

Using USENET: Gender, Power, and Silence in Electronic Discourse

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Using USENET: Gender, Power, and Silence in Electronic Discourse

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Introduction

The study of gender differences in various types of communication has become something of a national pastime, thanks in large part to Deborah Tannen's book, You Just Don't Understand (1990). Again and again, studies have shown that there are real differences in the ways that women and men express themselves verbally, especially in face-to-face interactions in mixed-sex groups (Spender 1980, Kramerac 1980, Maltz and Borker 1982, Coates 1986, Tannen 1986, Tannen 1990). There is heated debate about the explanations for these variations (see especially Freed 1992), much of it centering on the relation of gender and power, and whether external power as a variable can ever be controlled for. There is also dispute over the correlation of linguistic forms and strategies - for example, that silence can be indicative of power or of solidarity depending on context. Whether one believes that power can be gendered, or that gender is power, it does seem clear that much of the difference in expression is tied to the patriarchal structure of Western society (in particular) and the constant struggle for control within it. Interaction reproduces culturally constructed relations of gender and power; sometimes they are perpetuated, but sometimes subverted. In this paper, I want to look at a new form of interaction, computer-mediated communication, which has very few rules or models. Although it is written, it does not share all the features of written discourse, and in fact shares some features with conversation; and the ways in which it differs from these standard modes of discourse seem to hold promise for more egalitarian cross-sex communication, as discussed by Herring (1993). However, Herring looked at two academic electronic discussion lists over a one-year period, and found that there was a tendency for a minority of male participants to dominate discussion both in amount and style of talk. Claims of democratization of communication due to anonymity of participants, uninhibited expression, and the depersonalized nature of CMC are shown to be false: "Rather than being democratic, academic CMC is power-based and hierarchical" (Herring 1993:10).

The data I have collected from a non-academic source shows much the same tendency. Adversarial behavior is a valued form of academic discourse (as in law) and requires participants to view the other as the enemy and to engage in direct conflict to "overcome" opposition. This framework is also used in non-academic CMC to disguise extreme, hostile, and irrational views with authority and legitimacy - the voice of reason. Men, in particular, utilize the adversarial framework this way. And although not all men on the Net behave in this way, when the behavior occurs it is almost exclusively used by males. As Herring found, men appear to take this kind of behavior in stride and respond in kind, without calling attention to the form of language. Women, in contrast, seem not to expect or tolerate this type of interaction. Most non-adversarial communication (typical of women's contributions) was either ignored or attacked. Once the level of hostility had escalated, it was extremely difficult to return it to non-confrontational discussion; women felt they had lost control of the discourse. Even more so than Herring's example, the issue was not discussion, but dominance.

Silence

First, I want to review some of the large body of work documenting the silencing of women, and the silence of women. Beginning with Lakoff (1975), many studies have attempted to define characteristics of women's and men's oral discourse; Maltz and Borker (1982) list some of them, characterizing women as asking more questions, providing more feedback, and using pronouns which acknowledge the presence of the speaker, while men are characterized as interrupting and challenging the speech of their conversational partners, ignoring others' speech, and using these (and other) devices for controlling the topic of conversation (Maltz and Borker 1982:198). Spender (1980) sees the conversational strategies of men as part of the larger process of silencing women, pointing out that public discourse is equated with the male register, forcing women to learn the male register or remain invisible. Debate continues as to whether the discourse style of men (which some claim is better for expressing ideas clearly and directly, for making strong assertions, and for logical reasoning) is the model which women (and others without power) should try to emulate, or whether other discourse styles are just as effective, or even more so. One thing seems clear: the language of men is culturally constructed as the language of power and prestige, whatever its form.

Lakoff (1992) takes as a given that women are silenced in conversation, regularly and often casually, and that the methods that have been identified as achieving that end in informal dyadic conversation are *interrupting* and *non-response* (Lakoff 1992:344). Lakoff suggests that the means by which women are kept silent in public and in private, and the functions of silencing are similar. To silence is to achieve three ends: to appropriate the ability to name and define self and environment, to deprive others of the ability to see oneself as rational, and to punish for speaking, or deter from speaking what must not be said (Lakoff 1992:349-351). When used against women, these strategies help preserve male power and dominance.

