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Babes on the Web. Sex, Identity and the Home Page

by: Marj Kibby

In 1995, a new Web site appeared 'Babes on the Web', it was the creation of Robert Toups and it featured a list of women who had Web pages that included a personal photograph. Toups rated them on a scale of one to four on the basis of the appeal their image had for him. His rating system is totally subjective and he is proud of being a chauvinist pig as he himself explained. Toups published the list. He certainly expected controversy, advising the offended to complain before the National Organisation for Women (NOW) home page. A number of anti-Babes on the Web pages appeared, including 'Babes on the Web II', rating the personal photographs of men's home pages in an apparent spirit of the gender equity. Ellen Spertus discussion of the Toups page pointed out that it may be one more factor discouraging women from participating on the Internet by limiting the choices they might make in designing their home pages.

Toups responded to the criticism and later versions of his page have been toned down. But his header, however continues to assert Toups' right to free speech, and his right, under the American Constitution, to bear arms to defend this. His 30 Steps to Understanding Babes on the Web' argues that any criticism of his page is an indictment of the critic.

This raises a number of issues: what constitutes harassment on the Internet; the gendered nature of harassment; Web privacy; free speech and censorship; Internet service providers' responsibilities; and netiquette, or acceptable practice in electronic interaction. And another set of issues raised by the Babes on the Web page concerns the relationship between the 'self' presented on the home page, and the gendered, sexed, body. Mediated communication arguably affords women the opportunity to present themselves in ways not bound by such categories as 'sex object', and facilitates the presentation of a self that existed independently of the sexed body, why on so many women's home pages was the sexualised body chosen as a primary image of self?

There is a need to consider how the self and the body have been theorised, in relation to the potential impact of new forms of electronic communication on ways of conceptualising the relationship between mind and body. This theorisation is in the tradition of William S. Gibson fiction, where the body is 'meat', obsolete as soon as thought can be uploaded into the network (1984). The Cartesian mind/body split is celebrated by Rheingold (1991) as an escape from our 'carnal vessels'. Reid describes how MUD players 'are able to create a virtual self outside the normally assumed boundaries of gender, race, class, and age' (1994, 60). Stating that the gender subject is separated from the sexed body, if not finally divorced from it' (1994, 62)

The physical body provides a locus for our sense of self, supporting a belief that this self is a stable and measurable 'identity' . On the Net, however, there is no pre-given body to anchor identity. One can theoretically have as many electronic identities as one has the time, energy and expertise to create. It would

therefore appear that there are kinds and categories of electronic selves which can be presented and maintained in cyberspace quite separate from the embodied self.

Where sexuality is an issue, or a focus, of the communication then the identity presented is often disguised, or a fantasy identity constructed. Cu-Cme (see you-see me) involves the transmission of images via video camera and conversation through the keyboard. The communication of self here involves not only linguistic codes, but also visual codes such as framing, lighting and setting, as well as the interpersonal communication codes of appearance, dress and pose. On the Cu-Cme 'sex' sites like Mysteries Place and Buffnet, women predominantly depict themselves through shots of their breasts framing their clothed, semi-nude or naked torso from shoulder to waist. Rarely do they include their faces in the frame. While men focus the camera on their genitals more often than women do, they are also much more likely to show their faces in either close up or full-body shots, in effect revealing their identity. Trans-world computer mediated communication confers a level of anonymity, and the video camera encourages representation of the 'whole' person, but most of the women choose to separate their sexual identity from their personal identity.

Female MUDers also seem to regard their social interactions in text-based virtual reality environments on the Internet as role plays separate from the rest of their lives. It is widely recognised that the highly sexualised female characters in these environments are usually played by men. On the other hand, in constructing a role-play identity, women are more likely to create an identity where sexuality is hidden, or where sexuality is amorphous, disconnected from a gendered body.

On these sites it appears that women tend to disconnect sexuality and identity. However, on the home page many women choose to emphasise their sexuality as an integral part of their identity. And commonly women's home pages are organised around a photograph. This new medium allows the possibility of creating a new genderless self, the tools of creation are still those of a gendered society. Language is a determining factor in the construction of self and identity. Explicit information is primarily available through the content of the page, the language, and the construction of identity is therefore language based. Those who insist that race, class and gender are irrelevant on the Net are proposing that language is an abstract system, the use of which lies outside any cultural context. Bakhtin, however, differentiated between language as an abstract system, and language in concrete use, explaining: one can say that any word exists for the speaker in three aspects: as a neutral word of a language, belonging to nobody: as an other's word, which belongs to another person and is filled with echoes of the other's utterance; and finally, as my word for, since I am dealing with it in a particular situation, with a particular speech plan, it is already imbued with my expression (1986, 88)

And he repudiates the idea that an individual's language use derives solely from his or her singular 'world view', 'evaluations' and 'emotions'. In other words, language use is dependent on the genres that are familiar to the user, determined by social and cultural context; that is by the material conditions of race, ethnicity, class, age, and gender.

