

Cyberfeminism

The term Cyberfeminism was first introduced in the 1990's. Cyberfeminism is defined as an alliance or the connection between women and technology. It was created by a culture of *geekgirls*, *surfergirls*, and *netchicks* and it gave a network of resources for women online. Cyberfeminism is feminism in relation to 'cyberspace' and 'technology'. It is the idea that women take control in an attempt to empower themselves in the technological field¹. Feminism has many definitions, but there is a general philosophy which acknowledges that a difference in power between women and men exists. Cyberfeminism focuses on the connections between gender and technology.

As technology becomes more advanced and the society's access to technology becomes more widespread, women are becoming liberated from the traditional patriarchal powers. As a result, gender roles and gender identities are breaking down, where the notions of being human, feminine, and masculine are in transition. As a result, Cyberfeminism, like feminism, has a common concept of bodies and identities under the challenge of technology. Cyberspace, which refers to women using the Internet other than shopping or simply browsing, offers women an environment for putting forward their own versions of reality, the body and identity, a world where gender becomes fluid and body becomes embodied. Cyberspace, is envisioned as an arena

¹ Sweetman, Caroline. Gender and Technology. Page 8.

where all voices are equal. Therefore, as machines get more autonomous, so do women. As the women start to make connections, they feel more comfortable with technology. Women have perceived the need to multi-task, who have to keep in mind both professional and personal duties such as family commitments.

However, men have mostly dominated the technological world. Some argue that machines are traditionally coded as masculine and associated with male privilege, military power, and the masculine culture surrounding engineering. Therefore, feminist uses of technology can then be defined as interventions within these dominant cultural narratives about technology².

Since early 1980's, studies of computers and gender have shown that computer culture is still seen as a male preserve. An analysis of computer advertisements found images of confident male executives interpreting computer output and women as typists, computer phobics, and bimbos (marshall & Bannon, 1988). Studies of the computer industry have portrayed a workplace hostile to female computer professionals who receive less pay, less responsibility, fewer opportunities to advance, and avert harassment (Frenkel, 1990; Horning, 1984)³.

A 1999 news article⁴, by Deborah Radcliff opens with Shelley Hayes story. Hayes has a computer science degree but gets an IT job answering phone calls because the company owner thought that is where women belonged. Radcliff states that although

² Blair, Kristine and Takayoshi, Pamela. Feminist Cyberscapes. Page 286.

³ Blair and Takayoshi. Page 378.

⁴ www.computerworld.com/news/1999/story/0,11280,33610,00.html

women have made many advances in the workplace, things have not changed all that much for women working in the information technology field.

In another news article⁵, Ilana DeBare talks about girls getting into games. DeBare reports that for years, industry executives concluded that girls do not play games, but women within the electronic game industry said that girls are simply averse to games. DeBare gets feedback from Michealene Cristini, a Sega of America vice president who launched a girls' task force, who said, "The reason girls don't play games is that we don't create games that interest girls. People come up with the idea for a game without any input from girls. Then girls don't buy it, and it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy... it just infuriates me."

Furthermore, women have been culturally discouraged to deal with technology. Women continue to face a variety of challenges in entering technological world such as issues of time, having to juggle between jobs and family responsibilities, and continued prevalence of on-line sexism.

Scheingold, Hawkins, and Char's study (1984) found that cultural assumptions operate to deny elementary school girls' credibility, or even visibility, as competent users, even when these girls demonstrate computer knowledge and skills⁶.

Similarly, Kiesler, Sproull, and Eccles (1985) found that masculine cultural values and stereotypes are incorporated into computer-based learning, work, and play. They also did a study on high school girls and found that these girls were passive observers

⁵ www.sacbee.com/static/archive/news/projects/women/wcgames.html

⁶ Morrill, Hope. Women and Computer Based Technologies. Page 31.

in many computer settings due to pervasive warlike or competitive sports metaphors in educational and recreational software⁷.

In practice, women have always been important to the computer industry. A woman named Ada Lovelace (1815 – 1852) was the world's first programmer. Her father, George Gordon Byron, was a famous poet. However, Ada was not allowed to see how much her father loved poetry until she was in her twenties. Ada was raised by her mother, Annabella Byron, whose aim was to make Ada everything her father was not – mathematical, methodical, moral, and scientific. Ada worked with some important scientists of the day including Charles Babbage, the inventor of calculating engines. In 1843, Ada wrote a paper about Babbage's most ambitious invention, the Analytical Engine. This paper contained the first published example of a computer program, written over a century before the creation of the technology needed to run it. In the honor of this achievement, the US Department of Defense decided in 1980 to name the standard programming language it had adopted for its military systems 'Ada'⁸.

In addition, other women who have had a hand in invention of technology are the "ENIAC girls" who programmed the first modern computer in the twentieth century. Admiral Grace Hopper invented COBOL. Roberta Williams wrote the first adventure games.⁹

Sacks, Bellisimo, and Mergendoller in 1994 did a study to examine the relationship between alternative high school students' attitudes toward computers and

⁷ Morritt. Page 31.

⁸ Woolley, Benjamin. The Bride of Science. Page 1-2.

⁹ Blair and Takayoshi. Page 379.

computer use over a four-month period. Computers were primarily used for word processing and computer use was tracked using an internal tracking system. Results revealed that girls' attitudes toward computers improved over the course of the study while boys' attitudes did not¹⁰.

In Turkle and Papert's (1990) study of computer programming, they noted two dimensions of programming: the standard canonical style and the concrete and personal style. The standard canonical style is the conventional route into formal systems through the manipulation of Abstract symbols. The concrete and personal style, also called as bricolage, uses graphics, sound, text, and animation. Turkle and Papert's research of seventy cases (forty grade school students and thirty college students), found that of the forty grade school students, fourteen girls out of twenty preferred the concrete and personal style of programming, but of twenty boys, four preferred the concrete approach. As well as, they found that out of fifteen women college students in programming courses, nine were concrete style programmers, whereas of fifteen men, four preferred the concrete style¹¹.

Although, we have seen advancements in how women have made progress in dealing with technology, yet there is something wrong with the system, which continues to discourage and keep women from accessing technology. This is a cyberfeminist view which holds that technology will continue be used to subordinate women. Advances in communication and transportation have brought a new form of "mail-order brides." There is a notion that for every 2 steps forward, one step is taken backward. For

¹⁰ Morritt. Page 26.

¹¹ Morritt. Page 27-28.

example, women can build their own identities, but anyone can be a woman on the net. Thus, the idea of building identities can be taken advantage of. There is also the view that even though it is easy to be a woman in cyberspace, being a woman in the real world is difficult.

With all the differing views and varying applications, cyberfeminism calls attention to the lines drawn in society due to gender specifically in relation to technology and the digital world. It studies the ideas of power, structure, and culture of feminism but in a technological context. One can take the position that the historical disconnect between women and technology will be perpetuated, or that women's relationship with technology will improve overtime.

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