Lakoff (1990) has also written about the power of silence in the psychoanalytic setting and in the courtroom, noting that "silence can be powerful, but mostly where the silent one has real power, or in a conversation with only two participants" (Lakoff 1990:49). In a courtroom setting, for example, a person who is testifying cannot attempt to use silence as power; a silent witness is seen as uncooperative, or worse, untrustworthy. The witness is compelled by law to answer questions, just as the jury is compelled to sit and listen silently. But Gal (1990) argues that some forms of women's silence in ordinary discourse constitute resistance and subversion of the dominant form. The difference between these two silences is in the **choice** of the speaker to be silent. But this choice is not usually available to women, and voluntary silence may not be interpreted as such.

What of other discourses? Spender (1980, 1989) has written extensively about the problems of women's writing, and work is continuing on women's discourse on the telephone and in formal context. However, as Herring (1993) points out, "the question of sex differences in computer-mediated communication has only recently begun to be raised" (Herring 1993:1). Kramer and Taylor also call for discussion of "sex-related behavior on the networks and the impact of this kind of dominant behavior on women's participation" (Kramer and Taylor 1993:56).

Background

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) is the fastest-growing area of information exchange. Many people are more familiar with one type of CMC -

electronic mail or e-mail - but in this paper I will focus on bulletin boards (BBS), the second most popular form of CMC. Some of the differences between e-mail and BBS postings have to do with the other types of discourse they resemble: in general, e-mail is closer to the oral dyad, while postings share more with expository prose (see Reinman, 1992 for a closer examination of e-mail). E-mail tends to be used for more informal, spontaneous, reciprocal discourse, usually (although not necessarily - email is often used for group mailings) with only one other participant as the target. BBS postings, in contrast, are often non-reciprocal (postings do not have to be in reply to anyone else, nor do they require a response), well-planned (some users reply to other posts by quoting line-by-line and replying to each sentence), and formal in the sense that they are supposed to be part of an ongoing discussion about a particular topic, and follow some basic formula for presentation (stating topic in the header, identifying quotes, signing post with name and often an affiliation and e-mail address). There are very few guidelines for BBS posting, but those that do exist caution against the very things that separate it from e-mail; a book like Krol's *The Whole Internet* (1992) spends several paragraphs advising the user to think carefully before posting something (which might be read by thousands of people) that is informal, spontaneous, hostile, and directed towards someone specific. This type of posting is commonly known as "flaming".

CMC is, in theory, inherently more democratic than other communication media. Anyone with a computer and a modem can enter a discussion on any of thousands of bulletin-board services or news lists and voice their opinions to everyone else who reads follows the discussion. Electronic media can provide a buffer, or a neutral, non-threatening arena for everyone to share their views. Herring (1993) discusses several characteristics of CMC which are claimed to facilitate communication that is democratic in nature. CMC is accessible, socially decontextualized, has few conventions of use, and has very little censorship (Herring 1993:2-3). Theoretically, anyone can contribute to or introduce any discussion, question any assertion, or express any attitudes, without internal or external coercion that would prevent them from doing so. Any user can contribute for as long and as often as they like, or until their funding runs out. Also, users need not provide any information about themselves, thus encouraging more equal communication in the absence of status- and gender-marked cues (Graddol and Swann 1989). Some people prefer to use their real names and affiliations in their posts, while others rely on screen names which may be designed to disguise gender, age, race, etc. It is possible to send truly anonymous postings, by using specially constructed mail-servers that strip off from a post all information about the author and place of origin. Thus, the possibility of *physical* intimidation (and danger) is greatly reduced, and perhaps even removed. As one might expect, *verbal* intimidation becomes a very important means for controlling the discussion.

To better understand the scope and importance of CMC, it may be helpful to draw a brief outline of the area I am focusing on, the USENET.

What is USENET?

Most users are connected to e-mail and BBS through the Internet, which is a global, noncommercial system with more than 20 million computers communicating through it. Currently, almost anyone can get access to the Internet: researchers in computer science, government employees, government contractors, students and faculty at most four-year colleges, and now some secondary and primary schools. Some areas of the Internet are also accessible through private online networks like America Online and Compuserve. Network news is the Internet equivalent of a

discussion group or BBS, where users from around the world can post to any news group. Different computer networks have different news groups available to their users:

It depends mostly on what computer your news reader uses for its news server... You have your "news reader", which interrogates a news server to receive a menu of articles, and calls for the articles themselves as required. The server collects news from a number of places: USENET, local news sources, mail reflectors, and Clarinet.
(Krol 1992:129)

