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## Information Sources in **Women's Studies and Feminism**

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## The power of naming\*

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### ► **NEW INFORMATION TECHNOLOGIES**

The only constant in today's world is change.

One of the defining features of our historical condition is that it rests on the compulsive occurrence of contradictory trends: the globalization of the economic and cultural processes, which engenders increasing conformism and tends to conflate being citizens with being consumers of material and immaterial goods; and which does not exclude the fragmentation of these processes by the resurgence of regional, local, ethnic, cultural, and other differences not only between geo-political blocks, but also within them.

The historical moment we are living through raises increasingly complicated questions, the best illustration of which is the new information technologies, such as the Internet. The World Wide Web is a paradoxical mixture: it confronts us, on the one hand, with a cheerful cacophony of clashing bits and bytes of the most diverse information, and, on the other, with the threat of mono-culture and the largest concentration of military-industrial monopolies in the world. The Internet was first a military technology, before it was put to more productive ends.

I could not think of a better image for the paradox of globalization and concentration, uniformity and fragmentation, that lies at the heart of the concerns of late postmodernity. The theories as to the composition, the implications of and possible solutions to the paradoxes of the new information technologies are varied – ranging from euphoric promises of electronic democracy (John Perry Barlow and the cowboys of the electronic frontier) to prophecies of doom (think of the Unibomber manifesto).

Only some scholars like Emanuel Castells and feminist critics like Donna Haraway seem to be keeping a sober perspective on what is, after all, the great challenge of contemporary social theory and cultural practice, namely: how to assess information science and technology and their

impact on the real-life embodied subject, with special but not exclusive emphasis on women?

One way or the other, the hype about the information technologies is very persistent. Whether we like it or not, we are made to desire the human/machine interface, we are made to want to pursue it further and perfect it. It seems to me that the electronic information technologies are very conducive to the impression, if not the fantasy, of immediate connection. Those of us who are profoundly techno-philic know how fantastically addictive electronic communication can be. The desire to be wired is here to stay.

But so is the opposition, also known as: 'proud to be flesh'. And, as far as women are concerned, the flesh is not only weak, but also traditionally technophobic. There is no denying in fact that women's main mode of relation to technology is by negation. Even *not wanting* technology, however, is a way of relating to it. We all know what a powerful bond rejection can be. I think that the dominant technophobia of the women's movement, which is certainly not helped by the naturalistic essentialism of some branches of the eco-feminist movement, is a real obstacle to the advancement of the status of women in the age of the global economy. A retreat into cultural relativism will not help us much, either.

Cyber-space is a highly contested social space, or rather, it is a set of social relations mediated by technological flows of information. This has a number of troublesome aspects.

Firstly, it is unevenly distributed worldwide, in terms of access and participation. Gender and ethnicity are major axes of negative differentiation. The extent to which the Internet is capital-intensive, male-dominated, Westernized and English-speaking, is simply distressing.

But age is also a very important discriminating factor. I remember wanting to offer to my dear mother a computer, only to hear her say: 'my eyes are too tired, my fingers are too swollen, this is no fun for me'. I remember having a blind student who was so proud of what he had been able to achieve thanks to Braille, wondering how he would gain access to the electronic frontier.

Secondly, and as a consequence, we need to reflect about the uniquely visual focus of contemporary technologies. Scholars like Evelyn Fox-Keller, Sandra Harding and Luce Irigaray have written wise and insightful critiques of how Western rationality has historically privileged the gaze, the visual, what Freud called 'the scopie' to the detriment of other forms of perception. Keller speaks of a 'hierarchy' of the senses to indicate the secondary role to which hearing, touching, smelling or feeling have been reduced, *vis-a-vis* the king of senses: seeing.

It is not the least of the paradoxes of the new information technologies that they rely exclusively on vision and very much still on writing. One is tempted to ask whether they mark the end of the Gutenberg Galaxy or rather its extension in a digital format.

