GEEK GRRRLS NEED MODEMS: DISEMBODIEMENT, CYBERLIBERATION AND POSTFEMINISM IN THE 1990S

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Introduction

This paper discusses how Australian-based cyberfeminist zine *Geekgirl* aimed to make a space for women online and challenge the narrative that women were technologically inept and helpless in cyberspace. *Geekgirl* focused on strategies that empowered individual users, and promoted and argued for actions that would improve women's online experience. However, while portraying itself as an explicitly feminist project, the articles in this zine were informed by the 1990s turn towards post-feminism. It dismissed earlier feminist movements as dry and ridiculous and was frequently derisive of women who took things said online 'too seriously'. This paper argues that the narratives presented in *Geekgirl* came from attempts to reconcile, somewhat awkwardly, emerging ideologies about the liberatory potentials of cyberspace and cyberlibertarian tendencies with feminist critique. It aimed to promote the internet as a tool to regain agency while also critiquing the patriarchal power structures inherent in the technology, imagery of cyberspace, and the online experience. *Geekgirl* played with concepts of embodiment and disembodiment, feminism and post-feminism, as well as online and IRL.

In the 1990s, it was often predicted that the internet's ability to remove offline identity markers – to disembody users through its text-based format – was going to equalize society and remove prejudice (Bomse 1743). At the same, there was a transition from pop culture products explicitly representing feminist messages to an attitude that Western societies had moved beyond the need for feminism (McRobbie 258). However, it was quickly acknowledged that there were very real barriers that made it more difficult for women to access and fully make use of the internet (Waller; Scott et al.; Spender 180). If the internet was the future of society and a potential tool for liberation, then women's lower use of the internet was a key problem that needed to be addressed.

Geekgirl Zine

Geekgirl's first issue was published in 1993 and continued throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. Originally, both physical and online copies were available, but in 1996, due to budgetary constraints, it switched to electronic only publication. While based in Australia, the zine gained international contributions and attention. The website received over 500,000 hits a month in 1996 and was displayed at the Museum of Contemporary Art in New York as part of a digital exhibition (Cooper).

I accessed physical copies of the zine at the National Library of Australia, and digital issues through Trove (which hosts the .au web archive). I then qualitatively analyzed how the articles and images contained within portrayed women's experience online, their place in cyberspace, their relationship with technology, as well as what benefits the internet offered women. I also looked at how these articles portrayed masculinity, men's behavior online, and the patriarchal nature of technology. These were then placed in the broader context of prevailing images of the internet and feminism in the 1990s and more long-term attitudes towards women and technology to highlight how *Geekgirl* emerged from, responded to, or challenged them.

I draw from the concept of the domestication of technology to position *Geekgirl* as a project that aimed to create a space for women online. Research into how technologies are domesticated has highlighted that seeing a place or role for new technology in one's life is a key step towards acquiring it and including it into everyday life (Haddon 196). In the 1990s, the default internet user and representation of users was male (Ferrari 334; Nakamura 713). *Geekgirl* created a space where women were represented, a history of female participation in information technology was created, and internet-related women's issues were discussed. Moreover, the zine drew from youth culture imagery, such as the riot grrl movement, to present the online world as a cool space for young women to hang out.

Women, Technology, and the Internet as a Liberatory Tool
This paper positions *Geekgirl* as a product of the 1990s, and one which must be understood in this context. As previously highlighted, online the default user was male. The concept of technological mastery itself, was also often gendered male (Waller 82). In fact, as Waller (81) has argued, research that reported on observed differences in internet use between men and women, often inadvertently reproduced the narrative that women were resistant to technology use. However, women did often face hostility and propositions when they entered online spaces (Scott et al.; Herring et al.). As such, they often were not encouraged to develop technical skills or would change their behavior online to avoid harassment.

However, the internet was also, at this time, believed to be a force of democratization, one would encourage greater participation of minorities in the public sphere (Papacharissi 10). *Geekgirl* drew from these themes of empowerment and liberation that were common in 90s narratives about cyberspace (Allen 105). It presented the internet as an important tool for women to express themselves and seek solidarity. The format of a zine itself drew from an ongoing countercultural tradition that was non-hierarchical and participatory (Barrett 26). It also drew from 1990s cyberlibertarian emphasis on individual empowerment – offering women advice on how to improve their own experience online (Morrison 61).

It was these broader cultural narratives, which often contradicted, that *Geekgirl* referenced and drew from. It often aimed to create a sense of community while also emphasizing women's own personal responsibility to manage their online experience and create change to the gendered dynamics in cyberspace.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is not to argue that *Geekgirl* was not a feminist zine or that it failed in its mission to promote women's agency online. Instead, it looks at how *Geekgirl* tried to reconcile its critique of structural issues with an online culture that emphasized personal agency and individual responsibility. It highlights the strategies that the zine used to promote the internet as a cool space that could empower women. *Geekgirl* aimed to create an online space and culture for women, providing icons to look up to, communities to engage with, and strategies to combat online sexism. Within this, *Geekgirl* rejected the pervasive narrative that women were not interested in technology. The zine instead showed that women did use the internet and could have fun doing so.

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