USENET is a set of news groups generally considered to be of interest globally, and free. It is not a computer network; it does not require the Internet; it is not software. It is a set of voluntary rules for passing and maintaining news groups, and also a set of volunteers who use and respect those rules (Krol 1992:129). There are seven major news categories (*comp news, rec, sci, soc, talk, misc*), as well as groups created by local servers. These latter are known as "Alternative News Group Hierarchies", and these are distributed almost as widely as the core USENET groups. The most common alternative news groups include the group *alt*, which Krol defines as:

Groups that discuss "alternative ways of looking at things". There are a lot of truly bizarre news groups here (including one that tracks the wanderings of an itinerant West-Coast evangelist). In a few groups, the postings lack any coherence at all, and make you wonder what, er, stimulants were influencing the authors. However, there is also a lot of useful information. Some important groups (like *alt.gopher*) were created here rather than going through the bureaucracy required to create an "official" news group. (These groups sometimes migrate to official news groups as their topics gain acceptance.) On the whole, though, discussion tends to be out of the mainstream.
(Krol 1992:131)

Groups may be moderated, meaning one person takes responsibility for reading all the incoming postings and deciding which should go out to the news group. Most USENET groups are unmoderated: anything that is sent to that group is automatically posted.

Nobody knows how many people use the Internet, or USENET, but it is easily in the millions. Given the easy accessibility of USENET, the potential number of readers of any news group must be in the thousands. Of course, some news groups (like *alt.bondage*) may not be carried by every news server, and not every USENET user reads every news group. Still, a typical news server subscribes to over 1500 news groups and receives about 10 megabytes a day (Krol 1992:132).

News items are similar to e-mail messages, having a header (which gives some information about the sender, the topic of discussion, and the date and place of origin) and a body (the text of the posting). Each news item is considered part of a discussion *thread* and the act of posting a new article on a new topic creates a new thread (Krol 1992:135). Postings can be sent to more than one news group at the same time. Future posting on the same topic carry the original topic in their headers:

Article 8307 of alt.feminism:

Path:agate!spool.mu.edu!hri.com!noc.near.net!transfer.stratus.com!redondo.sw.stratus.com!dswartz

From: dswaxx@xxxxxxxxxxxx.com (Dan Sxxxxxxx)

Newsgroups: alt.feminism

Subject: Re: chelsea

Message-ID: <119rm2\$moi@transfer.stratus.com>

Date: 10 Feb 93 03:09:54 GMT

References:<Erika_L_B@sxxxxxx.edu>

Organization: Stratus Computer, Software Engineering

Lines: 21

NNTP-Posting-Host: redondo.sw.stratus.com

In article <Erika_L_B@sxxxxxx.edu> Erika_L_B@qxxxx writes:
>I agree with you. That poor girl will probably grow up with the worst
>self-image problem. She didn't run for President, her father did. And I
>do think it's a feminist issue, because I bet if she were a boy people
>wouldn't be evaluating his appearance all the time.

Oh please! Like the media didn't rag on Perot about his big ears, funny haircut and beady little eyes? Like I (and many other boys) weren't constantly ragged on because we wore glasses, were skinny, and didn't act cool? Besides, *anyone* at that level is going to be under a constant magnifying glass, looking for any hint of scandal or dirt to sell papers/air time. That's the screwed-up media in this country.

#include <std_disclaimer.h>

Dan S.

Through the use of News Reader programs, users can control what groups they wish to read and the order of the postings they read; most importantly, it allows them to *kill* (ignore or delete) postings within a group. Kill criteria can be set so postings with certain strings of characters in the headers, either in the subject field or the author field, are automatically ignored when the user begins to use USENET.

One important consideration in analysis of postings is the actual number of women who use the Internet and USENET. Broadhurst (1993) estimates that some private online networks have a male: female ratio of more than 9:1. Most Internet users have access through schools (generally universities), work, or the military. Anti-discrimination laws in the U.S. theoretically allow women to attend the same schools, hold the same jobs, and serve their country in the same way that men do. So although women may (in some circumstances) have the same *physical* access to computers that men do, it is unlikely that they use it to the same extent¹. This is due to a number of reasons, not the least of which is that women, throughout their schooling, are still not encouraged to excel in math and science. This has led to a very small number of women in computer science departments at most universities (in 1990, less than 8% of all computer science professors were female (Spertus 1992)), and has also created a "lag time" for women in terms of familiarity with hardware, software, and general computer knowledge. If boys are introduced to computers at an early age, becoming "computer literate" in several systems (as well as extremely adept at computer video games), they will find the Internet and USENET navigable, if somewhat overwhelming. But for the inexperienced user, as most women portray themselves, performing even the most basic task, like posting,

can take days to figure out². Help is not always available, and help from other computer users can often seem condescending or impatient.

