The Woman Question: Addressing Women as Internet users

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What do female Internet users want? What kinds of online services are appealing to women? These are what one might call million dollar questions, and ones that service providers are desperately seeking answers to, even while trying out sites designed for women.

As a feminist media researcher, I often feel caught in a strange double-bind. On the one hand, there's a considerable body of writing on the subversive possibilities of the Internet as a site for trying out multiple identities, reworking fluid and unfixed gender boundaries, and subverting one's conceptions of gender identity.[1] Information networks are seen as sites for escape from the gender systems of everyday life, a Promised Land of sorts, and one especially suited for women and "feminine modes of communication."[2] On the other hand, these subversive potentialities are nowhere to be seen in the ways commercial services, information society agendas, and guide books address women as Internet users. Commercial services for women that reach vast audiences of female net users, are a far cry from academic fantasies of fluid genders. Sites such as the U.S.-based Oxygen, or the Finnish services Nicehouse, Ellit, and MTV3's Naiset, or sites maintained by companies that produce sanitary products for women—like Tampax, Always, and Libresse[3]—illustrate quite a different take on gender and the Internet, one that is prone to reproduce and reinforce very familiar gender structures.

I will look at this gendering of online services for women, and argue for the importance of critical feminist intervention; my focus is on addressing women as Net users. These services, targeted at a wide range of audiences, are important platforms for articulating concepts of gender, and (re)producing specific understandings of women. Commercial Online Services (COS), Internet Service Providers (ISP), and various kinds of corporations have launched services for women with specific ideas of female Net users in mind. Roughly put, some of these services function as advertisements for the company behind them (Tampax, Libresse, Always). Others can be thought of primarily as a means for the company to profile itself as "woman-friendly," and thus address new customers (MTV3, Sonera), and yet others are attempts to create a profitable business that both attracts female users and provides advertisement income (Ladyvista, Nicehouse). The target groups vary from teenage girls to young urban professional and middle-aged women, although these emphases are not always obvious. What interests me here are the common features of these services, the gender categories that they are based on, the means used to attract female Internet users, and the ways in which these strategies of address are linked to wider discourses of women and technology.

I will illustrate practices of gendering with recent examples from memoranda on Internet and equality, popular guidebooks and overviews that address the so-called "woman question" on the Internet. These practices are linked to widespread frameworks for conceptualizing gender and information networks, frameworks that span national borders and exert a powerful influence politically as well as economically.

I am writing this text in Finland, a country widely recognized as a model "virtual society." It has one of the highest rates of Internet usage per capita, its economy is boosted by Nokia and its schools and institutions are carefully wired. As in other European countries, North America, and Asia, there are governmental information-society agendas that aim at securing the nation's position in the global marketplace. In economic and educational outlines alike, new media, especially information networks, are given high status as tools of the future, and the challenges and implications of rising information societies

are the subject of academic research, as well as various regional and national strategies and memoranda. In this tradition of public policies, Internet users are discussed in seemingly gender-neutral terms as "citizens."[4] There also are, however, attempts to diversify the category of citizens by pointing to such markers as gender and locality. In 1998, for example, the Finnish Ministry of Transport and Communications published a memorandum on equality and information networks, with a special focus on women. The memorandum, to which I will return below, directly addressed gender difference, women's needs and likes as Net users, through anonymous expert interviews.

