

CYBERMIND DISCUSSES GENDER V 1.0

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Abstract

The account of gender on the Cybermind Mailing List is furthered by presentation of data and discussion from the List which touches on gender. Areas considered include: attitudes to feminism; gender and technology; awareness of gender; gendered patterns of communication; clichés about the way the different genders address each other; flaming and aggression; harassment; single gender lists; gender ambiguity; intimacy; the shifting divisions between public and private spaces; and bodies and netsex.

This paper gives further background to the discussion begun in the Introduction to this issue of the *Transforming Cultures eJournal* with the aim of providing some illustrations of the points made there and to add to the depth and generality of the material presented.

Gender and Feminism

In the Introduction I have already emphasised the problems that analysing gender seems to provoke in that it draws attention to, and causes disputes about, gender beyond those which might already exist at the research site. However, irrespective of the observer's questions, these complexities are nearly always constitutive of List argument about gender, and in particular List argument about feminism. All of these continuing arguments say something about attitudes towards gender in both the online and offline worlds, and they challenge any easy assumptions about progress towards feminism, equality or a 'non-gendered world'.

Some members seem to be hostile to the 'paradox' of the process of drawing attention to gender in order to criticise its functioning, one man writing (16 Nov.01):

By the way I've always wondered why the term "feminism" is often used like it meant somekind of action to free women from "chauvinism" to create "equality" between sexes. Isn't that a bit sexist thought?¹

Elizabeth is also critical of how drawing attention to a problem might lead people to possibly exaggerated positions (14. June.03):

I have personally witnessed, on more than one occasion, a roomful of feminists proceed to blame men for everything that has ever gone wrong in the world. I have read with annoyance a lot of feminist writings which paint men in very unflattering ways. I have also seen feminists turn on anyone who attempts to point out that men are not, perhaps, the Root of All Evil. Hell, I've even seen people pitch a screaming blue fit over the idea of "gender studies" instead of simply "women's studies." If all you do is bitch about what is *wrong* without pointing to what is *right* then it only creates more problems.

Elaine, presents a similar argument against feminism from a more nostalgic point of view (6 Oct.02):

Feminist equality has taken away a woman's right to be a woman. In being equal to men, women have forsaken the tribute given to their unique identity and nature.

When the stolidly non-heterosexual Kate was questioned what she meant by using the right wing term "femi-nazis" in reference to feminists, she responded by instancing a perceived feminist bias against female freedom. 'Femi-nazis' were, according to her, (14 Nov.02):

Radical Separatist Vegetarian Animal Rights Activist White Middle Class Androgynous Lesbian Feminist Weemoon Wimmin Womon who think ALL women everywhere are biologically predisposed towards being peaceful nurturing loving co-operative beneficent and nonviolent as opposed to men who are totally the opposite, and all such women should be able to speak their minds and have equal rights as long as they toe the no fur no leather but Birkenstock wearing Party Line.

Such positions were nearly always contested, but there was constant difficulty in reaching agreement on what feminism should be. On the very few occasions when a person argued that women could not, or should not, do something because they were women, the person's arguments were generally not accepted by anyone. Nevertheless, there was apparently no accepted prototype for feminist behaviour, except perhaps of getting on with one's life. Salwa desperately attempted to sum up, with only fragmentary agreement (7 Oct.01):

¹ All quotations are given without 'correction'. Ellipses added by this author are within square brackets [...], other ellipses are as written.

Can we then agree on a heuristic definition that captures the spirit of this movement while steering away from inflammatory rhetoric? How about "feminism is an attempt to see the notion of human rights truly include women; it attempts to translate the UN Declaration of Human Rights into laws and social practices that protect women"?

The most popular personal or political feminisms seemed to be libertarian feminisms, rather than 'restrictive feminisms' as might be expected in a group who's politics can generally be classed as US 'liberal'. On the whole, any idea that freedoms could benefit from some kind of restrictions was generally not accepted and List members seemed largely uninterested in any joint political action which involved explicitly 'interfering' with some one else; so this was not just a feature of their reactions to feminism or to gender. I have suggested elsewhere that one of the conventions around the important framing rubric of authenticity is that truth is vitiated by conventions, rules or restrictions², and this seems to apply to feminism when it is taken as an authentic expression of being female.

Argument that feminism was sexist in itself, tended to come from men, while the argument that feminism restricted or condemned some female behaviour tended to come from women. Despite these ambivalences, people were quite capable of using "old wave" feminist theory (Dworkin, McKinnon, Spender etc.) in their analysis of events on the List. Discussions about feminism, even when conflictual, were relatively friendly unless the debate was framed within another wide-spread conflict such as that between Right and Left wing politics, when events could easily become more heated and abusive – especially as all the overt right wing List members who ever engaged in this kind of argument were male.

To some extent, these issues demonstrate the interplay between offline and online. At the moment, most people online in the West probably have some shared political opinion about a 'movement' generally called feminism and a category of people labelled feminists, which affects their attitude towards people who might put forward the subject of gender equitable interaction. Therefore offline politics and gender are brought online and they influence: the possible 'equality' and presence of men and women online; the reactions people will have when questions around gender arise; the

² Jonathan Paul Marshall *Living on Cybermind Categories, Communication and Control*, NY, Peter Lang, 2007b: Chapter 6.

kinds of categories they put themselves and others into; whether they have to listen to people in those categories; the kind of battles those categories predispose them towards; whether they will see attempts at freedom for members of some social categories as suppression of their own, and; the kinds of rhetoric they will employ when dealing with these issues³.

Gender and Technology

Most people on Cybermind seemed to be technically proficient enough to not mention their lack of technical proficiency, and most requests for technical help seemed to come from males rather than from females. There was no voiced expectation that women would not be able to use the technology adequately. Caitlin Martin, for example, mentions that she works with computers and computer geeks in her paper. In November 1997 Amy Fletcher asked women on the List if they believed they had “the same amount of computer skill as the average male, more computer skill, or less skill?” Few people responded directly to the List but those that did seemed to think they had enough skills writing things like: “I have average computer skills, about the same as a man” or:

As a user, I am as skilled as the next user. However, I'm not a programmer, nor do I aspire to be. I do try to keep up with the latest tools so I can keep up with my students. Sometimes, but not often, I get to be ahead of them.

On occasions there might be some ‘bragging’ about computer equipment; while this was always started by males, females would often join in and people would share their experiences with their equipment. Occasionally, but rarely, people, usually female, would mention gender barriers to learning, as when Mari recounted her experiences in the past with a male maths professor who declared that (18 May.02):

women had no place in higher math, and so could not expect to get anything higher in his classes than a C. our minds were simply not logical enough for the complicated thought processes needed, etc. any women who did not care for this view was invited to leave his class

Another member told how for one of her female students (15 Mar.96):

the medium carries a gendered quality [...] with video and the electronic media carrying the most male-karma. She wants to make a "feminine" work,

³ It is also possible to argue that not only has feminism and ‘equality’ proved more complex than was assumed, but that there has been a concerted politically motivated ‘backlash’ (to use Susan Faludi’s term from the 1990s) against women’s freedom and equality. As Anne Summers writes in *The End of Equality: Work, Babies, and Women’s Choices in 21st Century Australia*, Millers Point, Random House, 2003: 2-3: “the actual experience of far too many women in Australia suggests that the promise of equality has not been met. Sadly we are actually going in the opposite direction... We cannot ignore the facts of our regression”.

and feels that her efforts at conversation in these coed contexts will be completely off the mark. Wrong level stuff.

Rose wrote, positing a gender difference, but without getting much support, (14 Aug.97):

Male studies/creates technology
Female _uses_ it (sometimes before its birth ;)

On the whole, it can be said that the women who spoke to the List did not seem to find the technology difficult to use or incompatible with their identities as female, but this to some extent is a self-selecting sample; those who could not handle the Internet would not have been present. The nerd/geek connotations were acceptable for both sexes, although not used very often, as Mari wrote (26 Feb.03):

almost all the men in this list are geeks.
they were all bumbling male idiots, until someone recognized their inherent talent and channeled them. of course, to be entirely fair, this description fits most of us women in this list, as well...

Mari's account can be seen as an example of category making functioning as an attempt to give or describe unity. More significantly, I cannot recall any significant incidents in which males overtly used suppositions of masculine technical proficiency to support their dominance or to suppress discussion.

Awareness of Gender

I first approached the issue of gender by asking people whether they were aware of their own and others gender online and, then, what intensified or diminished that awareness. Most responded that they were not particularly conscious of their own gender unless the topic came up, or other people presented their positions as stemming from gender, or they were in an online place which was marked by gender (e.g. a single gender List, or a place geared towards dating or sex). The implication of these statements is that, when pressed, members do have an explicit awareness of the relevance of context for gender awareness. For some, mainly female, gender and identity were said to be "mixed up" or inseparable. However one woman could write (19 Jan.01):

On CM I'm generally not conscious of my gender, and I like that. My brain seems to work better when I'm genderfree. Sometimes I get backchannels which evolve into cybererotic communications, but that doesn't change my "ungenderly" feeling onlist.

This suggests that even if a person felt ungendered, they could still participate in activities which involved gender.

There was a great deal of reported variance on the issue of whether people were conscious of the gender of others, or whether this awareness guided the ways they might react to or read others. Thus Elizabeth writes (19 Jan.01):

If it doesn't come up, I don't care about it. If I spot telltale pronouns or other references, that's cool, but it's not something I go out of my way to hunt for. I am perfectly comfortable dealing with people in a disengendered way.

