

No Boys Allowed: The World Wide Web as a Clubhouse for Girls

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Although popular representations of the World Wide Web depict it as an inhospitable and sometimes dangerous space for girls, there are increasing numbers of young women who actively navigate the author girl-friendly and empowering sites. Many studies report that during adolescence, girls become withdrawn and suffer from lapses of self-confidence. Girls authoring Web pages devoted to girl power, however, use the Web as a place where they confidently assert themselves and actively shaped their identity. In this article, two adolescent girls and their stepmother (a composition scholar) identify grrl-power sites, explore their potential strengths for girls as authors and readers, and discuss the sites' implications for classroom practice.

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For many girls and women, computer culture feels like an electronic clubhouse for boys. They are the outsiders addressed in the “no girls allowed” sign on the boy’s secret clubhouse door. Jennifer Wolff (1996) described her first experiences with computers in terms of this familiar cultural narrative:

When I first went online two years ago, I felt like a trespasser in a forbidden universe. Computers had always intimidated me; I used them only to write. Now I was in one, endeavoring to explore the corners of my brother’s secret clubhouse. NO GIRLS ALLOWED, especially little sisters. (p. 27)

This cultural sign communicates a well known story—neighborhood boys building a secret club, maybe in a tree house and refusing membership to little sisters and other girls. Through language (both the writing on the sign and the spoken language), the clubhouse boys establish a gender division in the backyard, which reflects quite presciently other gender divisions that structure the boys’ and girls’ adult worlds.

With the advent of the World Wide Web, however, there are signs that the boys-only club of technology is being stormed by girls and women, creating their own girls-only clubhouses. Although numerous surveys conducted by the Graphic Visualization and Usability (GVU) Center at Georgia Tech University have reported that female users are outnumbered by male users, recent trends suggest that girls are using the Web more

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than ever before. Although the (most recent) Ninth Gvu Web User Survey found that females still represent only 38% of the respondents to the surveys, it also proclaimed that “Females Dominate New Web Users!” For the first time, females outnumbered males in a survey category; they represented 51% of new Web users, whereas males represented 48%. Additionally, Pitkow and Recker (1998) reported that “younger respondents are more likely to be female: 43.8% of those age 11–20 compared to 33.9% of those ages 50 and over” <http://www.cc.gatech.edu/gvu/user_surveys/survey-1998-04/reports/1998-04-General.html>. This last finding supports what some girls have long known—against a predominance of male users and within the masculine culture of computing, some girls are actively weaving the Web, creating corners of the Web that reflect girls’ interests, values, and solidarity. As the *Guerrilla Girls* proclaimed on their Web page, “The Internet was 84.5% male and 82.3% white. Until Now. Guerrilla Girls have invaded the World Wide Web” (see <<http://www.guerrillagirls.com/posters/internetposter.html>>).¹

Like the *Guerrilla Girls*, adolescent and teenage girls have discovered the Web as a place for creating spaces of their own. Whereas Spanky and his gang of Little Rascals had the “He-Man Woman-Haters Club,” girls online have established a world-wide Grrl Power club.² Search engines from *Web Crawler* to *Yahoo* acknowledge that girls’ spaces on the Web are distinct from boys’ spaces or kids’ or teen’s spaces in general by collecting links under titles such as *Girls’ Clubs* (see <http://webcrawler.com/WCGuide/home_and_family/kids/clubs/>) or *Grrrls* (see <http://www.yahoo.com/Society_and_Culture/Cultures_and_Groups/Women/Cultures_and_Groups/Grrrls/>). Although these search engines collect links to Web sites of which girls are either authors or audience, there is no corresponding collection of boys’ sites on the Web. Similarly, women’s sites are often designated as *female*, while men’s sites are not designated by gender. One exception to this practice is found at the *Yahoo’s* Society and Culture page, which organizes Web sites under cultural designations. It is interesting to note that in contrast to statistics, reporting an underrepresentation of girls on the Web, this *Yahoo* page lists 167 sites for *Men* and 952 sites for *Women* (see <http://www.yahoo.com/Society_and_Culture/Cultures_and_Groups/>). By relying on the categories *women* and *grrl*, these search engines reveal that girls and women are a substantial presence on the Internet and World Wide Web; at the same time, the placement of female-related Web sites into their own category may also be a way of noting that women and women’s sites occupy a nonmainstream, nondefault position on the Web. Are boys (and males) once again assumed to be the *default*—in this case, the authors or audience of all sites not designated *girl*?

Feminist studies of technology might suggest this reading of the way sites are categorized (or of the meanings of those categories). Feminist representations often draw a

¹We’ve collected all the Web sites mentioned in this article, plus some interesting Grrl Power sites that we found but didn’t incorporate here. If you point your browser to <<http://www.louisville.edu/~pdtaka01/grrls.html>>, you will find a Web site that collects these links together.

²Throughout this article, we should make clear, we are discussing young women who have easy access to computers and computer technologies such as the World Wide Web. In other words, we have zeroed in, on *one* Web neighborhood where differences in computer access vary across gender lines, rather than across class or race lines. Although, like gender, race and class limit many girls’ access to computer technologies, in this article, we examine girls who do get involved, asking what it is that attracts them and keeps them involved.

dismal picture of the relationship between technology and women: Technology is imbued ideologically with masculinist culture and metonymically associated with men and their world (Haraway, 1985; Wajcman, 1991); girls are marginalized and misrepresented in actual computer uses (Sutton, 1991; Turkle, 1998); and American culture constructs technology within narrowly proscribed gender roles and stereotypes (Balsamo, 1996; Stabile, 1994). Although women's relationships to technology are largely depicted as negative in the popular press and in scholarly media, we explore the constructive and meaningful role technology plays in the everyday lives of two of us—Emily, age 13, and Meghan, age 15. These young women's activities and experiences with the World Wide Web clarify the negotiations young women make in gendered terrains and suggest areas for further research on the relationship between women and technology. Rather than depicting stereotypes about girls and the Web, these girls' experiences assert that the relationship of women to technology is neither fixed, predetermined, nor stable across the categories of women's lives.

