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# Feminist Empowerment Through the Internet

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# Feminist Empowerment Through the Internet

*by Lucretia McCulley and Patricia Patterson*

In bell hooks' words:

> Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes life and new growth possible. It is that act of speech, of 'talking back,' that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject — the liberated voice.[1]

Our goal in this article is to reflect on women "talking back" in a different medium, that is to say, in cyberspace.

The University of Richmond's upper division Political Science course, "Women and Power in American Politics," has several ambitions. Among these is an exploration of the power of information technology to foster political research by and about women and to advance feminist political aims.

In the Fall of 1993, the majority of the (mostly female) students drawn to the class were unfamiliar with and intimidated by computers. By 1995, students enrolled in the course were considerably more aware of and comfortable with electronic technology, although the range of skills and attitudes was large.

The instructor in the 1993 class introduced most of the students to electronic mail (e-mail) for the first time. With the help of librarians and computing staff, students were taught how to subscribe to listservs and to use telnet and gopher commands. They began to communicate electronically with one another and with the instructor, sent messages beyond the campus (to the White House, for example), and accessed several gopher research sites.

Student enthusiasm is captured in a 1993 e-mail message: "Thanks again! I never would have learned this on my own, and it's something I've been wanting to learn for a while. It's also great to know you can just play around and not worry about messing anything up. I'm losing some of my computer phobia."[2]

Two sections of the same course were offered in the Fall of 1995, and technology was in even greater evidence. The instructor this time structured experiences and collected reactions more intentionally and purposefully. She and the Women's Studies Librarian began by asking students about their experiences with computers and information technologies and their rationales for using or avoiding them. In addition to teaching the skills covered in the 1993 class, we worked together to develop a homepage of resources in Women and Politics (http://www.urich.edu/~library/wp.htm) and to teach students to use the World Wide Web. Finally, the course syllabus included specific assignments to connect to websites for class preparation.

The results of these forays into cyberspace were much more comprehensive and varied in 1995 than they had been two years earlier. Not only could one take for granted that e-mail messages would be received and read, but this time Internet resources made their way into the course in a much more integrated way. For example, several student papers cited Web sources in their bibliographies. Students prepared an address book of interesting websites as well as three homepages highlighting websites for other young women interested in politics and public policy. Class members were also excited to learn that they could keep track of emerging events in the world and the state via the Internet. Some students followed events in Beijing at the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, while others, attending a statewide conference, were familiar enough with computer technology to understand a workshop on an in-house system for tracking bills in the Virginia General Assembly.

What is the particular relevance of these activities to a course on women and politics? Because our focus is the feminist political uses to which information technologies can be put and their role in the political empowerment of young women, we asked students on their final exams in 1993 and 1995 to reflect on the political opportunities that information technologies might offer uniquely to women. Their responses reflected much insight and understanding of the possibilities.

Students proposed that electronic mail offers a kinder, less intimidating environment for less aggressive students to network not only with each other, but with politically engaged others at the grassroots. They also realized that cyberspace offers a way to reduce the isolation feminists often experience and provides a place to exchange ideas from many points of view, across boundaries of gender, race, and culture. Many saw the Internet as a way for women to contact government officials, to develop a more efficient substitute for the organizer's telephone tree, and to form political coalitions across the country and the world.

Electronic communication reduces students' own preoccupation with physical appearance and self-presentation, as typified by the following student comment: "Electronic mail

eliminates the need for concern about one's appearance and voice because it eliminates the need for gender identification all together. This anonymity allows women to proceed forward without being self-conscious in their appearances and mannerisms." This might not only aid individual women's coming to voice, but could help female candidates circumvent such preoccupations on the part of the mass media. Moreover, students hold out hope that electronic media will offer them, and female candidates as well, some relief from the labels Jamieson says are attached to women's speech: witch, heretic, whore, or hysteric.[3] If female candidates are "able to be heard and not seen", in electronic forums, then their issue positions and qualifications might be highlighted as much as the sensational or horserace aspects of their campaigns. As another student said, "...[W]ith the stigma of gender removed, women are able to compete equally with their male counterparts in political and analytical debates."

Students also believe the Internet and electronic mail offer new mechanisms for recording and valuing traditional female experience. They see opportunities for female citizens to participate politically from their homes, without added concerns for child or elder care that often accompany community activism. One student wrote: "As Elshtain notes, in the past, only male experiences have been recorded and valued. Females were associated with the private sphere — sexuality, natality, and the human body.... With today's advancing technology, women have the possibility of escaping these barriers and penetrating the public sphere via the Web."

We have compared the 1993 and 1995 courses in an effort to articulate linkages between technology, feminist political empowerment, and Women's Studies. Some of the changes over these two years reflect growth in research about gender and technology, changes in the technologies themselves, growing campus resources, developing skill levels, and multiplying Internet resources. Other differences have resulted from our embrace of the technology and the opportunities it affords us for feminist change. In the words of one student: "Feminists could begin a real discussion — one not dependent on publication of articles or exchange of ideas through the mass media. The Internet will provide the nearest approximation our society can offer to a mass meeting of feminists."

*[Lucretia McCulley is Director of Public Services and Women's Studies Librarian, Boatwright Memorial Library, and Patricia Patterson is an Assistant Professor of Political Science. Both work for the University of Richmond, a small, privately-endowed, undergraduate university dedicated to providing a liberal arts environment.]*

NOTES

[1] bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1989), p.9.
2. This and ensuing quotes from student e-mail and final examinations, PS 321, University of Richmond, Fall 1993 and 1995.
[2] Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Eloquence in an Electronic Age: The Transformation of Political Speechmaking* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p.70.

*Miriam Greenwald*