

The Rhetorical Dynamics of Gender Harassment On-Line

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This article compares two extended interactions that took place recently on the Internet, one from a recreational Internet Relay Chat (IRC) channel, and the other from an academic listserv discussion group. The two interactions exhibit similar gender dynamics, which can be characterized as harassment of female by male participants. This harassment takes different forms, in keeping with the possibilities inherent in the two modes of computer-mediated communication. Whereas female participants on IRC are kicked off the channel, in the discussion group harassers must rely exclusively on language to intimidate and silence. This "rhetoric of harassment" crucially invokes libertarian principles of freedom of expression, constructing women's resistance as "censorship." A rhetorical analysis of the two harassment episodes thus sheds light on the means used to construct and maintain asymmetrical gender and power dynamics in different modes of CMC.

Keywords censorship, free speech, gender, harassment, IRC, listserv

As the number of women who use some form of computer-mediated communication (CMC) continues to increase,¹ public concern over gender inequity in cyberspace has tended to decrease, as though simply logging on guarantees that women will have equal access to on-line resources and be treated equitably in computer-mediated interactions.² Yet as Carole Spitzack and Kathryn Carter

(1987) note in regard to the status of women in communication studies in general, "the suggestion that mere presence or strength in numbers signals understanding may be overly optimistic." It is not only a matter of bringing our knowledge up to date; some basic questions also have yet to be addressed. Most research on gender and CMC to date has focused on asynchronous (e.g., e-mail-based) communication, the first form that most academic researchers encountered in their own on-line experiences in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Since that time, however, synchronous interaction via various modes of real-time "chat" has become increasingly popular, especially among younger users, and has potentially important consequences for how (and how equally) communication takes place. How well do women fare in synchronous as compared to asynchronous CMC, and have problems of gender discrimination that were previously identified in asynchronous CMC disappeared, now that women constitute a significant percentage of regular Internet users?

In this article, I claim that gender-based disparity persists in both modes, at times manifesting itself in extreme forms, including overt harassment. Evidence for this claim comes from a comparison of two extended interactions that took place recently on the Internet, one on an asynchronous discussion list, and the other on an Internet Relay Chat (IRC) channel. Despite differences attributable to CMC system, user demographics, and purpose for use, the two interactions exhibit striking similarities in their underlying gender dynamics. In both, male participants advanced views that were demeaning to women, women responded by resisting the demeaning characterizations, and the men then insulted and blamed the women as the cause of the discord. The ultimate outcome in both cases was that women complied with male norms or fell silent. The behavior of certain men in these interactions can be considered harassment in that it involved repeated episodes "which tend[ed]

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to annoy, alarm, and [verbally] abuse" female participants (*Black's Law Dictionary*, 1990).³

At the same time, harassment takes different forms in the two interactions, in keeping with the possibilities inherent in the two CMC modes. For example, whereas female participants on IRC can be kicked off a channel—that is, their connection can be electronically broken—no such option is readily available on a discussion list. Instead, harassers must rely exclusively on language to intimidate and silence in the asynchronous mode. In the example considered here, this "rhetoric of harassment" invokes libertarian principles of freedom of expression, constructing women's resistance as "censorship"—a strategy that ultimately succeeds, I propose, because of the ideological dominance of (male-gendered) libertarian norms of interaction on the Internet.

Differences in the nature of verbal harassment can also be traced to user age and purpose for communication. In the adolescent and postadolescent recreational culture of IRC, gender harassment tends to be crude, direct, and sexually explicit. In contrast, in discussion lists oriented toward debate among older, academic users, gender harassment is typically rationalized by—and masked beneath—an intellectual veneer. However, when the rhetorical dynamics of the two episodes are explicitly compared, the adolescent crudeness and the intellectual rationalizations emerge as alternative strategies for achieving the same end: limiting the scope of female participation in order to preserve male control and protect male interests. A language-focused comparison of the two harassment episodes thus sheds revealing light on the mechanisms used to construct and maintain asymmetrical gender and power dynamics on the Internet. These findings argue that more, rather than less, critical study of gender and CMC is needed as women swell the ranks of Internet users, threatening historical male dominance and provoking social change in on-line domains.

BACKGROUND

Contrary to popular claims that computer-mediated communication breaks down traditional gender hierarchies by rendering social status invisible (e.g., Barlow, 1996; Kiesler et al., 1984), empirical research has found that females tend to enjoy less success than males in mixed-sex computer-mediated interaction. In asynchronous modes such as listserv discussion lists and Usenet newsgroups, women tend to participate less, introduce fewer successful topics of discussion, and receive fewer public responses than men (Herring, 1993, in press-a; Herring et al., 1992; Hert, 1997; Kramarae & Taylor, 1993; Selfe & Meyer, 1991; Sutton, 1994). When women attempt to participate on an equal par with men, they risk being ignored, trivialized, vilified, and—if they persist—accused of censoring or silencing male participants (Brail, 1996; Collins-

Jarvis, 1997; Herring et al., 1995). If by dint of skill or perseverance they succeed in gaining control of the conversational floor, their meanings may be co-opted and reinterpreted to conform to male discursive agendas (Herring et al., 1995). This asymmetrical behavior is possible, despite the anonymous potential of CMC, because the culture of asynchronous discussion groups, which are primarily serious in purpose, favors the presentation of real-life identities, including the use of real names to sign messages (Collins-Jarvis, 1997; Herring, in press-b). With gender identity known, gender stereotyping and gender-based discrimination carrying over from the "real world" are free to operate.

As yet, however, relatively few empirical studies have focused on gender dynamics in synchronous ("real-time") CMC modes such as Internet Relay Chat (IRC) and Multi-User Dimensions (MUDs). In the predominantly recreational culture of IRC and MUDs, users interact using nicknames ("nicks") or by creating "characters" that need not reveal anything about their real-life identities. Behind these pseudonymous "masks," users can play with gender and other aspects of identity (Danet, 1998; McRae, 1996). These aspects of the medium—and the playful nature of the culture—are claimed to have potentially liberating consequences for women and other members of traditionally subordinate social groups.

However, what little empirical research has been carried out points to the existence of gender asymmetry in synchronous CMC as well. In a study of the use of "action verbs" in a social MUD, Cherny (1994) found that female-presenting characters used mostly neutral and affectionate verbs (such as "hugs" and "whuggles"), while male characters used more violent verbs (such as "kills"), especially in actions directed toward other males. This parallels the finding that women and men in asynchronous discussions tend to use different rhetorical styles—aligned and supportive, as opposed to oppositional and adversarial (Herring, 1996a, 1996b). Furthermore, Rodino (1997), in a case study of an IRC interaction, concludes that "despite multiple and conflicting gender performances [by one participant], the binary gender system is alive and well in IRC," as manifested, for example, in sexual objectification of female participants (see also Bruckman, 1993).⁴ Thus even in environments where it is not possible to determine if a participant is biologically female or male, gender dualism may continue to operate with respect to their performed personae.

Synchronous CMC modes have also been the site of violent and harassing actions against women. Dibbell (1993) describes a textually enacted "rape" on LambdaMOO in which a male character, "MrBungle," took control of the characters of two female players and caused them to perform sexually degrading actions on themselves with knives and other weapons. Reid (1994) reports an incident on a support MUD for sexual abuse survivors in which a

male-presenting character named “Daddy” shouted graphic enactments of sexual abuse to all present on the MUD. Such occurrences expose the dark side of role-playing CMC, in which anonymity may not only foster playful disinhibition (Danet et al., 1997), but reduce social accountability, making it easier for users to engage in hostile, aggressive acts.⁵

These observations suggest that female users may encounter a discriminatory bias in synchronous as well as asynchronous CMC. As yet, however, the evidence supporting this position is limited, and much of it is anecdotal in nature. Moreover, although harassment episodes have been reported in the CMC literature, the rhetorical mechanisms of harassment itself have yet to be analyzed in detail. In the study reported on here, I examine the phenomenon of on-line harassment, using sociolinguistic rhetorical analysis (Brock et al., 1990) to compare the gender dynamics of two female-discriminatory episodes.