While Paul writes:

i'm more aware of the gender of others than of my own. (Shamefacedly) I'm possibly more likely to be easily aggressive towards males in argument, more likely to be 'open' to women (most of my long term correspondences, or contacts are with women, but in some ways this is true off list as well), more likely to be sympathetic to women, for a longer time.

Gender was also said to be noticed more when expectations were shown to be wrong, which implies the identification of others was unconscious and usually successful enough for discrepancies not to be noticed. This was the case even when people recognised the right of others to present themselves as 'other-gendered'. Thus Caitlin mentioned that when she was speaking with people who chose the gender neutral (or differently gendered) spivak on MOOs (5 Feb.01):

For me the only real concern ever w/the spivaks I've spent time w/is remembering to use the correct pronouns rather than defaulting to whichever set of traditional pronouns defined them in my head. In other words, I found that I'd made a decision about the person's "real" gender & I tended to discover I'd made that decision when I typoed while talking to them & used the wrong either male or female pronouns -- Freudian slip with lace & combat boots, I guess.

It seemed that the less important people were to someone then the less they bothered about that other person's gender. Awareness of gender might also become significant during an argument when a person's gender became important for judging the authenticity of their reasoning or the facts they presented. There was also some wariness of essentialising gender, especially when that was seen as a restraint or a veil over the authentic self⁴, while at the same time people often argued for 'essential' gender differences in communication patterns.

⁴ Marshall (2007b: 120-22, 133-4).

Gendered Communication Patterns

One of the areas in which male and female behaviour has been widely seen as differing *and* as being imported into online life, has been in styles of communication and in dominance over communication. Thus in a discussion back in March 1996, various members noted that women were frequently silent in offline mixed class rooms while being quite voluble when in single sexed classes. Laurie argued it seemed cultural, as “black women” seemed quite able to participate, and described some “white” women in her class (15 Mar.96):

two of whom said once that interrupting was rude, but who never got a chance to talk because they never interrupt in the discussion.

Jane and Laurie both wondered if it had to do with male styles of discourse in the classroom and the language deployed, despite Laurie being a female teacher/tutor, but KathrynZ expected this to change through technology, and wrote that (15 Mar.96):

What is heartening to me is that my own generation (X) is creating spaces online where people can speak out and interact regardless of gender, race, or orientation.

To which dobie responded, stressing the paradox mentioned earlier of emphasising gender in order to engage in critique, but quickly heading to resolution in silence (16.Mar 97):

It **is** heartening that there are these spaces online to speak - but many of them are far from free of stresses on gender, race (odd typo, I almost wrote 'face' here ;-), and orientation. If that's not already evident, I can always throw in a few examples later. Ocassionally I've found that the same people who intently discuss such things [[as]] "the feminine is uncomfortable with this (masculine?) discourse" end up reifying the very concepts that divide us. As an example, there are different ways of discourse that has been instilled in men vs. women. But I'd be wary of labeling something "a masculine/feminine discourse" because again, there we are falling into the trap of yet another binary opposition.

Despite the hope that being online might change things offline, expectations about behaviour were common. The most frequent cliché about male and female communication expressed on Cybermind was that men engage in problem solving and women in support (which again resonates with the gender basis of the ‘public-pragmatic’/‘private-intimate’ contrast). Thus Rose (5 Nov.01):

it's been my experience that women view a "statement of problem" as an opportunity to provide understanding and support, while men see it as a challenge to their ability to *_solve_*.

Similarly, Robert wrote (15 Nov.01), "Women "share" emotions. Men try to figure things out", and Ian claimed (4 May.02):

The major gender difference between men and women I see is men want to fix problems and women want understanding.

When a woman is describing a problem and wants to know that someone feels what she is experiencing a man needs to fix it not commiserate...

Again, the frequency of such positions does not mean they go unchallenged, and the last two posts evoked opposition. Renata wrote in response to Robert, stating that this rhetoric did not express her complexities (15 Nov.01):

Oh man, it's kinda weird to get males all around telling me they perfectly know the difference between men and women and how it all works, and seeing myself stumbling through yet another attempt to just be renata with a male present.

While Elizabeth wrote in response to Ian: "By which definition I am most definitely male".

In another discussion Jennifer expressed a similar idea of gender difference at more length (15 Aug.97):

Our way of communicating, regardless of our gender is governed by how we view the world. This encompasses our values, our concept of humanity, and how we, as individuals, fit into the world (see Becky Mulvaney, Gladys We, Larry Samovar, and Richard Porter). And, apparently, as we know intuitively and experientially, the genders view it rather differently. Carol Gilligan, arguing from a psychological perspective, states that "female identity revolves around interconnectedness and relationship," while the male identity "stresses separation and independence". Although this seems a bit too simplified, it can work as a general basis to explain some of the differences.

Jennifer continued her analysis, by arguing that males often show a need to be superior, to be more adversarial, to put people down for being female (or at the least to make the female nature of their co-correspondent an object of irony), and to perceive themselves as central to the conversation. Again, whatever the truth of these propositions, they show that the experience of, and theorising about, male dominance does not automatically stop online. She also suggests that where one gender predominates, then people who wish to be responded to, will adapt their presentation styles to those of the dominant gender. However: "Neither [style] is better. Each have suitable venues and purposes". Many males who responded seemed able to agree with the general direction of the argument, thus Andy writes (18 Aug 97):

It is nearly impossible to interact on the internet without gender effecting how you write, how what you write is interpreted by others, and how you interpret what you glean from the internet.

The differences can not be completely irradiated on the net. [...] I don't agree with gender bias, but I **do** think that a definite difference in genders should be maintained for the variety that spawns great thinking.

Michael objected, not only making the standard “you don’t really know I’m male” argument about the way he was being sexed by Jennifer, but also presenting the gender paradox as a problem (18 Aug.97):

Do you wish me to communicate with you in a manner which gives paramount importance to your gender or do you wish to be considered just another Cyberminder? Damned if I know now.

And later, being more explicit about the paradox:

You seem to want to create an atmosphere of gender equality, or gender neutrality at least, but everything you say emphasizes differences between genders.

Jennifer saw the first of these posts as illustrating:

a "typical" male's need to be the center of the conversation. You have apparently ignored the theory upon which I based my post, and have instead focused only on that which applied directly (read publicly) to you.

Lynne responded to this discussion by mentioning Dale Spender’s work in *Classrooms* in which Spender looked at mixed groups discussing gender bias, and found that men dominated the discussion, effectively silenced the women and kept the discussion at a theoretical rather than experiential level, thus preventing the appearance of other types of thought or information. Lynne further referred to the work of Susan Herring which showed parallel effects online, with the remark that lack of serious response to women “has a similar silencing effect”, although adding “CM seems to be a little atypical here, but does that really surprise;”).

Herring’s classic work was often mentioned in this kind of context, and needs to be briefly described. In her study of the mailing lists LINGUIST and Megabyte University, Herring found that women participated “at a rate that is significantly lower than that corresponding to their numerical representation”. “Women constitute 36% of LINGUIST and 42% of MBU subscribers”. Yet in a discussion on sexism, women constituted only 30% of posters. In more neutral theoretical discussions they made up only 16% of posters. Herring also stated that “the messages contributed by women are

shorter... a very long message invariably indicates that the sender is male”, and that “messages posted by women consistently received fewer average responses than those posted by men.... [T]opics initiated by women are less often taken up as topics of discussion by the group as a whole”⁵.

On three occasions Herring found that “women’s rate of posting increased gradually to where it equalled 50% of the contributions for a period of one or two days”⁶ – which suggests, given the proportions of the population, that those women who were posting were individually posting far more than were the men. Most women might have been quiet while some were being very active, but she does not give us enough information to be sure, or to be able to say how many people of either gender were being active. In general, it seems that a small number of posters on any list write most of the messages⁷. Herring claims that on those occasions the reaction “was virtually identical... a handful of men wrote in to decry the discussion, and several threatened to cancel their subscription to the list”. Which implies that some men could not cope with such a visible, or argumentative, female presence, but the more relevant question for power, is whether anyone took any notice of them.

Herring further asserts that in order of decreasing magnitude: men discussed issues, provided information, made queries and wrote about personal things. Women talked about personal things, made queries, then discussed issues and last of all provided information. All of which matches with the common gender clichés elaborated on Cybermind. It is, unfortunately, not stated how she determines if something is personal or not – although on one occasion she gives as an example, “talk about linguists and not linguistics”⁸.

Herring does not investigate, except briefly, the ongoing interaction of male and female subjects. Each utterance seems to be taken in isolation, so there is no investigation of overall trends or variation, or even of the ways in which people interact to co-produce the ambience of the list, or in which they recognise and reinforce gender. Proper

⁵ Susan Herring, “Gender and Democracy in Computer-Mediated Communication”, *EJC/REC* 3(2) 1993. <<http://www.internetstudies.pe.kr/txt/Herring.txt>>.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Marshall (2007b: 95, 291ff.)

⁸ Herring (1993: np).

engagement with these kind of local level issues requires intensive fieldwork rather than brief visits or abstract samples. Her results have not always been replicated by researchers of other groups⁹, and were not the case in statistical analyses of Cybermind¹⁰.

In harmony with the expectations of gendered discourse described above, topics of discussion were also seen as gendered. More emotional or personal topics were often seen both as female and as attracting a higher female response rate. Thus Salwa writes (14.Nov.01):

At least, this has been my experience on most lists: men shy away from topics perceived as women's, the kind of topics you find in girlie mags.:

Newspaper reports reinforce these ideas. Thus a New York Times article by Joyce Cohen, which was forwarded to Cybermind (21 May 01), claims that:

many e-mail users [...] can't help noticing that women are so often voluble and open on screen, while men are terse and tight-lipped. [...]