And what about other forms of information and communication technologies that would be acoustically based? Here I stress the importance of appropriate technologies. Among them I would rate highly aural technologies, such as radio. I personally think that solar-battery recharged, satellite-connected transistor radios are one of the most powerful and inclusive technologies available on the planet today. I have also been saying for some time that the women's movement needs to get its own satellite as soon as possible. Packing the information acoustically is the best way to reach people in out-of-the-way places. It is also the best way to speak to the vast masses of illiterate people of today, who, as the United Nations statistics indicate, are overwhelmingly (over 60 per cent) female.

Of course the argument is tricky, because our first collective priority is to go on fighting illiteracy, but while that struggle goes on, we must not allow the masses of women globally to miss the boat of the information revolution. Knowing how to read remains a major priority in a world where multiple literacies are going to be required of all citizens and all workers. Multiple literacies in turn need life-long education and retraining programmes. European universities at the moment are painfully aware of the need to restructure education to suit the changing needs of today: life-long adult education. Whether the university can rise to the challenge is very much an open question.

There is enough here to convince me that the age-old issues of sexism and racism are exacerbated rather than eliminated by the information societies.

### **Sustainability and the global economy**

Another important set of questions I would like to raise concerns the position of the new information technologies in the framework of other technological developments going on around us today. I think it would be dangerous to separate the information and communication technologies from, for instance, the global field of biotechnologies, which control life – health, medicine, nutrition, food production and last but not least, reproduction – to an increasingly high degree of complexity.

Every day technologies freeze time and cancel space. This does create a certain amount of confusion about what many speakers have already struggled to define as 'real' reality, as opposed to virtual reality. But how real is the real and where is it, really? Technology offers a variety of prosthetic extensions of our bodily functions: faxes and answering machines multiplying our aural and memory capacity; microwave ovens and their complement, the freezers, making food available to us at the push of a button. And the list goes on – electrical toothbrushes, videorecorders, telecommunication networks, frozen embryos, sperm banks – amplifying other bodily capacities.

For some humans, mostly situated in advantageous geo-political and class locations, the human body, supported and prompted by advanced technologies, is achieving more health, longevity and beauty than ever before.

But that, of course, is only one aspect of the story. The full picture looks quite different. Even in the so-called advanced or developed world, on an everyday sociological level the good old mortal body is striking back, with a vengeance. And remember that all humans are mortal, but some are more mortal than others.

An estimated two million American women have silicon breast implants most of which leak, bounce out of place during bumpy airplane flights or cause undesirable side-effects. Millions of women throughout the advanced world are on Prozac or other 'mood-enhancement' drugs. The hidden epidemic of anorexia/bulimia continues to strike one third of the younger women of the opulent world, as Princess Diana so clearly illustrated. Killer diseases today do not include only the great exterminators, like cancer and AIDS, but also the return of traditional diseases that we thought we had conquered, like tuberculosis and malaria. The human immune system has adapted to the antibodies and we are vulnerable again.

In such a historical, bio-political and geo-political context, there is no question that what we go on calling, quite nostalgically, 'our bodies, ourselves', are in fact abstract technological constructs fully immersed in advanced psycho-pharmacological industry, bio-science and the new media and information networks. This does not make them any less embodied, or any less 'ourselves', it just complicates considerably the task of representing to ourselves the experience of inhabiting them.

What seems urgent to me is that a culture that is in the grip of a techno-hype be brought a little bit down to earth. The techno-hype needs to be kept in check by a sustainable understanding of social progress. Social sustainability has to be one of the key words of the twenty-first century. We women committed to progress also need to assess lucidly the price we are prepared to pay for our high technological environments. We have our prosthetic promises of perfectability, now we need to hand over our pound of flesh. 'Proud to be flesh!', indeed.