TWO CASE STUDIES

The two episodes analyzed in this article both occurred in public discussion forums on the Internet, and both contain extended sequences of gender harassment, as determined by my own and several colleagues’ initial subjective reactions to them.⁶ Gender harassment in this context is defined as unwanted contact that targets individuals with offensive message content by reason of their gender. An additional criterion for the selection of the two case studies is that they represent very different modes of computer-mediated interaction, as described later. If significantly similar gender dynamics are found between two otherwise dissimilar data samples, the chances that this is due to coincidence are greatly reduced, and the similarities constitute a phenomenon that must be explained.

#india. The first sample consists of 326 consecutive messages posted over a roughly 40-minute period in June 1996 to an IRC channel named *#india*. This channel is frequented primarily by expatriate and second-generation Indians living in English-speaking countries such as the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia. Most participants appear to be undergraduate-age college students. Since membership is not required to participate, and logs are not regularly kept of IRC interactions by the system, it is difficult to know how many individuals participate regularly on *#india*.⁷ The focus sample involves 12 active participants ($M = 7$, $F = 5$), of whom seven ($M = 4$, $F = 3$) were centrally involved in the interaction analyzed.

Despite occasional switches into South Asian languages such as Hindi and Punjabi to signal cultural authenticity and in-group membership (Paolillo, in press), discourse on *#india* generally resembles that of other IRC channels

in its language use, degree of informality, and range of interactive activities. As in many IRC channels, a typical half-hour session includes greeting and leave-taking sequences, flirting, and interpersonal conflict (Herring, 1998b). Gender discriminatory comments on *#india* are not rare.⁸ The researcher (in this case, not the author of this article⁹) began logging the session analyzed here when sexually demeaning remarks began to be addressed to female-identified participants who were conversing among themselves. The logging continued until after all of the central participants in the interaction had left the channel.

Paglia-L. The second sample is drawn from a listserv discussion group, *Paglia-L*, devoted to discussion of the writings of “anti-feminist feminist” Camille Paglia. As of the time of the data collection, in January 1994, *Paglia-L* had 178 subscribers, of which 60% were male, 37% female, and 3% of indeterminate gender.¹⁰ Participants are located primarily at universities in the United States and Canada (the list is moderated by a Canadian man), and include professors, graduate and undergraduate students, and nonacademic professionals. Discourse on *Paglia-L*, as on other academic discussion lists, tends to be relatively formal and centered around issue-centered debates. In addition, interaction on *Paglia-L* is frequently openly contentious, and Paglia’s views are often cited as a pretext for directing animus against “feminists”—a flexibly defined term whose referent ranges from published authors and women on the list who express particular feminist views, to any woman with whom the writer disagrees—as well as against women in general.¹¹

The thread selected for analysis concerns a case reported in Canadian newspapers of a professor of mathematics at the University of New Brunswick, Matin Yaqzan, who was forced into early retirement after an outcry arose about an article he wrote in the student newspaper blaming women for “date rape” and proposing that if women who were raped were upset by it, they should be paid “for their inconvenience.” The “Yaqzan” thread ($N = 132$ messages) took place over a period of 16 days, during which time it was the main topic of discussion in the group, and involved 25 active participants ($M = 18$, $F = 6$, gender indeterminate = 1). Gender-based conflict arose in this discussion when several male participants began derogating a female participant for suggesting that the content of Yaqzan’s remarks about date rape was offensive.

Differences Between the Two Samples. The two samples differ in many respects. Communication on IRC is synchronous; that is, messages are exchanged in real time between participants who are logged on simultaneously, while listserv discussion groups are asynchronous, such that there is typically a delay between the time messages are sent and received. This has consequences for message

length, speed of exchange, and degree of informality: Communication on IRC is more “conversation-like” than listserv communication, which may sometimes resemble formal academic writing (Herring, in press-b). There are also differences in participant demographics and purpose of communication: #india participants are young South Asians interacting recreationally, as compared with somewhat older, mostly Anglo-European professionals engaging in “intellectual” debate on Paglia-L. Finally, although both discussions involve sexual harassment (in addition to gender harassment), females are directly harassed sexually in the #india sample, whereas sexual harassment is discussed at a hypothetical remove (the issue of “date rape”) in the Paglia-L sample.

The two samples were compared using sociolinguistic methods that analyze linguistic and rhetorical usage by social group—in this case, female and male participants. This grouping can be justified on the grounds that participants’ behavior tended to polarize according to gender, and gender was oriented to by participants themselves as highly socially meaningful. Amount and nature of participation is first considered, followed by a qualitative rhetorical analysis of the stages of evolution that characterize both discussions, and the specific devices—linguistic and otherwise—by means of which each stage is realized.

Participation

In both samples, as well as in both groups in general, there are more male than female participants, and males post more and longer messages. Participation frequencies are broken down by gender in Tables 1 (for #india) and 2 (for Paglia-L).

Gender in each sample was determined on the basis of names and other information that participants revealed during the interactions.¹² That is, gender was taken at “face value” as participants represented it. While this procedure might be considered problematic on the grounds that participants could have been “cross-dressing” (Danet, 1998), nothing in either interaction suggested that any participant was attempting to pass as the opposite gender.¹³ However, one female participant in each sample may have been attempting to hide behind a gender-neutral name. That individual is classified as “female” in the #india sample, because others recognized and oriented to her in her female identity. In the Paglia-L sample, the relevant individual is classified as “gender indeterminate” because other participants seemed not to know how to classify him/her, and interacted somewhat cautiously with him/her as a result.

“Total participants” in Tables 1 and 2 refers to the pool of individuals who were in principle available to contribute to the discussion, regardless of whether they actually contributed any messages. On #india, this number refers

TABLE 1
Participation by gender in #india sample

	M	F	Total
Total participants	57.5%	25%	<i>N</i> = 40 ^a
Active participants	58.3%	41.7%	<i>N</i> = 12
Messages (utterances)	57.8%	42.2%	<i>N</i> = 211 ^b
Words	61.9%	38.1%	<i>N</i> = 1147
Average words/message	5.8	4.9	5.4
Actions and kicks	100%	0%	<i>N</i> = 16

^aSeven participants (17.5%) of indeterminate gender are not included in this table. These were individuals with gender-neutral nicks (e.g., ppp, swtl) who joined the chat channel and left without posting a message.

^bFor the purposes of this analysis, only “utterances” (i.e., messages in which a participant “says” something), actions, and kicks are considered. Messages generated automatically by the IRC system (for example, when someone joins or leaves a channel) are excluded from analysis.

to all individuals who joined the chat channel during the time it was logged, and on Paglia-L, to the number of subscribers to the discussion list. In both samples, the number of potential male participants was roughly twice that of potential female participants. This could reflect the fact that fewer women than men participate in public group discourse on the Internet (Hoffman et al., 1996), or women’s previous negative experiences with these particular groups.

In the Paglia-L discussion, contributions by women steadily decrease and contributions by men increase as one reads down the table toward actual number of words produced—a classic pattern in mixed-sex asynchronous groups (Herring, 1992, 1995, in press-a). In the #india log, there is only a slight suggestion of this trend, caused by the fact that women’s messages are shorter on average

TABLE 2
Participation by gender in Paglia-L sample

	M	F	Indeterminate	Total
Total participants (subscribers)	60.1%	37.1%	2.8%	<i>N</i> = 178
Active participants	72.0%	24.0%	4.0%	<i>N</i> = 25
Messages	80.3%	17.4%	2.3%	<i>N</i> = 132
Words	86.0%	12.5%	1.5%	<i>N</i> = 38,807
Average words/message	315	211	197	294
Messages with quotes	89.7%	8.0%	2.3%	<i>N</i> = 87

than those of men. In general, amount of participation by males and females is more equal in the synchronous mode. However, as I show later, this is due in part to the fact that females in IRC are often the targets of sexual attention.

It is surprising that women's messages should be shorter than those of men on IRC, given that IRC messages are so short to begin with. I have hypothesized elsewhere (Herring, 1996a) that women's shorter messages in public discourse on the Internet reflect a lesser sense of entitlement to hold the floor for extended periods of time. In asynchronous CMC, women's messages rarely exceed two screens in length, and longer messages are frequently accompanied by apologies, whereas men write messages as long as 20 screens and rarely if ever apologize for message length. The message length figures for Paglia-L are consistent with this trend. It seems unlikely, however, that anyone would feel that even a very long IRC message of 30 words would tax the recipients' patience or take up too much of their time.

