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## CONSTITUTING FEMININE SUBJECTIVITY IN CYBERSPACE

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**Abstract.** This study looks critically at how Foucault's notion of subject formation unfolds within the matrix of power: a dynamic complex of force relations permeating society. Moreover, it elucidates how a singular subject is constituted in its interaction with the Internet. Foucault analyses our contemporary system of power as a pastoral regime where the responsibilities of government extend from institutions to the self. How one governs one's self is shaped by various technologies; most significant for this study are technologies of the self: how an individual constitutes herself as an embodied subject. Subjection and subjectivation distinguish technologies of the self that are imposed from society from those that come from within the individual to influence society. We considered various Web sites articulating issues around women's concerns, deconstructing the discourses they disseminate and identifying their role in women's subjection and subjectivation. Our reading of cyberspace underscores opportunities the Internet offers in bringing about social change, provided it is integrated within a real social context that subverts the isolating and disembodied character of the virtual. This reading also warns of the increasing difficulty of taking this opportunity as Cyberspace becomes structured by commercialism's tight constraints.

## Constituting Feminine Subjectivity the Role of Cyberspace

In contemporary discourse, society is often seen as constituted through rational debate. Since we are rational beings, the logic goes, there should be no obstacles to keep us from fully engaging in and influencing this debate. From its inception, the Internet has been touted as a space where reasoned public discourse could engender rational debate that promotes an enlightened political arena. If this were true, from a gender perspective, women today should gain access and influence to the broader public sphere by using the Internet. The rational statements of both women and men should equally influence the way in which civil society is constituted. Unfortunately, this is not the case.

Placing our discussion within the much broader critique of modernity, we recognize that this failure could result from assuming that civil society is, in fact, constituted through rational debate. It could also result from the presumption that the Internet is indeed a public sphere with universal access where rational debate can occur. However, we elect to focus our discussion on the premise that rational beings are engaged in rational discourse and that they rely on reason, which is understood as an attribute of the unique, transcendental subject, the subject of Modernity.

We argue that the constitution of the subject, how we think about ourselves, is not simply the recognition of one's sympathy with some universal subject (as predicated by such thinkers as Descartes, Kant, or Husserl). Rather the constitution of the subject results from the relational networks that connect all agents through relations of power.<sup>[1]</sup> Therefore, the constitution of the subject occurs in two ways: through compliance with accepted rules (subjection through what Foucault calls the power/knowledge nexus) and by a personal creative move beyond the constraints spun by those rules (subjectivation). In this paper, we examine, within the context of the Internet, how feminine subjectivity may be constituted at a historically specific moment. From this, we infer the conditions of possibility for the Internet to facilitate social change.

The later work of French philosopher Michel Foucault ([1983](#); [1988](#); [1994](#); [1997/1978](#)), who has taken up the question of subject formation, establishes the theoretical ground for this study. Foucault first examined what he terms "coercive practices," particularly those undertaken by medical and penal institutions. In his later work, he focused on the "practice of self-formation of the subject," that is, the way "by which one attempts to develop and transform oneself and to attain to a certain mode of being" ([Foucault, 1994, p. 282](#)). In short, Foucault clearly demonstrates how subjection operates in creating a specific subject. He then expands his focus to include subjectivation at work. If, as Foucault does, we understand power as a complex system of force relations that permeates society at every level, it is critical to understand how the microlevel of power relations works in possibly reinforcing forces of domination (subjection). Moreover, it is as important, if not more so, to understand how the dynamics of microlevels of power relations can also counter forces of domination or perhaps transform them

(subjectivation). The space from which the forces of domination are acknowledged and either countered or transformed is what Foucault calls the space of freedom. In this paper, the Internet, which is itself a reflection of power relations, provides a site from which to elucidate the workings of subjection and subjectivation. Our aim is to understand better how the Internet may offer us a space of freedom.

## **Power Relations and the Constitution of Subjects**

Foucault has carefully investigated how the subject emerges in the deployment of technologies that affect the matrix of power relations. When Foucault (1994) speaks of power, he speaks of relational forces that proliferate in human relationships and that are “mobile,” “reversible” and “unstable.” These relational forces manifest in two principal ways: as states of domination and as games of strategy. States of domination occur when power relations freeze, when “an individual or social group succeeds in blocking a field of power relations, immobilizing them and preventing any reversibility of movement by economic, political or military means” (p. 283). Women under the Taliban regime exemplify this condition. In these instances practices of freedom are either nonexistent or grossly confined. By strategic games Foucault means “strategies by which (free) individuals (or groups) try to direct and control the conduct of others” (p. 289). It is through the play of power relations that subjects are constituted.