Technological cultures carry structural injustices and inequalities that reintroduce rather ruthless power relations into post-industrial, post-colonial, post-socialist societies. They are about the becoming-third-world of the first world, while continuing the exploitation of developing countries. They are about the decline of 'legal' economies and the rise of structural illegality as a factor in the world. The global economy is also about the globalization of pornography and prostitution of women and children; it is about ruthless trade in human life. It is about the feminization of poverty; it is also about the rising rates of female illiteracy and the structural unemployment of large sectors of the population, especially the youth. It is about Cruise missiles, war and military violence. It is also

about the difficulty of the law to cope with such phenomena as the new reproductive rights, ranging from copyright laws in the use of photocopies and MP3s to the control of surrogate motherhood and artificial procreation; from the problem of authorship on the Internet to environmental control.

### The politics of naming

Not the least of the paradoxes of global information technologies is that they foreground the role of the imaginary as a social practice. I want to argue that information technologies are key elements in the restructuring of the contemporary social imaginary and they constitute the site of a real power struggle for the control over the it. Critics like Mike Davis suggest that it is already too late and we have already been re-colonized by the Californian imagination that has already taken over films and television. Some of us hope it is not too late and not all the cards are played out.

For these alternative cards to be fully deployed, however, we need more participation by women, feminists, and other so-called minority subjects. We cannot make a difference unless we are in, playing the game.

Let me clarify one point. The 'imaginary', as the poststructuralists teach us, is a set of socially mediated practices that function as the anchoring point – albeit floating and changeable – for identifications and therefore for identity formation. These social practices are interactive structures that both shape and empower the desire and the sense of agency of the subjects and are also shaped by them. It works two ways. Neither 'pure' imagination – locked in its classical opposition to reason – nor fantasy in the Freudian sense, the 'imaginary' for me marks a space of transitions and transactions. As such, it is eminently social. Nomadic, in a deleuzian sense, the imaginary flows like glue between the social and the self, the outside and the inside of the subject; it catches on as it goes. It possesses fluidity, flows, I said, but it is sticky: it catches on as it goes. It possesses fluidity, but it lacks transparency, let alone purity.

I choose the term 'desire' to connote the subject's own investment in this sticky network of social relations that are mediated by technology. This network constitutes the social field as an affective landscape, as well as a normative – or power-dominated one. This is why I do believe that there is something like the desire to be wired.

Considering the structure of the social imaginary, however, the task of the social critic does become rather daunting. The task of decoding and accounting for the contemporary technological imaginary, for instance, has led to a variety of divergent interpretations. So much so that some people have spoken of a crisis of representation, which most women experience daily in the form of: 'what the hell is going on in the world around us?'

As usual, women and especially feminists are not very worried about crises, maybe because we are used to them. Loyal to the politics of experience that has always guided political practice, many of us have stressed the opportunities that come with the crisis.

I think that one way of responding to the crisis of representation is by coming to terms with the power of naming. Issues of definition are no mere name-swapping. They rather register the decline, or the inadequacy, of dominant analytic frameworks and their consequent incapacity to grasp what is at stake in the changes that are taking place in information societies.

If change is our only constant, then we need forms of representation – of social and symbolic representation – that do justice to processes, dynamic flows and forces, rather than to fixed meanings and familiar identities. We need to emphasize what it is that we want to become, and not only who or what we are.

I think it is of the greatest importance to find adequate forms of representation for the emerging kind of subjects that the women's movement has helped to create: the new women, men and children who are the subjects of the information societies – whether they like it or not.

Saskia Sassen, for instance, challenges the platitudes with which official academic but also policy-making language defines issues of migration and ethnicity within the global economy. She argues that in fact, much of what we still narrate in the language of immigration and ethnicity is actually a series of processes having to do with major changes in the structure of the global economy that transform the relationship between periphery and centre, causing a general dislocation of identities.

The globalization of economic but also of cultural activity has a huge impact on the formation of identity, also for those who live in the so-called 'centre'.