A closer examination of the #india data reveals that women's message length varies according to where in the sample one looks. At the beginning of the log when women are responding to harassing comments and simultaneously attempting to continue their conversation among themselves, their messages are as long as or slightly longer than those of men. After several episodes of harassment, however, women's message length decreases, dropping to an average of only 2.5 words at the end. The timing of this decrease suggests that it is a response by female participants to intimidation tactics directed against them.

The last line of each table refers to behaviors that are characteristic of each CMC mode, but that in these samples are engaged in exclusively or nearly exclusively by males. "Actions" in IRC refer to a type of message known as an "action description" in which rather than "uttering" something directly, a participant describes a third-person action of which she or he is the subject. Actions appear on the recipients' screens preceded by three asterisks, as shown in example 1:

- (1) *** Action: Aatank grabs st's butt and says "excuse me but is this seat taken"

There is no a priori reason why females would not make use of action descriptions as much as males. However, as example 1 suggests, actions in the #india sample typically enact sexually aggressive behaviors,¹⁴ and thus may be avoided by participants who are the targets of such behaviors.

The activity of "kicking" is more self-evidently aggressive. When a participant "kicks" someone else off the channel, the "kickee's" connection is broken, and the person must rejoin the channel in order to continue to

participate. Only "operators," or "ops," have the power to kick others. In principle, operators function to maintain order in the channel by kicking those who abuse and harass other participants. In practice, however, operators are sometimes the worst perpetrators of these offenses, kicking others arbitrarily as a form of harassment (Paolillo, in press; Reid, 1991). In the #india sample, three participants have operator privileges, all of them male. Together they execute six kicks, most of which ($N = 4$) target female participants. Kicks symbolically and literally "interrupt" another person's participation, and thus can be an effective strategy for asserting interactional dominance (cf. Zimmerman & West, 1975).

The phenomenon of "quoting," or including a portion of a previous message in one's response, can function similarly in asynchronous CMC. Quoting is no more inherently aggressive than action descriptions in IRC; quoting part of another message helps to establish interturn coherence, and can lend to asynchronous interaction a "conversational" feel (Baym, 1996; Severinson-Eklundh, in press). However, when sentences in the quote are cut off, or when the quoter responds too frequently, the quoted participant may appear to be interrupted. This is illustrated in the following message excerpt from Paglia-L, in which a male participant, Don Ingraham,¹⁵ attempts to discredit a previous message posted by a female participant, Mary Joos, by interrupting her repeatedly (lines quoted from Mary are preceded by >):

- (2) >But my gut feeling

Which you feel compelled to air here, without any substantiation. (...)

> is that Yaqzan probably had failed to
>produce much research, was a terrible teacher, or had
>some other problem, and the university used this
>incident as a way to finally get rid of him.

To quote the Dread Pirate Roberts, your insight is "truly dizzying." You read a couple of summaries of an op-ed piece by someone unknown to you, and you are able to reconstruct his career. What an amazing power! (...)

>Someone also wrote something

Your usual clarity is, again, breath-taking. (...)

Quoting is frequent in the Paglia-L discussion: 65.2% of all messages contain at least one quote. Of these, 83.7% present the quote to disagree with it, as in the preceding example.¹⁶ As the last line of Table 2 shows, female participants on Paglia-L engage in much less quoting than male participants (8% vs. 90% of messages), consistent with the tendency for females to make less use of direct disagreement than males in asynchronous CMC (Herring, 1996b).

Rhetorical Dynamics

The picture that emerges thus far shows male participants employing more aggressive tactics than female participants in both samples. This picture comes into sharper focus when we examine the rhetorical dynamics of the two discussions as they evolved over time. A common progression of stages is evident in the two interactions, from a beginning point prior to the initiation of harassment, to a later state of affairs in which female participation decreases. The stages in this progression can be schematized as follows:

1. Initial situation.
2. Initiation of harassment.
3. Resistance to harassment.
4. Escalation of harassment.
- 5a. Targeted participants accommodate to dominant group norms and/or
- 5b. Targeted participants fall silent.

Initial Situation. At first glance, it is not immediately obvious what triggers either episode of harassment. At a time when the #india channel was relatively lightly trafficked, three females, st, sm, and rani,¹⁷ were conversing among themselves. One operator was on the channel at the time, a male using the nickname ViCe, as well as several other inactive participants. Unfortunately, as the researcher did not begin to log the session until the harassment began, no written record of the prior conversation is available. However, from the researcher's report, it does not seem that the young women intended their activity as a provocation; rather, they appeared to be friends who simply wished to chat with each other. It seems likely that ViCe began to harass the women because he felt excluded from their conversation. More males than females use IRC, and females are sought after for interaction by males, often for purposes of flirting. By interacting among themselves, the three females were effectively less available to interact with males.

Johnson and Aries (1998) observe that men sometimes feel threatened by female–female friendships, sensing their potential to subvert the traditional patriarchal arrangement whereby women derive their social identity primarily in relation to men. In the #india sample, ViCe's reaction to the conversation of the three women is consistent with this interpretation; his intrusive behavior attempts (ultimately, successfully) to realign the interactional dynamics, such that instead of talking to each other, the women direct their attention toward him.

Nor did females set out intentionally to provoke male participants in the Paglia-L episode. After the list moderator posted the text of a newspaper article describing the Yaqzan case, several subscribers to the list responded with comments; one of them was a woman I call Mary Joos.

The newspaper article quoted Camille Paglia deploring the treatment of Yaqzan by the president of UNB, whom Paglia characterized as a “totalitarian” who has “no business running a university which should be about free inquiry.” With this comment, Paglia constructed the Yaqzan incident as a free speech violation, a perspective that was echoed by the first three male subscribers who responded to the article on Paglia-L. For example, one man described the UNB administrators as fearful “sycophants,” intimating that they were not real “men.” Another referred to “the anal PC attitude of administrators.”

In contrast, although Mary agreed that UNB was in the wrong to suspend Yaqzan, she also expressed disapproval of Yaqzan's views (*note*: all typos in quoted examples are from the original messages):

- (3) Well, as for Yaqzan, I for one am happy to hear that he retired or was retired. Good riddance. However, I have to agree with Paglia that it was wrong to suspend him, particularly if he had not been asked to keep his views to himself before. This is the sort of action that creates heroes out of idiots. Universities, after all, are supposed to provide academic freedom, so one must allow Yaqzan his views, however unfortunate they may be. [MJ 6]

With these comments, Mary introduces a different aspect of the case: the content of Yaqzan's views on “date rape.” Out of context, this is reasonable enough—the incident itself is open to interpretation from a variety of perspectives: that of Yaqzan, that of the UNB administration, that of the students, those of various schools of feminism, etc., each potentially focusing on different aspects of the case. Moreover, Mary takes pains to agree with Paglia and the three men who have posted previously concerning the “free speech” issues involved. However, Mary's remarks were perceived as threatening in the male-predominant, antifeminist context of Paglia-L, judging by the virulent responses they drew. Comments in these responses make it clear that Mary's disapproval of Yaqzan's views was interpreted by some male subscribers as a threat to their personal freedom of expression.¹⁸

Collins-Jarvis (1997, p. 4) posits that discriminatory behavior is especially likely among some men “when they perceive that their dominant position in the on-line discussion is threatened by increased participation from women who disagree with their viewpoints.” In these samples, women do not intentionally disagree so much as pursue their own agendas, as if they had the same discursive rights as men: to talk unimpeded among themselves, and to express independent views. This “equal” behavior threatens the asymmetrical, dominant position that some men apparently assume is theirs in both groups. In the case of #india, the threat is direct: The male operator is effectively prevented from getting the attention he seeks from females on the channel. In the case of Paglia-L, men indirectly

experience criticism of Yaqzan's misogynist views as an attack on their own freedom of expression.

Initiation of Harassment. The actual harassment process began with the initiation of hostile actions by some male members of the group against the females who had been participating. When st, sm, and rani rebuffed ViCe's initial advances and continued talking among themselves, his messages to them became more aggressive in tone. When another male operator, Aatank, joined the channel, full-scale harassment ensued. ViCe begins by "introducing" the three women to Aatank:

- (4) <ViCe> Aatank man i got women here u'll fall in love with!!
 <Aatank> vice like who
 <ViCe> Aatank a quick babe inventory for u: st/sm and rani :)

Aatank, interpreting this as an invitation to play at "harassment," cooperatively follows with two messages directed toward the women containing sexually crude content:

- (5) <Aatank> sm hi u can call me studboy. what color are your undies
 <ViCe> haha
 *** Action: Aatank rushes upto st and yanks her panties off.
 BOO!