In terms of gender equality, Finland was the first country in the world to give women full political rights back in 1905, and in the spring of 2000 the first female president, Tarja Halonen,[5] was elected. A substantial majority of women are in fulltime employment, and more than half of all university grad-uates are female. One might think of Finland as a test-laboratory, both in terms of the information society and gender equality, but things are not that simple. Although the Finnish language lacks the semantic difference between "*she*" and "*he*," this does not really translate as a culture free of gender bias, as a society with equal access, or equal pay for that matter. The processes and tech-nologies of gendering are no less active in Finland than in other parts of the world. I would argue that the Finnish texts on women and the Internet, used below as illustrative examples, are applicable also to discussions of mapping and defining gender difference, women's needs and interests as Internet users elsewhere. The project of localizing female users/consumers is carried out by corporations on a national, as well as cross- and multinational level. Further-more, the popular and fundamentally anti-feminist trend of socio-biology, as it has been employed to explain gender differences in Internet use, seems to have market value on a global scale.[6]

Broadly speaking, "the woman question" has surfaced in discussions of the Internet in two ways. First, women have been under-represented in technical skills, in content production, as well as online usage. This has been seen as a threat to plans for an equal information society, in which all information-intense citizens possess multiple media skills. It has also been a problem for
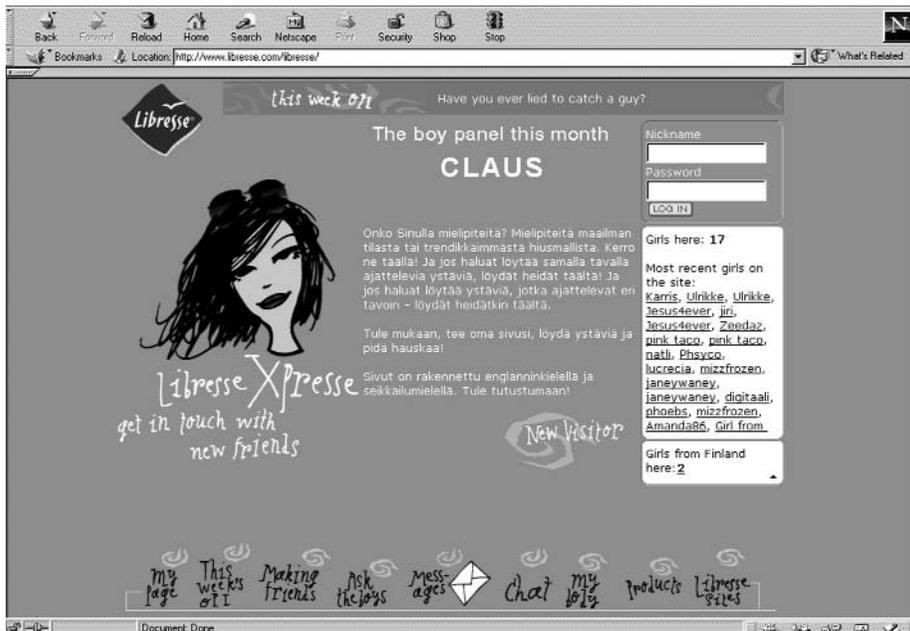
different service providers, who fail to reach the desired groups of female users. Second, the woman question has to do with how women could be better addressed as net users, and with what kinds of contents and services this could be accomplished. Discussions on gender and the Internet are often based on the construction of women as a collective *other* defined against the male norm. Internet services addressed to women always presuppose an understanding of what women are like, what unites them, and what they are interested in. These understandings are not necessarily based on market research, but on so-called common knowledge. Thus, the problem involves not only the ability of the media industry to provide services that reach women, but also its capacity to determine why women might be less interested in information networks, computer technology, and what "women actually want." Thus "the woman question" widens into ontological reflections on gender difference, women, and femininity. To put it bluntly, women as such become the problem to solve.

These articulations of women as Internet users are parts of a wider process, which, paraphrasing media scholar Cecelia Tichi, can be understood as a discursive production of a medium. Media texts, such as web sites, but also various—and often contradictory—texts by experts, popular overviews, com-

mercials, and publicity all participate in the production of meaning through which a new medium becomes understood. Explaining and domesticating a medium is based on already existing discourses, values, and traditions that provide it with a cultural context.[7] The web site of Tampax, or the memorandum by the Ministry of Transport and Communications, for example, operate on different levels of authority, credibility, and desirability, and there is no guarantee that their addresses actually work. What I'm interested in are the continuities between these forms of address, and their location in wider discursive formations. Therefore, these texts and services should not be seen as merely descriptive, but as productive, active technologies that shape understandings of media technology and its use of gender and identity.