"My female friends write huge, long things -- the latest gossip and every little, minute detail of what's going on, and really specific stuff about school and social life and everything," said Leslie Wright, a student at Barnard College. "With guys, it's more like an outline".

According to this article, not only are women more voluble, but they are supposed to respond right away, while men delay for a couple of days. This, of course contradicts Herring's findings, but perhaps suggests that Western women tend to be more voluble, or comfortable, in 'private-intimate' exchanges than they are in domains which can be defined as 'public'.

⁹ See Jonathan Marshall ("Gender in Online Communications" in D. Leu, M. Knobel, C. Lankshear, & J. Coiro (Eds.), *Handbook of Research on New Literacies*, NJ, Erlbaum, 2007a: 506-10; "Online Life and Gender Dynamics", in Eileen M. Trauth (ed) *Encyclopedia of Gender and Information Technology*, NY Idea Group, 2006a: 927). Recently Herring has done work on blogs (Susan C. Herring and John C. Paolillo "Gender and genre variation in weblogs" *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 10(4), 2006: 439-459), writing:

While blog authors were roughly evenly divided between women and men, gender was skewed in relation to blog sub-genre. More females than males wrote personal journal blogs, although many males wrote journals, as well. However, almost all filters and k[knowledge]-logs were written by men (443).

The authors go on to argue that styles of language use also depend on the genre of the blog: "genre predicts the hypothesized female-preferential features in the weblog entries better than does author gender" (ibid: 449), and "among the six hypothesized male-preferential features that we selected for study, only one, numbers, shows the expected association with gender... filter genre is still, overall, a better predictor than male gender is for this feature set" (ibid: 450).

¹⁰ Marshall (2007b: 295-97).

We may summarise these stories and expectations by suggesting that it is expected that women will be more relational, emotional and intimate than men and more active in 'private', as might be expected offline. People also expect that this will be reflected in language use and behaviour. Or as Renata wrote in response to a question about how to identify someone from their language (8 Feb.01):

let try to name some of the "hints":

- being supportive is female (f.e. "I appreciated/enjoyed ...")
- statements are male (f.e. "it is a fact that ...")
- subjective talk is female (f.e. "I have the impression that ...")
- justifying that one takes up space is female (f.e. "I have the right to express the opinion that ...")
- assuming it is only natural that one takes up space is male (f.e. "this is my opinioon - period")
- asking for confirmation is female (f.e. "is there anyone else who ...?")
- "knowing" that others will confirm is male (f.e. "of course it is ...")

To which Dom responded (9 Feb.02):

A lot of so-called "female" language is designed to appease; indirectly, it attests to a fear of violence (be it "linguistic"); implicit is the speaker's helplessness. Diffidence also attests to fear, but it armours the speaker and issues a challenge of sorts - it can be readily taken for contrariness.

However, it can be suggested that much placatory language might *not* actually stem from fear either of rejection or of the power of the established, but from the aim of being relational and keeping the List running smoothly when people are upset. This is a form of politics and of 'emotional labour', but it may be that established, or well liked, figures who easily become upset will tend to have the appearance of dominance. However, a place in which people do not reject that kind of politics, may also be seen as welcoming to women in some ways. It is also notable, and examples have already been given, that when discussing gender people would frequently remark that Cybermind was not a place generally polarised by gender, or hostile to women. Thus during a discussion of Susan Herring's work and its application to Cybermind, Amy wrote (20 Aug.97):

My comment: Cybermind is a little different. Since we're here discussing cyberspace, we're more in tune with the way things typically are, and the way things are supposed to be -- we're more likely to have better gender equality because we're aware of its role

I am not sure whether people thought this kind of disclaimer was a necessary genuflection if they were being critical, or was part of 'community building', or it simply struck them as true.

Despite the common acceptance of male female differences, there was little presentation of explanations for, or justification of, these differences. The most common explanation, which was almost always put forth by men, depended upon sociobiology and the assumption that men and women evolved to produce modern Western customs, and gender categories. Thus, it would be argued that through evolution, and the need to spread their seed and maximise offspring, men tended to be promiscuous and aggressive, while women, needing support during child rearing and only being able to have one child at a time, tended to be more monogamous and relational. It is hard to say how these explanations would have proceeded if left alone, as unfortunately this anthropologist tended to get involved at that point.

Flaming, Aggression and Power

Related to this conflation of intimacy, relationality and perhaps fear, with women, is the story that women do not flame and that therefore lists which have a large proportion of women tend to have less flames and are more harmonious – with the implication that people might be genderable by their propensity to flame, or that people might be interpreted as flaming depending on their gender. Herring writes “the simple fact of the matter is that it is virtually only men who flame”. “Women and men have a different communication ethic, and male ethical ideals can be evoked to justify flaming”. However, in her research both men and women state that they do not particularly like flaming¹¹. Baym reports that the level of flaming was unexpectedly low in the newsgroup she studied, and sees this not only as a result of largely female users, but because the group was, in some ways confessional¹². The latter was also true of Cybermind, and may have contributed to that group’s gender balance in postings, although it did not prevent intense arguments.

I have written elsewhere about how people proposed similar stories about flames on Cybermind¹³. Frequently, on Cybermind, if the people flaming or engaged in struggle were male, it would be mentioned, usually by a woman, that this was typical male

¹¹ Susan Herring “Gender Differences in Computer-Mediated Communication: Bringing Familiar Baggage to the New Frontier”, Keynote talk at panel entitled “Making the Net*Work*: Is there a Z39.50 in gender communication?”, *American Library Association annual convention*, Miami, June 27, 1994. <<http://cpsr.org/cpsr/gender/herring.txt>>

¹² Nancy Baym, *Tune in, Log On: Soaps Fandom and Online Community*, Thousand Oaks, Sage 2000: 138-40.

¹³ Marshall (2007a: 508-9; 2007b: 100, 191-92, 208-9).

behaviour. In at least one case when people commonly alleged onlist that male aggression had driven away women or caused them to be quiet, there was absolutely no statistical evidence that this effect was long lasting, or had even occurred – although it is possible that heightened awareness of this possibility and the setting up of the secret women’s list emma¹⁴ had reduced the effect. In this case the aggression almost certainly stemmed from problems, unrelated to List life, which had occurred in the offlist life of one particular male List member. Even one person can influence the shape of a List if they write enough or strongly enough. There is also the possibility that the later disputes over the Iraq War drove people away, changing the personnel of the List and changing the List as a result¹⁵.

Women on Cybermind did participate in flame war, especially when it was short term and primarily involved other women. However, it does seem to be true that certain males participated in flaming more often than any particular women did. Analytically the problem is that what is considered to be a flame differs between different people. On Cybermind, it was nearly always *other* people who were perceived as flaming, and a recurrent hallmark of political disputes has been that people condemn the writings of others as flames while apparently being unaware of the tone of their own writing. Similarly while Cybermind was frequently described as a place with little flame, it also had frequent passionate and occasionally abusive disputes. I found it impossible to make any kind of objective rating of flame when I tried to do so; therefore it was hard to check propositions about women and flames, even though female ‘pacifism’ was widely believed in.

However, if a List is going to have a ‘feminine’ culture of deliberately not flaming, then this must be indicated, and some can find these conventions trying. Thus Rowena writes of places too femininely gendered for her comfort (11 Oct.01):

The very first list I ever subscribed to (wholly by accident) was Cybermind, now that [...] wasn't particularly overboiling with niceness (with nice people maybe, but that is something else). Anyway, I was to intimidated to plunge in, so I became a lurker (for about half a year). But because I would have liked to participate and because I was intrigued by this medium I went on a search for more mailinglists, see whether there might be one with a lower treshhold.

¹⁴ See below and Marshall (2007b: 198-9).

¹⁵ Marshall (2007b: 204-8). See also Ghaly’s article in this journal.

[On lists]dominated by women there was a regime of niceness, always start with compliments and good wishes, always fold everything that smacks of criticism in layers of 'if I understand you correctly you say such and such, but if I am a wrong please don't take offence' lots of {hugs} and such. (gush??) Personally, I don't thrive in such an environment (not feminine enough, or not American enough or just not nice enough, I don't know)¹⁶.

Similarly 'Karen Crawford' also talks about such groups in her letter in this journal and suggests that power struggles still exist on such 'feminine' groups, only they are more covert.

Gender put downs or clichéd jokes used as dismissal, move in both directions, although such put downs from women tended to be longer, less common, and less like one line dismissals. Thus when one male implied that males avoided discussing personal questions because women would attack them for insensitivity, because the women were tense or too bound to biology. Salwa (15 Nov.01) wrote:

Men are supposed to say the most blatantly sexist things and go unchallenged, right? So much for communication! If we, the women, try to show them the "error in their ways," we're aggressive, or have PMS, or are menopausal... shall I rattle them off for you? No, you have much too much savvy to need help.

I say, demonize us as much as you want, but at least show some IMAGINATION! Think up of an updated version of that canonical list.

This drew differing responses. The original offender replied, arguing he had been misunderstood, and 'joking':

ok, This is a tongue and cheek remark! "I'd communicate, if I could get a word in edgewise!" [...]

Yes it takes communication but that involves talking AND listening. Sometimes only the talking is done and the listening part never takes place (on both sides of the gender gap, since I seem to need to be explicit in my means now)

Another man wrote, in perhaps a competition for repression (15 Nov.01):

Wrong, Salwa, actually. We are *always* challenged. We are always reminded that we are phallogocentric, patriarchal, domineering... pigs. It gets worse: we are challenged even when we are not being sexist.