In "Weavers of Webs: A Portrait of Young Women on the Net," Nancy Kaplan and Eva Farrell (1994) described a network of young women who use the Internet to build and maintain their friendships with one another. In explaining the need for studies on why some young women persist in often hostile online environments, Kaplan and Farrell suggested a future direction for composition scholarship:

Most studies have yet to take into account the entrance of young women into electronic discourse especially when their participation occurs outside of formal educational settings. In other words, we have been so busy noticing what hinders and repels us that we have failed to ask what draws some of us (but not others). We need to know more about what attracts women to electronic environments and what features of the activities we engage in sustain us in these new spaces.

We offer one answer to this call by exploring the feminist Web spaces girls access and write as well as the relationships girls build online that support their own development as strong, capable, and responsible young women. The collaborative nature of this article underscores the importance of listening to girls' voices as they articulate their experiences negotiating these technological spaces. In answering Kaplan and Farrell's call to understanding "what attracts some women to electronic environments and what features of the activities we engage in sustain us in these new spaces," we must turn to the women themselves. Outside observers can record how young girls use computers and suggest some interpretations of that behavior. But, often, the researchers and the young women studied are significantly different in age, gender, class, sexuality, and career orientation. These subject positions may give researchers and participants different attitudes toward computing—differences that may inspire research that significantly influences our practice as writing teachers using computers. For example, how do generational differences affect attitudes toward and aptitudes with computer technologies?³ Deborah Brandt (1995) has demonstrated that generational differences often reflect economic and social transformations of a culture, which in turn create "dramatically different social contexts in which [different generations within the same family] learned about literacy and its relationship to the world" (p. 650). Computers are an accepted feature of the everyday lives of young

³Of course, another important question in the context of this article, is "How do class differences affect computer attitudes and aptitudes?" This question is touched on in the previous footnote.

users, often as a direct result of education: "Schooling typically brings into a family's possession books, manuals, typewriters, and the like that then become the first forms of literacy that the next generation encounters" (Brandt, 1995, p. 659).⁴ In addition, younger generations of users have watched parents and older siblings use computers, have often encountered computers outside the home (in classrooms, museums, bookstores, and libraries), and are less likely than older users to view computers as a hindrance (older users may have lost their jobs to computers, found themselves subject to computer surveillance at work, or felt pressured to learn new, computerized ways of doing familiar tasks).

Including girls' voices in the professional scholarship introduces perspectives that might otherwise be ignored or not understood. Emily and Meghan bring knowledge to the collaboration that Pam does not; Pam can situate that knowledge within a body of scholarship with which Emily and Meghan are not familiar: She provides the scholarly framework within which to read the experiences of girls and technology. As a feminist concerned with developing constructive responses to the low but growing numbers of women involved with computing, and as a witness to the ways these two young women used computers in empowering ways, she first approached Emily and Meghan about writing the article together. Emily and Meghan, in turn, rely on their participation online as a frame for understanding what the Web can mean to girls as writers, as readers, and as feminists. Emily and Meghan conducted the Web research, exploring hundreds of sites, collecting sites they saw as empowering to girls, and organizing their findings. After collecting the sites, we explored them together, taking notes on what we saw and on what we initially thought was of note. We then turned to the computer, with one of us typing as all three talked. In this way, we formed the skeleton of the issues we wanted to discuss, which we printed out.⁵

Although the stories included here, identified as Meghan's or Emily's, might appear to be Emily and Meghan's sole contribution to the writing of the article, this was not the case. The stories are separate because they recounted the girls' experiences, and we felt they captured best these experiences when written by the individual involved. The rest of the text was produced collaboratively by the three of us sitting around the computer, from organizing ideas in the drafting stages to composing sentences in the proofreading stage.⁶ Although we hope readers will hear the three different voices in this article, as any writing teacher knows, in a collaborative project, it is impossible to pinpoint exactly

⁴Brandt also acknowledges the reverse movement of artifacts of literacy from younger to older generations by providing the example of "seventy-nine-year-old Emily Staubach [who] had recently acquired the first personal computer of her life, a 'hand-me-up' from her professional son. . . . She in turn had passed her old manual typewriter on to her grandchildren to play with" (p. 659). Similarly, our own experience (not unlike the experience of many computer users) reflects learning from younger generations. Over the years, Emily and Meghan have taught Pam many things about using her computers.

⁵The printouts were essential, it turned out, because the three of us live about a hundred and fifty miles apart, and we saw each other only on weekends and holidays. Because the girls did not have e-mail access at home (and because e-mail access at their respective schools is so restrictive), we worked when we were together, and when we were apart, we discussed the article over the phone and made notes on the hard copy printouts. These features of our collaboration underscored for us how much e-mail could have eased our writing processes.

where one authors' ideas end and another's begins; our processes of thinking and writing, like those of any other coauthors, have fed into one another and triggered in us responses we would not have arrived at on our own. Through our multivocal discussion, we offer several suggestions to educators trying to connect girls to the World Wide Web in ways that contribute meaningfully to their development as young women. In the final section, Pam makes explicit the connections between Emily's and Meghan's experiences and technology pedagogies.