Turkle (1988) has written about the strong reticence women feel towards "developing a relationship" with the computer, and subsequently becoming a hacker, someone whose involvement with the computer shuts others out. Along with this reticence, Turkle claims that women dislike working in formal systems which provide only yes-or-no options: "The 'nailed-down' quality of formal systems feels unfamiliar and threatening" (Turkle 1988:57). And in a much more basic way, women are taught to be afraid of machines: women have a nagging fear that they can break a \$10,000 piece of equipment by touching the wrong key at the wrong time. Ebben and Krameræ (1993) have reviewed the factors contributing to women's late and slow entry into the area of CMC, noting that "although women are not usually deliberately excluded [from computer policy-making groups], many have been reluctant to raise concerns when they realize that few others in the group have had similar experiences with sex stratification, technology, and campus organizational structure and change" (Ebben and Krameræ 1993:15).

Although overall the number of women on the Net must be less than men, in some groups the levels of participation seems nearly equal. This is perhaps a result of the group's focus. In the groups *alt.northern-exposure* and *alt.society.generation-x*, contributions from men and women appear to be almost 50/50, based on informal surveys within the group by myself and a few others. In general, the more controversial the topic, the more gender-imbalanced the discourse seems to be. This is an area that begs for further research.

I selected the unmoderated group *alt.feminism* because I thought it would be an interesting testing ground for something like the "30% limit" introduced by Spender (1979) - that is, 30% is the upper limit of time in a conversation when women may contribute before men feel that women were contributing more than their share. Would women contribute in an amount consistent with their numbers? I thought that *alt.feminism* might be the place where women would be discussing topics of importance to them, alternative ways of looking at feminism. I also thought that even given the gender imbalance on the Net in general, this might be the place where I would find more women than men participating in the discussion (for that matter, I might have chosen *alt.sewing* or *alt.support.diet*). Following Herring (1993; Herring, Johnson, and Dibenedetto 1992), I wanted to analyze the gender-related differences in frequency of posting, discourse style, topic control, and length of posting. Herring (et al 1992) found that this limit (actually slightly lower - 20%) held for women's contribution on the MBU (Megabyte University) electronic discussion list as well as women's participation on the LINGUIST list. (Both of these are academic lists.) Herring (1993), in her analysis of manner in these postings, identifies a set of features "hypothesized to characterize a stylistic variety conventionally recognizable as 'women's language' as opposed to 'men's language'" (Herring 1993:7). These features follow quite closely those associated with male register, public discourse, and the silencing of women by men. Men use strong assertions, self-promotion, authoritative orientation, challenge, and sarcasm, while women use apologies, questions, personal orientation, and explicit justification in their discourse (Herring 1993:8). Herring also observes that "discussion on each of the lists investigated tends to be dominated by a small minority of participants who abuse features of 'men's language' to focus attention on themselves, often at the expense of others" (Herring 1993:9). This adversarial

discourse has the effect of intimidating women who want to avoid this kind of interaction.

Email and BBS studies provide a unique opportunity for linguists to study some aspects of oral communication which have heretofore been transitory and impermanent. Because CMC shows features of oral discourse in written form, we can observe adversarial aspects of male behavior that cannot normally be examined so directly. It is one of the first times we have been able to "catch in the act" these distinctions between male and female styles (tape recording has done it to some extent, but the data gathering is much more laborious).