## **The Foucauldian Subject**

This subject that is constituted, Foucault (1994) cautions, is not a legal subject, one narrowly defined by the internal rationality of the law as having certain rights, but something else. Here the subject is conceived of as a form that is “not primarily or always identical to itself” (there is no single referent for the self) but is determined by the kind of relationship which one establishes with oneself (p. 290). So for example, we may constitute ourselves as sexual subjects, as political subjects, as mad subjects, and so forth. The subject then constitutes herself in specific forms the genesis of which are historically situated. This subject is not passive, although certain discourses will act on her in a coercive fashion, but one who actively constitutes herself through those “practices of the self... (which) are proposed, suggested, imposed upon her by her culture, her society, and her social group” (p. 291). It is no accident that primary school teachers and nurses, for example, are usually women. Care of others, and especially of children is considered a “natural” role for women.

These “practices of the self” are manifested as technologies that in Foucault take on a broader meaning than the nuts and bolts of concrete objects. Here technologies are “dispositifs” or social apparatuses that are obligatory passages

through which we interact with our world. In this context, Foucault ([1988](#)) distinguishes four types of technologies:

the *technologies of production* [the nuts and bolts] which permit us to produce, transform or manipulate things; the *technologies of sign* systems which permit us to use signs, meanings, symbols, or signification; the *technologies of power* which determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination, an objectivizing of the subject; (and) *technologies of the self*, which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct and way of being, so as to transform themselves” ([p. 18](#); italics added).

We rarely find these four technologies in their “pure” states; rather they operate in conjunction with each other.

Over the course of his work, Foucault differentiated systems of thinking and correlated systems of power. He also paid close attention to those forces that contributed to the shifts between systems of thought and systems of power. For instance, **Discipline and Punish** (1975/[1979](#)) chronicles the evolution of a regime of sovereignty to a regime of surveillance. In his recent work, Foucault attempted to describe the foundation of our contemporary system of power as a regime of pastoral power, a regime that emphasized surveillance and control through the care for populations.

## Pastoral Power

Historically, pastoral power has been linked to Christian religious institutions and practices and concerns itself principally with guiding individuals to salvation in the afterlife. This form of power focused on the ecclesiastical community and each individual member in an effort to secure the salvation of both community and individual. Although each individual was responsible for his or her own salvation, the pastorate was also called to care for others. Pastoral power in this form implied the pastorate’s willingness to sacrifice himself for the ecclesiastical community and an understanding of the inner life of his congregants. While Foucault ([1983](#)) acknowledges that the ecclesiastical dimension of pastoral power had diminished in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, its structure and function has proliferated throughout the social field with the formation of the modern state. This modern state was a very complex system of power relations where “individuals could be integrated, under one condition: that this individuality would be shaped in a new form and submitted to a set of very specific patterns...a modern matrix of individualization,...a new form of pastoral power” (pp. 214-215).

However, in modern times the religious aspirations of the pastorate have been displaced by more “worldly” goals. Salvation, as Foucault ([1983](#)) points out, no longer referred to a “next world” but to “this world” and thus is concerned with “health, well-being (that is sufficient wealth, standard of living), security, protection against accidents” (p. 214). Dispersed throughout the social body, pastoral power is exercised by “state apparatuses”, “public institutions”, “private ventures, welfare societies, benefactors,” as well as the “family” and “hospitals” (p. 215). The result is a “‘tactic’ which characterize(s) a series of powers: those of the family, medicine, psychiatry, education and employers” (p. 215). In the context of pastoral care, the responsibility of government therefore extends from the institutions to the self. Thus the scope of government encompasses more personal domains, as in the manner in which one governs one’s family and one’s self ([Foucault, 1994](#)). How one governs one’s self is shaped by technologies of the self, the means by which an individual constitutes herself as an embodied subject.

## **Technologies Made Visible**

Clearly understanding subject formation is important if we are to understand the forces that bring about social change. We now focus our analysis on concerns about formation of the feminine subject as it occurs within Web sites targeted for women.<sup>iii21</sup> To achieve this, first we briefly characterize how the Internet and the Web are instantiations of the technologies that Foucault identified. This gives us a foundation from which to explore the technologies of the self as they are deployed and used in subjection or as they are invented and exercised in subjectivation.

## **Internet technologies**

**The technologies of production.** The technology of production concerns the implementation of the Internet infrastructure. In this respect, according to the American Association of University Women ([AAUW, Women at Work, 2003](#)) there is still a real lag in women becoming involved in the fastest-growing and projected-largest-growth occupations, which include computer and information sciences, education, engineering, health services, and law. “Women are less represented in and less prepared for the growth of information-related occupations than for lower-status service occupations. [And] women were less likely to major in high-growth fields in 1998 (26.7) than in 1980 (37.8) ” (p. 39). Also, as Phyllis Haag of AAUW has put it, “when it comes to today’s computer culture, the bottom line is that while more girls are on the train, they aren’t the ones driving” ([McGovern, 2000](#)).