THE BIG DIFFERENCE

Services for women, as well as official memoranda on women and the Internet, presuppose a given gender difference, which can be based on evolution, genes, learned behavior, upbringing, or the common-sense knowledge that "women are different from men." Currently, various socio-biological explanations surface when gender difference is directly addressed in guidebooks, general interest articles, or memoranda. The fluid gender identities extolled in academic literature have little connection to these gendered uses of technology and understandings of gender difference primarily through the lenses of evolution history, thus reflecting the prevailing Western belief in biology as destiny.

A popular guidebook by Petteri Järvinen, as well as anonymous expert interviews in the memorandum by the Finnish Ministry of Transport and Communications, assume innate psycho-physical gender differences drawn from the twilight of evolution, from the gender-differentiated roles of man the hunter and woman the gatherer/nurturer. Gender difference becomes here something final and unchangeable, difficult to define, but mostly marked by women's inclination to social interaction and all things domestic, and men's determination and desire for exploration. According to these arguments, men became physically strong, handy with tools, and good with 3-D structures, since it was their

role to provide for the family that waited in the domestic cave.[8] Thus, the gendered division of labor, as it was developed during the 19th century, becomes inscribed in the flesh. Projected to a million years ago, this model is depicted as an inescapable result of human evolution (and thus natural laws). Consequently, the links between women and femininity and men and masculinity are naturalized and turned into expressions of inner character.

The "natural" division between the public and the private resurfaces in several expert interviews by the Ministry of Transport and Communications. Men are associated with "hunting, tools and determination…men's hobbies [are] outside the home, women's at home. Because of this, men get a mobile phone, own a PC, and use cars a lot." Furthermore, "Men [have] a relationship with the machine, women are into human relations."[9] Thus the male drives of hunting and mastering tools, as well as the social nature of women, are genetically determined, automatically placing men behind the steering wheel and women by the stove. Even a superficial reading reveals the inconsistencies inherent in these propositions. For example, the acquisition of a PC might just as well be explained by domestic inclinations as by the opposite. Thus, these categories do not make any sense, or have any consistency, but can realign from moment to moment as the complete opposite of one another.

In these texts, the Internet is seen as gender-neutral, which is crucial in terms of information-society agendas aiming at greater female participation. Gender is depicted as a set of stable differences that structures experience (being, feeling, and communicating) in a way that resembles the logic of Mars and Venus, familiar from John Gray's internationally best-selling relationship guidebooks.[10] Ultimately, however, the woman question for Järvinen and others concerns a bias in women's attitudes towards technology: Gender ceases to be a problem only if women "act more like men." These understandings of gender follow a common-sense logic which, according to sociologist Judith Lorber, tends to see gender as bred into one's genes. The binary gender model and the universality of gender difference seek justification from nature, genes, and even the pairing practices of simians. In all cases, gender differentiates women from men almost as if they were from two different species. Genes and hor-

mones are upheld as unchanging factors that define needs, desires, and behavior. The natural gender difference thus produced functions as an ideological justification of gender inequality. However, biology is not so clear cut and binary, and a biological body is always also a social body, one that is gendered from the cradle to the grave. References to "the natural" are always cultural and serve to justify and strengthen a given social order.[11] Current socio-biological rhetoric justifies stereotypes of "emotional women" and men "that do not iron," and thus supports a culturally specific gendered division of labor.

