

Cyberfeminism

Cyberfeminism is a term coined in 1994 by Sadie Plant, director of the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit at the University of Warwick in Britain, to describe the work of feminists interested in theorizing, critiquing, and exploiting the Internet, cyberspace, and new-media technologies in general. The term and movement grew out of "third-wave" feminism, the contemporary feminist movement that follows the "second-wave" feminism of the 1970s, which focused on equal rights for women, and which itself followed the "first-wave" feminism of the early 20th century, which concentrated on woman suffrage. **Cyberfeminism** has tended to include mostly younger, technologically savvy women, and those from Western, white, middle-class backgrounds. The ranks of cyberfeminists are growing, however, and along with this increase is a growing divergence of ideas about what constitutes cyberfeminist thought and action.

Prior to the advent of **cyberfeminism**, feminist study of technology tended to examine technological developments as socially and culturally constructed. One major argument was that technology has been positioned as part of masculine culture—something that men are interested in, good at, and therefore engage in more than women. Even though women throughout history have been active in developing new technologies, feminists have argued that technology has still been looked upon as a masculine creation. For example, although women had been involved in the creation and development of the computer, their contributions were largely marginalized, and their participation often ignored or written out of history. Therefore, feminists such as Judy Wacjman, a professor of sociology at the Australian National University in Canberra, and Cynthia Cockburn, an independent scholar and activist in London, argued that technology needed to be continually interrogated and re-conceptualized, and that women needed to become more active in technological areas as well.

Also pointing the way for **cyberfeminism** was the work of Donna Haraway, a professor in the History of Consciousness program at the University of California at Santa Cruz. In her groundbreaking essay "A Manifesto for Cyborgs," she argues for a socialist, feminist cyborg that challenges the singular identities and "grids of control" that work to contain women and other marginalized groups. Haraway agreed that women needed to become more technologically proficient, better able to engage with the "informatics of domination" and challenge these systems. But Haraway also and importantly argued that women would need to be savvy and politically aware users of these technological systems; simply using them was not enough.

From these beginnings, **cyberfeminism** began to develop. Plant, an important early proponent, has argued that women are naturally suited to using the Internet, because women and the Internet are similar in nature—both, according to Plant, are non-linear, self-replicating systems concerned with making connections. She has argued that although previous feminists have believed computers to be essentially male, we should instead see computers and the Internet as places for women to engage in new forms of work and play—where women are freed from traditional constraints and are able to experiment with identity and gain new avenues for claiming power and authority. Her view of cyberspace is as a welcoming, familiar space for women, where they can and must seize opportunities to advance themselves and to challenge male authority.

Some younger feminists active on the Internet, while they do not identify with theoretical arguments about masculinity or the similarities between women and computers, also see the Internet as a vital space for women

to “claim their territory,” and use the technology to gain power and authority in contemporary society. Some women in this group would reject the label “feminist” altogether, but would still see the Internet as a vital tool or space for women to learn about and engage with. To advance these ends, individuals and groups have created Web sites, discussion groups, and other online resources for women interested in learning more about Internet technologies, and also for women already employed in information technology areas. These groups believe that empowerment for women can be achieved through women's greater knowledge of new-media technologies, and through the creation of more opportunities to advance in these lines of work.

Another branch of **cyberfeminism** argues that the idea of women gaining power and authority merely through greater use of new-media technologies is overly simplistic or reductive. Australian feminist scholars, such as Susan Luckman of the University of Queensland and Anna Munster of the University of New South Wales, believe that this approach reduces complex technological systems into mere tools and ignores their historical contexts of production and use. They believe that technologies are embedded in structures of power, which are not always positive. In their opinion, calls for women and girls to uncritically take up and advance the use of these new technologies does nothing to critically assess technology's larger role in culture, and how we wish to see technology develop—or not. Women must be part of this future, not by simply advocating for more women to engage in using technology, but by becoming more critically aware of the perils as well as promises that new technologies offer.

Other critiques of earlier cyberfeminist work suggest that the call for more women to engage with new technologies is based on mistaken assumptions about real living conditions. Simply put, all women do not have access to computers and the Internet, and likely will not in the foreseeable future; cyberfeminists who make the simple declaration that “all girls need modems” are ignoring the conditions of those who do not share their privileged middle-class, Western (and often white) background. Women's material conditions must be taken into account when considering how best to advance feminist ideas, online or otherwise.

Beyond the root idea that gender equity, particularly in new-media technologies, is a desired goal, **cyberfeminism** itself, a growing area of thought and study, is not a unified set of ideas concerning women and new technologies. Cyberfeminists explore many areas of theory: that women are naturally suited to using the Internet, as both share important commonalities; that women can best empower themselves by becoming fluent in online communication and acquiring technological expertise; and that women would do best to study how power and knowledge are constructed in technological systems, and how and where feminists can disrupt and change these practices for the betterment of all members of society.

—Mia Consalvo

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Entry Citation:

Consalvo, Mia. "Cyberfeminism." *Encyclopedia of New Media*. Ed. . Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2002. 109-10. *SAGE Reference Online*. Web. 4 Apr. 2012.



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