¹⁶ For further examples, see Karen Crawford's discussion of 'ladies Lists' and 'soft talk' in her paper in this journal.

The term 'sexist' is obviously being taken by him as being an objective term with no possibility of dispute, but the implied violence is transferred to the women. Robert writes in response to the same item, with a similar transfer, yet possibly opening up to further continuations (16 Nov.01):

Yo, Renata, Salwa and you and rose and Elizabeth and others are teaching me plenty. (No Salwa, please stop hitting me! OWWWW!) Could it be that this is the best forum for learning about differences?

Now, if we could add cultural differences to this mix, ie how women-men interact in, say China, as compared to Chicago, or Brussels as compared to Botswana. hmmmmm.

This if anything shows the ways that aggression can be defined differently, and can be expressed obliquely, even by males.

As might be expected, most of the flame wars about gender occurred when gender was being discussed but they particularly occurred when gender was being discussed, or emerged, within a wider political context. Thus after one of the more rightwing males made a remark implying that Janet Reno, the attorney general in the Clinton administration, was both ugly and unfit for office (perhaps tying a woman to 'the body' yet again), an argument arose around the politics of gender, abuse and jokes. Tara wrote of (25 Oct.01):

the light laughing off of the male/female power differential.[...] Trigger-phrases such as: "diatribe against men", "worthless without a man"; the former creating a 'knee jerk response' to perceived 'feminism' from a position of male privelege, the latter the age-old refrain of the 'spinster'(image) and her detractors.[...] The woman must defend herself against the very possibility of the 'dyke' label, to defend herself as a 'friend' of men, a non-enemy, a non-'janetreno'. [...] The light tone of the male when joking about such imagery with no care for the harm it signifies to all women if they could see, and to many who see by nature. Harm signified in silence only continues the image in the mirrors(in the mirrors) of the male-less female, the deep seated male fear of rejection in toto by any or all females.[...] WHY is the face of the janetreno so hated and mocked? What in that face frightens men?

The answer is the absolute indifference to men that they fear women hold. This may explain the entire power differential and certainly the immediate jerking of knees. Please realize that your phallus may be of intense interest to you but is of no interest to many and accept that of the many, most are women. The powerlessness of female life is the price, the pain, paid. Please do not mock it with your callous humor.

The male who made the original remark then complained about political correctness, liberal hypocrisy and the inability of women to understand humour. Accusations that women are unable to understand jokes would seem to be intended to imply (and construct) a 'fact' that women are being offended irrationally, cannot understand certain kinds of inexplicit dialogue, and cannot partake in proper argument. This seems to be the most overt way of attempting to maintain male dominance if gender comes up. Any speech/text can be (re)classified, after writing, as ironic or joking, which not only acts as an attempt to excuse the perpetrator but condemn the recipient. As well, the social categories deployed in the 'joke', tend to reinforce gender differences and divergencies in power as they only refer to one gender category explicitly and with condemnation.

Another more complex event of this 'joking' type occurred when flame war resulted from the forwarding of a supposedly humorous parody science article about men living longer if they looked at women's breasts. This had its background and its declared point in a discussion about the up and coming Iraq War and the validity of information found on the internet. The gender issue was presented by the male forwarder as almost incidental, while it was clearly the main point for the women who read the post, as they saw women being presented as objects, and as being used.

Again there is a degree of ambiguity in this kind of event. Sometimes, as Ghaly states in her paper, joking behaviour can function to lessen tension and show inclusiveness towards the people you are arguing with, so it may not be clear what the user of joking behaviour is, in fact, intending. This could lead to further unease.

In her paper Martin suggests that, in gaming, harassment or aggression towards someone for being female can vary with a woman's status in the game. Initially she may receive help (perhaps more than she might want), at a higher level of proficiency she may be attacked as an intruder, and finally she may be accepted as 'one of the boys'. I am not sure if this is true in non-gaming formats, but it does suggest a further avenue of research. It is not just about whether women can speak to a multi-gendered list, but whether they can gain high status and do so without attracting hostility – this latter was certainly possible in Cybermind. One of the highest status members in the List's existence was a woman (Rose Mulvale), and many other high status members have been female. Those high-status women I have talked to, do not seem to think they were, or

had been, singled out for hostility because of their gender – although my impression was that sometimes in intense political debates males might attack a high status woman, who they thought provided an easy target, rather more viciously than they might attack another man. But this is hard to evaluate with any clarity.

In other debates, orthodox right wing attacks on gender issues also provoked angst and voluble exchange. Occasionally more right wing inclined males would join with left wing males if those leftish males had been accused of sexism, by arguing that the ‘feminist woman’ wanted to censor opinions, or something similar. This could be seen as an attempt to draw in other males to support of their own positions on the lack of any need for feminism, or that feminism was a restriction, while effectively acting to suppress any complaint arising from the experience of being female.

In summary, most flame wars on Cybermind tend to be about politics or gender, and disputes about gender become more intense when external politics are involved. I am not certain if it works the other way and disputes about politics become more intense when gender is involved, but I think not.

Harassment

Related to issues around maintaining male dominance, but also related to the eroticisation of online gender, sexual harassment is well documented¹⁷. Fletcher quotes several women from Cybermind who wrote to her offline, about their off-Cybermind experiences:

One woman says, 'I have had male users proposition me when I was online answering questions about art, or moving files to different art libraries'. [...] She believes there is a ‘subculture’ of sexism throughout the online experience for women. Another woman surveyed says she “identified myself as female and this user unleashed a barrage of sexual language, on channel and in private message, complete with invitations and explicit details of what he would do to me”¹⁸.

In response to one of Fletcher's Questions another woman wrote to Cybermind that:

I can't go into a chat room without IM's popping up all over the places saying things like "Hey baby, what do you look like?" I always respond with "Hey Baby, whats your network?"... There is a man who was an online

¹⁷ See references in Marshall (2007a: 506-7, 2006a: 928)

¹⁸ Amy Fletcher, “Women's Experiences on the Net” December 8, 1997.
<<http://www.geocities.com/Paris/Metro/1022/women2.htm>> [no longer existent]

friend and met once. Since then he has hacked into my computer and even has attempted to imitate my screen name.

Another woman wrote in response to the same question:

As a woman, I'm so tired of getting those bulk email notices that read "cum on over big boy". These days I get more of those than I get of email from sex-starved guys who are amazed that there is actually a woman on the net.

However, although harassment is a general feature of online life, there are few cases of harassment on Cybermind for me to discuss. This is possibly because harassment can be largely unknown and unreported, and thus unknown to the researcher. This hiddenness also leaves the harassed people unable to respond to the harassment. One case seemed to involve a man who lurked on the list, and who perhaps mistook the appearance of familiarity and apparent intimacy with some female list members, who were living their lives in front of the list, as a mutual familiarity, and expected it would be returned¹⁹. Still another case I would not know about without the woman involved writing to me. A fairly major male on the list had been writing to her asking questions about local politics and apparently asking for sympathy with his various problems. The letters had become longer and had come to contain what she saw as sexual innuendo. She commented that he might not know what he was doing or how he was appearing, but she was feeling pressured and harassed. Dealing with this issue caused her a great deal of distress, especially when he followed her to other Lists, but it did not seem possible for her to bring the matter to the attention of the List and it seemed hard for her to tell him to leave her alone. The ambiguities of online communication were emphasised in her attempts to work out what was actually occurring and what his intentions were. Eventually it seems that she did manage to communicate fairly directly with him, and thus ended the issue. It was never really clear if the male had intended harassment, or whether he was just intending to be friendly in what she saw as an inappropriate manner – the difference may not be clear in many cases, as ambiguity is increased online, but it is the effect which counts.

The most contentious case of harassment in the last 12 years actually involved two women and shows the way that 'community' can appear to fail through these ambiguities and uncertainties. One of the women had previously sent a relatively large number of explicit musings upon sex to the list (such as describing driving at speed

¹⁹ Marshall (2007b: 94-5, 141).

while masturbating), and she was rumoured (in offlist contacts I had with other women) to have netsex with various men on the list, and perhaps even offline sexual contact – which at the time was not particularly rare²⁰. The eruption came when another woman on the List accused her of harassing her boyfriend, who was also on the List, by writing sexually explicit emails to him against his will. This second woman threatened to destroy the career of the first woman by taking the events offline, and heated exchanges as to the truth of the matter occurred between the two women, both on Cybermind and on another List. The first woman claimed that the posts had been a flirtation, that she had never written unsolicited emails, and that the exchange had stopped several months previously. The male involved was relatively quiet but supported his partner. The moderator, plus some other people acting offlist, managed to get the dispute off the List, in effect separating the public and private domains. Publicly neither side received much support or condemnation. The first woman, wrote to me in response to a question:

This was a devastating time.. I confided in several other list members but did not really receive support except from two people, one of whom was a lurker who I knew well and who sympathised. What I found was that people didn't want to be involved or appear to 'take sides'.... [People were] very shocked, I know - but I was amazed how little support I got. This demonstrated to me, that however 'real' we think the medium is, the fact is that people are not sure what to believe when the chips are down. In real life, if this had happened, I feel sure that people would have supported me.

