and their social implications, cyberspace, virtual identities and gender is provided.

Media and the Construction of Reality

People like us, who believe in physics, know that the distinction between past, present, and future is only a stubbornly persistent illusion - Albert Einstein

Old or new, the importance of the media in the modern world is indisputable. In some communities, the media have largely replaced traditional institutions, like the Church or the Trade Unions, as the primary source of understanding of the world (Talbot, 2007). We hear very often the assertion "media constructs reality", but what is the difference between *real life* and *virtual realm*?

The Power of the Media

As opposed to realism, which starts from the assumption that it is only reality which affects the agent (and not the reverse), constructivism asserts that solely the agent, in the act of perceiving reality, builds it. Among the various agents that construct realities, we encounter the media, both individual media and mass media systems, corresponding to the media-cultural constructivism current, whose most relevant representatives are Gebhard Rusch, Klaus Merten et al., and communication, media and culture corresponding to the socio-cultural constructivism current, represented by Siegfried J. Schmidt, who attempts to observe all agents equally in a 'closed circuit'.

Majority of constructivists believe that the constructive nature of our reality and world is the *sine qua non* of knowing. Weber (2002) defines media reality as a construction, which implies the unification of journalistic and entertainment forms of *re-presentation*. Yet, Karl Popper (1963) argues

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