The Adversary Paradigm

Herring feels that it is important to make a distinction between the adversarial behavior displayed on these lists and flaming. She sees flaming as the result of "spontaneously venting one's emotion, [while] adversariality is a conventionalized and accepted pattern of behavior in academic discourse" (Herring 1993:11). Adversarial behavior - aggression - is thought to be related to more positive concepts such as power, activity, ambition, authority, competence, and effectiveness. However, Moulton (1983) examines the association of aggression with success and finds that it is quite possible to be professionally competent without being aggressive. The Adversary Paradigm is based on the assumption that a thesis which has passed an "objective" test, the most extreme test possible, is more likely to be correct. But reasoning, like theory, is not value-free; tests can never be truly objective. The use of counterexample, which may be quite effective on isolated claims or arguments, is not appropriate on an interrelated system of ideas. For something like a moral issue or scientific theory, to construct an analogy with all the features and their interaction (which is not part of the issue in question) may well be impossible. "The adversary paradigm prevents us from seeing that systems of ideas which are not directed to an adversary may be worth studying and developing, and that adversarial reasoning may be incorrect for nonadversarial contexts" (Moulton 1983:161).

I argue that adversarial behavior is flaming; the difference is in where they fall on the aggression continuum. Academic adversarial behavior may be conventionalized aggression, but it often displays some of the same qualities as flaming, i.e. "excessive informality, insensitivity, and the expression of extreme or opinionated views, and vulgar behavior" (McCormick and McCormick, 1992:381). Flaming is unrepentantly hostile; in fact, one of the most aggressive flammers (male) on *alt.feminism* signs his posts with the phrase "He doesn't feel pain, or remorse, or pity. And he'll NEVER stop. EVER. Until you are SPANKED OFF THE NET!"

Broadhurst interviewed several systems operators (*sysops*) about the flaming phenomenon and found that all agreed flammers are usually men. "Online, as offline, women seldom come on so forcefully hostile" (Broadhurst 1993:49). Habitual flammers seems to be neurotic, perhaps using their disruptive power to manipulate others; one sysop thinks that "they often speak in highly intellectualized, but shallow prose. They have no capacity for empathizing with anyone else's point of view" (Broadhurst 1993:50). Flaming is the extreme end of adversarial behavior, using the form of accepted argumentation to present hostile, and often personal, attacks.³ In the group I looked at, when someone flamed in an "unsophisticated" way (as did the man who posted "HEY ... YOU BORED BUNCH OF WOMEN QUIT WASTING BANDWIDTH AND FIX ME A HAM SANDWITCH ...

I'M HUNGRY" (post #8999)) they received few responses (one woman replied to this post with : "Hey Mr. CAPSLOCK, tell you what. Sandwiches (not sandwiTches) are so easy to make, a child can do it. So why don't you empower yourself in the kitchen. From the look of it your sandwich recipe would be as follows: 2 slices white bread, 1 slice bologna, 1 slice processed cheese, Miracle Whip, iceberg lettuce." (post #9007)). In contrast, when the academic model was followed, discussion continued for weeks and sometimes hundreds of posts.

Data Analysis

I collected 974 consecutive postings from the USENET group *alt.feminism*⁴ (approximately 1242 pages or 2MGs of memory on my Macintosh). These postings appeared beginning on February 4, 1993 and ended on February 25, 1993; the average number of postings per day was 40 (this excludes the 2 highest days, both at 126, and the 2 lowest, having 21 and 26). There were several threads which carried most of the discussion, plus some unrelated comments and 2 unauthorized postings of news articles. Here is the relevant data on gender, presented in table 5:

	Male	Female	Unknown	Total
number of posters	152 (67%)	48 (21%)	32 (14%)	228
number of postings	720 (74%)	166 (17%)	88 (9%)	974
number of lines	31639(78)	5802 (14)	3141 (8%)	40582

Figure 1: Breakdown of Postings by Gender
 (posters = individuals contributing;
 postings = separate contributions)
 (# of posts / % of total posts)

Immediately one can see that postings by men far outnumber postings by women, and that men have many more lines posted than women do. Men represent 67% of posters, women 21%, and people of unknown gender 14%. Posts by men account for 74% of the total; postings by women, 17%, and unknowns, 9%. "Number of lines" refers to the total lines for the entire 974 posts (not including headers). The longest post was 586 lines (a magazine article) and the shortest was 1 line. It is important to note that lines per posting includes not just new discussion by the poster, but any quotes from previous discussions that the poster has included and is now addressing. I will return to this point later in the analysis.