One solution to the woman question is to tailor Internet services especially for women to meet needs specific to the group. What is it that women need, then? According to Järvinen, there is a need for online versions of women's magazines, cosmetics companies, Tampax, and clothing stores.[12] Thus understood, women are defined by an interest in their own appearances, quintessentially feminine consumer products, and the maintenance of heterosexual desirability. Companies like Tampax have, in fact, invested great amounts of resources into developing their online services into "communities for women," service sites that do not only do direct product promotion, but instead offer channels for communication, asking questions, and exchanging experiences on health and corporeality. The term "community" is used somewhat liberally, since it refers more to the framework of the site than it does to its actual uses or users. The discourse on virtual communities and community building of all kinds has, during the past years, led to a general dilution of meaning, as networks, random points of contact, discussion forums, and mailing lists are all referred to as "communities," often without further consideration.

The term "community," in sites by Tampax, Libresse, and Always, can also be seen as a soft-core appropriation of the discourse of community within the women's movement—of support and sharing experiences *among women*, but without any political edge. The international on-line *Tampax Community for Girls/Women* offers spaces for discussing women and health under the headline "Women Know," plus a chat forum for young women, as well as a Net 'zine for girls. *Always a Woman*, a site by the company Always, deals with the relations between mothers and daughters, health, and growing up to be a woman, but it

also includes a discussion forum named "Sharing—Women Worldwide Helping Each Other." These communities maintained by sanitary-supply companies do, to a large degree, circulate the discourse of communication between women, women-only spaces, and a rhetoric of "shared experiences of womanhood." In addition to offering product information, the sites aim to function as supportive communities of "sisters."

"Female spaces" on corporate web sites seem to be defined through very familiar axis of embodiment (menstruation, reproduction, motherhood) and femininity as a set of values, characteristics, and practices (sharing, caring, emotions, social skills, mutual support). The shared experiences of women are depicted in pastel colors, with images of neatly attired, able-bodied women of various ethnic backgrounds smiling side by side. The diversity has obvious limits, and the sites do not give space to a redefinition of gender and/or femininity.

The *Secret Garden* by Libresse invites, in a somewhat separatist vein, only women users to discuss topics such as ideals of manhood, or the latest news on the Spice Girls: "You are welcome in the Libresse Secret Garden in whatever mood you are! The most important thing is that you are your own self. The only criterion is that you are a representative of girls, for all discussions are carried out only and exclusively 'among girls'! Here you can say out loud even your most secret dreams." The name of the service is intriguing, for it refers to menstruation as a "secret shared among us girls" and to the private and lush space of a garden instead of a more mundane chat-room, but it is also associated with female genitalia. The site emphasizes authenticity: Users are encouraged to be their true selves, and, so it seems, also "true," that is, biologically defined, "natural" women.

Libresse's online services are illustrative of how sites are both localized for different language groups (in the Nordic countries, with domains .fi, .se, .dk, and .no), and linked to an international site (.com). Thus the audience, and the community in question, is simultaneously national and cross-national, and unified by the product manufacturer. Libresse's online services are clearly targeted at teenage girls, and their international site seems to be structured around

gendering girls. The service includes, among other things, a possibility to "ask the boys" from different countries questions on dating, female attractiveness, and male preferences.

On November 3 and 4, 1999, among the questions addressed to a boy named Daniel were: "You look really good, Daniel :) And how must the girl of your dreams look?"; "Hey, Daniel…I just wonder…do boys really like girls with tight jeans, tight sweaters and high shoes…and the girls that laugh at everything? Please answer me!"; "Hi Daniel. What do you think about girls with big breasts? Tell the truth," and "Have you got a girlfriend?" The hot question of the week was, "What do you do to make a boy notice you?" Handsome young Daniel was situated here as the official male that could voice general male preferences. The genre of questions posed to him, as well as the general framework of the "ask

the boys" pages, clearly positions girls as interested in boys and in the prep-
aration of their body both for boys and romance. Like romantic fiction for girls
in a study by Pam Gilbert and Sandra Taylor, Libresse's sites function as
technologies of gender that prepare girls to enter heterosexual practices, and
romantic love in particular, by instructing them in the ideological and dis-
cursive positions that produce and reproduce femininity. Femininity means,
both on the Libresse site and in Gilbert and Taylor's study, being socialized as
romantic and heterosexual, and female desire is defined through desirability,
and success in relationships.[13]

