

THE INTERNET AND WOMEN: SHAPING A NEW SOCIETY

By Gloria Pan

The proverbial glass-ceiling metaphor got quite a workout during the recent election season, yet barriers to equity remain a part of everyday life. It's no wonder, then, that millions of women are building new communities online. Welcome to cyberspace, where the rules are different.

Although the feminist movement of the 20th century laid before women a banquet of opportunity, still we do not feast. Deciding between after-work cocktails with the boss or macaroni and cheese with our children, we choose our children. Between the Saturday management seminar with our colleagues and the doctor's office with elderly parents, we choose our parents. Many of us opt out of the workplace altogether, because, time and time again, it's too hard to try but fail to be in more than one place at a time.

The cumulative result of these decisions, made by millions of women every day, has been the lingering pattern of unequal gender representation in public life. As the pull of home draws women away to focus on their private lives, government, academia, media, business, and virtually every other important sphere of influence remain in masculine hands, promoting an agenda that all too often neglects the best interests of women and families.

But the laws of physics do not apply in cyberspace, where vast numbers of women are finding that they can indeed be in many places at once. The Internet, always on, always available, is allowing women to break through the constraints of space and time to focus outward. This rush of women into the public space is reweaving the fabric of society into one that better serves us all.

Women Embrace the Internet

Today, more than 100 million women are online.¹ In our slivers of spare time—after the kids are asleep, with a sandwich in our cubicles, before dropping one child off somewhere and

picking up another—we are (among other things) shopping, looking for health or product information, and watching videos. More significantly, we are sending e-mail, instant-messaging, participating in online support groups, and contributing to online debate and commentary, all interactive activities based on relationships and engagement.

Recent studies by the Pew Internet and American Life Project on teens and the Internet reveal the nature of the Internet's appeal for female sensibilities.² The studies found that, among boys and girls ages 15 to 17, 70 percent of girls maintain personal profiles through the social networks Facebook and MySpace, compared with just 57 percent of boys; 35 percent of girls have their own weblogs, or blogs, compared with just 22 percent of boys. Online profiles and blogs are forms of Web-enabled personal media particularly developed for encouraging creativity and individual expression, and they invite commentary and connection from like-minded people who

stumble across them while surfing the Internet. A 2008 social media study from Compass Partners and BlogHer reports that 36.2 million adult women participate in the blogosphere weekly.³

In addition to creating their own spaces, women online are massing around sites that relate to their personal interests and lives. According to comScore, an Internet traffic measurement company, from makeup and fashion sites to “mommy blogs,” sites aimed primarily at women had close to 70 million visitors by the end of 2007, a 35 percent jump from 2006, faster than every other category on the Web except politics.⁴

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AAUW Dialog Builds Community Online

By Peggy Woods-Clark, AAUW Website Manager

"Should AAUW endorse Sarah Palin?" Posed in AAUW's blog, AAUW Dialog, this provocative question elicited a flurry of comments, thoughtful debate, and definite opinions from members and nonmembers across the political spectrum. While AAUW is nonpartisan and does not endorse candidates, political questions like this one are some of the many topics of importance to women and girls that have been discussed and viewed on AAUW's blog.

In August and September, AAUW Dialog featured timely blogs from the Democratic and Republican national conventions, written by convention attendee and AAUW Public Policy and Government Relations Director Lisa Maatz. Several AAUW state and branch websites, including AAUW of Wisconsin, the AAUW of Oregon Online Branch, and the AAUW Greater Naples (FL) Branch, republished the convention blogs on their own sites to help keep their readers informed. Two ongoing series on the blog, Following the Fellows and Project Profiles, also bring members and other readers up to date on the research and project activities of former AAUW fellows and grantees.

AAUW Dialog is a great place to gather and discuss the critical issues of the day, including why women should vote, how personal decisions affect future retirement security, the lack of women in state-level executive leadership positions, and ways to protect college students from sexual assault on campus.