These were the top 5 threads, in order of frequency of posting:

Topic	Total	M	F	?
Nannygate (a woman attorney general)	123	80 (65%)	39 (32%)	4 (3%)
The Dread Power of a Feminist Moderator	115	99 (86%)	9 (8%)	7 (6%)
Is Male Dominance Universal?	99	89 (90%)	10 (10%)	0
Let us never forget: ALLEN WELLS	68	50 (74%)	8 (12%)	10 (15%)
How many rapes are there?	34	26 (76%)	5 (15%)	3 (9%)

Figure 2: Top 5 Threads (# of posts / % of total posts)

In each of these threads, men were in the majority, and in the case of "Male Dominance" men's posts were 90% of the total. The only time women came close to representing their actual numbers is in the "Nannygate" discussion, where women's posts were 32% of the total; in the other 4 threads the percentage varies from 8% - 15% of the total. So even when women did contribute, they were not part of the most active discussions.

As Herring (1993) found, a minority of users dominated discussion. 12 individuals (1 woman, 10 men, 1 gender unknown) - 5% of total users - were responsible for 45% of the posts. Within this small group, the men tended to have longer posts than the lone woman, "holding the floor" for screens at a time. A common pattern was for 2 men to debate a topic back and forth for weeks at a time, posting not only to this group but to several others as well (*soc.women*, *sci.skeptic*, etc.). They were able to dominate discussion in many places at once, almost by remote control. Occasionally women got drawn into an extended discussion, but most often they simply stopped posting; as one woman put it, "And as I had figured, this whole discussion has been a tar baby and since at least one low blow has been struck, I'm bowing out as gracefully as I can." (post #8478).

Obviously, it is possible that only the dominating 5% of posters were responsible for the "noise" in the noise-to-signal ratio. To investigate this, I subtracted the contributions of the 12 most prolific individuals and looked again at the levels of participation:

	Male	Female	Unknown	Total
number of posters	142 (66%)	47 (22%)	31 (14%)	216
number of postings	353 (66%)	113 (21%)	71 (13%)	537

Figure 3: Breakdown of Postings by Gender, minus Most Frequent Contributors
(# of posts / % of total posts)

Topic	Total	M	F	?
Nannygate (a woman attorney general)	61	37 (61%)	22 (36%)	2 (3%)
The Dread Power of a Feminist Moderator	64	48 (75%)	9 (13%)	7 (11%)
Is Male Dominance Universal?	51	41 (80%)	10 (20%)	0
Let us never forget: ALLEN WELLS	35	29 (83%)	6 (17%)	0
How many rapes are there?	18	13 (72%)	4 (22%)	1 (5%)

Figure 4: Top 5 Threads, minus Most Frequent Contributors
(# of posts / % of total posts)

We see that the participation now is more consistent with the number of contributors. Note, though, that in 3 of the 5 top threads, women still did not contribute in an amount representative of their numbers. 10 men were responsible for 42% of men's posts, so they were clearly responsible for much of the "noise". If we take 21% as the percent of women who participate in the group (based on

total number of contributors in Figure 1), and also as the amount of talk we expect from them, it is interesting to see that women did not make up 21% of the most prolific posters - there was only one woman, 8% of this group. So it was not just a minority that dominated the discussion; it was a minority of men.

As in oral discourse, when women did initiate a topic, they were often ignored (*non-response*, as mentioned by Lakoff 1992). Of 8 sample topics introduced (or reintroduced) by women, most received approximately 5 responses. The exception to this was the topic of "Nannygate", which was the most frequently posted to thread during February. However, although this thread was started by a woman, it quickly became a men's debate, as shown by the gender differences in number of postings. The nature of CMC prevents actual *interruption*, but in its place comes virtual dissection: a reply to a post which reproduces the original message with "annotations" - criticisms, counterexamples, and flames - after almost every line. This is the main reason why men's posts used so many more lines. Often, these detailed posts become multilayered, so you read comments on comments on comments - a kind of bizarre literary criticism.

Besides maintaining control by number and length of posting, men relied on the Adversary Paradigm almost exclusively. Posts were aggressive, often overtly hostile, using the experiences of men as the final authority on a subject. Sarcasm and ridicule were also used to belittle the "adversary". Here are some samples of men's postings, taken from a single day's posts:

female posts in Geneva, male posts in Times

> This symbol indicates that the text is being quoted from a previous posting

> Michael, you made several good points as how language in
>this argument can be used and abused. Some of this legislation
>is to change some attitudes that go back into the Middle Ages.
>Such as a husband would get off with a slap on the wrist for the
>murder of his wife but if a wife killed her husband the
>punishment would be death.