ADOLESCENT GIRLS, VOICE, AND THE WORLD WIDE WEB

"Technology is so highly valued and so crucial in modern society that being excluded from it can almost singlehandedly lower women's opinions of ourselves." (Stanley, 1992, p. 464)

During girls' adolescent years, a sometimes overwhelming set of changes happens simultaneously—hormonal changes exacerbate emotional lives often already in turmoil; the intensifying gender enculturation sends signals to girls about appropriate behavior, attitudes, and appearances for young women which can conflict with girls' desires; the tension residing on the threshold between one familiar world (childhood) and another, unknown world (adulthood) makes all these events more pressing. At this emotional and exciting time in their lives, girls may need guidance most in negotiating their identities within a culture that seems to limit their potentials. And, yet, adolescence is also a time when the strength and confidence with which they faced childhood difficulties seems to evaporate. Hilary Carlip (1995) described the dynamic in this way:

For decades, the teenage years have been the most awkward time for girls, a time when they are teetering on the threshold of womanhood. Extensive studies have shown that in adolescence, girls have a tendency to go inward, shut down, lose their confidence, become self-conscious, and no longer speak freely, editing their communications. (p. 1)

This loss of voice is described in several other studies, as well, including the American Association of University Women's 1991 study, *Shortchanging Girls, Shortchanging America*. That study, the most extensive national survey on gender and self-esteem, reported the responses of three thousand boys and girls between nine and fifteen. Its conclusions were disturbing: The physical passage of young girls into adolescence is accompanied by a psychic movement *backwards*. Along with biological changes, girls moving into adolescence experience a series of losses—loss of self-esteem, loss of confidence in their abilities, and loss of faith in their competence. Mary Pipher's (1994) study of adolescent girls' notions of self recounts these losses through the stories of real girls. Most important, the experiences of adolescent girls we know bear out these conclusions and reveal the cultural mechanisms behind them. Women in this culture know too well how worn down one can feel repeatedly fighting oppression over time.

⁶We wrote the section titled "Girls Defining Themselves on the Web" in Pam's office on "Bring Your Daughter to Work Day." After Emily accompanied Pam to her morning classes, we spent the remainder of the day writing, surrounded by lunch and snack foods. At the end of the day, we had a finished draft of that section and stomach aches. Emily now has this image in her head about the life of an academic—surfing the Web as a research tool, talking and writing, and eating junk food.

Emily's Voice

In my science class this year, everyone was assigned to a group which would teach the class—two boys and two girls in each group. The boys in my group sat around the whole time the other girl in the group (Rana) and I were preparing for our presentation, but they decided that when we taught the class, they were going to say everything from answering questions to telling the class what notes to take. They silenced us (by not letting us speak), but worse, they took our words and claimed them as their own. They didn't tell us their plan until minutes before class. Rana and I were not going to lower our grade by fighting with them in front of everyone, so I think maybe the guys meant for it to work out that way. I guess they thought that they weren't smart enough or whatever so they just let us do all the work and made it look like we were the ones who sat around the whole time. They didn't know what they were talking about half the time, which put Rana and me on the spot to answer every difficult question asked by our classmates. Before the presentation, one guy in the group took Rana aside and asked her a question about one of the notes we had the class take, and then when someone raised their hand to ask the same question, he answered it as though he knew it all along. After class I went up to him and gave him a real talking to, by assuring him that he would not be doing this when we would finish teaching the next day, and he still didn't understand why I was mad. I had to explain to him that after all the hard work Rana and I did, he wanted to take credit for everything. He said "So?" like it didn't bother him at all that I was upset.

Meghan's Voice

There was an episode of *Sabrina, the Teenage Witch*, which brings up a lot of the same issues Emily's story raises. I think it's significant because of the popularity of the show with teenage girls. Sabrina's male friends are working on a car, but they can't figure out why it won't work. Every suggestion Sabrina makes is totally disregarded, because she is a girl. So Sabrina drinks a "Boy Brew" and comes in looking like a boy. When she makes the same suggestions *as a guy*, the guys all listen and it turns out that she was right. Guys always seem to think we can't think for ourselves. On the Web, if you have an opinion on something being discussed, you are given a space to say it. You won't be silenced. Several years ago when women still did not have the right to vote, they didn't have a place to speak for themselves. Even today guys talk over girls and don't give their opinions any credit. The World Wide Web is the perfect place for us to be our own individual.

In her year-long study of girls in two Northern California middle schools titled *School Girls: Young Women, Self-Esteem, and the Confidence Gap*, Peggy Orenstein (1994) suggested that the loss of self-confidence many adolescent girls experience has serious implications for what girls achieve:

Girls show a more precipitous drop in their interest in math and science as they advance through school. . . researchers have long understood that a loss of confidence in math usually *precedes* a drop in achievement, rather than vice versa. A confidence gap, rather than an ability gap, may help explain why the numbers of female physical and computer scientists actually went down during the 1980s. (p. xvii)

In a later discussion of this finding, Orenstein concluded that

this is particularly disturbing when one considers that today's young people are growing up in an era of rapid technological change; without a solid grounding in science, girls will not only be unable to participate in shaping that change, they will be helpless in the face of it. (p. 23)

Being kept out of the boys' technology clubhouse not only affects the immediate shape of girls' lives, but it also affects how they will turn out and whether they will influence the future of technology. Within an increasingly technological world, girls must be involved in making decisions about technology, both for their sake and for the sake of technology.

Ironically, a potential answer to the problems of voice and self-esteem in adolescent girls is a technology—the World Wide Web. In light of the studies that found a loss of voice in adolescent girls, girls' home pages, which emphasize girls' strength, intelligence and potential to be anything, seem strikingly discordant. Rather than remain silent and withdrawn, legions of articulate, thoughtful, and strong girls are actively creating and maintaining progirl home pages. Although Carlip (1995) reported that adolescent girls "have a tendency to go inward. . . no longer speak freely, editing their communications" (p. 1), there *are* adolescent girls on the World Wide Web who, rather than editing their communications, are airing them to a potential audience of millions. Although we don't dispute Carlip's assertion (indeed, our own current and past experiences as adolescent girls and friends of adolescent girls tell us that Carlip's assessment is correct), we are interested in exploring places on the Web where girls are defying this tendency to go inward.