**The technologies of the sign.** We see the technology of the sign manifested in the creation of a place, the World Wide Web, where social practices extend an already asymmetrical construction of gendered power relations in that environment. In the context of women and the Internet one aspect of the technology of the sign is reflected in the design of Internet content. According to Spender (1995) and Rakow (1988), technology is actually fashioned after the values and perspectives of those who have created it, and indeed, the information and communication technologies on which the cyberspace is based is gendered. Balka (1996) further asserts that men and women have different access to the creation of this technology of the sign. In other words, the presentation and application layers of the Internet are based on the dominant masculine value systems of Western society. If we understand that one web design principle is to place those elements that will immediately engage the viewer on the home page, then the presence, for example, of male sports links in the home page of major portals bears this out.

**The technologies of power.** If we focus on Web sites, we become aware of how certain technologies of power are deployed. According to Rakow (1986), women's lack of access and skills are often given as an explanation for unequal participation of women on the Web. She notes, however, that the differences are in the social structure, not in the women. Scholars such as Spender (1995), Tannen (1990), and Turkle (1984) also suggest that women are in fact discouraged from participating in traditionally male environments because they do not know how--or are not allowed--to succeed in these social situations. In addition, women are often made to feel extremely unwelcome because they do not know how to "play by the rules." Rakow (1988) explains that technologies are an effect of a particular social field, reflecting the values and meanings of that field. So despite apparent gains in access and participation of women on the Internet, the fundamental status of power relations remains.

**Technologies of the self.** Foucault's final type, the technologies of the self, is the focus of this paper and will be detailed below. Before proceeding, however, we need to return to Foucault's theoretical "toolbox" and try to delineate clearly the contemporary matrix of power as well as understand the dual role that the technologies of the self can play in this matrix.

Technologies of the self operate in two different ways. On the one hand, there is the work done to habituate oneself to a discipline imposed from the outside and the self's active participation in enforcing this discipline. On the other hand, there is the work of the self on itself to recognize and act on the singularities of the power/knowledge nexus, those specific instances where change is possible, "in the context of interactions and multiple strategies" (Foucault, 1997, p. 60). These singularities are the anchor points for resistance or dissonance where the self exercises her practices of freedom.

## **Women's Internet sites**

When they first appeared on the Web in the mid 1990s, women's sites, which were often run by women, "promised to provide alternatives to shallow women's glossies on newsstands" ([Brown, 2000, p. 1](#)). Almost a decade later, it is difficult to see a difference between women's sites and mainstream women's magazines. Content focused on beauty, sex and horoscopes, for example, dominate home pages. One could argue there are sound business reasons for this: Beauty related content attracts advertisers, while sex and horoscopes generate traffic. Some observers argue that Web sites give women what they want ([Brown, 2000, p. 2](#)). However, from a (White, First World) feminist perspective steeped in Foucault, we would counter that as they deliver content, these Web sites participate in the process of forming particular feminine subjects. The palette offered by these sites is limited; the subjects constituted are univocal or homogenous.

### **Subject Formation in Process**

As we have noted, the process of subject formation emerges from the nexus of power/knowledge. Indeed, knowledge is the result of historical sedimentations of discourses and practices (facts, theories, etc.), which are guided by regimes of power. In return regimes of power are themselves constructed by the matrix of knowledge. Thus historically specific systems of power relations are manifestations or reflections of a particular regime of power and its associated knowledge structure. If, in the process of subjection, those relations of power are reinforced in their status quo, then the relations of power "stiffen." The structure of society is in effect imprinted on our brains as that which is normal. As a consequence regimes of power should remain relatively stable.

However, in his systematic analysis of changes in systems of thought, Foucault came to understand that without a mechanism to perturb a regime of power, there could be no possibility for social change. Subjectivation became the means by which those regimes of power could be challenged. Such a challenge was possible because of the discrete nature of both knowledge and power. Indeed, the grid defined by power and knowledge inherently fails to address the concepts of knowledge and the forms of power relations that do not fit the internal logic of the network defined by that grid. This is not unlike a road map that fails to apprehend the landscape circumscribed by the road network.

Thus other ways of thinking (i.e., the deployment of new knowledge structures) can always be predicated to perturb the current regime of power through an arduous process of individuation and creativity. These predictions transpire from the interstices



of the regime of power itself, which constitute its implicit space of freedom. They are articulated through rare discourse and practices, which are the points of resistance that radically initiate the reconfiguration of the matrix of power/knowledge. The Copernican revolution, which was more a cultural and social challenge than a scientific one, is an example of such seismic social transformation ([Kuhn, 1957](#)).