Instead of thinking of race and ethnicity in such a framework of interlocking destabilization, most of us go on constructing immigration and ethnicity as otherness and depreciate it as such. We need instead to understand them as a shift of paradigm, that is, a set of processes whereby global elements are localized, international labour markets are constituted, and cultures from all over the world are redefined by the displacement of the workforce in the global economy.

Just think about it for a minute, within the 'ethnoscapes' of post-modernity, in the framework of the global economy the cartographies of dynamic or travelling subject-positions abound: the itinerant-worker; the illegal alien; the cross-border sex-worker; and various brands of displacement, diasporas, and hybridity. The cyborgs of Donna Haraway and Zygmunt Bauman's postmodern duo: the tourist and the vagabond. Trinh Minh Ha calls this subject 'the inappropriate/other'; Spivak 'the post-colonial subject'; Alice Walker 'the womanist'; Gloria Anzaldúa, working from the NAFTA zone, calls her 'mestiza'.

More historically, specific figurations have been offered: the mail-order bride; the illegal prostitute; the rape-in-war victim seeking political asylum in the European Union and failing to obtain it because rape does not confer the status of political refugee; the live-in domestic from the Philippines who has replaced the more familiar figure of the babysitter or the au-pair girl, to the cyber feminists cross-dressing electronically while surfing on Internet. The list is endless.

In a world that is structured this way, we need to exercise the politics of location on a global scale, assessing the global economy in its localized and most imminent forms. If the motto is 'think globally, act locally', then the strategy must be how to be able to combine accurate mappings of our global situation with incisive actions on the local level. In the European Network of Women's Studies, we call this: 'the strategy of the g-local'.

*Glocalization* means bringing the information technologies, if not down to earth, at least down to the special section of the earth that each of us inhabits as her/his spatial and temporal locations. Let us not forget that, as Proust and Einstein teach us, spaces or places are just a sedimentation of time, or a cumulation of remembered experiences. *Glocalizing* is about embedding and embodying the effects and the structures of the information technologies, so that the desire to be wired and the pride to be flesh combine in the here and now of our specific and respective locations. And so that, by being embedded and embodied, we may be empowered to act and not be paralyzed by the huge transformations that are happening around us. Don't agonize, *glocalize!*

Terms like 'figuration' or 'fabulations' are often used to describe this politically charged practice of looking for alternative representations for new forms of the social imaginary. It is a way of bringing into focus what was, until now, outside representation. It is a way of enlarging the social imaginary by making it more inclusive on the grounds of gender, race and age, to name but a few.

Embodied and embedded practices of *glocalized* locations illustrate the power of naming. I would connect the formulation of a new social imaginary with both theoretical and political accountability. Accountability is the practice that consists in unveiling the power locations that one inevitably inhabits as the site of one's social identity. The practice of accountability (for one's embodied and embedded locations) as a relational, collective activity of undoing power differentials is linked to the crucial notion of memory. It activates the process of putting into words, that is to say bringing into symbolic representation, that which has been left on the margins of society.

This calls, among other things, for a new alliance between political reasoning and the imagination or creativity. It also requires transversal alliances that cut across gender, race, ethnicity and age and interconnect them, in a more complex manner.

Renaming the global information technologies in terms of glocalization has everything to do with reactivating the memory at both collective and individual level. There is a reductive tendency at work in the information technologies to reduce memory to the storing of data banks. This is a static and limited understanding of the term. What is needed instead is a memory that is activated by an alert consciousness, a dynamic, curious, disturbing memory that does not easily let go. A memory that forgets to forget some hard truths about, for instance, women, but not only. A rebellious and unsubjugated memory. Cornel West and bell hooks have stressed time and again that without collective memory there cannot be political or ethical resistance. And those of us who live in Europe will do well to meditate upon the warning of Friedrich Nietzsche, that people who ignore their history are condemned to repeat it.

► **FOOTNOTES**

- 1 \* The original version of this paper was presented at the KnowHow: Conference on the World of Women's Information sponsored by the International Infomaticentrum en Archief Voor de Vrouwenbeweging in Amsterdam, August 1998.

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