Through my own offlist discussion with people, it did seem to be the case that people found it very hard to decide upon which side of the argument truth or probability lay. This was fairly surprising as, in general, people do not know the truth about others but decide upon probabilities based upon how people have behaved 'in public'. It is possible the list was also importing more 'mainstream' assumptions about sexual women as uncontrollable creatures into its behaviours, which fears were increased by projection or by uncertainty. There may also have been a degree of fear, given the strength of the feelings and the threats of taking the matter offline, along the lines of 'what might any of the parties do if 'I' intervened publicly on either side, or even tried to make peace?'. Such fears may be increased when people are online and cannot get

²⁰ The person concerned wrote to me that:

Shortly before this, there was (I think) some list discussion about a piece I posted [...] which was written using the 'you' tense but was entirely fictional. A number of women objected to the address and thought it was aimed at a male audience (although it did not say so). In fact, I was playing with the email conventions... I wrote about this at the time.

Here we can see the difficulties of people being able to distinguish fiction from autobiography without further cues.

full information about others. The dispute ended with the accused woman leaving the list, but soon after subscribing under another address and writing less explicit posts. About six months later she came back with her old name with no objections from anyone. Again ambiguity and uncertainty has become a major part of an experience which could be described as ‘harassment’.

Dorris makes the important point in her paper that there is little need for many men to be violent or harassing online for it to have an effect, as women are accustomed to some men being violent, threatening and unpredictable offline. If some men reinforce this online by stalking, by being ambiguous, by making threats, by treating a woman as just a body for sex, then it affects the freedom of nearly all women to express themselves. The ambiguity of online presence may even reinforce the fears that arise, the inexplicitness of threat may make it harder to challenge and defend against; the powers of ‘the other’ may appear vast and uncertain. If the issue does come into offline life, the woman may not even be able to recognise the person who is threatening her.

Finally, as already implied, when joined together, political and gender differences can be potent sources of harassment. There are a number of documented cases, largely from the early days of the internet, in which groups which were founded for the discussion of female issues came to be dominated by men²¹. This in itself leads to modes of discrimination²², but also to the formation of women’s only lists, and this occurred at least once on Cybermind.

Single Gender Lists

It is difficult to tell whether these women’s only lists tend to be more peaceful than multi-gendered lists because of gender or because of tight policing. At one time, Cybermind had a semi-secret breakaway women-only list called emma²³. Rose wrote (3 Nov.01):

²¹ Marshall (2007a: 507); J. Korenman, “E-Mail forums and Women’s Studies: The example of WMST-L”, in Susan Hawthorne and Renate Klein (Eds.) *Cyberfeminism*, (pp. 80-97) Nth Melbourne, Spinifex, 1994.

²² F. Can “Feminist rhetoric in cyberspace: The ethos of feminist usenet newsgroups”, *Information Society*, 15(3), 1999: 187-197. More generally see A. Barak, “Sexual harassment on the Internet”, *Social Science Computer Review*, 23, 2005: 77-92.

²³ See footnote 14.

Emma was a females-only group, off-shoot of this list. I don't know what the element of cohesion was, exactly, but do remember that we were generally gentle in our critiques of the posting (and sometimes posturing) males from whom we periodically retreated to our own more congenial shared company.

Laurie adds (3 Nov.01):

Emma struck as being like similar lists I've been on, more concerned with complaining about the lists being retreated from than in developing concerns of its own.

And Rose further added (5 Nov.01) to me:

I... remember it as your basic "stitch and bitch" outfit, eg "This is what we don't like about how we're treated on CM" and "Isn't it great to be able to talk freely like this?!" *

Then we settled down and just shared with one another - questions, worries, crises - and then the whole thing just petered out. There was a flurry of renewal a year or so later (for those of us who had kept the others' e-mail addys), but when I began chirping giddily about Kerry's imminent arrival here in NS there were some "happy for you"s and then silence.

While this List seems to have broken down on its own, possibly without dispute because Cybermind became more hospitable again, other female Lists have not been so peaceful. One woman described her experiences when two women's lists split. There was private hate mail between members of the lists, deliberate attempts to disrupt the other list, misrepresentation of private mails, and the ultimate involvement of lawyers²⁴. On the other hand Kathryn wrote (27 May.03):

Recently, I've joined an all-woman writing group online. There are probably around 20 really active woman in the group. Some clearly have more experience than others (have published novels, for example), others, like me, have less. I'm a newbie, but what I see is a very tight-knit group, that discusses everything from menstruation to publication success. These women are kind, eager to share information, honest in their response to one another's work, funny, intelligent, critical, analytical. This group has a single goal -- to be a group of women writers who share daily experiences, give support, technical and market information, etc. I find it a perfectly functioning group.

Ruane discusses her own experience of gendered online forums in comparison to Cybermind in this journal. What this work suggests is that there is no simple gender

²⁴ There is a growing body of work which suggests that women do not live peacefully together under all circumstances, just that it is not much discussed. See Phyllis Chessler *Woman's Inhumanity to Women*, NY, Thunder's Mouth Press, 2001, Pat Heim, Susan Murphy & Susan K. Golant *In the Company of Women: Indirect Aggression Among Women*, NY, Tarcher/Putnum, 2003, Susan Barash *Tripping the Prom Queen: The Truth About Women and Rivalry*, NY, St. Martins Press, 2006 and Martha Putallaz & Karen Bierman (eds) *Aggression, Antisocial Behavior, and Violence Among Girls*, NY, Guilford, 2004.

division of behaviour in action at all times, and that the behaviour of people on Lists is as much a matter of the social conventions they construct and the disputes that arise, as it is about gender.

Gender Ambiguity

It is well known that people claim that gender impersonation is common online²⁵, and can give real insights into the nature of gender, or lead to a sense of total betrayal, but these claims are not really matched by investigation on Cybermind or many places elsewhere, and I prefer to talk about gender vagueness or ambiguity rather than gender impersonation²⁶. Thus Drew writes (2 Feb.01):

Out of dozens of people I've met online, not one has fictionalised their gender.

Out of hundreds of people I know offline and who are online, not one has fictionalised their gender. [1]

And I know straights, gays, males, females, TVs, and at least one non-sexual being.

[1] Excluding the usual experimental five minutes on lambda as the opposite gender before you get bored with it.

Alan added (Feb.01):

it does depend where one is, however. On IRC probably 90% of the women are male. But somehow through Sandy Stone & chatroom stories people get the idea that masquerading is everywhere.

I've met dozens of people (maybe well over 100) from Cybermind in real life and almost always they seem as if I've known them for a long time. I've never met anyone masquerading re: gender.

The opinions of people who had experience of impersonation themselves was similar, thus David writes, drawing attention to harassment (3 Feb.01):

I impersonated a woman once in the one and only MUD I ever played in, but everyone wanted to have sex with me. I didn't feel comfortable misleading people (and I wasn't getting turned on by their lines anyways) so I just started telling everyone I was a guy.

²⁵ Almost without fail, whenever I tell people that I'm writing about gender online, they will come out with a story of mistaken gender identity, which has usually occurred to someone else, and is almost never intentional.

²⁶ Jonathan Marshall "Online Life and Gender Vagueness and Impersonation" in Elien M. Trauth, (ed) *Encyclopedia of Gender and Information Technology*, Idea Group, Hersey, PA, 2006a: 932-8,

Some women have said to me that, for them, playing a male was a lonely experience, and that people would appear to abandon them if they were not ‘successful’. Caitlin writes (5 Feb.01):

I had a male character on LambdaMOO for a very short while. I did it because I wanted to see what it is like to have a male character since I'd only had same-gendered characters. It was interesting. I had to constantly remind myself to use the male pronouns when referring to myself which was quite a trick. As I said, it was a short-lived experiment, primarily because it was boring as hell. In a world that was dominated by men, playing a female character meant a certain amount of guaranteed conversation (not all of it of a sexual nature). It was simply easier to meet people in a female-gendered body.

As this statement implies, cross-gender identity is one of the main reasons for heterosexually gendered people making contact; at least people attempt to determine that one of them is female if the relationship is going to be intimate – although this also leads to experiences of harassment if everyone tries to find out if you ‘really are’ female, or assumes that a person presenting as a woman is ‘looking for’ sex. More research is needed as to whether female characters on MOOs or otherworld environments, still attract so much sexual attention now they are less uncommon and more likely to have local offline friends around.

Despite the expression of anxiety about the gender of others, people expressed the feeling that it was generally easy to ‘sex’ people, by their styles of language use and interaction or by special knowledges such as the nature of pantyhose sizes. American members of Cybermind who used this technique seemed surprised that such sizes were not universal and thus useless in detecting women from other countries – not to mention those women who did not wear panty hose. In another discussion, Jill remarked (17 Nov 97) “When someone asks me for age, sex, statistics, I know they are male” although a male responded “I’ve had quite a few experiences in which a female asked me those same questions”. The art of detecting women who pose as men is almost never discussed; it causes little anxiety. It might cross the power lines, but does not, in general, cross the intimacy/public line.

When the topic of gender identification came up people would constantly report bad identifications Thus Elizabeth (12 Oct.06):

Sheesh, I've had people blow up at me because I said I liked "The Three Stooges," my name is feminine, and they therefore concluded that I had to be a male body masquerading as female. <laugh>

Similarly Fanny (16 Aug.97):

I have often had my gender questioned in cyberspace - I mean I've been "accused" of being a man posing as a woman.

Occasionally, people reported that they had misconstrued the gender of fellow Cybermind members. I have written elsewhere about how gender could be miscued by misreading gender clichés, with people making gender based assumptions about the usage of emotional indicators such as emoticons, or empathetic writing²⁷. However gender could be misread through simple things such as not sexing the name properly, whether through unfamiliarity as Rose with Yarden who wrote about politics in the Middle East (24 Nov.01):

And then we have Yarden surfacing as female, having earlier de-lurked with a hard-edged immediacy and passion that I (and not alone either, eh?) read as male...