ViCe and Aatank effectively join forces, encouraging further harassment by appreciating and approving each other's actions (note, for example, ViCe's appreciative laughter in example 5). This is similar to the off-line phenomenon of gang violence, where two or more individuals together may commit more violent acts than they would have had each been alone. Both ViCe and Aatank continue to address crude remarks to the three women, applauding each other's performance, over the next 20 minutes of the interaction.

On Paglia-L, Mary's message was met with vituperative responses from several active male "regulars."¹⁹ First, Don Ingraham responds to a question Mary asked about the Yaqzan case by quoting the original newspaper article, underlining several phrases, and appending the single comment: "RTFM."²⁰ The second response, from Geoff Markus, employs heavy sarcasm, patronizing Mary by treating her as if she were slow-witted.

The messages that follow contain more explicitly prejudicial statements. For suggesting that Yaqzan's views on "date rape" are problematic, Mary is labeled a "censor" by Geoff, and lumped together with "PC fascists" who promote "feminist dogma" by another regular participant, William Davis:

- (6) This is the typical rationalization of the censor. "You have the right to say whatever you want, but of course you should expect to be punished for it." Sadly, Mary shows an absolute ignorance here of what freedom of speech is all about. [GM 18]

- (7) Mary,
 (...) To argue that because of the content of Yaqzan's speech he ought to shut up, even if not legally required to, is to go along with fascists of the left. Paglia has had to use extreme imagery and language to make her point, but apparently it takes that kind of rhetoric to break through the incredible bullshit with which the new PC fascists are trying to structure their new cages for us all. The debate is about freedom [*sic*] and the need to be able to speak and write freely. Any dogma is an enemy of freedom.
 (...)

I would like to know, when the values clash, which is more important, feminist dogma or freedom? [WD 11]

These messages distort Mary's position, conflating her criticism of Yaqzan's views with a call for the suppression of the rights of individuals to express such views. They also categorically reject the suggestion that Yaqzan's own behavior was in any way responsible for the outcome of the case, representing Mary and people like her—that is, "feminists," although Mary does not explicitly self-identify as such—as the source of the problem. This strategy is later aptly criticized by another participant as "misrepresent[ing] the [Yaqzan] incident as a means of attacking others" [TJ 45].

Mary is also the target of ad hominem remarks. In example 2 shown earlier, Don demeans her intelligence with sarcastic comments such as, "your insight is 'truly dizzying'" and "your usual clarity is, again, breath-taking." In a message which is partially cited as example 6, Geoff accuses Mary of "absolute ignorance," "patent and dishonest distortion," and of being "self-serving" and a "censor." The last label in particular is a strong term of abuse on the Internet, where the notion of "free speech" is considered by many to be the highest good (Pfaffenberger, 1996).²¹

Thus in both the #india and the Paglia-L samples, male participants align themselves against female participants and repeatedly direct abusive messages at them. In the synchronous chat channel, this takes the form of directly sexually harassing messages. In the asynchronous discussion group, harassment is accomplished rhetorically, by associating women in the discussion with alleged extremist political forces in the Yaqzan case, and by labeling them as "censors" in opposition to the desirable ideal of "freedom."

Resistance to Harassment. In response to this harassment, the women targeted in the two samples resisted actively, including engaging in "counterharassment" against the perpetrators. As with the harassment itself, resistance is accomplished through direct verbal actions in the IRC sample, and through rhetorical manipulation in the listserv sample.

In the #india sample, st responds to ViCe and Aatank's crude remarks with snappy put-downs and rejoinders

designed to deflect the force of the harassing comments by making light of them. Some of these rejoinders are given in example 8:

- (8) <Aatank> sm hi u can call me studboy. what color are your undies
 <st> st's not wearing any thanks
 <Aatank> st thats rad. what do u look like? how big are your thingies
 <st> aatank.. relax.. you might not be able to handle it
 ...
 <ViCe> sm/st wanna have a threesome?
 <st> no dogs allowed
 ...
 <Aatank> rani how would u like a lot IN u
 <st> hmmm aatank..wait till i throw up
 ...
 <ViCe> Aarti i got a 12 inch long net-schlong²²
 <st> so short vice

In her rejoinders, st consistently rejects the premise that ViCe and Aatank's remarks have any power to hurt her or the other women, and exploits the occasion to put down the harassers by implying that they are subhuman, disgusting, and sexually inadequate. Sm and rani also engage in snappy comebacks, albeit to a lesser extent than st, as well as matching insults with insults:

- (9) <ViCe> Aatank a quick babe inventory for u: st/sm and rani :)
 <rani> Vice= dumbass
 ...
 <ViCe> st sucks
 <sm> yeah u blow

In an interesting parallel with this direct verbal thrust and parry, Mary on Paglia-L also subverts and exploits the rhetorical tactics of her harassers. In response to having her position labeled as "censorship" in opposition to "freedom," Mary redefines "freedom" and "feminist dogma" to support a feminist position on date rape:

- (10) Someone also wrote something about which does one accept, feminist dogma or freedom. I sense that in this case, freedom= male freedom. One cannot feel very free as a woman if you feel that every time you enter a room there is a possibility of rape. "Feminist dogma" as you so kindly called it, does represent freedom for women-freedom of movement and freedom from fear. I think it was John Bergman who wrote, "Men watch women and women watch themselves." The concept of date rape suggests that men also have a responsibility to "watch" and monitor themselves. I suspect that many men see this as an imposition on their freedom to be men, but hey, too bad! [MJ 13]

In this message, Mary presents herself as a defender of freedom (for women) and discredits the men's concerns as self-serving, thereby turning the tables against males who had employed a similar tactic against her.

Another female participant, Gail Aronowski, also resists the move by some males to turn the Yaqzan discussion into a pretext for feminist bashing. Gail supports Mary, pointing out that Mary did not say the things she is accused of saying. Moreover, she insists on focusing on the facts of the case, a stance also adopted by a sympathetic male participant, Tom Johnson. This "just the facts" approach not only resists harassment, it resists off-topic and unsubstantiated comments more generally.

Finally, female users in both samples resist harassment directed against them by continuing to participate actively. In particular, st and Mary remain active in the samples until near the very end, and maintain resistant stances throughout. Continuing participation counts as resistance in that the ultimate goal of harassment is to exhaust or weaken the targets of harassment into compliance or silence.²³

In both samples, resistance strategies are predicated on the denial of the intended effects of harassment. Through their words and actions, resistant women attempt to demonstrate that they are not demeaned or derailed by harassment (cf. Herring et al., 1995). In some cases, they also appropriate and subvert strategies of harassment used by men against them.

Escalation of Harassment. Unfortunately, counterharassment did not cause harassment to desist, but rather incited the harassers in both samples to employ stronger forms of harassment. In the IRC sample, this involved the use of the "kick" command discussed earlier. When the three women resisted their sexual come-ons, ViCe and Aatank, the two channel "ops," successively kicked Rani (twice), sm, and st off the channel. The ostensible pretexts for the kicks are flimsy: sm was kicked because she typed "good riddance" when Aatank left the channel, and st for speaking Malay with sm. The reasons for rani's kicks seem especially arbitrary (note that kick reports allow the kicker to append an "explanation" of the kick in parentheses):

- (11) <rani> Vice: what the fuck is ur prob?
 ...
 *** rani has been kicked off channel #india by ViCe (u bitch - lighten up)
 *** rani has joined channel #india
 <Aatank> haha
 ...
 <rani> st: uhh i just got a lot on my mind. . . sorry
 <Aatank> rani how would u like a lot IN u
 <rani> aatank: whatever
 *** rani has been kicked off channel #india by Aatank (quite the stupid valley girl talk)
 <Aatank> quit even
 *** rani has joined channel #india
 <ViCe> hahaha

Rani is kicked for the first time for protesting ViCe and Aatank's sexual advances; the message is that she should "lighten up" and play along with the men. Of the three female participants, rani seems most upset by the men's remarks, and most intimidated by being kicked. After the first kick, she apologizes and shows vulnerability. She is also much more guarded in her choice of words ("whatever," as compared to "what the fuck") in responding to further harassment. Perhaps because of this evidence that they have "gotten to" her, Aatank then kicks her a second time on the pretext that she is using "valley girl" talk. These kicks are bald displays of power, which have intimidation as their primary goal.