In the balance of this paper we turn our attention to these movements of subjection and subjectivation as they are manifested on the Web. We particularly focus on sites that directly or indirectly address women's "issues." More specifically, we look in detail at iVillage, which is emblematic of the women's Web sites we surveyed: iVillage.com, Women.com, Oxygen.com, Cybergrl.com, bellaonline.com and femina.com. We also look at sites which are more overtly political: NOW, WILPF, and CodePink, as well as as MoveOn which in a particular action, invokes the feminine condition.

## Subjection

A striking image of what is meant by subjection appears in Foucault's ([1975](#)) **Discipline and Punish** ([p. 170](#)). It depicts a tree tied up to a tutor with a strong rope, which brings it in line with a desired shape. Surprisingly, and somewhat incongruously, the print's caption reads "N. Andry, Otrthopaedics of the *art* (sic) of preventing and correcting deformities of the body in children. 1749." This 18<sup>th</sup> century visual metaphor and its underlying literal meaning could serve to illustrate how many Web sites destined for a feminine audience make use of pleasant appearances to shape particular beliefs and behaviors. An analysis of iVillage's homepage serves as an entry into the deciphering of specific mechanisms of subjection. [iii \[3\]](#) Our decision to focus on the homepage was guided by the assumption that, as the initial point of contact with the user, the homepage is a showcase for the site. Its function is to "grab" the user's attention, to encourage her to interact with the site and to have her bookmark it for her return. This page, unassuming in its soft pastel color scheme, essentially offers links to other sites or to other pages within iVillage that presumably offer more text images, or customizable tools (e.g., a wedding calendar, a health calculator, e-shopping lists) whose content is fixed. Content focuses on recurrent problem solving and self-improvement topics, which are not time sensitive. Furthermore topics most frequently tackled by iVillage are reshuffled and recycled over a short period of time; the same topic is frequently covered by different sections of iVillage during the same week. This emphasis on repetition and circulation echoes Foucault's ([1972](#)) assessment of statements "that are repeated, reproduced and transformed, to which pre-established networks are adapted, and to which a status is given in the institution" ([p., 120](#)).

Repetition is also visible in iVillage's "Hot Topics" which are introduced through the main focal point of iVillage's home page: the photo of an anonymous woman located at the center top of the page. In lieu of a caption, which the user would expect, is the hot

topics section. By definition a hot topic is “currently popular” and thus subject to change. However, the 8 categories (pregnancy, personal finance, diets, babies, work, love, well-being, interests) listed under iVillage’s hot topics are static. They also suggest attributes traditionally ascribed to women: Most topics fall within the realm of family and home, a central theme of the pastoral regime of power that Foucault theorized.

The placement of pregnancy in the upper left of the hot topic list, the first topic to catch your eye, suggests that it should be a fundamental concern for most women. Indeed, the theme of pregnancy is reinforced in the home page through tools such as fertility options, the pregnancy calendar and the baby name finder. In the Shopping Central menu, pregnant women can order from iMaternity.com. The site map indicates that there are experts from midwives to obstetricians, chats that include expecting clubs and birth stories, and talks on aspects of fertility. Although our sample did mention tools, it did not include articles or talks on pregnancy. Even if a user is not convinced of pregnancy’s importance, the site encourages her to revise her position. In effect, the site subjects woman as reproducer, the primary component in the formation of the family from a traditional perspective. The importance of pregnancy is indirectly reinforced through iVillage’s focus on children, on “your kids.”

Parenting is the most frequent topic at iVillage; for most days it accounted for at least one variable section (e.g., 21<sup>st</sup> century, audio, etc.). This concern for children starts with the babies section in the hot topics list where issues include breastfeeding and potty training and continues relentlessly throughout the site. In Shopping Central parents can buy things for young children at Babygear.com as well as clothing for older kids at oldnavy.com. Numerous tools, from immunization charts, to school reports, to college planners are available to help mother manage her children. Two channels, parent soup and parentsplace, are dedicated exclusively to parenting topics. Experts address each developmental stage, giving advice on such topics as teens and body image. Topics often focus on medical issues such as those that examine the relationship of kids and Ritalin, allergies, skin cancer, and medicines in general. Some are broad: kids and money, kids and trust, kids online, or books for kids. Other talks are more specific: 5 ways to encourage homework habits. Bearing the consequence of her pregnancy, woman is the primary caregiver for her children. The forms of care which she gives range from enforcing school habits, to shaping her teen’s behavior, to providing basic physical welfare. Through those practices in which she is encouraged to engage (child bearing, childrearing, shopping, etc.) woman is subjected as the family anchor. As she herself is subjected, so she too becomes the agent of subjection.