The ideas in this article began many years ago, when Meghan was eleven and Emily was nine. Both were familiar with computers, having watched their father and stepmother write dissertations, papers, conference presentations, and numerous other types of writing. Both girls had a highly developed sense of literacy—going to the library and bookstores, reading books in the evening and during the summer days. In our household, sharing and discussing the books we'd read were regular events. Emily and Meghan wrote stories, poems, reflections. They created artworks with CREATIVE WRITER, KIDPIX, and CLARISWORKS. With the introduction of the World Wide Web into this literate environment, Emily and Meghan's creative works became known outside our house. Rather than watch television or rent movies, they were writing. Emily had "friends" (pen pals from around the country whom she had met online), who would check her Web page regularly to read the latest version of her stories and poetry. Meghan, likewise, posted creative writings onto her Web page. These pieces were not class assignments that the girls then loaded onto their Web pages, nor were the girls dutiful students writing for the teacher-as-audience. They had discovered what it means to be an author writing for a real audience. Their parents had discovered that the Web, as a unique literate space, offered girls a space to share their voice and ideas with a real audience. Since that time, these discoveries have been made by innumerable girls whose presence on the Web is bold, loud, and proud.

GIRLS' DEFINING THEMSELVES ON THE WEB

The expansive sprawl of the Web presents many methodological questions that writing specialists have yet to address. It is impossible to make any claims that represent the entirety of the Web—the Web is unmappable but not unnavigatable. Although search

engines can give a lot of navigational information about the shape and flavor of the Web, those engines miss a great deal. Thus, the claims we make for sites we discuss suggest *some*, but not all the issues present online. Strong grrl pages present an alternative to the media construction of “the imperiled women and children of the Western narrative, [who] make their appearance today in newspaper and magazine articles that focus on the intimidation and sexual harassment of women on line and reports of pedophiles trolling for victims in chat rooms” (Miller, 1995, p. 52). Although this media depiction may seem to support women in that it reveals the patriarchal oppression women and children face online, ultimately, we find this depiction disturbing and limiting, as Miller did:

The media prefer to cast women as the victims, probably because many women actively participate in the call for greater regulation of online interactions. . . . These requests have a long cultural tradition, based on the idea that women, like children, constitute a peculiarly vulnerable class of people who require special protection from the elements of society men are expected to confront alone. (p. 53)

To acknowledge strong grrl sites is not to deny the importance of intervening in pedophilia and harassment as they arise in this new cultural space. If this space is to allow *all* girls to enter and feel comfortable, these problems will need to be resolved. But, both constructive and harmful images of the Web as a space for girls come with a price: Cautionary representations may make girls reticent to explore and write for the Web and educators and parents reluctant to encourage such activity. But, positive representations of the Web may suggest that pedophilia and harassment are not systemic social problems. An exploration of girls’ sites on the Web reveals that the true story lies somewhere between these extremes: Girls *are* an active presence on the Web *even though* the environment can be hostile to them. Ultimately, by recognizing that girls have created spaces in what can be a hostile environment, we reveal that girls are not powerless (as the negative representation of the Web would suggest), but that they may have overcome significant challenges in creating Web spaces for themselves. Allowing that oppression is a potential problem for girls on the Web emphasizes the strength of girls who forge a space for girls anyway. Understanding women and children not as victims but as technology users who critically manipulate the technology of the Web to their own ends and goals creates a different understanding of girls on the Web.

This critical manipulation of technology arises in the ways girls use language in constructing online spaces. As Lisa Gerrard (1997) has argued, through their use of language on the Web, including the word “grrl,” girls have taken charge of how they are defined. In contrast to oppressive depictions of girls online (as in the multitude of porn sites), Gerrard referred to the vast number of empowering girls sites to show that oppressive depictions are not the whole story. Many adolescent girls’ sites on the Web rely on the term *grrl*; and although the usages vary with the context, for the most part, grrl signifies an *in-your-face, we’re-here-and-we-won’t-be-silenced-or-ignored* attitude. The female author of *Nrrd Grrl* (see <<http://www.grrl.com/grrrl.html>>) explained her use of grrl in this way:

GRRL is not the same as grrrl as in Riot Grrrl. I’m missing that extra “R” for a reason, sister. I don’t feel like having this site be grouped with any political and sociological thang that gets on the cover of *TIME*.

These are not the orderly, well mannered, quiet and acquiescent little *girls* of previous generations, nor are they girls who allow themselves to be co-opted by the machinery of culture. “gURL” emphasizes this difference in its logo—the lower loop of the “g” becomes the muscle in a purple arm with a hand balled-up in a fist (see <<http://www.gurl.com>>). These are *grrls* who identify themselves with a fierce growl that might reflect the energy of a wild cat or the angry under-the-breath sound a girl makes when someone tells her that she’s not appropriate. *NrrdGrll* made this point with their wallpaper pattern, which lists the excesses *grrls* are labeled with: too serious, too smart, too independent, too demanding, too opinionated, too loud, too nice, too needy, too cute, too fat, too thin, too much. The *NrrdGrll* site, in drawing on notions of excess, nerdiness (a state of being judged as uncool) and *grrl-ness*, usurps the culturally-defined image of girls and takes charge of the act of defining. As the *Smart Girl* site asserted, “Smart Girls decide for themselves” (see <<http://www.smartgirl.com>>). These redefinitions suggest the ways girls are using the Web as a place for taking charge of the cultural mechanisms that have defined and constricted their behavior. Being a girl, a nerd, and too much of anything is not, according to these girls, something that keeps girls down. Instead, these are identities *grrls* adopt proudly. Like other groups marginalized by the uses of language,⁷ girls on the Web have taken the language used against them and used it to empower themselves.