Launched in February, AAUW Dialog and its 200 or so blog posts have already been viewed nearly 45,000 times. Haven't visited or subscribed to AAUW Dialog yet? Let us know what's on your mind! Visit AAUW Dialog directly from the AAUW homepage at www.aauw.org or go to <http://blog-aauw.org>.

Finding Community

Through the Internet, women are recovering the sense of community we used to rely on before a modern life of far-flung families and jam-packed, competing schedules got in the way.

Dooce is arguably the most successful individual blog in that vibrant segment of women's online media called "mommy blogs" (sites devoted to the experience of motherhood). Sharply observant and wickedly irreverent, Dooce blogger Heather Armstrong has crafted a unique, online voice that has captured a loyal audience big

enough to drive advertising revenue sufficient for both her and her husband to quit their day jobs. Armstrong started blogging in 2001, before marriage and children, as a way to tell her friends about her life as a young graphic designer living in Los Angeles. Later, her blog



Dooce blogger Heather Armstrong

became the natural outlet through which she vented her frustrations and guilt as a new mother for whom motherhood was not working out the way she had expected it to.

Armstrong's postpartum writing struck a nerve among millions of mothers, and Dooce took off, with her readers solidifying into a community of women who regularly use her blog posts as the starting point from which to share life experiences and support each other through the ups and downs of parenting. Armstrong says about the Dooce community, "We've reinvented that campfire around which we can talk."

Beyond mommy blogs, there are sites devoted to politics, work, celebrity gossip, hobbies, and a host of other topics. One highly successful blogger, Birdie Jaworski, started her online writing career chronicling her adventures as an Avon lady on a blog called Beauty Dish. AAUW Dialog, accessible from www.aauw.org, is a group blog that focuses on women, public policy, and education (see sidebar). "There are so many communities to join," Armstrong says, "so many women saying, 'Let's keep each other company.'"



Speaking Out and Changing Society

These days, more women than men are graduating from journalism schools, but the top decision makers in corporate media are still predominantly male. The need, however, to break that particular glass ceiling has become much less pressing, says Elisa Camahort Page, a cofounder of BlogHer, a community of women bloggers that attracts 8 million individual

visitors a month. “Existing barriers don’t apply when you can create your own space on the Internet,” she says.

Indeed, the 24/7 chatter of feminine voices talking through blogs, discussion boards, and other digital channels is growing louder by the day and has become so pervasive that it has bled into offline media. From broadcast programs to magazines to newspapers, traditional media have adapted to the competition for the public’s attention from the Internet by incorporating prominent online voices into their own production of news and

“EXISTING BARRIERS DON’T APPLY WHEN YOU CAN CREATE YOUR OWN SPACE ON THE INTERNET.”


—Elisa Camahort Page

information. BlogHer has become a first-stop source for journalists researching women’s issues or looking for the feminine viewpoint, and BlogHer members frequently appear on programs like *CNN News*.

The online women’s community has emerged as an alternative to mainstream media, a loud and insistent voice speaking on behalf of women’s issues and concerns. The outcry among

women because of the perceived sexism against Hillary Clinton’s candidacy is the highest-profile example yet. Women’s protests echoing through the Internet forced mainstream media (as well as the Obama campaign) to proceed much more cautiously, and it also changed the entire tone of the primary race.