These concerns for reproduction and education resonate with the focus on population control characteristic of the pastoral regime of power that Foucault described. This dominance of bio-power as it affects women is further reinforced by a complementary

focus on health. There is, for example, an allhealth channel addressing health ailments at iVillage. For the most part, however, women's health is generally framed within the context of diet and fitness. With the exception of the pregnant woman who has many health related resources at iVillage, women's health topics are often limited to issues of self-image. From the diet section of hot topics women are guided through a variety of weight loss methods designed to give them the perfect body. A health calculator, menu maker, and fitness horoscope are some of the tools available to help women shape their bodies. A healthy and fit family requires a healthy and fit woman to keep it running. This woman's image must enhance the picture of the healthy family and should also please the husband to maintain family cohesion. It is mainly when this cohesion is threatened that her health becomes a concern. For instance, the hot topics section suggests that depression and stress are primary issues for woman's well-being. This may be because they are the mental ailments that compromise her efficiency within the family.

Beauty is a form of knowledge that women must master. This process of mastery has a normalizing effect similar to that which Foucault ([1979](#)/1975) described in his observations of "the examination" in **Discipline and Punish** (p. 194). Women at iVillage have a "beauty IQ" and take "facial, scalp massage and fragrance quizzes." Since beauty is "ageless," a woman must attend to caring for herself at all stages of her life. And she should look ageless (i.e., young) as well. There are outer as well as inner manifestations of beauty, but in all cases, beauty always has a purpose beyond the subject's desire. To help women achieve the "perfect image," iVillage offers beauty prescriptions. A link in the Channel menu is dedicated to beauty. At Shopping Central women can buy beauty products from PlanteRx.com or Origins.com. Tools include "Makeover-o-Matic," "Fragrance Finder" and "My Beauty Homepage." Experts give advice on hair, skin, and make-up. One headline encourages women to "drive him wild with easy evening makeup. Get radiant skin, pouty lips, and striking cheekbones." Another offers tips for making lipstick last. These various discourses conjure up the image of woman as the object of male desire. She is subjected as the perfect "ten" not for her self-satisfaction, but for "Mr. Right's" pleasure.

At iVillage, relationships are clearly women's responsibility. To make these relationships work, women need to know about men. The headline "Why do men cheat" gives users a lesson in male behavior. "Ten tricks to get him to help with housework" gives users tips to manipulate their partners. The implication here is that men are untrustworthy and easily manipulated and that women need to understand this. Dating is an independent discipline with defined behaviors and expectations as the headline "Find out if you're a great date, whether he's worth seeing again and the secrets to dating success" attests. For those women seeking a relationship, iVillage instructs them on "where to find love." The channel devotes a link to relationships and provides more information. There are compatibility quizzes, couples quizzes and communication skills classes offered in the Tool menu. Experts include the dating doyenne, the sex coach, and the wedding women. The hot topics section casts women as sexual and as either married or divorced. (We

may also read this as the progression of relationships: following the links, we engage in sexual relations, we wed, we divorce.) As the links to wedding information and tools to help plan weddings indicate, marriage is clearly the accepted realm for or desired goal of sexual relations. Weddings recognize that sex is important so that families can be established. Nonetheless, it is still the woman's responsibility to make her self desirable and to learn sexual techniques to keep the level of desirability high so that she can maintain "proper" attractiveness, keep her man and preserve family stability. The polite kinkiness of the "sex coach," who is here to prepare her for her performance, foregrounds her contradictory position. These obsessive allusions to sexuality are a reminder of the many treatises on masturbation that Foucault (1999) compiled to describe the construction of specific power relations between children, the church and their parents in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Finally, iVillage places money in prominent spots in the hot topics section. It's related to our work and to our personal finances. At first, work may seem to be an alternative to pregnancy and by extension an alternative to the realm of the home. However, we notice that iVillage's discourse reinforces the private or personal as women's spheres. Even the thing that would get her out of the house—the market—is used here as an anchor to the house, keeping her in. The financial focus, for example, is on home buying and individual debt; the work category includes one's "home business." The only other places where finances are mentioned daily are the moneylife link in the channels and News & Stocks in the Daily Check. It is worth noting that the News & Stocks section is sandwiched between Horoscopes and the Joke of the Day, which seems to tell women that news and the public financial sector are arenas with which they need not concern themselves. In the three weeks in 2001 that we surveyed iVillage, finances were discussed only 7 times. Two examples referred users to the moneylife link; another asked users to talk about the most "extravagant purchase" they had ever made; a 21<sup>st</sup> century solutions addressed the "problem" of "living within your means"; one headline focused on how to reduce debt and "learn to charge smart"; one suggested "7 ways to save money with your computer"; and finally, another headline warned users about financial compatibility, noting that "even Mr. Right can be wrong about money." Again, we see a financial world circumscribed to the personal arena. Through work and finance, iVillage continues to subject woman as the caretaker of the home. Although she is the one in charge, she is limited to the economy of the household. It is as caretaker that women are subjected as consumers. At iVillage she learns to live within her budget and manage her credit card debt. The tool menu provides the "technologies" (an AccountMinder, Your Money Personality, Debt Reduction Planner, etc.) the smart consumer needs. In effect, iVillage circulates the precepts already explicit in Xenophon's *Oeconomicus* which states that the husband "had trained her [his wife] so well and had made her such a valuable partner that he could put the house in her care while he went about his work...in those places where male activities ought to be exercised in a privileged way" (Foucault, 1985, p. 155). The sole distinction being that "the husband", has become society, as a whole and "the home" has turned into care for life to preserve population.