This play with language, which literally invests female Web authors with the authority to name, also structures female audience members’ experience with the Web when searching by topic for sites. Search engines, one of the main navigational tools for Web users, rely on keyword and search terms, which, like other database indexes, locate sources based on word match rather than the spirit of the search. When one uses a Web search engine (such as *AltaVista*, *Lycos*, or *WebCrawler*) to find information about breast cancer, for example, sites in the “hit” list include those with *breast* as a key word. Thus, one must sift through volumes of pornographic sites, which position the user as a consumer of images of women’s breasts (an especially difficult position to occupy when one is also a breast cancer survivor seeking support groups and information). Similarly, when girls use search engines to find girls’ online sites and zines, the search term *girl* brings up thousands of pornographic sites written by men, for men. This pejorative use of *girl*, which inscribes adult women as immature children, is the type of usage at which *grrl* growls fiercely. The result of using the *girl* search term is a representation of the Web as a male domain where girls exist only as objects for men to consume. This search, however, does not reveal the whole story. When one uses the search term *grrl*, one locates a list of sites not only alternate but also antithetical to the *girl* sites; *grrl* avoids belittling representations of what it means to be female in this culture and finds sites that identify themselves

⁷Gloria Naylor (1991) described this dynamic with respect to uses of *nigger* in white and black communities. In describing the first time she encountered the word (as a young child called a *nigger* by a white classmate), she contrasted this usage with that of her large extended family and concluded “the people in my grandmother’s living room took the word whites used to signify worthlessness or degradation and rendered it impotent. . . . They transformed *nigger* to signify the varied and complex human beings they knew themselves to be. If the word was to disappear totally from the mouths of even the most liberal in white society, no one in that room was naive enough to believe it would disappear from white minds. But, meeting the word head-on, they proved it had absolutely nothing to do with the way they were determined to live their lives” (Naylor, 1991, p. 768).

as empowering to girls. So, unlike the user searching for information on breast cancer, users will find that grrl is a sorting mechanism that allows them to avoid marginalizing constructions of womanhood.

Often existing coterminously with grrl is a strong notion of Girl Power. At a time when the Spice Girls are spreading a particular version of Girl Power (and there are numerous Spice Girl-Girl Power sites), defining *girl power* becomes a complex act. Many grrl pages on the Web take this challenge head-on, using their pages to define girl power and asking audiences to contribute their own understandings. The *Girl Power!* home page, sponsored by the Department of Health and Human Services, aims "to encourage and empower 9- to 14- year old girls to make the most of their lives. Girls at 8 or 9 typically have strong attitudes about their health, so, *Girl Power!* seeks to reinforce and sustain these positive values among girls ages 9-14" (see <<http://www.health.org/gpower/index.html>>). One avenue for this encouragement and empowerment is the feature which allows girls to contribute their own definitions and positions on various girl-related subjects (see <<http://www.health.org/gpower/girlarea/girlspeak/girlspeak.htm>>) and read what others have said (see <<http://www.health.org/gpower/girlarea/whatusaid/gspeak1.htm>>). The definitions girls offer on these pages vary in detail, tone, and meaning but together form a definition of *Girl Power*. Girl Power is about girls being themselves even when they face resistance, it is about girls recognizing their strengths and speaking up to change things, it is about taking control of their lives and celebrating the power that comes from that control. One girl wrote:

GIRL POWER IS LIKE THE SPICE GIRLS WHEN THEY SAY GIRL POWER THEY MEAN
BE STRONG DON'T LET ANYONE PUT YOU DOWN FOLLOW YOUR HEART DON'T DO
BAD STUFF BECAUSE THE COOL PEOPLE DON'T DO IT JUST TO BE COOL. DO WHAT
YOU WANT TO DO.

However problematic the Spice Girls seem to adults and feminist cultural theorists (because their theme of self-affirmation for girls is coupled with female stereotypes), their message of Girl Power has captured the imaginations of young girls. Indeed, the phenomenon of the Spice Girls may indicate how hungry young girls are for affirmation that they are powerful.⁸

Susan Willis, (1991) writing in the early nineties about the feminist movement in the seventies, argued that *Our Bodies, Our Selves* (written by the Boston Women's Health Book Collective) reflects a time when the feminist movement had a collective goal: "The primary reason why the Boston collective saw their struggle so clearly and completely is the unmediated male domination of health care which they confronted and contested" (p. 63). In contrast to today,

nothing is the same. The notion of political wholeness that shaped so many women's collectives and projects has evaporated. . . . If anything, women's struggle has become more diffuse and rendered all the more frustrating for lack of sharply drawn male opposition. (p. 64)

⁸And, the vast number of Spice Girls Web sites certainly indicates how widely they have been embraced by girls. Rather than dismiss a phenomenon like the Spice Girls (tickets to their recent concert tour sold out in some venues across the country within 10 minutes), adults concerned about the empowerment of young girls might ask the girls themselves what makes the Spice Girls so appealing.

Similarly, by embracing the Girl Power message, young girls might be responding to the diffuseness of the feminist movement at the end of the twentieth century. Although there is no “sharply drawn male opposition,” one meaning of Girl Power is that sisterhood is of primary importance. In this way, sisterhood (that is, girls sticking together, no boys allowed) achieves its meaning through an opposition to male power and patriarchy. Grrl sites on the Web capture this feeling of girls sticking together by making clear that their spaces are about “Girls Only.” One collection of links to girl’s sites is introduced by saying, “All of these are GIRLS ONLY clubs that I belong to here on the WWW. . . [referring to a specific link:] You’ll notice that we have 2 male members, but besides that, it’s girls only” (see <<http://www.davelash.com/amber/amber2.html>>). Membership on Girl-Only pages seems to be limited to having the correct biological make-up. Against this version of sisterhood, Willis’ (1991) claim resonated—that the “political wholeness that shaped so many women’s collectives and projects has evaporated” (p. 64). Seemingly, it isn’t political action that draws participants together but their biological sex. Underlying these organizations around one’s biological sex, however, is a complex set of meanings about girls’ gender identity.