When the women rejoin the channel after being kicked, they are met with more verbal harassment, escalating from sexually demeaning propositions to personal insults. During one exchange, st, sm, and rani are characterized by ViCe as "a friggin sisterhood of Nuns" and addressed by Aatank as "u stupid lesbos." The implication here is that a woman who does not respond positively to a man's sexual advances, no matter how demeaning, must be homosexual or asexual. ViCe and Aatank also resort to racist comments (st and sm occasionally address comments to one another in a Malaysian language), calling the women "fucking chinks" and referring to their language as "chimp talk." While it is possible to consider sexual come-ons as a crude form of play (Danet et al., 1997), it is more difficult to dismiss racial insults such as these as "playful."

On Paglia-L, in contrast, listserv subscribers do not have the technical ability to interrupt or terminate another subscriber's participation; that is, there is no analog to the "kick" command. Instead, an escalation of harassment takes place rhetorically. For example, Don responds to Mary's resistant definition of "freedom" by shifting the focus of discussion away from the Yaqzan case to a full frontal attack on feminism:

- (12) Oh, and the last line—"I suspect that many men see this as an imposition on their freedom to be men, but hey, too bad!"—is just the icing on the cake. I love the way Accredited Minorities (tm) will bitch and moan about the incredible depth of their oppression, and then casually toss off a line like this, asserting their power to impose whatever limitations they want on Future Dead White European-Descended Males, who damn well better get used to it! The notion that all utterances deconstruct themselves is false; but this sort of nonsense certainly does. [DI 17]

Don sneers at the feminist critique of date rape, equating it with "bitching and moaning," and represents women as powerful censors of "Future Dead White European-Descended Males." His assertion is that women dominate men, and hence feminism (which claims that women are oppressed) is "nonsense." This rhetorical reversal not only denies Mary the right to be concerned about date rape, but attacks her as an oppressor of men for raising the issue.

In a further escalation, William delegitimizes Mary's concerns as indicative of a failing of women in general:

- (13) Mary,
your postings are verging on the stereotypically hysterical.
(. . .) Be reasonable, at least.

Before we leave this overwrought subject, to those who think we have gotten too far away from Paglia, may I point out that we have in fact been exhibiting one of the main points of Paglia's thesis. She argues that there is a biological determinism in which men because of the external nature of their genitalia are exposed, out there, the "arc of transcendence" and all that, while women whose equipment is more internalized are emotionally and intellectually more internal. Hence from biology stems the stereotypes of the woman defending hearth, home, and security and the Marlboro Man out there exposed to the elements in the dangerous wilderness. In this debate, it has been the men who have been defending freedom of expression despite the real risks that allowing people to say offensive things creates. And it has been the females Like Mary who have insisted that security is more important than "male freedom." [WD 74]

While this message appears milder in tone than the previous messages, conciliatory even, it is more insidious in that it deprives the women of any legitimate grounds from which to voice their concerns. Mary is stereotyped as "hysterical" and unreasonable, and hence not to be taken seriously. Worse, women in general are essentialized as inferior to men. By invoking an abstract higher "good"—"freedom of expression"—and associating it with themselves, men in the Paglia-L discussion claim the moral high ground, relegating to women a problematic position of weakness, dependency, and ignorance of moral principles. According to the world view assumed in William's message, there is no point in women protesting the behavior of men, as they are incapable of understanding the higher principles that motivate it.

Thus in both interactions, males can be seen as engaging in "power plays" to intimidate and discredit female resisters. In this respect, rhetorical manipulation of hegemonic views about gender and free speech on Paglia-L functions in some respects as an indirect, literate analog of "kicking" on #india.

Targeted Participants Accommodate to Dominant Group Norms. Inevitably, persistent harassment takes its toll on women in both discussions. Two distinct outcomes can be identified, sometimes occurring separately, and sometimes occurring in sequence, depending on the woman involved. The first outcome is that some female participants modify their interactional behavior to comply with male norms.

Accommodation is most clearly evident in the #india sample. After repeated interruptions from ViCe and Aatank, the three women mostly abandoned their attempts to converse with one another and instead began interacting

with males on the channel. Rani allowed herself to be engaged by BOSS, a male who had previously attempted to interact with sm unsuccessfully, in chatting about common acquaintances in Hong Kong. After rani left the channel, st took up the interaction with BOSS. This latter interaction had a flirtatious component, as for example when st complimented BOSS for a put-down he directed toward another male participant, funny-face, who had not been involved in the previous harassment episodes:

- (14) <st> good one boss..doesn't take much to insult a funny face
 <BOSS-> st:thank u. . . .
 <BOSS-> st:ur sweet:)
 <st> boss . . . :))))))))))))))))))))))))))))))

(The icon in st's last utterance is a "smiley face" with a repeated smile, conventionally symbolizing extreme pleasure or happiness.) Finally, and most disturbingly, sm agrees to interact with ViCe, even though he continues to sexually demean her²⁴:

- (15) <sm> vivek u still there?
 <ViCe> sm talk to me
 <ViCe> sm forget vivek
 <ViCe> sm lets talk kinky
 <sm> promises . . . promises
 *** Action: ViCe mounts sm
 <sm> vice you sap let's talk
 <ViCe> sm can i ask the questions?
 <sm> ok stoopid
 <ViCe> sm have u ever had sex with a human?
 *** Signoff: sm (Read error: 0 (Error 0))
 [sm rejoins #india a few moments later. ViCe has left the channel in the meantime.]
 <sm> VICE YOU CHICKEN

It is perhaps not coincidental that sm gives in to ViCe's persistent demands for interaction only after ViCe "mounts" her, a symbolic act of domination that supports the feminist adage that sexual harassment is not fundamentally about sex, but about exercise of power. Thus despite their initial strong resistance, the three young women ultimately acquiesce to the expectation that females on the channel will interact (preferably flirtatiously) with males rather than with other females, and that this interaction will be largely controlled by males.

Male interactional norms also prevail in the Paglia-L discussion. These norms can be characterized as contentious interaction through which male participants seek to display their intellectual prowess through rhetorical one-upsmanship of their interlocutors, who are primarily other males (see also Herring et al., 1995). Two female participants in the Yaqzan discussion, Mary and Gail, attempt to accommodate directly to male norms by resorting to some of the same adversarial tactics that are employed by the men.²⁵ This is illustrated in the following exchange

between William and Mary:

- (16) Mary:
 I posted this once before. Maybe I can't read. I had the same problem with my ex-wife. On Monday she would say the grass needs cutting. On Wednesday [sic] she would insist she never had. Perhaps you don't realize how your words come across. (. . .) [WD 122]
 . . .
 [Mary's response:]
 Indeed, William, I must sympathize with your ex-wife. You are incapable of reading. (. . .) [MJ 128]

However, use of this adversarial strategy does not have the same effect for the women on the list as it does for the men. Gail explicitly comments on this double standard in one of her final messages:

- (17) I will refrain from responding in kind with generalizations about deficient male logic and hostility, etc. I responded in kind to another similar post a while ago, just to test my hypothesis: sure enough, the rule seems to be that when a male makes nasty, personal, sexist comments, he considers this a demonstration of proper macho aggressiveness. When a female responds in kind, she is hysterical and a man-hater. No surprise there; just checking. [GA 101]

For the women, this is a classic "damned if you do, damned if you don't" situation (Lakoff, 1975). The only other option available to them at this point is to cease to present viewpoints that do not meet with male approval, and indeed most of the women in the Paglia-L sample eventually fall silent, as discussed later. Silence brings them into conformity with male norms in a different way: Rather than behaving like men, they comply with male expectations of appropriate behavior for women, namely, that women should leave control of public discourse to men (Spender, 1980; see also Herring et al., 1992).