Or Salwa and Renata with Baz, not knowing how to gender his name, but giving reasons which seemed to support their mis-gendering (15 Nov.02):

Baz, at the risk of betraying my own gender stereotypes, I'll admit to thinking this is a "woman who's rough on the edges." LOL Male listers tend not to give online advice on how to deal with asthma. ;) They also shy away from describing the mundane in their lives. You talk about your buddies, your partner and your office/work more readily than most men on CM, or at least this is the impression I get... What do the others think???

[...] now that I know you're male, everything has fallen into place. ;)

Oops, I shouldn't have said that!

In these cases the vagueness about the name conventions, were also linked to gender clichés. But not always; there was a brief exchange on the Netdynamics list about a Cybermind member who the female participants thought was a woman because of his name, despite the fact that 'she' "threw down the gauntlet" and would attack people who seemed out of the ordinary and "give them what for...".

Sometimes vagueness can occur simply though misreading a name, as when Wendlyn wrote (18 Feb.01):

²⁷ Marshall (2007a: 509, 511-12; 2007b: 122; 2006a: 946)

My email program truncated the "From" column so all I saw was Sharon B[...] halfway through the post I'm thinking, "This is one audacious spunky crone and I sure hope I get to know her better!"

...only to find at the end that you're Jerry, not Sharon, and suddenly it was just typical.

So now I'm wondering what was it about the post that seemed so refreshingly unusual when I thought it was written by a woman, but perfectly normal from a man?

Sometimes people, usually male, would use the possibility of gender vagueness, to argue when challenged about their sexism or gendered behaviour, to allege that their questioner did not know they were male, even if they had previously signed their name as male. Here gender vagueness seemed to be being used as a rhetorical tool to try and avoid challenges to gender conventions or inequalities. It was rarely accepted as valid by anyone other than the user.

However, people, again usually male, could also see the abandonment of gender as a moral imperative. Thus one of the first discussions I initiated about people's experience of gender was constantly interrupted by a man who claimed that talking about gender reinforced norms of gender, and that this could, and should, be abandoned online. As far as I can summarise his arguments they were: gender leads to bias and sexism, to judging people's ideas by their body, and that the sex of a person provides no useful information about anything they are saying.

The sky is blue. What does that fact have to do with the online world? I suggest that gender in the online world has the same role as the sky is blue.

In some ways this approach seems to aim at solving the 'gender paradox' by preventing it. He did gain some male backing, and one of his supporters argued that he, himself, was into "judgements based purely on skill and efficiency", and he thought the best way to reach this state was if we each "begin to ignore gender". He also thought that "race and gender should not be political considerations" – perhaps easier to do if you are not being discriminated against on those grounds. I found the derailing of the discussion I had started, somewhat irritating, as these kind of replies were made to any person's attempts to explain their gendered experience. This to me seemed incompatible with the first person's denials that he was preventing talk about gendered experience. How else could one claim to have that experience without making a claim to a gender?

Despite this ‘disruption’, those who objected to his position were in effect showing how they thought gender might be important, and what kinds of events contributed to gender awareness. They wrote such things as: “gender, in one form or another, is one of the few things all humans confront”; “show me a non gender identity”; the online world is not separate from the offline world, “there are no entirely online persons”; “if its part of the human experience, it's relevant”; “I don’t agree that acknowledging difference equates with sexism/racism, etc.”; “these differences are a part of who we are”; and ideas do not exist without bodies. So, many List members insisted upon the importance of their bodies, and offline experience, to who they were. At the time, I suggested that “the importance of gender may be more invisible to some than to others. This outcome, may itself be gendered”, and also asked about the effects of the imposition of gender on a person by others as gender is not simply a personal trait. Later on, Alexanne Don wrote to me (1 Nov.01):

generally, as usual, it's the men who come out saying that there are no gender markers in cyberspace...while the females tend to say, whoa, i have experienced things a bit more problematically than that.

At the time, I also wondered why people assumed that the ‘abolition’ of gender would necessarily be a ‘good thing’ and lead to increased ‘freedom’. It is even possible that the abolition of gender online would merely reinforce discrimination based on gender offline, as it teaches people that women can only be taken seriously when their gender is not visible.

The main power that the ‘ignoring gender’ argument seems to get, might come from conventions about authenticity being a kind of rule-free expression of one’s true being, as mentioned earlier²⁸. To some extent the issues around authenticity and ambiguity, gender and hiding were most forcefully put when Cybermind was visited by two ‘Stonedynes’²⁹, in which Jim, for one was puzzled by DBs overt decision to refuse to pass as a ‘man’, writing (11 Nov.02):

This is going to sound naive but, if a butch wants to be treated as a man, why bring the actual different into play in the first place? Certainly in cyberspace there is no problem with seeing if you can pull off a convincing

²⁸ Marshall (2007b: Chapter 6 and passim).

²⁹ Robin Maltz writes that the stonebutch is “a queer masculine female, not a woman/not a man” who pairs with “the straight-appearing [stone]femme. Together, they fall out of the ‘woman-loving-woman’ definition of lesbian, and problematize feminism’s evacuation of female gender difference and assimilationist strategies”. From the abstract to “Toward a Dyke Discourse: The Essentially Constructed Stonebutch Identity”, *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 3(3): 83-92.

male persona. I don't see why you need to muddy the waters with declaring this not to be true, up front. I would think that would be an additional reminder that you weren't. What am I not understanding in this?

DB replied invoking authenticity (11 Nov.02):

Hmmm.... maybe it's just part of who one is sometimes. I don't see it as "outing" myself particularly, just being who I am. To not be clear on that issue makes me feel somehow dishonest, perhaps?

Kate wrote about hiding as suppression (11 Nov.02):

Huh? To disappear as Unmarked? To pass and take on a "privilege" of not inviting a certain kind of unwelcome attention in a world where only the "norm" gets that privilege? Sigh. There's an excellent book written by Peggy Phelan at NYU performance studies on this subject [...].

not being accepted and recognized and given equal privileges just for being exactly what and who you are is a highly charged political issue that one lives with, eats, breathes and sleeps every day and night.

Salwa proposed that (11 Nov.02):

If they only cared about "passing," we wouldn't be having this ongoing discussion, and we'd be the losers for it.

And Renata (11 Nov.02):

Because he wants to be what he is. Why do you [Jim] draw attention to yourself being male and being heterosexual all the time? [... if] we leave such markers behind us?

Kate added (13 Nov.02):

I personally don't think these gender markers can or should be left behind so easily.

That is the problem with the issue of being "Unmarked" in a society where the (invisible) standard of privilege and power is still predominantly white, male, heterosexual, and financially secure (and to a lesser extent a white female of the same class.) If someone does not "out" themselves, they are assumed to conform to this standard until they slip up and reveal things about themselves which don't match up...which are different. As long as the standard of power and privilege remains this way, we cannot afford to just leave these markers behind. We can call attention to the way those with the privilege of conforming to the norm are "Unmarked", and should be made more conscious of this.

Some people want to erase gender differences altogether, assuming that difference equals inequality. I don't believe that this necessarily has to be so. I believe we could change our thinking somehow so that we are able to tolerate other people's differences from ourselves without imposing oppressive and exploitative hierarchies.

In another context Renata wrote (7 Oct.02) “if equality is obtained by hiding who you are, what is the worth of that equality then?”. Interestingly, I understand that the stonedynes left not because of issues about gender, but because they did not like what they perceived as attacks on America during the period leading up to the second Iraq War, again showing that political and national categories can be more divisive than gender.

Ultimately, it seemed that people, although more women than men, felt that their gender identity, however it was constructed (and it was always constructed in relation to other people of similar and different genders), was an important part of their authentic or true identity and should not be ignored. Those who accepted the possibility of ignoring gender, tended to embrace a very traditionally masculine rational and instrumental argument in which all people were in some ways similar to themselves, and ‘the feminine’ was no more than an addenda to identity categories.

Online Ambiguities: Asence

These online ambiguities are, it should be obvious, not confined to gender; they spread to everything else about other people³⁰, and to some extent even to ‘yourself’. It is not really possible to tell if you exist, or have been heard without acknowledgment from others, and the kind of acknowledgement they give determines the kind of existence or presence you have. This oscillation and vague presence I have called asence. Resolving, or dealing with asence is one of the major factors of online life³¹. Esther Milne’s paper in this issue of the journal seems to me to explore this question. A possible reason for Alan’s upset at the rewriting of his ‘avatars’ or characters, is because it rewrites him and his presence in the world; it has the possibilities of uncontrolled spillage. He might be seen as someone who supports particular political or aesthetic positions different to the ones he has – and these, to some extent, are survival issues for him as he earns an income through his reputation, writings and art. In the information society, we survive by the traces and trails we leave behind. These traces are easily commandeered by other people writing other trails and leaving us with the consequences of misidentification. Thus, in a more serious incident, occurring just before these papers were published,

³⁰ See ‘Karen Crawford’s’ account of her use of various identities in her letter in this journal, and the ways this ‘caused’ her to learn things about herself.

³¹ Marshall (2007b; 2004).

Alan lost the website with which he presented his writings, recordings and graphics to the world, as an indirect consequence of identity theft. This left him with most of the references to his work cued to a non-existent web-space, which might then have other items placed upon it.