In the instances described above a subject is formed through subjection. In our exploratory analysis of iVillage's home page, we examined how the elements of design and of discourse contributed to the process of subject formation. This process systematically functions at the nexus of power/knowledge. Women are constantly incited to learn about their alleged condition through disciplinary practices such as quizzes, tests, and so forth. They are also guided to develop embodied practices (e.g., beauty, diet, exercises as well as the interactive tools the site provides) that in turn become a natural part of their ways of being and thinking. The power/knowledge nexus is the ground for the deployment of technologies of the self that at once reinforces or stiffens this ground or reconfigures it.

Specifically, in our analysis of iVillage we noted several ways in which women are subjected as one who constitutes and sustains the family. She reproduces, takes care of her family, cares for her body and manages the household economy.<sup>iv[4]</sup> As Foucault describes in his analysis of pastoral power, the subjection that we see emerging on the iVillage site unfolds within the relations of micropower. It is neither the state nor any other political or commercial institution acting on the individual. Rather, it is the iVillage user herself who actively works on herself, on her children, and on her friends to constitute herself as the "ideal" caretaker. In doing so she also works to convince herself and others (her children and friends, for example) that this "ideal" caretaker is who she should be.

## **Subjectivation**

Perhaps the image of an Iranian woman wearing a *chador* during the 1970's revolution best exemplifies subjectivation at work. To western women this action may be seen as subjection, but to many Iranian women it became an outward symbol of solidarity with a movement, which, according to Foucault (1978), "introduced a spiritual dimension in politics" (p. 48). In this specific historical context, individual action was soon united with the actions of others to form a collective will strong enough to overthrow with seemingly "bare hands" a government "best endowed with weapons, ... a large army, ... a police whose violence and cruelty often made up for a lack of subtlety (and) ... a regime directly supported by the United States [that] had the backing of the whole world" (Foucault, 1988, p.217).

When trying to characterize this collective will, Iranians described it as the spirit of the revolution, which far from being seen as progress, was understood as an opportunity to "change themselves, their way of being, their relationship with others, and with things" (Foucault, 1988, p.217). This opportunity stemmed from the recognition of a space of freedom that religion carved out by being "the promise and guarantee of finding something that would radically change ... subjectivities" (p.218).

Practices of freedom thus result from the work of the self on the self in the process of subjectivation. They are not concerned with what has been or what is, but are focused on what is becoming. Given these characteristics, these practices can only emanate from the individual and can only be assessed as a historical event or in a state of emergence. How these practices are tactically defined, however, is important, as there is a fundamental distinction between those positions that simply transgress the rules and those that create new ways of thinking about the rules to the point of overthrowing or “breaking” them. On the Internet, this distinction is made evident in the comparison between traditional women’s activist sites such as the National Organization for Women (NOW) and the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) and sites like MoveOn and CodePink that begin to exploit the virtualities of the Internet. We will discuss these sites below to provide examples of the role the Internet plays in the subjectivation process in feminine subject formation.

In raising consciousness we take stock of the situation in which we find ourselves. We reflect on how we are constrained and how we might change that which limits us. In short, we understand our condition in a logical way that reflects a social relationship: *“If I am a woman, then I am likely to be paid 69 cents on the dollar.”* From this point we can devise two types of strategies. We may elect to work within the constraints of the rules and simply transgress them by changing the *then* clause: *“If I am a woman, then I am likely to be as well paid as a man.”* Alternatively, we can decide to transform the relations of power by subverting the rules and adding another dimension: *“If I am a woman, then financial inequity, albeit important, is not really the issue; how this condition can support creative participation in social change is critical.”* In this framework NOW and WILPF’s Web sites are prime examples of subjectivation through transgressions, while MoveOn and CodePink are examples of what transformation through creative subjectivation could look like, as we will explain below.