Thus in both samples, communication evolves over time to more closely approximate a style of interaction preferred by, and advantageous to, male participants. Female participants accommodate to male expectations of their gender by interacting flirtatiously with men (on IRC), or by withdrawing from participation (in discussion groups), according to the ideal role assigned to women in each mode. The women in each case are coerced into accommodation by being systematically presented with limited, undesirable choices: cease interacting with other women or be kicked/sexually degraded on #india; cease to express pro-female viewpoints or be vilified on Paglia-L. Not surprisingly, with the exception of Mary (and to a lesser extent Gail), most women select the option that brings an end to having aggression directed against them.²⁶ It is noteworthy that in neither discussion do women have the option of gaining rhetorical effectiveness by behaving like men²⁷; men can achieve dominance through the use of aggressive and crude tactics that are ineffectual for women, at best.

Targeted Participants Fall Silent. The second and ultimate outcome of both harassment episodes is that women fall silent. Overall, participation by women decreased as aggression by male participants increased in each sample. In the #india sample, women's messages make up 46.1% of all messages in the first half, but only 30.8% of messages in the second half—a decrease of 33%. In the Paglia-L discussion, the frequency of women's messages dropped from 21.7% to 12.9%—a decrease of 41%. As noted earlier, women's messages also tended to become shorter over time.

In many cases, women fall silent altogether or leave the group. The connection between women dropping out and the harassing behaviors just described is made explicit in the following message posted by a female subscriber to Paglia-L:

(18) Greetings!

I joined the Paglia list a couple of months ago, in the hope that I might gain a better understanding of some of Paglia's views. I am dismayed at the level of discussion I have encountered on this list.

I am baffled by those contributors to the list who seemingly have nothing worth saying, and yet frequently attack others who have ideas worthy of consideration. I guess that in some way these arrogant, pathetic individuals must believe that they are contributing to the list. My suggestion to these list members is to take a course in critical thinking - even if you can't pass the course, perhaps you can find some first year undergraduates who are not as offended nor as tired of your childish blathering as many of the rest of us are.

I will be signing off the list. Good luck to those who are truly interested in the interchange of ideas.

Shawna O'Toole
University of Toronto [SO 68]

This woman's disgust, and her aversive action taken in response to it, are representative of women in the Yaqzan discussion more generally. Of all active female participants, 71% complained about the manner in which the discussion was carried out; of those who complained, fully 80% then fell silent, posting no further messages. In contrast, only 11% of male participants complained about the discussion, and none stopped posting. The gender disparity in drop-out rates reflects the fact that women were disproportionately the targets of harassment in the Paglia-L sample.

Women also dropped out of the #india chat channel as a result of harassment. Rani was the first to leave the channel after she was kicked for the second time. Sm also dropped off shortly after being kicked, although she joined again briefly under a different name. This appears to have been an attempt on her part to avoid unwanted attention from male participants while continuing to interact with

st, who recognized her despite her new nickname. Finally, all three women's messages became shorter over time, and were more likely to consist of one-word minimal responses (such as rani's "whatever" in example 11) than earlier in the interaction.

After the three women left the channel, Aatank and ViCe also left, and a new batch of participants joined and began interacting with one another. In the manner typical of IRC, therefore, the sequence has no clear-cut ending; rather, one interaction blends into the next as some participants leave and new ones join the channel. In contrast, the Yaqzan discussion ended abruptly. After most of the women had dropped out of the discussion, Mary and Gail continued to post messages and to present a resistant stance toward the harassing men. Shortly thereafter, however, the moderator terminated the discussion. In his message requesting that the group move on to fresh topics of discussion, the moderator stated that "the Yaqzan thread, although once fascinating, has now more or less exhausted itself." This justification is curious, in that the discussion was still active at the time; the moderator's message came only after Mary and Gail started employing adversarial tactics in response to adversarial messages from males. However, his request had the ring of authority, and no further comments related to the Yaqzan thread were posted publicly to the group. Thus although Mary and Gail did not fall silent of their own accord, their voices (along with those of the men) were silenced, and thus the outcome was effectively the same.

These different endings suggest that the success of the harassment in each sample was not equivalent. When female participants gave in to male norms on #india, the interaction ended smoothly. However, when even a small minority of active female participants continued to resist the demeaning characterizations of women on Paglia-L, a tension was created that the male moderator resolved by unilaterally terminating the discussion, a move that effectively acknowledged the failure of "order" to be enforced by other means.

It is worthwhile to consider the factors that contribute to more or less successful resistance to harassment by women on-line. It is possible that the women on #india were ultimately more compliant because of their younger age, their South Asian cultural background, or the fact that the harassment—including "kicking"—was more overt and more severe. In contrast, the Paglia-L conflict was carried out entirely through discourse, in a "democratic" environment where no subscriber was technically able to interrupt or terminate the participation of any other. Moreover, the two active female participants were somewhat older, established professionals who appear to have had a prior feminist awareness that helped them to maintain a position resistant to harassment.²⁸ This suggests that technical and

demographic variables not only influence the nature of on-line gender harassment, but also the degree to which it is likely to be resisted.

DISCUSSION

Persuasion and Consensus

Why were the women in the two discussions not more successful in putting an end to the harassment that was directed against them, given that they clearly found it unwelcome and made repeated attempts to resist it? One possible explanation for the failure of the women to prevail is that they were less rhetorically effective than their male antagonists. Success and influence in text-only computer-mediated environments is popularly held to be determined solely by one's skill with words, one's rhetorical persuasiveness. However, notions of effective persuasion and resulting consensus are problematic in the #india and Paglia-L samples. "Harassment" is arguably incompatible with "persuasion"; the harassing individuals appear to have had in mind to provoke and intimidate female participants, rather than to persuade them rationally to their point of view.

As Sonja Foss (1979) points out, conflict tends to lead to polarization rather than to consensus:

The creation of two conflicting rhetorical worlds . . . leaves little or no common ground on which argumentation can occur or through which understanding of the opposing viewpoint can be reached. Each side's rhetoric is not only a threat to the other's way of making sense of the world, but also is a reason to defend strongly their particular world. (p. 288)

Gender polarization occurred in both data samples as males joined forces to harass females, and females joined forces to resist harassment. This polarization was not absolute—although no females supported the harassing males, in each discussion there was one male (BOSS on #india, Tom Johnson on Paglia-L) who behaved sympathetically toward female participants, and others who contributed without taking part in the harassment. However, in general, the positions taken by individuals in the two interactions corresponded to their gender.

At the same time, consensus and solidarity emerged within each polarized camp. Same-gender participants directed supportive comments to one another: ViCe and Aatank approve one another in their harassment of st, sm and rani, and the three women support one another by expressing sympathy and concern when one or the other becomes upset by the harassing behavior. In cross-gender interaction, the women (especially st) leap to one another's defense, and ViCe "protects" Aatank's honor by copying for him some disparaging comments made by st and sm when Aatank was away from the channel.

Gender solidarity is amply manifested in the Paglia-L discussion as well. Several women, including Gail, defend Mary, and Mary thanks and appreciates Gail for her support. In the other "camp," Geoff compliments two different men who express positions on "free speech" consistent with his own, and several men support and defend William. Two especially revealing interactions in terms of solidarity involve participants whose gender behavior is nonstereotypical. One participant has a somewhat masculine-sounding name, but takes a position critical of the harassing men. In later interactions on Paglia-L, this individual is revealed to be female; however, her gender identity is ambiguous in the Yaqzan discussion. Her comments are responded to supportively by females and by Tom Johnson, as if she were female, but are criticized with uncharacteristic restraint by Geoff and several other males, as if she might be male and therefore due greater respect. That respect is accorded other males, even those with whom one disagrees, is also evident in an extended interaction between Geoff and Tom Johnson. Tom initially defends Mary and Gail against Geoff, William, Don, and the others, but Geoff and Tom eventually agree to disagree in a mutually respectful fashion. Tom then shifts his position to become more critical of Mary and more aligned with Geoff in advocating free speech issues. By the end of the discussion, the two men are engaged in an extended cooperative debate.

This is not to imply that conflict and aggression are avoided among males; on the contrary, both samples contain lengthy examples of male-male conflict. When we consider this alongside the fact that the majority of cross-gender aggression was initiated by males, and the fact that no appreciable conflict arose between females in either discussion, the evidence supports the existence of a male rhetoric of violence (Herring 1993, 1995, 1996a, 1996b; Sutton, 1994), consistent with what Gearhart (1979) calls the "conquest/conversion" model of traditional rhetoric. However, this violence is not necessarily persuasive—if male views and male norms of interaction ultimately prevail in each interaction, it is not because female participants are convinced of the superiority of those views and norms, so much as coerced and exhausted by repeated harassment designed to punish their nonconformity to them.