   This making of girlhood takes place in specific settings, since Libresse's
international service also is based on chat options: "Do you have opinions?
Opinions about the state of the world to the latest haircut. Well, express them
here! And if you want to find friends who think like you, find them here! And
if you want to find friends who don't think like you, find them here too." The
friends who *think unlike* are not that easy to find, however. The rhetoric of
community is linked to a homogeneous construction of gender, since it is diffi-
cult to find discussions on other things than music, dating, looks, fashion, and
beauty. When registering as members of the community, users fill in a personal
profile that consists of a pet name, approximate age, favorite hobbies, music,
actors, web sites, ideal holiday destinations, and general self-descriptions. Pro-
files are visible whenever the user in question has logged onto the service. These
parameters of the self are very much focused on consumption preferences, and
they seem to function as guarantees of "thinking alike"—that is, of having sim-
ilar orientations to heterosexual relationships, looks, and desirability.

   The ways that media products recognize and address women, also can be con-
sidered in relation to Louis Althusser's ideas on religion, family, education,
communication, culture, legislation, and profession as multiple ideological
state apparatuses that address—or, in his term, "hail"—subjects. According to
Althusser, it is typical of ideology to make things taken for granted function as
truisms. When faced with them we automatically and "naturally" cry, "That's
clear! Right! That's the way it is!"[14] Judith Butler has rethought hailing and
subjection as the gendering of bodies, in which bodies are named and situated

in the structure of illegibility, the heterosexual matrix. According to Butler, naming bodies male and female is the fundamental hailing that is the perquisite to the cultural legibility of an individual. To put it another way, gender difference, understood as a bipolar model structured by heterosexual desire, is a cultural truism that produces frameworks for thinking identity, corporeality, and desire in general.[15] Subjection means being addressed (hailed), and recognizing oneself as the object of address, as a subject. Girls are formed through the compulsory reiteration of norms that assume the continuity of body, gender, and desire as feminine, heterosexual womanhood.

Althusser emphasizes the contradictory and uneven nature of different mechanisms of interpellation. However, he understands subjection as a one-way process, whereas Butler emphasizes the possible failures of address, the ruptures and gaps between the discursive command and its appropriated effect.[16] The Libresse site, for example, is based on truisms about girls and their focus on looks and heterosexual attractiveness. These truisms provide the site with coherence, but their simplified and one-sided nature makes the gender norms strikingly visible and, perhaps, open for resistance.

Such more or less successful attempts at hailing can be thought of as tech-

nologies of gender that not only aim to position the target of address as a woman, heterosexual, teenager, etc., but also provide these categories with meaning. A technology of gender generates assumptions on what the subject category, and the subject, in question is like.[17] This "knowledge" is incoherent and often contradictory, as the notions of gender difference discussed above illustrate. If gender is thought of as an unstable result of continuous production, it is necessary to note the importance of common knowledge, and things taken for granted: That women are "known" to be talkative and social and men determined and technical, are examples of repeatable elements of common knowledge that reproduce the social order. Something becomes obvious when it is repeated over and over again: "Everybody knows," and "it is familiar to all," for example, that women's communication is intimate. Things taken for granted thus function as performatives, as acts of discourse with the power to create that to which they refer.[18] Simultaneously, they function as interpellating calls that reproduce the social order. It is exactly the taken-for-granted nature and transparency of such gendered practices of everyday life, that supports the assumptions of gender as biology. Through constant repetition, these assumptions become common knowledge that doesn't require any proof or explanation—that, in fact, cannot be proved or verified. When common knowledge reaches transparency, it becomes a substitute for reality.[19] Repeated gendered practices thus naturalize gender difference and help to whisk women towards Venus, and men to Mars.