It can be suggested that this process of asent presentation, is mirrored with Alan's own writing of female avatars (even though he has no intention of gender impersonation³²), because these are also powerful categories and exemplars, beyond his control and intention. Thus people, especially women, often seem to feel uneasy with his 'treatment' of 'them' (this was probably part of what prompted Karen's actions as described in Milne's paper and her letters), as it gives forth a presencing of the female in a way many women may not like but feel contributes to how they are being perceived. Something similar occurred on Nettime when Alan posted the draft version of the paper included in this journal, which included some writing in the person of one of his female avatars. Long before both of these incidents, a female List member wrote to me (1 Nov.01):

i have always been chary of alan's appropriation of female experience, and that of 'foreigners'. i guess it's meant to be 'trangressive', but quite a few feminist theorists, it seems to me, are also a bit wary of this scopophilia (sp?) regarding the female as object. i haven't thought it through completely, but i cannot always remain impassive at the ways women are represented in texts, especially public texts (eg the 'media'). i tend to find it reproductive of unfortunate stereotypes, or at the very least, playing to male desires rather than female desires, and thus calling upon the female viewer to identify with the male viewer...

There is a sense in which this rewriting is both necessary, inevitable and resisted.

Intimacy and Gendered Relationship

Because of these ambiguities, as Milne suggests, intimacy can verge into, or be hard to distinguish from, harassment. I have proposed elsewhere, that especially in Lists which create 'community', the prospect of widespread intimacy becomes an issue, and it becomes a gendered issue. Here, I am only considering heterosexually driven lists, as the dynamic elsewhere might be different. I have also suggested elsewhere that women often perform the emotional labour in making 'community', and that this is often hidden

³² See his paper 'Gender and You' in this journal.

offlist³³. Sometimes this activity might take the form of women flirting with an established political ‘outsider’, perhaps in order to show him he was accepted and to diminish dispute. Such flirting happened both on and offlist, but onlist usually only happened when those particular women were not involved in the politics. Sometimes this labour could occur overtly onlist, as in a discussion which started with a report on this gender project but moved into an angry discussion of war, with Rose actively patching things up to large scale praise. It may also be being shown in the common care with which women praise the List as a whole after having disagreed with it; the move is towards healing, especially when she has won.

If, however, women become the carriers of intimacy, and do the ‘emotional work’ of the list largely in ‘private’ off the public face of the list, then the reason the impersonation of females by males, rather than of males by females, becomes an issue is because it violates these divisions of intimacy and publicity. In folklore if you become intimate with a male pretending to be female then they will expose your private self, and authentic trust and intimacy is violated. You are open to attack. Thus Renata writes (19 Jan.01):

I remember a psychology list intended to help people with incest (and related) problems. At a certain point one of the female members said she was actually male and that almost blew up the list.

Abstractly the person had not changed, but at important symbolic levels they had shown they could not be trusted, and had gained information they would not otherwise have been given. Privacy had been violated.

Given these assumptions about gender and the offlist as equalling the intimate sphere, then extended offlist mailings in these conditions have the potential to lead to pairing and netsex, or to expectation of netsex and possible harassment as a result of that expectation. I was given one letter by a woman from a man written offlist, which expresses some of this. She wrote to him:

You mean to say that when you're in the presence of an attractive woman all you can think is of banging her? Way to go man!!

And he replied, making this behaviour part of the nature of reality:

³³ Jonathan Marshall “Categories, Gender and Online Community”, *E-Learning*, 3(2), 2006b <http://www.wwwords.co.uk/elea/content/pdfs/3/issue3_2.asp#10>

That's not the only thing I can think of but that's the first thing I think of and honestly it's never far from my mind. I thought all or damn near all heterosexual males (actually I thought all) were this way. I thought this was common knowledge. I wouldn't believe any male who denied this. Of course I can also respect and enjoy other aspects of females just as I do males. I'm greatly enjoying your quick wit, good humor and intelligence for example. And I'm telling you the truth about that as well. If you don't want to talk about this with me I will respect that. I admit I'm enjoying this on several levels but first of all we are fellow humans and that is what you are to me even before you are an adult and a female.

And BTW its not just fucking, its coupling (communing I think you said) in the broadest psychosexual sense.

Similarly Caitlin replies to Renata who is making the same kind of point (1 Feb.01):

- > Often when I'm just being nice to men backchannel, they assume
- > I'm desperate for cybersex.

I've had that experience, too.

I was never able to find, even roughly what proportion of the male List population could be taken as behaving in this manner. No one presented it to me as an on going problem, and on the whole, it seems not to be something which arouses much complaint, despite there having been periods of intense sexual activity around the List.

As implied, one strategy which was employed to generate the appearance of community was public flirting or the humorous exchange of sexual innuendo, and this can produce hostile reactions from those not involved, not just because space is taken from the List's official topic, or it can be found boring, but because some people find it threatening. Thus one short-lived female member wrote, criticising both men and women on Cybermind:

I would like to know where things stand on this list. As far as I;m concerned, I don't want to be on a list where women seem to condone the sexual ignorance of men - even though that is, of course, one of the main ways they get ahead. in life. [...] unless I hear something sensible from someone on this matter, I'm off.

And

Women can take sex and sexuality for granted, until we say no (although many women seem to know the power of their seuxality and the fragility of men's sexual egos as well as their physical needs.) As long as women are rewarded through being granted funding, academic degrees and career

promotions, for sexual favours, the idea of sexuality as something genuine cannot exist

To some extent this criticism can also be seen as resulting from the ambiguities of presence and the ease of reading a particular meaning into messages where it might not have been intended, and allowing existing alienation, rather than intimacy, to intensify.

People frequently mention the speed and intensity with which relationships can form. Thus Fletcher in her study using women from Cybermind writes: “that’s the common thread in all of the stories shared with me...everyone feels that their person knows them in some seemingly impossible way”³⁴. People have said similar things to me, and expressed how surprised they were to find themselves in intimacy so quickly, and how sometimes this may finish equally quickly. Perhaps in order to maintain communication when the formal topics have been absorbed, people run into self disclosure and generate intimacy to lessen asence. Alvin Cooper and Leda Sportolari remark in their account of online relationships that:

Online relationships are vulnerable to a ‘boom and bust’ phenomenon: when people reveal more about themselves earlier than they would in FTF interactions, relationships can get quite intense quite quickly. Such an accelerated process of revelation may increase the chance that the relationship will feel exhilarating at first, and become quickly eroticized, but then not be able to be sustained because the underlying trust and true knowledge of the other are not there to support it³⁵.

The question might further arise as to whether there is a typical pattern to the form of a net-based relationship. This is hard to decide upon the evidence of interviews and limited observation, other than to assert that the relationships I know of through Cybermind usually progress from contact in a group environment (usually the List, or a common MOO room, or nowadays on Second Life) progress into private email or conversation within a more private MOO room (probably one belonging to one of the people involved) – or people might use a private IRC channel or ICQ or Unix talk. The relationship may then progress into netsex or phone contact, with at some time an exchange of photographs. The relationship then usually remains stable for a couple of months, and people may get MOO-married and share the same room on the MOO if they are frequent users. There is then usually talk of visiting each other and organizing

³⁴ Amy Fletcher “Internet Encounters Cyber-Relationships...” (March 1998).
<<http://www.geocities.com/Paris/Metro/1022/romance.htm>> [no longer existent].

³⁵ Alvin Cooper, & Leda Sportolari, “Romance in Cyberspace: Understanding Online Attraction”, *Journal of Sex Education and Therapy*, 22(1), 1997: 7-14: 12

the transport or money to do so. If the people do meet, this is a critical moment with relationships frequently falling apart soon after meeting, otherwise the relationship may continue for some time. It is a well known part of Internet folklore that few of these relationships, especially those which become erotic, survive much offline contact. Yet because of the conventions of authenticity they need to be validated offline. Then gender ambiguity is rarely tolerated.

Relationships rarely fail offline and continue online. When a relationship breaks up, it frequently, but not always, leads to one person of the couple leaving the List or MOO in which they met each other. It seems rare for such a relationship to break up and contact to be maintained, but that may be rare offline as well.

In this context, Cooper and Sportolari emphasize the conceptually paradoxical nature of the net:

on the one hand, it seems to epitomize the alienation of the modern world, and yet it also leads to the development of supportive and sometimes intensely intimate, even deeply erotic, relationships³⁶.

These connections between men and women, and between women and women, work to form a network of relationships around the list, which both support the List, and cause the List problems. Mail which might have previously made it to the List and given it presence, is exchanged between the couple, and they can respond onlist with references that only make sense to those in their private network.

Similarly, these ambiguities while enabling relationship also undermine it. If under the conventions of authenticity relationship becomes based on personal feeling *and* being able to express anything, then the closer the relationship the greater the demand to express any kind of desire, or to say anything without reciprocity. Within this framework love seems to be a process of revelation, of exposing more of one's truth to a trusted other. But what happens when all is said? Either the process ends and love ceases, or you continue but the other is tested – can they survive this uncovering, will they retreat?³⁷ Online the responses needed to confirm, need to be strong, but it is not

³⁶ *ibid*: 7.

³⁷ Cf Zygmunt Bauman, "Life-world and Expertise: Social Production of Dependency" in N. Stehr & R. Ericson (eds) *Culture and Power of Knowledge; Inquiries into Contemporary Societies*, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin 1992: 84-8.

always clear what the response is. Are they still there? People constantly express some of these ambiguities – not only around whether their ideal net partner is of the gender they portray themselves, whether they are as they described themselves, but as to the effect of netsex itself, whether it is libratory, whether netsex with a married person is adultery, whether netsex is destructive, and even whether netsex is more intense than ‘ordinary’ sex or just boring.