A Man's World

We must also question the role played by the larger cultural context of the Internet in interpreting the women's "failure" to prevail against harassment. Television commercials for Internet services proclaim there is no gender, no age, and no race in cyberspace. Yet not everyone has equal opportunities and equal rights in on-line interaction. At the most basic level, access to the technology is

affected by social class, race, gender, nationality, and language, with the largest population of Internet users being middle-class, white, male, English-speaking, and residing in the United States (GVU 9, 1998; Yates, 1996)—not coincidentally, the same demographic profile as the designers of the first computer networks (Hafner & Lyon, 1996). Moreover, the Internet itself is organized hierarchically, with certain individuals—system operators, Usenet administrators, IRC administrators, MUD wizards, etc.—empowered to make policy decisions that affect thousands of users. The people who occupy these administrative positions are also overwhelmingly middle-class, white, English-speaking males.

A case can be made for the existence of a dominant Internet culture, characterized by a high incidence of flaming and verbal aggression (Kim & Raja, 1991), and a civil libertarian ideological bent that advocates individual freedom of expression and condemns all forms of regulation as censorship (e.g., Barlow, 1996). This culture is largely inherited from preexisting social arrangements (e.g., the practices and values of the male hackers who invented and populated the first computer networks; see Turkle, 1984), rather than negotiated “democratically” on-line, and it disproportionately benefits male users.

In the present study, a priori male advantage is evident in the hierarchical organization of the two groups. All group administrators are male. Group administrators have the power to interrupt other’s participation and terminate discussions; in the two case studies examined here, they exercised this power in the interests of their own gender. Libertarian values of extreme freedom of expression are also present in both discussions, and benefit the most aggressive participants, who happen (not coincidentally) to be male. By maintaining (explicitly in the case of Paglia-L, and implicitly in the case of #india) that any verbal behavior is authorized, no matter how crude or aggressive, males justify the use of dominating and harassing tactics in the name of “free speech.”²⁹

Finally, an assumption of greater male entitlement—indeed, a blatant double standard—is also evident in both samples, in that only male participants are entitled to express themselves freely. Women were labeled “censors” on Paglia-L for expressing concern about the content of Yaqzan’s views on date rape, despite the fact that they did not attempt to exclude other views of the situation, and despite the fact that they explicitly conceded the dominant male (and Paglian) position that a free speech violation had occurred.³⁰ Meanwhile, males hypocritically represented themselves as heroic defenders of freedom of expression, even as their behavior showed them to be intolerant of even partial disagreement with their views. When women attempted to resist or critique male tactics, they were technologically and/or discursively silenced.

A double standard is also evident in the #india sample. The three women, st, sm, and rani, were all kicked for alleged violations of language norms: for using profanity (as in rani’s “what the fuck is ur prob?”), for using “valley girl talk” (“whatever”), and for using a language other than English (when st and sm typed in Malay). However, the channel operators, ViCe and Aatank, also used profanity (“u bitch,” “no shit,” “fucking chinks,” etc.) and youth slang (“ewwww”; “cool”), and addressed one another in a non-English language (Hindi)—the difference seemed to be that since they were in a position of power and authority, they were not subject to the same rules. Nor were any other males kicked for language-related violations, consistent with Spender’s (1980) observation that men make the rules of language but are themselves exempt from them.

Thus a context for gender disparity on the Internet is present in preexisting social and historical conditions that accord greater privilege and power to males. The playing field is not level, even when it might superficially appear that every user has an equal opportunity to participate in any given interaction. This larger context helps to explain the female-discriminatory outcomes of the specific interactions analyzed here—since women do not control the resources necessary to insure equal outcomes, it is hardly surprising that such outcomes are not achieved, despite the efforts of outspoken and persistent female participants.

CONCLUSIONS

In this article, I compared two episodes of gender harassment on the Internet, one from a synchronous recreational chat channel, and the other from a semiacademic asynchronous discussion list. The results of this comparison lead me to the following conclusions.

Gender is expressed and oriented to differently in the two modes of CMC. Due perhaps to the youth and sexual preoccupations of the majority of its users, IRC tends to sexualize female participants, and to involve them in flirtatious interactions (see also Herring, 1998b).³¹ Accordingly, the ideal for female interaction in IRC appears to be cooperative flirtation, as it is also in many off-line recreational social realms. In contrast, the main activity in discussion groups is discussion or debate. Accordingly, the ideal behavior for women in discussion groups is minimal participation, in keeping with the traditional expectation that public debate is predominantly a male preserve (Holmes, 1992). Such differences have consequences for the nature and amount of female participation, and thus CMC mode must crucially be taken into account in analyzing gender and computer-mediated interaction.

Despite these differences, the rhetorical gender dynamics are similar in the two samples. These similarities suggest the existence of a structural schema (Longacre, 1992)

or “morphology” (in the sense of Propp, 1928) of on-line gender harassment, with interacting moves that follow in a more or less predictable sequence: (non)provocation, harassment, resistance, escalation, compliance. Further, the particular variety of harassment found in the samples crucially involves coercion, in that aversion-inducing behaviors are directed against women in order to get them to modify their original behavior—which serves their own interests—in order to serve (to all appearances by free choice) the interests of their harassers.

The fact that similar harassment dynamics take place in two such different CMC modes is especially revealing—and ultimately damning—for what it says about the behavior of some men in academic listserv discussion groups. Despite the presence of a moderator, and despite the fact that academic listservs are overwhelmingly populated by highly educated adults who participate through e-mail accounts from institutions that have official policies against harassment,³² some men regularly browbeat women in discussion lists and intimidate them via their gender identities—that is, because they are female—in ways that are disturbingly reminiscent of the practices of adolescent boys. Comparing functionally similar episodes in a “direct” and a “rhetorical” mode of CMC thus lets us see beneath the veneer of literate expression in the latter to the fundamental lack of civility toward women that characterizes both types of exchange.

How typical are these examples of mixed-sex group interaction on the Internet? To be sure, the samples selected for this analysis are extreme cases, in that they transgress the limits of socially acceptable behavior.³³ It is tempting to posit that the groups in which these episodes took place are “outliers,” unusual environments in which attitudes toward women are negative for reasons specific to the groups, for example, because of cultural gender bias on #india, or “antifeminist” ideology on Paglia-L. Despite being extreme, however, such cases are not rare. Equally or more extreme cases of gender harassment have been reported in the CMC literature in recent years (Brail, 1996; Collins-Jarvis, 1993; Dibbell, 1993; Ebben, 1994; Reid, 1994; Sutton, 1994); their distribution includes feminist-oriented groups, support groups, community-based groups, and mixed-sex groups that are purely social in function. In one survey of 500 subscribers to a women-only listserv group, fully one-fifth reported that they had been sexually harassed on-line (Brail, 1994).

Collins-Jarvis (1997) proposes that gender-discriminatory episodes are most likely to occur when gender differences are salient in on-line discussion, such as when gender itself is the topic of discussion. This generalization holds up well for Paglia-L and the other asynchronous cases mentioned earlier (those described by Brail, Collins-Jarvis, Ebben, and Sutton), but it is less clear how gender is salient in the synchronous cases, since the women targeted

for harassment not infrequently have gender-neutral names.³⁴ It may be that the greater frequency of participation of females in real-time chat interactions, in combination with communication styles that give off cues as to their gender identity (Herring, 1998b), reminds users that women are in the environment more often than is the case in asynchronous groups, where women are more likely to “lurk” without posting (Broadhurst, 1993).

One might well question why male norms and male interests should continue to dominate in synchronous chat environments, given that both the recreational culture and the technology invite experimentation with alternative gender identities. In a similar vein, Kramarae (1995) questions why virtual-reality video games, although in principle able to create liberatory social worlds, tend overwhelmingly to reenact traditionally violent, sexist narratives. In both cases, the answer is arguably the same: The gender that controls the technology benefits disproportionately from traditional gender arrangements, and thus is motivated to preserve them. This classic conflict-of-interest situation helps to insure that power and privilege continue to be concentrated in the hands of men. At the same time, male dominance of cyberspace is increasingly “at risk” as women continue to swell the ranks of Internet users. In this period of transition, rather than decreasing, violence in video games and on-line gender harassment may actually increase, in that both lead women to “voluntarily” restrict their own participation in technological domains, and thus function to suppress challenges to the traditional status quo.