SOMETHING FOR THE LADIES

The rationality of female users is a recurring theme in discussions on women and the Net: For example, the Internet "doesn't save time or money, so it doesn't interest women," or "women usually surf the Net with determinacy, looking for something, whereas for men, surfing is often a purpose in itself, existentialist wandering in the ocean of information and humbug."[20] Women's Internet use is thus seen as well motivated and functional, linked to saving time and money, not fun or leisure. Paradoxically, then, women's Internet use is here defined as determined, and goal-oriented, which are mentioned above as innate

male characteristics. Intimate, social, or emotional womanhood seems to have little space in these understandings of gender and Internet use. However, women are simultaneously associated with compulsive, uncontrollable, passive and basically useless, media use. Thus, television, cinema, radio, magazines, and romantic fiction alike have addressed women as their most central source of income. The intimate relationship between women and consumption (as opposed to men and production) has positioned women as primary consumers of media, who are addressed by various content providers and advertisers.[21]

The passiveness often associated with consumption of television—and consumption at large—has been given a range of feminine features. The Ministry of Transport and Communications also presented assumptions of television viewers as passive female consumers numbed by the televisual program flow in the memorandum. The gendered differences in media uses find their meaning in a bipolar framework of active vs. passive, which is often complemented by the conceptual dualism of old and new media. In such divisions, men are often positioned as the forerunners and users of new and experimental media, while women are defined as conservative users of older media, like TV, radio, and print media.[22] It makes a kind of sense, then, that when women are addressed as Internet users, services designed especially for them use and recycle representations from other media products targeted at women, such as women's magazines. Ellit, Nicehouse, and MTV3's Naiset ("Women"), the major Finnish women-oriented sites, use the format of women's magazines.

As in women's magazines, women's sites address women as a group less defined by hobbies or professional interests than by gender.[23] To give only a few examples, according to interviewees of the Ministry of Transport and Communications, "The way of thinking about content design is women's worlds, and men's worlds, and news for everybody. Women's world: Food column, fashion, interior decoration, parties. Men's world: Sports, fishing, cars."[24] These definitions produce an understanding of women and men literally as creatures of different worlds, the private and the public sphere. It is hardly a surprise, then, that these very categories are the ones that structure online services for women.

The domesticity of women is emphasized in the interface of Nicehouse, which is strongly based on the metaphor of a home. The name of the service is a word game, signifying both a pleasant space (nice house), but also one of women, since the suffix *nais-*, which is pronounced the same way as the English word *nice*, translates as female. The interface is built as a light-colored drawing of a cross section of a house, and the different rooms of the house represent the different sections of the service. They include, among others, a "bedroom" on sex and relationships, dreams and their interpretations, a "wardrobe" on fashion, the somewhat Woolfian room of one's own of spiritual growth and questions of the self, as well as a "study," a "children's room," a "kitchen," and a "workshop." According to the introduction of the site, "The hand-made graphic appearance warmly welcomes especially women, but also those men bored with net surfing, who long for real content on the Internet." Content is, no doubt, the most central issue in services targeted at women, but it is impossible to separate content from form, from representation. The service is mainly made by women, and it seems to rely on a fantasy of women/girls as "decorating" creatures who are fond of organic, "hand-made" shapes and forms.[25]

Ellit, another major service for women, operates on a large budget, and advertises more widely. Ellit is divided into articles and discussions, which are carried out in five different categories: Relationships, fitness and beauty, leisure and hobbies, home and environment, "kitchen of Ideas" and work and finance. Ellit also includes the section, "Forbidden to Men," which, in spite of its name, is open to all users independent of their gender. During the first months of the service the articles in that section dealt with issues such as domestic violence, large breasts, and beauty ideals. Later, the emphasis shifted to intimate interviews with female celebrities. Discussions on autobiographical and emotional issues are defined as something "between us women," and not meant for male eyes. The colors used in Ellit vary from time to time, but are dominated by pastel shades (at the time of writing, lime), and softly filtered photographs. Like MTV3's Naiset, a service for women launched in 2000, Ellit relies on the conventions of women's magazines both in its ways of structuring information and representing it.