The NOW site clearly spells out its agenda: NOW cares about actions around congressional votes. They urge us to support specific actions when they are up for vote or to criticize them for unfairness, or incompleteness after they are adopted. NOW also encourages us to support or oppose specific nominees: the concern is mainly about the make up of the courts and secondarily about that of the executive branch. NOW’s logic of activism constantly re-defines the lobbying that needs to be done to bring about change within “the rules of laws.”

WILPF’s Web site differs significantly from NOW in that it expands its concerns to international and broader social issues. For instance, WILPF’s explicit concerns (as of

June 2004) include racial inequality, corporate power, disarmament and Cuba. However, while these topics are expounded in detail, there is no sense of connection between them nor is there a clear feeling about broader social issues. The site addresses women about real issues in terms of required changes to a stated condition but never expands that perspective to a more general understanding of women's condition. It deals with specifics by calling on the particulars of women's conditions without ever questioning that very condition. In contrast, both MoveOn and CodePink seem to go beyond this perspective.

Typically, bake sales, held to raise funds for schools or churches, were the work of PTA mothers or churchwomen. However, MoveOn's "Bake Sale for Democracy," a fundraising scheme, gives an example of how subjectivation through transformation manifests on the Internet. In the spring of 2004, MoveOn asked members to simultaneously hold local bake sales to raise money to counter the Bush administration's "big-money supporters." By helping to connect individual events and making the "collective will" visible, MoveOn's goal was to "Bake Back the White House." Over 1,000 bake sales involving over 500,000 people throughout the United States raised close to \$750,000. The Web site let members know where the bake sales nearest to them were being held. The site also posted comments from people who hosted or attended sales. From "Beat Bush Brownies," to "No CARB (Cheney, Ashcroft, Rumsfeld, Bush) Meringues," a sense of creativity and playfulness was apparent.

The originality of this campaign was to re-appropriate a practice typically delegated to women and often perceived as inconsequential and limited to local concerns. MoveOn transformed this practice into a popular action concerning everyone; the aim was to directly affect national issues. Interestingly, this move was articulated around the kinds of feminine responsibilities we identified in the subjection that iVillage perpetrated (i.e., family, children, education). This move underscores the nature of what Foucault calls a "point of resistance." At the same time, it foregrounds the multiple nature of these points. In other words, spaces of freedom are wide and the points of resistance on which subjectivation can be anchored are as abundant as the power relations through which subjection is exercised.

CodePink's Web site provides another example of an incitement to subjectivation that stems from the effort of a few to open up to the many. The site is articulated around immediate concerns about Iraq or the specific action they are currently supporting; however, one of their first banner selections is about local issues, which provides news of involvement in major cities and calls for input from actions taken throughout the country. Interestingly, this feedback needs to be forwarded to CodePink's "webmistress," a title that, in itself, calls into question the accepted Internet practices.

More interesting, however, is CodePink's commitment to networking, the spreading of ideas and singularities throughout the *virtual* communities to yield *real* actions. One way in which they achieve this objective is in providing a "toolbox" to support individuals who have never been involved in activism and to help them decide how they want to engage themselves in the broader political process. But more critical, in our minds, is their newsroom section that lists archives of their work as well as outside links. This list of outside links is telling by its length, which suggests a desire to share and circulate new ways of thinking, and by its diversity. It goes beyond *women's resources* to address *the global community, human rights, voices of reason, alternative media, and political satires*. Connecting in this way transcends the politics of identity and expands the message to the whole of society. In this structure we should particularly emphasize the use of humor, which explicitly appears in the political satire section, but also ironically transpires in *voices of reason* that points, among others, to Janeane Garofalo. As a female stand-up comic, Garofalo uses her comic talent to help displace our expectations to a place of acceptance and creativity, a voice of reason indeed.

### Conclusion

Considering first the assumptions of modernity as they apply to the Internet, we have undertaken a detailed discussion of the notion of subject formation in women. This dialogue, inspired from Foucault's later work, clearly established that agents engaged in a presumed rational discourse are not instances of a universal rational subject but are the product of their lived experience or history. This history functions as a sedimentation resulting from the work that is done on them through subjection and the work they do on themselves through subjectivation. We have documented how these two movements of subject formation are manifested in Web sites that, except for MoveOn, specifically address women and have concluded that their visibility vouched for a role of the Internet in fostering social change.

In our discussion we also raised a number of questions that speak to the other two assumptions of modernity: that social structures result from an open rational debate between the constituents of a society and that this debate must occur in a public sphere that the Internet can "naturally" provide.