A consequence of these circumstances is that an increase in the numbers of women logging on to the Internet does not necessarily mean that equality is thereby achieved. Numerical parity is important, but it does not in and of itself create social parity, which can only exist in an environment of tolerance and respect for diversity among users. The interactions reported on in this study suggest that gender harassment creates a hostile social environment for some women on-line, constraining their ability to participate on a par with men. As such, it is inimical to the goal of equality, and is thus a behavior that we cannot afford to tolerate.

NOTES

1. A recent self-report survey places the number of female Internet users at 39% of all users (GVU 9, 1998), up from just under 30% in 1995 (GVU 4, 1995). The percentages are somewhat higher for female users in the United States (41.2% and 32.5%, respectively).

2. Thus, for example, in a sociolinguistic survey of communication on the Internet, Yates (1996) expresses concern for the status of ethnic minorities, but after claiming that the number of female users has increased to 50% (a figure for which no source is cited) has nothing further to say about women, as if numerical parity were equivalent to social parity.

3. For an overview of the legal implications of on-line gender harassment, see Bell and de La Rue (1995).

4. According to anecdotal report, women often take on gender-neutral or male names in MUDs and IRC in order to avoid unwanted sexual attention. Males, conversely, may take on female-sounding names in order to attract more attention (Bruckman, 1993; Reid, 1994).

5. Less obviously aggressive but nonetheless degrading to women are the sexist jokes described by Kendall (1996) as being so frequent on one social MUD that they have been conventionalized as “obligatory jokes” or “objokes.”

6. Their reactions included characterizations of the exchanges as “abusive,” “coercive,” “degrading,” and “misogynistic.” These colleagues included both females and males.

7. Paolillo (1999) counted 350 different individuals who participated in a 24-hour continuous sample of #india chat collected during the fall of 1997.

8. For example, a regular participant who described himself as a 17-year-old male boasted publicly that he “learned how to rape a woman” on #india.

9. The #india data were logged by John Paolillo as part of a research project on code-switching on the Internet; see Paolillo (in press) for details. I am grateful to him for bringing the present sample to my attention.

10. Gender of participants in the Paglia-L discussion was determined on the basis of user names. In cases where names were not provided along with e-mail addresses on the list of subscribers, or where names were unrevealing as to gender, participants were classified as “gender indeterminate.”

11. For instance, in an earlier discussion on Paglia-L, several men citing Paglia claimed that all women were inherently irrational.

12. On Paglia-L, all active participants used what appeared to be their real names, and only one name was ambiguous as to gender. On IRC, participants were classified as male or female on the basis of (1) their nicks (e.g., “lisa1” was considered female, “shyboy” was considered male), and (2) gender-related information that they revealed about themselves or others in the course of the interaction (e.g., one male participant announced to another that “sm” and “st” were female, to which they agreed, and “BOSS” was addressed by a friend by his real name, and hence was classified as male). See Danet et al. (1997) and Rodino (1997) for additional criteria that can be employed to determine gender in IRC.

13. Such instances do occur on #india. For example, in one session, a participant with the nick “Staxx” claimed to be female, although the pretense was relatively transparent. Staxx behaved as a woman in a young man’s sexual fantasies might behave, including such improbable behaviors as “hitting other participants over the head with her big breasts.” Comments by other participants in the session indicated that they also believed that Staxx was a male.

14. Fully half of the actions in the sample describe sexually harassing behaviors, similar to example (1). Four of the remaining five are repetitions of a playful action—making somebody a maragita [sic]—by a single participant.

15. Names of Paglia-L participants are pseudonyms invented by the author of this article. This was done to preserve the anonymity of the participants, some of whom are well-known Internet personalities. The individual identities of participants are of secondary importance to the rhetorical behaviors they illustrate.

16. Hodsdon (in press) finds a similar tendency in a Usenet news-group whose participants are overwhelmingly male.

17. In citing IRC nicknames, I preserve the spelling and orthography—including use of lower case—used by the participants themselves. I have not pseudonymized the nicknames, as they are already pseudonyms.

18. For example, in later messages referring to Mary’s position on Yaqzan’s views, one man writes, “Not only can’t I accept it, but I’m against it strongly: it’s bad for me as a man since it implies restricting my actions” [LG 20]. Another comments simply, “This reader knows an encoded threat when he reads one” [WD 128]. See also example 12.

19. In the 24-hour period following Mary’s message, the majority of messages posted to Paglia-L—nine out of 14—were targeted against Mary. Eight out of the nine made use of “quoting,” and all were written by males. (Of the remaining five messages, two were from women supportive of Mary, one was a second message posted by Mary herself, and two were from men who did not mention Mary’s message.)

20. RTFM (= “read the fucking manual”) is a military acronym conventionally used on the Internet to signify that the addressee is asking a stupid question, the answer to which is readily available in documented material.

21. In response to a 1997 survey, a majority of users ranked “censorship” as the number one issue facing the Internet. Interestingly, younger people were more concerned with censorship than older people, and males were more concerned with censorship than females—privacy outranked censorship as the number one concern among female users (GVU 7, 1997).

22. ViCe addresses this comment to Aarti in the belief that Aarti is a female. As it turns out, Aarti is male, leaving ViCe open to allegations of homosexuality.

23. *American Heritage Dictionary* (1983).

24. Messages unrelated to the exchange between sm and ViCe have been omitted from this example.

25. One gets the impression that the women adopted this strategy as a last resort, after having attempted to present their positions in a reasoned way at the outset, but with no success. The dominant mode of interaction on Paglia-L is relentlessly adversarial—women who wish to participate actively may feel compelled to adopt an adversarial style in order to be taken seriously. See Herring (1996b) for further discussion of the tendency for members of the minority gender in a discussion group to accommodate to the discursive style of the majority gender.

26. See Frye (1983) for a chilling description of similar coercion techniques used to “break” young women who are kidnapped for service in the sex trade. The basic technique involves physically and psychologically abusing the women until “voluntarily” becoming prostitutes appears to them rationally as the more desirable alternative.

27. The exception to this generalization is that st engages in “sounding”—exchange of ritual insults targeting the sexual behavior of the addressee’s relatives (Labov, 1972)—along with two males, BOSS and funny-face, and receives expressions of approval for this behavior from BOSS. However, the aggression in sounding utterances is ritualized and frequently humorous; such utterances are valued for their cleverness, rather than for their aggressiveness per se.

28. For evidence that a feminist awareness makes a positive difference to female participation in Internet discussion groups, see Herring et al. (1992, 1995).

29. For a particularly egregious example, and a partial critique along the lines developed here, see Brail (1996).

30. As Ess (1996) demonstrates, it is a false dichotomy that anything that does not support the most extreme forms of free speech

constitutes “censorship.” The failure of women on Paglia-L to challenge this equation is indicative of the hegemonic status of free speech ideology on the Internet. This hegemony is enforced by violence: It is simply not possible to challenge the sanctity of absolute free speech in most public on-line forums without attracting a firestorm of flaming responses (Pfaffenberger, 1996). Here I suggest that the exaggerated concern with free speech ideals demonstrated publicly by some men conveniently masks gender class interest. For a fuller development of this argument, see Herring (1998a).

31. By “IRC” I intend the EFNet, the largest IRC network and the one on which #india is found.

32. Two of the men involved in the Paglia-L discussion—Geoff Markus and Tom Johnson—are well-known, respected professionals, the former a lawyer and the latter a university professor and moderator of an Internet discussion list.

33. Men who advocate absolute freedom of speech might take issue with this assessment, or argue that “social acceptability” is of secondary concern to the right of the individual to say anything whatsoever, regardless of who is offended by it. Indeed, the dominant free speech ideology on the Internet legitimizes and encourages socially marginal behavior, including abuse of the less powerful by the more powerful. Whether or not particular individuals consider this an acceptable outcome may depend on which of these two groups they belong to.

34. Thus st and sm on #india have gender-neutral nicks and maintain a low profile until ViCe “outs” their gender in example 4 as part of his invitation to Aatank to join him in harassment. In the LambdaMOO rape case mentioned previously (Dibbell, 1993), MrBungle violently “rapes” women who present their characters as gender neutral.

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