In Clarisse Mehar Molad's book on women and the Net, she advises designers working on sites for women: "Your site's look and feel should appeal to women. For example, straight lines do not work as well as curves, and women like pastel colors and softness. Black and red are considered very male. Yellow is female."[26] Indeed, the logic of "the pinks and the blues" is taken to full use in all three major Finnish services for women, which rely widely on pastel shades. An extreme case of gender-specific orientation is Ladyvista, a search engine for women. Despite its mostly American links and advertisers, the contacts are two Finnish men, who describe the aims of the site as "a gateway to the Internet—especially designed for ladies":

> Most of the sites that can be found in the Internet are made by male engineers. Those sites tend to look a little shady and are often quite mixed. We at Ladyvista realised that there is a clear need for a web portal which could prove itself a little different. That is why we launched Ladyvista in June 2000: To give our users a little bit more.

> Our mission is to make more attractive sites and bring beautiful web experiences to all for free. Ladyvista is especially designed for women, or "ladies," as we prefer to say. We know that even nowadays it is quite hard to find anything especially designed for ladies in the Internet. Our goal is to create a web community of all the sites including interesting information for women. We strongly believe that in this way we are able to make our users stronger and more independent as women in the male dominated world.[27]

The portal claims to emancipate women, but simultaneously the "Ladyvista team" prefers to call their target audience "ladies"—nothing short of an intimidating gesture. The site is interesting in many ways, not least since search engines, basic tools for using the web, are not often considered gender-specific. Relying on a binary gender model, Ladyvista challenges this notion. By marking itself "for ladies," it implies that general search engines are "for gentlemen." Like so many other services for women, the design of Ladyvista relies on pastel shades of pale pink and blue, and violet, soft italic fonts, and floral ornaments. The site has news services on entertainment, politics, fashion, travel, etc., and links to mainstream services for women, such as "Moms online," "Fighting Fat," "Women connect," and "Recipe Finder." The logo of Ladyvista comes with pink and blue little hearts, a style reminiscent of cute stationery for girls. Banners advertise rings and beauty services, and the link of the week, at the time of this writing, was one for romance novels. With claims to make its users "more strong and independent," the service has no links to explicitly feminist resources. The most intimate tie is to Missit.net, a Finnish service that provides information on beauty pageants in Finland and abroad, as the basic layout for the sites is identical. Contact information for Missit.net leads to the same people as in Ladyvista. Excessive gendering? Excessive femininity? I think so.

Repetition without a difference?

Ellit advertises itself as "a community of active women," but has a considerable percentage of male users. Discussions in Ellit often turn into heterosexual games, in which users use both male and female screen names, and also strongly gendered pseudonyms, such as Cosmo, Vanha Aatami (Old Adam),

Mies40 (Man40), Karhu (Bear) and Nalle (Teddy Bear). Following the logic of Mars and Venus, the discussions are structured by comparisons between male and female experiences, ways of thinking and experiencing, debates on women and femininity (what women are *really* like). Although "Relationships" is the most sex-oriented of the discussion channels, other discussions easily turn to sex and sexual desirability. Although the service is strongly moderated and censored, discussions do get personal, offensive, and sexually descriptive. Ellit discussions are structured around sharing experiences among women, but also among women and men, and among men. The core of the discussions is almost invariably the signification and reproduction of a given gender difference. The central question here, as in Libresse's "ask the boys," is what men and women *really* think, feel, and want. Discussions aim at understanding otherness, and in doing this, they reproduce the bipolar gender order.