Ever since the advent of Athenian democracy, the premise that societies are rationally constructed has long been the dream of western civilization. This dream, however, has been severely criticized over centuries and has been eroding since the very dawn of modernity in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. Indeed, Kant ([1951](#)) implicitly identifies limitations to



rational knowledge, which he began to theorize in his **Critique of Judgment**. This erosion was all but completed with the rise of psychoanalysis, especially Freudian and Lacanian perspectives, which established that the actions of individuals are never completely rational but also motivated by often unconscious feelings and desires.

That societies are not rationally constructed, however, does not mean that debates, which are at least partially rational, do not contribute to social formation or that debates are not part of the mechanism of social dynamics (i.e., change). Thus despite a weakening of the premises of modernity, the notion of public sphere remains an important one, and the idea that the Internet is a technology appropriate for the delineation of such a sphere remains viable.

The Internet, particularly its commercial segment, offers a limited range of possible interactions. So, for instance, despite its original intent, iVillage is a site that perpetuates a subject position for woman that she has occupied, often reluctantly, for many years. Although iVillage uses a medium that purports to be an innovative interactive public space, as exemplified by its chat rooms, it nonetheless offers severely circumscribed spaces where practices of freedom can be exercised. This failure to open spaces of freedom, particularly noticeable in commercial sites, does not negate the impossibility for novel uses of the medium as MoveOn and CodePink have shown. These comparisons between commercial and activist sites, however, call into question current Internet trends: its complete virtualization, a virtual world disconnected from the real world, and its increasing commercialization.

The virtualization of the Internet addresses specific Web design practices that confine this technology to a space separate from the everyday space of reality. Indeed electronic ticketing and to some extent purchases through on-line catalogues seem to set up a cyberspace with little contact with everyday life, save the FedEx delivery person. The discourses surrounding the Internet further emphasize the virtual characteristics of cyberspace when it describes it in conjunction with disembodiment and isolation. But, in this regard, we could ask the question that Michel Serres ([1994](#)) poses in **Atlas** when he wonders *where* a phone call between, for instance, Paris and Milan resides. One literal answer may well be in the phone circuits of Switzerland. However, we would argue it is more likely it resides in the lived relationship of the two correspondents. In the same way, the descriptions of the actions taken by MoveOn and CodePink suggest a direct connection with the real world, as the actions promoted on their sites often translate into real bake sales or demonstrations. Thus, to be an effective public sphere the Internet can be neither isolated nor isolating but must be understood as a link, among others, that contributes to strengthening social networks. This requires a radical departure from a view of the Internet that only focuses on its

capability to store and retrieve explicit information and on its ability to empower by removing all human contact.

Not surprisingly, this conception of the Internet fits the ideal of game theory, which requires independent rational agents having at their disposal transparent information to support decisions that only engage them. This model is, of course, that for the new economy, which serves e-consumers. A re-reading of the Internet as a mode of communication and collaboration between human beings thus underscores the importance of access which not only addresses the ability to connect to the Internet but more importantly, the ability to participate in a visible way with interchanges in cyberspace. Addressing this issue will demand implementation of procedures to regulate the search engine market and the invention of guidelines to favor the development of new systems that will broaden the opening of spaces of freedom.

Although points of resistance are always present, the ease of their exploitation in subjectivation is greatly diminished when the environment where they occur is constrained. As we have demonstrated, the increasing commercialization of the Internet fosters such a constrained environment. This is a reminder that when the networks of power are solidly entrenched in a quasi fixed patterned, the spaces of freedom are greatly reduced. Thus if the Internet is to have more of an impact in changing relations of power, its role in subject formation must be understood better. Designers must remain aware of the means of subjection and explore ways to open spaces of freedom where subjectivation can be exercised. This is critical because the subject is formed at the level of micropower relations where social change emanates.

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[2] Clearly, the audiences for the Web sites we considered are largely white, middle-class, liberal-leaning women. There has been considerable research dealing with women in cyberspace from varying perspectives. For example, Harcourt, ([1999](#)) offers a Third World women's perspective; Nakamura, ([2002](#)) looks at women in cyberspace through the lens of race; Fernandez et. al. ([1999](#)) and Consalvo and Paasanon ([2002](#)) examine gender in its critical manifestations on the Net. However, the point of this paper is not to explore the differences that are covered by the category "women", but to foreground how a particular feminine subjectivity is articulated within the Web sites. Our concern is specifically with subject formation. Thus the category "women," for us, provides the lens that helps to make visible the process of subject formation.

[3] The analysis that follows reflect work completed in 2001 and therefore addresses the design and content of iVillage at that time. Two subsequent reviews of this site acknowledged changes in design and content, but also recognized coherence and constancy in the tonality of the site. The structural conclusions reached in this analysis thus extend to the current instantiation of iVillage.

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