Although the political nature of grrls’ sites on the Web cannot be equated with the political drive and goals of past feminist movements, we think it would be a mistake to see these sites as politically void or naive. Indeed, the move to define one’s gender against gender definitions written for one by one’s culture can be political. Many grrl sites on the Web are political either implicitly (through the boundaries set by the site’s definition) or explicitly (through political statements and calls to action). Although grrl sites on the Web may vary a great deal from the political coalitions of early seventies feminism, the Web has put into the hands of a generation of young women tools that support feminist actions similar to those of the early seventies: publication tools for creating awareness and connectivity tools for bringing girls together.

As Jo Freeman’s description of feminist consciousness-raising groups emphasizes, awareness and coalition building are inseparable in a feminist movement: “From [a] public sharing comes the realization that what was thought to be individual is in fact common: that what was thought to be a personal problem has a social cause and a political solution” (as cited in hooks, 1995, p. 297). As women come together and share their experiences, they discover that their everyday lives have been constrained by social structures and cultural beliefs. Likewise, as they become aware that their personal experiences are shared by women as a social class, they are moved to come together with others and to “learn to develop self-esteem and to appreciate the value of group solidarity” (as cited in hooks, 1995, p. 297). This dialectic between awareness and coalition building provides one lens through which to see young girls’ presence on the World Wide Web.

Emily’s Story

The Web is a great place for girls to speak out. For example, a guy who rides my bus would charge other boys a quarter to show them pornographic pictures of women that he was somehow able to obtain. One time he was saying that I was a wimp because I was a girl, and he was calling my best friend fat, which she is NOT. I was already mad at him about the porn, so when he started calling my friend “fat,” I whacked him across the face and he hit me back. Carlip’s “Girl Power” web site has a bulletin board where girls are

encouraged to speak out. I wrote: "I HIT A GUY. IT FELT GOOD. HE LEARNED SOMETHING." The bulletin board had lots of other things girls wanted to "get off their chests." The other girls' situations were a lot more serious though, like being pressured by their boyfriends to have sex or being raped. That site's a good place for girls to release their feelings. It makes others aware of how unfairly girls my age are treated by guys. Of course, writing about difficult stuff girls are facing on the Web isn't a way to stop it from happening, though. Girls also need to talk to someone in charge, like a guidance counselor or teacher they trust. When I was sexually harassed by a boy two years younger than I am, I went to my guidance counselor, who made my principal aware of what was going on. I had a friend who spoke out after me that it had been happening to her too from the same boy. I don't know why my friend didn't speak out at first—maybe she thought no one would listen or someone would try to silence her. That's why the Web is such a great place for girls to speak out. It allows them to speak and no one can stop them.

As Emily's story suggests, for many adolescent girls the act of speaking out can be political. The Web can put them in touch with a vast audience of people receptive to their political message. Rachel's Page (see <<http://www.mcs.net/~kathyw/rachel.html>>), typical of many girls' pages in some respects (personal writing, links to fun girl-related sites, a message of girl-empowerment), is a good example of how speaking out can be a multilayered act. Rachel, twelve-years-old at the time she created her page, addresses the audience of her award-winning home page with a straightforward "This is about me and things I like and fun places you can go." Some of Rachel's links include "Girls Rule" (a collection of girl sites on the Web), "Poetry Page" (a collection of stories and poems written by Rachel), and "Fun Page" (a collection of kids' sites on the Web). Side-by-side with these fun sites, however, Rachel has an oftentimes serious and political message for her audience. On her poetry page, Rachel's poem, "American Girls," describes the fatal day (March 24, 1998) in Jonesboro, Arkansas when four young girls were gunned down by an eleven-year-old boy and his thirteen-year-old male cousin. After setting off fire alarms at their school, the two boys sat on a hillside and shot as people left the building. The shooting spree wounded fifteen, killing five; all the victims except one wounded boy were female. In the aftermath, *Newsweek* writers Trent Gegax, Jerry Adler, and Daniel Pederesen (1998) reported that the "closest anyone came to an explanation last week [was] that Johnson [one of the murderers] was unhappy about a girl who either refused to go out with him or had broken up with him" (p. 22). The first half of Rachel's poem sets up the events of the girls' everyday mornings—typical mornings for millions of American girls: they get dressed, kiss their fathers, tease their siblings, eat breakfast, hug their mothers, not realizing it is the last time they will engage in these activities. In the final three stanzas, Rachel moves from the individual to the systemic when she concludes that these girls' "typical" lives were shattered by larger cultural forces:

Men rape and they beat
They start wars and they kill
And they teach little boys
That its some kind of thrill

Boys learn their lessons
From the men in this world
And its not safe to be near them
If you're a woman or girl

Four little girls
 Killed by boys not yet men
 Four little girls
 When will it happen again?

What we find unusual about this poem, and interesting about its placement on the Web, is that Rachel interprets the events in Arkansas from a perspective not recognized by mainstream media. A perspective one might see as feminist, it recognizes that the murder of these children was motivated by gender. Media reports of the murders in Jonesboro often interpreted the violence for viewers as part of the larger issue of violence in schools. Another less popular context for understanding this tragedy, however, is the one Rachel has chosen. According to the National Organization of Women (NOW),

every day four women die in this country as a result of domestic violence, the euphemism for murders and assaults by husbands and boyfriends. That's approximately 1,400 women a year, according to the FBI. The number of women who have been murdered by their intimate partners is greater than the number of soldiers killed in the Vietnam War. (See <<http://www.now.org>>).

Coming as it does on the heels of seven other school shootings in which boys were the gunmen, Rachel's interpretation of the events is not a stretch. Rather than seeing the Jonesboro events as evidence of violence in the schools, Rachel's poem emphasizes that these girls' experiences were not merely personal to them but part of a larger social problem of violence against women. Using her Web site, she has articulated a response to the threat of violence against any girl in this country by emphasizing the ordinary "American-ness" of these girls' lives, asking "When will it happen again?"