As you say, that was the middle ages, and while it's wrong to have burned so many women for witchcraft back then, that does NOT justify the burning of men now, as neither the men nor the women alive today lived back when the crimes were committed, and cannot be held to blame.

BUT, I live here in the United States of America on the doorstep of the 3rd millenium. I'm not a criminal, a rapist, an abuser, nor do I beat my goldfish or tear the little tags off of my couch cushions. I was not alive in any of the places or times the feminists point to as cause for their angst, and I will not be made to feel responsible or guilty for crimes I have had no part in and could not possibly have influenced. And I am sick and tired of the gender based legal bias that inflicts greater punishments on men simply because they ARE men.

>True the vast majority of the victimes are women or children
>and the majority of victimisers are men.

For sexual crimes, that may well be, but certainly that's NOT the case for domestic violence, which is gender balanced for spousal abuse, and for child battery and homicide, is a problem of predominantly female offenders.

Or maybe women run the show and patronize men with their sensitivity to our "sexual jokes and innuendo". Perhaps the lower pay scale shows that the women in charge know women are more dedicated to work and don't have the bourgeois need to flaunt annual income. MAYBE THERES A SECRET CABAL OF WOMEN WHO SECRETLY MANIPULATE TRUTH TO PERSUADE OTHER WOMEN THAT THEIR OPPRESSION IS EXTERNAL AND NOT A RESULT OF THEIR OWN MISTAKES. Naaah, couldn't happen, if that were true, there would probably be a separate moderated newsgroup for those feministas (maybe called soc.feminism). Couldn't happen here, though, this is the land of the free.....

>I'm terribly sorry what happened to this man. It is tragic.

Yeh. Take your sincerity and fuck off with it.

>However, this sentence is pure bullshit as far as I'm
>concerned.

It's not bullshit. Read it again. the CODE OF HONOUR among men is that you don't strike a woman.

Sure some men do, but they are liable to prosecution for much bigger crimes or rape, no matter what their reason. The fact is, female victims are protected by law, and male victims are not.

Your pitiful example of your friend's s.o. just goes to prove my point. The worst that can happen to a woman is a legal accident. They do not get driven to suicide.

>What disharmony will they cause? The people that are worried
>that a member of the same sex will be looking at them in the
>shower or coming on to them in the barracks should stop
>flattering themselves and start thinking about what their jobs
>really entail.

Really "entail"! Quite a punny lady aren't you. Of course I would consider true social justice to be when you get assaulted by a bulldyke named Bertha. Twice as big as you, she laughs as you suddenly realize how aggressive female homosexuals can be if they think they have an easy lay like a white liberal. Especially when the liberal no longer recognizes right from wrong or the implications of having to live in the amoral world she has tacitly created.

(18 Feb)

Notice that in these examples, women typically began by agreeing with something previously posted and then went on to bring in other information or disagree with other points in a non-aggressive way. Even the woman who used the hostile word *bullshit* applies it to a sentence and not to a person, in contrast to the reply "*your pitiful example*". In the last example, the female poster blunted a personal attack by aiming it at an unspecified group: "The people that are worried..."; in reply, the

male poster tried to be as vicious and as personal as possible, hoping that she will be raped by a lesbian and that it will be her fault if she is. Men also seemed compelled to have the last word, bombarding the news group with postings until their "opponent" no longer replies.

I also followed a single thread, "Possible Arguments Against 'AA' in Custody Determination?..." through 18 postings, 8 men, 9 women, 1 unknown. I filtered out the postings by any of the "12 most wanted" and was left with 12 "average" postings by 7 men and 5 women. Here again, the patterns identified by Herring surfaced - all of the women used explicit justifications for their assertions and used questions for clarification. All included, somewhere in their posts, explicit agreement with the previous post - "Yes, I know...", "Absolutely", "Okay, that's one". Men, when they used any personal orientation, held it up as refutation or prime example: "This kind of thing really tends to piss me off", "Take it from someone...it is quite possible", "You'd be amazed at how little food costs...". I also noted that the thread ended when 3 men, in succession, addressed the topic of how much child support a woman should receive by claiming that it was possible for a person to live on less than \$5000 year, because they had done it, and that therefore \$5000 a year was not inadequate for a non-working mother and child. All three ended with an air of finality, as if to close the subject for good: "And I regard that [\$5000] as *quite* adequate" - sort of a "so there".