Bodies and Netsex

I have discussed issues around bodies and netsex at length elsewhere³⁸. As implied above, gendered bodies are important in anchoring authenticity and intimacy. People will use netsex to reduce asence in the intimate sphere, by maintaining a mood and a connection which is based in the offline body. Netsex, by easily referencing known and common bodily states, stabilises mutual presence and provides a context for interaction. The authentic truth of intimate relationships is anchored in that body, *because* people perceive the ambiguity present in online relationships and fear falling for a fantasy. Restricted knowledge of others allows the speedy building of processes identified with intimacy and an awareness of possible deceit. It also leads to the common description of Internet life as ‘disembodied’ which leads to people thinking of others in a similar manner to the way they think of ghosts, and these ghosts need to be ‘caught’ and tethered down in some way. Race and gender can become thought of as additions or appendages to the body with the body not part of the self. Such thinking seems less likely to happen when people are in a minority or have an otherwise marked ‘body’. So while conflict can arise over the importance of bodies to online functioning, bodies almost always become important when intimacy arises, and when bodily states become the truth underlying discourse.

Here I would like to quote from a long letter which was written to me about netsex and online romance by a female List member who requests anonymity. The letter has been slightly altered in this publication, and broken up by a few comments, but it tells us a great deal about how intimacy and romance arise and how words have bodily effect.

³⁸ Jonathan Marshall “The Sexual Life of Cyber-Savants”, *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 14(2), 2003: 229-248; “The Online Body Breaks Out? Asence, Ghosts, Cyborgs, Gender, Polarity and Politics”, *Fibreculture Journal*, Issue 3 (2004b). <http://journal.fibreculture.org/issue3/issue3_marshall.html>; “Online Life and Netsex or Cybersex”, in Elieen M Trauth (ed) *Encyclopedia of Gender and Information Technology*, Idea Group, 2006a: 939-45; and Marshall (2007b: Chapter 7)

At one stage I found myself having a productive online rapport with a man and our rapport was not hampered by the gender “hurdle.” We are just engrossed in our work and we can go on for months without communication then we pick up where we left off. So, it’s like the kind of fruitful professional relationship one can have with a colleague of the opposite sex at work. Yet cyberspace seems more “pregnant with possibilities” than office space, possibly because it lacks the markers in RL that help us define our position vis-a-vis others; anonymity also encourages people to be less inhibited. Not being able to see the person you’re writing to can also be disinhibiting. I know I’ve had been bolder than usual with my friend and he did not seem to mind. But with other people this suspension of gender relations would not be possible, or would soon become impossible after the opening had occurred.

Let me quote a small offlist exchange between us, and let us not worry who writes what:

>> Love getting mail from you – instant brightner to my day :)

> Just remember, all things instant are dangerous to your health.
>You’ve been forewarned. :)

Greetings!

Ahh - I’ve always taken the short term view; if it’s not dangerous, can’t be much fun!

> Sorry to hear you’re in the doldrums. Is the
> winter weather getting you down? [Here I am
> sounding like some used car salesman about to con you into a
> bad deal...]

Always ready to be conned into a deal!!!! And I can never resist a good offer!!!

All of a sudden, through such emails, a working relationship becomes more complicated and takes on a new dimension which I am sure that anyone with experience online can resonate with. It’s in moments like this that you really realize that a correspondence with a person of the opposite gender (for a heterosexual) can never be identical to same-sex correspondence. When two people are of kindred spirit, like each other a lot, work well together, get along etc. etc., there’s always a chance that a sustained email correspondence might turn into overt flirtatiousness then romance and possibly more, through the possibilities which can open up, or be taken up and which echo in the body. [...]

Such remarks are not uncommon. It seems that the ‘intimacy’ generated by working together, in private, as a cross gendered heterosexual couple, emphasises the potential

framing of the relationship as romantic or sexual. This is emphasised by another effect mentioned by the writer in the next paragraph.

For a while I was very skeptical of the notion of “cyber-rape”; I couldn’t understand how a woman might feel violated by sheer words alone, but then little by little as I became more in tuned to the subtlety and overwhelming intensity of words and the concomitant bodily/physical reactions, sensations and feelings, this notion became all the more plausible. One can’t underestimate the presence of the body in all of this cyber traffic of information and people.

Here, the writer is effectively claiming that it is our body, or the body reactions, which gives the meanings that we perceive in the message, and which involve us in the whole of our being and lead to our response. In some ways this may be more intense, as the bodily reading is not affected by subliminal perceptions of the body of the other. As Don argues elsewhere in this journal, our body and language are not separable, and thus, perhaps when we are trying to decode messages in this environment the body cues become more important to the way that we interpret what is being said and the way we respond in that moment. The letter continues:

When a cyber relationship is developing, everything gains symbolic significance: the spacing of emails, the speed with which the other party responds, the degree to which they probe beyond the surface, the innuendos, rhetorical games etc. In some ways meaning is everywhere, as if we become either beneficently or destructively paranoid.... [We] risk consummation or annihilation with every remark, just as we risk being taken out of context and seeing [our] own remarks take on different hues, which is another annihilation, or possibly another intimacy.

The reader searches for meanings in the mail of the others, and everything becomes indicative of what is happening, and of course opens the way for a more intense involvement – making sense of everything requires conscious energy and time – and that is probably not given offline to anyone outside of some kind of intimate or dangerous situation. What we can see is that the gender categories have, in some ways, started to run the conversation and the meanings which are likely to arise.

Conclusions

As has been demonstrated in the articles in this journal, gender seems to be a vital way that people categorise each other, know about each other, relate to each other and resolve messages from each other. It is part of the rhetoric with which people create ‘culture’ and make sense of what is happening to them and others. Gender has a particularly strong effect online, because gender is one of the primary social divisions

and organising factors offline, and people learn to live with offline certainties before the live online. Therefore, people already have theories and understandings about gender categories which are part of their way of understanding the world. Styles of using power and of suffering its effects, are also already present and are not easily discarded. It can also be hard to gain agreement on a 'radical' position on gender, or to gain much collaboration with which to challenge others, and to render oneself less of an outsider. Even on the most accepting List there is the possibility of splits which are increased by, or based in, gender. This can be further magnified by political or other divisions, which reinforce these views of the world and gender roles.

As a result, there does not seem much likelihood that the Internet, by itself, will obliterate gender as a marker of status and behaviour for the majority of users. To some extent being online might reinforce certain types of self-categories as people 'play' to them to produce good high status examples of gendered beings, increase sexual tensions, or go looking for their perfect gendered partner. At the same time as this intensification, widespread knowledge that people can make these kind of exaggerations and hence falsifications, also produces fear and uncertainty, especially in situations involving intimacy. This fear and uncertainty can only be resolved in offline contact and attempted resolution of these ambiguities. Despite these known difficulties, on the whole, people seem confident that they can attribute gender to people correctly through knowledges or 'clichés' about gender. This attribution is not always accurate and people can be incorrectly gendered if they do not fit in with these knowledges, and things like a genderable name may overpower any other identificatory knowledge.

Ambiguity and uncertainty is emphasised in online life; gender categories both increase and act to conceptually diminish this ambiguity. Harassment, or fear of harassment seems common, and can be magnified by ambiguity and the difficulties of interpreting the other. On the one hand, offline fears may not be that mitigated and can even be amplified while, on the other, intimacy can arrive very quickly but there is no guarantee it will be mutual. One, perhaps positive, thing which may arise from these ambiguities is that because people only appear present online when they type or respond, it may become more common for males on MOOs to engage in mutual conversation with women, or to try and gain their opinions, than it is offline where the presence of a listener is so much more marked by their body. Whether this kind of effect is significant

or not is difficult to research as it requires access to both people's on and offline lives. Even attacks may become ambiguous, especially those attacks which are described as jokes but which become a way of maintaining one gender's dominance and undermining the other, while simultaneously they may also function, for other people, as a way of establishing connection and diminishing the attack. Ambiguity leads to what I have called asence. Problems around asence are further emphasised in an 'information economy', as the traits associated with a person's name, or avatar, can give both presence and the reputation which allows them to gain benefit, or livelihood, from their productions.

In order to combat both these ambiguities and a sense of attack some online forums may be defined as single gendered or as being dominated by one gender. In those cases the clichés about that gender may be exaggerated and policed in order to mark the place as gendered.

People become aware of gender when it is brought up – leading to the gender paradoxes around drawing attention to something that you might want to diminish discrimination occurring through. As gender is always potentially vague, people make efforts to resolve gender depending on the circumstances. Gender becomes more important when it becomes a source of 'knowledge' or is invoked in a potentially private/intimate situation. It seems much more socially important to not incorrectly label men as women, possibly because this might violate intimacy. Although gender ambiguity and 'misattribution' can be high, deliberate gender impersonation seems to be largely confined to places in which some degree of role playing is expected, through the use of a character or 'avatar'.

There is what could be called a lot of 'folk knowledge' about how men and women interact, or should interact. In keeping with the public private divide, men are seen to be more aggressive, arrogant and oriented towards problem-solving, while women are seen as more pacific, supportive and relational. Flaming is widely supposed to be a primarily male activity, but it is also engaged in by women, although primarily perhaps against other women. However, because of this division between public and private, it seems likely that many women are most active offlist, or perhaps among people defined

friends, rather than onlist. It is again possible that women are central to the offlist network that supports a healthy List and perform what we have called emotional labour.

Despite arguments about gendered technology, it appears that computers are becoming less gender specific, although most people knowledgeable about how they work are male, the artefacts are becoming more domestic, and women are coming online in the English speaking west in proportion to their numbers and this probably will change some default expectations. However, the only thing that can be guaranteed is that gender will continue to be important to the production of most online cultures for a long time to come.

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