Furthermore, Rachel's Web site is itself a political project of sorts. Rachel and her mother started creating the pages when Rachel, ten at the time,⁹ moved with her mother to Colorado because, as Rachel explained: "my mom was dying and she liked how peaceful and pretty it was. And, she wanted to do special things with me before she got too sick." Rachel suggests, too, that her move to the mountains of Colorado might have been a result of the fact that "My mom died from AIDS. Sometimes people are really mean when they find out someone has AIDS. Or, if they find out someone's mom had AIDS." Although she hopes readers of her page never know anyone who gets AIDS, she exhorts that "if you do you should be really nice to them and to all their family." As Rachel informs her audience on the page titled "Why My Page Is So Old" <<http://www.mcs.net/~kathyw/why.html>>, her page has not been altered because her mother died:

My page is something special I made with her so I don't want to change it a lot even though some of it is babyish. So, a lot of the things on my page are old. Maybe sometime I'll change it more or maybe keep it and make a new page but I don't want to do that yet.

Rachel's mother echoed this sentiment on her page:

The time that I have spent building this site [her personal pages], and the time spent with Rachel as we built her page, has been special and dear to me. I've had the opportunity to see my daughter grow with the encouragement and support of people from all over the world, and I've had the priv-

⁹Rachel's mother, Kathy Williams, developed a home page of her own, "Kathy's Resources on Parenting, Domestic Violence, Abuse, Trauma & Dissociation" (see <<http://www.mcs.net/~kathyw/home.html>>).

ilege of knowing that my efforts have made a difference in the lives of at least a few people. There's little that could be more rewarding to me right now.

In contrast with popular rhetoric that suggests that girls using the Web are harmed (either psychically, physically, or mentally), Rachel's experiences with the World Wide Web have been meaningful to her. Indeed, the artifact that comes from her Web experiences carries such significance for her that within a fluid medium, Rachel has deliberately tried to freeze her Web site at one moment in time. Her use of the Web has not been limiting to her. She seems to be aware of the audience to whom she writes (addressing them directly and considering the ways they might read and use her page), and she has skillfully used the technology to communicate messages with which she feels personally involved. In explaining how her mother died, Rachel writes, "I can't decide if I want to write this part or not. But, I think I will for my mom. My mom died from AIDS." Following this revelation, Rachel asks her audience to feel empathy for those with the disease. Rachel draws on and shares her experiences, even when she feels reticent to do so. On her page, Rachel's mother, Kathy, underscored this potential for empowering children to realize the power of their own voices:

Working with your children on such a project [creating their own Web site] can be rewarding for the entire family as well as empowering for the children when they realize that what they create and what they say can and will be viewed by people from all over the world.

Many grrl sites capitalize on this potential for girls to share their perspectives by offering girls avenues for communicating with one another. An almost standard feature of grrl sites is the opportunity to connect with other girls through pen pal connections, bulletin boards, and chat forums. As the GIRL site suggests, bringing girls together may be the action, but the goal is political: "The purpose of GIRL is to unite girls who enjoy writing letters. It was also to show that girls can do anything boys can" <<http://www.worldkids.net/girl>>. One might read grrls on the Web as a complication to Willis' comment that the feminist movement is more diffuse for lack of sharply drawn male opposition. Although adult and academic feminists in a postmodern age work to articulate the complexities of power and patriarchy without polarizing men and women, grrl sites on the Web often do tell stories of sharply drawn male opposition. On the Nrrd Grrl site, for example, one of the discussion forums, titled "Boys," is devoted to a discussion of girls' conflicts with boys. Scattered throughout sites which ask for girls' contributions, including sites such as Girl Power's "Get It Off Your Chest," girls offer stories of struggles with boys similar to the story Emily told on the Web.¹⁰ Indeed, the opposition of male and female is a linguistically structuring feature of grrl's sites which define themselves as girls only.

Although Willis laments that "today nothing is the same" (p. 64)—that is, the women's movement is fragmented—sadly, the oppressions women and girls face continue. One

¹⁰Some sites, which are written by and for an older female audience than the grrl power sites we are interested in here, focus on opposition to men: for example, Heartless Bitches International <<http://www.heartless-bitches.com/>>, Kashka's Revenge: All Men Must Die <<http://www.kfs.org/~kashka/ammd.html>>, and The Boys Are Icky Brigade <<http://members.tripod.com/~AmazonFox/BAIB.html>>.

anonymous contributor to the Nrrd Grrl forum recognized the struggle she shared with younger generations of girls:

Old Nrrdgrrls Rule too! Being an abused product of the late 60s and early 70s (when I was told I couldn't take auto mechanics because my presence as a grrl would be "too distracting to the boyz"), I am f-cking crazed glad to see you grrls kicking ass and taking no prisoners. There's a lot of us older grrls out there, working in crappy jobs and learning how to better ourselves (I'm still a better mechanic/fixit than the current man in my life). . . . Don't look down on every older woman you see—we may be fat, old and slow to you, but we have faced the same sexist shit, the same putdowns, the same stupid ass boy games that you face now. There are plenty of grrls in disguise out there, and some of them may be your older sisters, your aunts, your cousins, maybe even your mom, who didn't get to take auto mechanics the way she wanted. . . we're just as angry as you are, maybe more so, cause we've had longer to deal with the stupidity and crap and games.

Sexist oppressions remain constant, this woman tells young girls, but her message is not despairing. Instead, by asserting the connection between older and younger generations of women ("we have faced the same sexist shit. . . that you face now"), she emphasizes that although visual cues might emphasize the differences between the generations ("we may be fat, old and slow to you"), reaching out across those differences to find some common experiences is possible. We see this potential for coalition building repeatedly on sites where girls are encouraged to see their experiences as shared by girls the same age across the culture (and across cultures) and to connect with girls in other cultures (a common feature of many grrl home pages is a pen-pal directory).