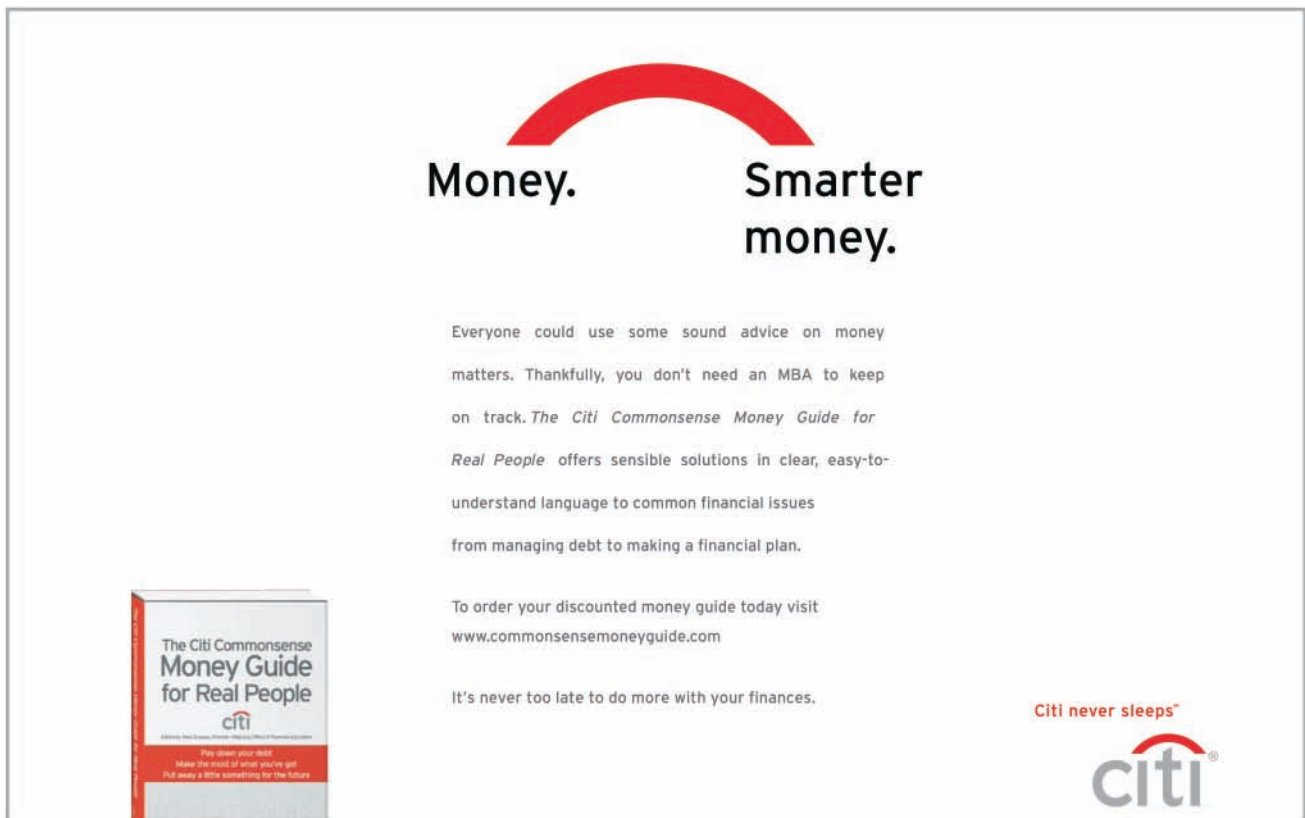
For millions of women, the Internet has been personally liberating. It is providing convenience in taking care of everyday tasks and helping us stay in touch with friends and loved ones. As the gateway to a universe of online outlets and communities, it is also the means for us to participate in public life. We can truly take part in the ongoing public dialogue on issues about everything, from national security to economics to social policy.

Society is only just starting to feel the effect of our collective voice. 

Notes

- 1 eMarketer, March 2008. www.emarketer.com/Article.aspx?id=1006082
- 2 Pew Internet and American Life Project. www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/230/report_display.asp
- 3 The BlogHer/Compass Partners 2008 Social Media Study. www.blogher.com/files/BlogHer.CompassPartners.Social%20Media%20Study.ppt.pdf
- 4 comScore, 2007 U.S. Internet Year in Review, www.comscore.com/press/release.asp?press=2043

Gloria Pan is vice president of Internet communications at Turner Strategies, a public policy communications firm in Washington, D.C.




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