So women were outnumbered and shouted down. They retreated into silence. Undoubtedly, some continued to read but rarely posted; this behavior is known as *lurking*, and some sysops estimate that around 85% of users simply lurk. Broadhurst observes:

It says something, though, that the "Why Do Women Lurk?" thread on ECHO (NYC news system) has continued for three years. Occasionally, it serves as a place where members conspire about how to cope with the latest flamer in a different section. Or they retreat to vent their emotions after another onslaught. Yet only here, in this section open to women only, do women repeatedly describe themselves as "guilty of lurking," routinely. (Broadhurst 1993:51)

Women, having been forced into silence, choose to stay that way, which perpetuates the stereotype that women do not have anything important to say, and also that they cannot express themselves in the "correct" (adversarial) way. This silence could be interpreted as the silence of disapproval, the silence of being fed up, the silence women use when something offensive or threatening is said. But aside from rare women-only areas, there do not appear to be many places online where women can go to break that self-imposed silence.

Conclusions

Despite high hopes for egalitarian communication, computers and CMC seem still to be a male domain. Where do women go? One alternative is the **moderated news group**, where messages are screened before they are posted to the group. Here one must rely on the taste and whims of the moderator; as I've shown, the second most-posted to thread in this group was "The Dread Power of a Feminist Moderator". Moderated groups tend not to be as lively as unmoderated ones (for obvious reasons) and some feel they cross the line into censorship. Another alternative is the private **news list**, which is sent by e-mail. Some of these are moderated - the "owner" of the list reads each message before it is sent out

- but some automatically send every message to the whole list. Herring (1993) describes the Women's Studies List (WMST), which has a subscribership 88% female. The majority of posts are queries for information, with the stipulation that answers be sent privately to the poster by e-mail. Discussions are usually cut off by the list owner to prevent a huge volume of mail, and also to discourage flaming. The high membership on WMST (about 2,000 members) is proof that "many women are comfortable with CMC that consists primarily in asking advice and information of others" (Herring 1993:7). Smith and Balka (1988) describe attempts by women to establish communication - "sisterhood" - through a feminist computer network to share information and technology. The goal is to create "computer networks that are compatible with feminism" (Smith and Balka 1988:96).

Issues of gender and behavior *have* been receiving attention in the electronic community, and more groups like the WELL (Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link) and the Electronic Frontier Foundation are establishing rules of etiquette (or "netiquette") for participation in their groups. Whether CMC will actually change styles of communication remains to be seen; but it has provided a vast new area for research on what may be the media of the future.

Notes

¹This posting appeared in the CU [Computer Underground] Digest, vol 3 #3 (1991):

First, The CU is made up mostly of males. I'm told by friends, and the facts are consistent with those given to me by one CuD moderator, that at a maximum, less than five percent of pirates are female, and probably less than one percent are phreaks or hackers.
(Liz E. Borden)

²This was my own personal experience, as well as that of 2 other women in my department. My news reader was different than that described in the Help Manual, and I could not locate the correct "help" file online. The problem was that I had typed "pnews" rather than "Pnews".

³Flaming usually stops short of what could be called "hate speech" and therefore open to censorship or prosecution. Most private systems have procedures for dealing with habitual flammers (sometimes banishing them from the system), but sysops are hypersensitive to implications of censorship, so action may only be taken if many complaints are filed. In unmoderated USENET groups, however, no such procedures exist.

⁴ During the time I collected data, one of the postings on *alt.feminism* gave a short history of the group:

The idea of *alt.feminism* began in soc.men. There was a thread about the moderators of *soc.feminism* rejecting articles and the anti-man nature of many of the posts...Others wanted to create a group to reflect a more open discussion of feminism. Not just a forum for dogma...T.J.Wood wrote a charter which simply stated that the

group would be for all who wished to discuss feminism, both anti and pro.
(post #8473)

⁵ I determined the gender of the poster by either the name they signed their post with (i.e. "Doug", "Roberta", "Mr. Graley") or by references made in their posts (i.e. "as a heterosexual male", "my wife tells me", "I'm a woman who has worked in shelters"). In most cases, individuals gave not only their names, but also their affiliations (school, work, etc., with the usual disclaimers). I did not feel it was necessary to verify the gender of each of the 228 posters. In some cases, I attempted to contact people by e-mail (or by "fingering" their accounts) to verify their gender. Those who did not reply were grouped in the "Unknown" category.

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