Discussions on homosexuality and cross-dressing do surface, but are discussed in relation to the heterosexual norm, which renders these practices "perverse" or "unnatural." Thus, for example in a discussion on male homophobia in November of 1999, biology was used to justify and devalue alternative sexualities. In the words of a user, "What are males and females for? Man and woman. Stamen and pistil. For reproduction. And gays/lesbians are not abnormal?" Nature and biology function here as ideological assumptions, and by referring to them, specific sexualities are marked as natural, that is, "normal," and others unnatural and "abnormal." As philosopher Tuija Pulkkinen has put it, in the Finnish language there is no simple division equaling that of sex/gender: "The word for the realm of the body, desire, and role-identification, for both sex and gender is *sukupuoli*; *Suku* means family in large or kin, *puoli* means half of. Ideas of ordering, reproduction and division in two are linguistically present in this concept. *Sukupuoli* assumes that there are two classes of beings and that they produce offspring." It is no surprise, then, that in this cultural context the "truth" on sex life *sukupuolielämä* is searched for in reproductive nature.[28]

Taking into consideration the much-discussed possibilities of altering one's gender online, it might very well be that the bears and men in Ellit are in fact

something other than anatomical men. But this crossing is not necessarily an interesting object of study. Independent of his/her "true" identity, the textual man performs, produces, and reproduces a specific gender, which is again linked to the norms and conditions that define the cultural illegibility of individuals. There is not, then, much subversion in these gender performances, and they do not automatically aim at a *repetition with a difference*, parody and variation that might open up gender categories and their assumed coherence for reinterpretation.[29] On the contrary, "making" another gender also can mean seeking credibility by contentiously repeating the stereotypes, norms and issues of common knowledge that structure gender categories?

For several decades, feminism has problematized discussing women on a generalized and/or essentialist level, and has made visible the norms, exclusions, and privileges inherent in such discourses. Generalizing speech assumes an understanding of women as norm, which, historically, has meant the universality of white, Western, middle-class, heterosexual women.[30] The representation of women as a homogeneous group ultimately reinforces the binary gender models discussed above. Critical analysis of concepts of gender is a quintessential part of cyberfeminist activity. In discussions of women and the Internet we must question *which women are being discussed*, what meanings are attributed to the category of "women" and what meanings are actively excluded. Critically we must analyze women-oriented products and services along with basic assumptions about women's "nature," needs, and experiences produced in commercial contexts. The companies that market these services and products are local and global, national and multinational, and, in most cases, prone to efface differences between women while selecting primarily middle-class women with higher incomes as ideal consumers.

Information networks are not only media of tomorrow, but, more crucially, they are parts of a cultural continuum for reproducing cultural values and hierarchies. The attempts to increase the percentage of female Internet users by producing women-specific services can contribute to the reproduction of gender stereotypes, and naturalization of the status quo. Janelle Brown, writing on

women's sites in her complaint, sums this up: "They promised a revolution, but all we got was horoscopes, diet tips, and parenting advice."[31] ★

1   See Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), p. 210–232; Sandy Stone, *The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 1996), p. 180–181.

2   See Sadie Plant, *Zeros + Ones: Digital Women and the New Technoculture* (London: Fourth Estate, 1997); Clarisse Behar Molad, *Women.Weaving.Webs: Will Women Rule the Internet?* (Houston: CBM Press, 2000).

3   Cf. <http://www.oxygen.com>; <http://www.nicehouse.fi>; <http://www.soneraplaza.fi/ellit>; <http://www.mtv3.fi/naiset>; <http://www.tampax.com>; <http://www.always.com>; <http://www.libresse.com>. **Note:** some of these site addresses have been changed or deleted since this article was first written.

4   Päivi Eriksson, and Marja Vehviläinen, eds., *Tietoyhteiskunta seisakkeella: teknologia, talous ja paikalliset tulkinnat* (Jyväskylä: SoPhi, 1999).

5   <http://www.presidentti.fi>

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