ACTING FOR THE GRRLS OF THE FUTURE

What we need is a conspiracy of sisters that begins with the recognition that there is nothing inherently masculine about computers. . . . We have to teach our younger generation of women that they are free to explore computers in their own way and to draw their own conclusions about the usefulness of these machines. And we start it all with a simple thought that could be the beginning of a revolution: How hard can it be? (Coyle, 1996, p. 54)

Peggy Orenstein perceives adolescent girls' loss of voice and confidence as symptomatic of a larger loss—"many of today's girls fall into traditional patterns of low self-image, self-doubt, and self-censorship of their creative and intellectual potential" (p. xvi). These traditional patterns of low self-esteem are being complicated on the World Wide Web. As we have argued here, there are spaces on the Web where girls are constructing powerful self-images, asserting their knowledge and awareness of themselves, and positively *not* censoring themselves. Taken as a whole, these constructions suggest that one strategy toward building more constructive relationships between women and technology is to begin earlier in women's lives, before gendered definitions of the self become entangled in gendered definitions of technology. By exploring this moment of gendering (both of technology and of self), we will better understand the complex relationship between women and technology and discover ways to disrupt limited and limiting conceptions of technology and women.

Web-based writing is compatible with pedagogical theories that argue that students find writing more engaging when they write to real audiences (Schwartz, 1990) and that writing teachers should make student engagement a high priority in constructing student writing environments (Hillocks, 1995). Many girls' experiences as Web-based writers

demonstrate that Web-based writing, with its potential for immediate and personal response from readers authentically interested in the writing, can be engaging and meaningful. Many literacy theorists have described how nonschool-based literacy activity differs from school-sponsored literacy activity, arguing that school-based literacy activity often has no relevance or relationship to students' lives outside school (Moss, 1994). The Web may bridge these often disparate worlds.

When communication, rather than learning the workings of the technology, becomes the motivation for using computers, girls may realize the productive role technology can play in their lives, a realization which, in face of a cultural myth that technology is too difficult for girls, can also instill them with pride. With technology, girls are connecting across geographic boundaries to build coalitions. This connection holds both realized and potential significance for their lives as they rely on the expertise, caring, friendship, and support of people whose common bond is an issue, interest, or political goal. Whereas the "Old Nrrdgrll" quoted previously will probably never meet any of the young girls she addressed, her posting to the Web bulletin board allowed her to make connections based on commonality; the shared theme that brought together these culturally and generationally diverse groups is female political solidarity.

In this way, involving student writers in Web-based writing and research may over time alter relationships between girls and technology. Around the same time that girls begin to lose self-confidence, they learn that our culture considers technology to be difficult for girls, and thus, come to believe that computing is something they cannot do. Paula Spann argues that female involvement with technology is crucial because technology is increasingly a site of power in our culture: "Women have to be in [the computer world] because decisions about language and culture and access are being made and we should be involved in making them. Women have to be in it because, although nobody really knows what form all this technology will take, there shouldn't be a clubhouse we're afraid to climb into" (Paula Span, as cited in Kaplan & Farrell, p. 43). The Web is a productive venue for girls' self-expression because writing Web space is a two-fold act: It gives girls a place for self-expression while intimately involving them in the workings of technology. Although we as a profession must remain aware that cultural forces perpetuate unequal access to technology, we can also intervene in these forces—by using computers in our classes, by encouraging students to see computer technologies as relevant to their school and nonschool lives, and by helping them be technology critics, we may help lower barriers to access, so that women, racial minorities, and other marginalized students can become computer users *against* the traditions that would otherwise limit their access. Although we see the Web as a place where girls can meet as a coalition dedicated to empowering girls, as teachers, we must recognize that coalition building does not happen simply by giving people access to like-minded individuals. As Howard Rheingold (1993) asserts in his discussion of virtual communities, "The technology that makes virtual communities possible has the potential to bring enormous leverage to ordinary citizens at relatively little cost—intellectual leverage, social leverage, commercial leverage, and most importantly, political leverage. But, the technology will not in itself fulfill that potential; this latent technical power must be used intelligently and deliberately by an informed population" (Rheingold, 1993, p. 4). Thus, a significant goal for technology-using teachers might be teaching girls (and boys) that computer technologies hold political, communal potential and showing them how to use computer communications intelligently.

Emily's Story

My school requires that students have a release form signed by their parents before they are allowed access to the World Wide Web. The only time last year that I used the Web was in my art class, when we looked up some painters. Even then the teacher was walking around the room, making sure everyone was on the same Web page. We couldn't take our time or go ahead if we were finished. The worst part was that my teacher thought we didn't know how to use the Web or type in URLs so everyone was treated like a baby, which was annoying for those of us who knew what we were doing. Then, when the whole class was finished some of us "computer nuts" asked her if we could just do our own thing on the Web and she said "no" because she didn't want anyone to have the chance to access anything we weren't supposed to.

Early claims for computers as writing tools argued that teachers should understand the revolutionary potential of computers and avoid using them merely as glorified typewriters. In the same way, teachers would be wise to use the Web as more than a glorified research database and realize its revolutionary potential for dismantling stereotypes about technology and girls. When all students are required to view the same teacher-determined Web page they are deprived of the principal value of this technology: educating and broadening the intellectual horizons of young children—girls and boys alike. Surrounded as we are by the myth that girls and children are in danger every time they log onto the Web, it is understandable that schools should be cautious. Still, this concern often overlooks the sophisticated skills students may already have. As girls' sites on the Web demonstrate, girls are engaged in complicated rhetorical acts when they surf and write the Web. Cultural narratives concerning women and computers too often send an age-old message: "No Girls Allowed." Every time they endeavor to create a space online, Web-savvy girls like Rachel negotiate a complex terrain where the messages too often say "No Girls Allowed." And, with each Girls Only clubhouse they build, girls make the terrain more friendly for those who follow.

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