The Net has been largely populated by a homogenous group: the Net community is primarily white, largely male, and usually middle to upper-middle class. That the language of women is marked as 'other' on the Net, has been documented in research on news groups, and other discussion forums (see Herring 1994; Shade 1996).

In describing how people negotiate and validate identity in face-to face communication Goffman (1959, 1981) distinguishes between information that is 'given', that is intentionally provided and consciously managed, and that 'given off', which leaks through without intention.

Web pages are carefully planned and designed, and therefore provide an opportunity for a constructed representation of self, but with the limited interaction provided by the home page there is a reduced possibility of clarifying misinterpretations through an exchange of communication. Therefore the home page offers little way of interactive communication. The fear of embarrassment which Goffman (1959, 81) describes as one of the controlling forces in face-to-face communication, is relatively absent on the Web. The protective community of the face-to face encounter is replaced by a distant reader who has little self-interest in supporting another's presentation of personal identity.

Women present a sexualised self on their home pages because for them sexuality and identity are not easily separated , and nor is such a separation desired. In the late twentieth century we are confronted by many new

and complex ways of experiencing and theorising the relationship between the physical body and the mind or self. As Jameson suggests 'the rise of posmodernism is signaled in parallel development in our culture: diffusion of power, decentering of contexts, and denaturing of the physical' (Jameson 1991, 38).

In the Tremulous Private Body, Barker (1984) describes how the body has become progressively more hidden, constructed less as a public spectacle and increasingly constituted in a way that inserts protective layers between the private body and public space. At the same time the self retreats even further, becoming primarily expressed through texts.

Stone believes that the split between the body and the subject 'is simultaneously growing and disappearing', suggesting that 'the socioepistemic mechanism by which bodies mean is undergoing a deep restructuring in the latter part of the twentieth century' (1991, 92). Haraway (1991) also believes that we are witnessing a collapse of the boundaries of the body, brought about in part by the mediations of technology.

Where the boundaries of intellect, body, machine, and self are blurred, the task of leaving the body to create an electronic self becomes complex. Women can , and perhaps should, remember the body, speak through the body, in defining and redefining their social identity. It is, of course, possible for women to re-define themselves outside of traditional categories, particularly using the space of computer mediated communication.

A woman 'thinking through the body' (Gallop 1989) speaking, performing the self through the body, confronts a set of social meanings already assigned to the feminine and to the body. The thrill of leaving the body may not be a challenge for women, for whom the sexed body has not uniformly offered security or protection. It may also be that the construct of the body as a shell, which simply constrains and restricts the true, intellectual self may be an essentially masculinist one. The (male) fantasy of the disembodied and therefore liberated self is one which disavows the lived experience of sexuality which ultimately shapes women's identities as women.

The Krokers say that we are living in an age 'typified by a relentless effort on the part of the virtual class to force a wholesale abandonment of the body to dump sensuous experience into the trashbin, substituting instead a disembodied world of empty data flows' (1996,3). They point to the negative effects of such an evacuation for society as a whole, but any attempts to 'discredit bodily experience' will specifically result in the devaluing of women's experience. It could be argued that by refusing the 'abandonment of the body' in their home pages, women are therefore insisting on their right to present a sense of self constituted, as least in part, through their experience of inhabiting a gendered, sexed body.

These personal, 'this is me', home pages of women reveal little desire to escape the body in creating a Web persona, their cyber-identities are constructed partly from their gendered, sexed bodies.

It is possible that the information superhighway will lead us to a place where race, class and gender may become irrelevant, but we are not there yet. The Web is not a new world, but an electronic reflection of the world we currently inhabit. Home pages are constructed from language and images written and read in a social context in which women may be labeled 'Babes'.

For a woman her (sexual) body is her social reality, her identity a product of her embodied knowledge and experience. A woman's refusal to abandon her sexual body in creating her home page, identity is not devalued by Robert Toups' list.

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About the Author:

Marj Kibby. Teaches cultural studies at the University of Newcastle. Her research interests focus around issues of media representations of race and gender: including self representation by minority groups on community radio, Aboriginal music in Australia films, and the significance of the hyper-masculine in the cinema of the eighties. Personal interests that may one day become research interests are country and western music, and feminist crime fiction.

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