

"The Virtual Neighborhoods of Cyberspace"

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"The study of technology needs to be grounded in the material as well as the pedagogical, cultural, and the cognitive if it is to be intellectually and ethically respectable."

Charles Moran (p. 206)

"Cyberspace," "Information Superhighway," "Electronic Frontier" "Worldwide Web" are all terms used in connection with the Internet, an electronic space which John Markoff once described in a *New York Times* article as a "computer generated neighborhood dotted with avenues, residences, and commercial centers." (*NY Times*, October 24, 1993, p. E7) Today the Internet continues to expand its vast conglomeration of computer networks, and according to the latest Internet Index, it currently reaches almost 150 million users (The Internet Index, Number 5). A large neighborhood by any standards, to be sure. For many of us throughout the world the Internet is indeed a neighborhood, peopled by friends and colleagues and web sites from which we might borrow not a cup of sugar nor a lawnmower (in good American fashion) but instead a bit of information-a reference, a teaching strategy, a reading list, a bit of encouragement in mid-draft. Yet, for many others, the Internet and the World Wide Web, the hypertextual component of the Internet, comprise a "gated community" where only a privileged few can afford to enter and take advantage of the abundant resources of this new exclusive online neighborhood that's fast becoming a metropolis in its own right. Despite its huge growth, many are still being left out, and those who are not left out cannot access the same privileges as those who dwell in the upscale regions of the neighborhood. But let me explain.

I know that in talking about access I'm not telling you anything new; it is no secret that for people in many parts of the world there are no computers much less easy access to the Web. Mark Warshauer has pointed out that the Internet is primarily dominated by users in the United States and other industrialized countries. He includes statistics indicating that more than 80% of the world's Internet host computers in July, 1997, were in the United States or Western Europe, and of the fewer than 20% sites remaining, more than half were in Canada, Japan, Australia, or New Zealand. .6% are in Africa, mostly South Africa, and .4% are in the Middle East, excluding North Africa (Warshauer 18). Is it any wonder, then, that when I did a survey of my international colleagues on the Internet in 1995, I found that most hailed from places like New Zealand, Australia, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, Scotland, Netherlands, Belgium, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, and Switzerland-the same old Internet players.

Such inequities in access are not restricted to people in developing nations around the world. In the United States, for example, access is a similarly vexed problem. A new government survey that came out this month shows that while minority groups are increasingly gaining access to computers and the Internet, the racial divide remains dramatic, with blacks and Hispanics less than half as likely as whites to explore the net from home, work, or school. Similar findings emerge from a survey conducted each year by Georgia Tech University. In its tenth and most recent user survey, it found that as in all previous surveys, the respondents continue to be predominantly white (87.2% in the tenth survey, 87.4% in the ninth). The survey concludes that although more of the younger respondents classify themselves as more racially

diverse than in the past, African-Americans only account for 1.7% of respondents who have been online for more than a year.

And even as these statistics improve in the coming years, it should be noted that access in and of itself is not sufficient; as my colleague Bertram Bruce has argued, access is not an "unalloyed good" (Bruce). Sometimes it is not so much that certain groups have less access as it is that they have different access, and these different kinds of access do not show up in the statistics I just presented. As Bertram Bruce has also pointed out, access often means "social disconnections, deskilling of work . . . , cyber-crime, corporate surveillance, [and] loss of personal privacy" to name a few of the conditions that can also accompany access. In American schooling what this "different" access often means is that those classified as the brighter students have access not only to computers and the Internet but also to advanced applications like Web authoring-these students are participating in writing and creating the World Wide Web. But those students classified and typed as "other" for whatever reason-outwardly in the United States it's usually stated that they are on a "lower" or "vocational" track-find themselves restricted in their access. They are usually assigned to computer labs where instructional software delivers lessons to them in a manner not so different from the old drill-and-skill paper workbooks. These students are not taught more advanced computing; they do not become Web authors and "write" the Web; they are instead confined to browsing the Web-merely looking at it-accessing those materials that others have already written. Jane M. Healy, an American educational psychologist, in her book *Failure to Connect* (Simon & Schuster, 1998) documents what we might call a "second-class" computer access and argues that computers are used inadequately in early education. In her important study, she found schools relying on software packages with flashy graphics and simplistic recall-questions rather than presenting them with challenging tasks that require creative and hard thinking about the material at hand. She also notes the tendency for administrators and teachers to use the machines as "baby-sitters" to keep students company, instead of as opportunities for the students to engage in rewarding problem-solving activities.

Access outside the school setting can also mean, of course, simply the ability to download on the Web the panoply of glitzy advertisements that many commercial sites feature to promote and sell their wares via the Internet. The irony, of course, is that as the World Wide Web becomes increasingly successful for commercial advertising-this past year alone 1.9 billion dollars were spent on advertising on the Internet and US consumer spending on online retail purchases from November through December, 1998, was 8.2 billion dollars-many will be able to **see** more of the Internet but be able to participate on it less. In other words, the multi- and transnational corporations will make sure that they target large segments of the world's population for profit-vast numbers will be able to browse the electronic world and make purchases-but will they be able to participate easily in the kinds of personally and educationally profitable activities of which we-the connected and educated of the world- now partake?

The problem with this kind of second-class access arises when we begin to introduce notions of literacy, for surely, it is no surprise that in the next century the Web will be every bit as critical a medium for literacy activities as books, paper, pens and pencils have been in the 20th century. The World Wide Web is fast becoming a global literacy system, a technology-embedded environment in which writers distribute words and images, which are, in turn, read and responded to by those working in schools, businesses, government settings, and the public sphere. And whether we are merely "viewers"-or "doers"-in this new literacy environment on the Web makes a huge difference. As Manuel Castells, a Spanish sociologist who spent twelve years travelling the world to observe the impact of information technology locally, argues in his landmark three volume work on the Information Society:

The multimedia world will be populated by two essentially distinct populations: the interacting and the interacted, meaning those who are able to select their multidirectional circuits of

communication, and those who are provided with a restricted number of prepackaged choices. And who is what will be largely determined by class, race, gender, and country. (p. 371)

Thus when we speak of access, what Charles Moran has called the "A-Word," increasingly we need to stipulate what privileges "access" must include. And to my mind "access" must include not only being able to browse the Web, or even being able to write to the Web-to be a Web author-but also must mean that our students and ourselves have an awareness that information technology not only reflects inequitable opportunities, but also constructs and maintains them.

How do we go about ensuring for our students this complicated but nevertheless necessary kind of access? The first thing we need to do is to recognize that online literacies, like those of print, are far more than simple sets of skills to be transmitted or delivered to students in person or online. Literacies-technological or otherwise-are culturally embedded within our value-laden everyday activities. As Anne Wysocki and Johndan Johnson-Eilola have argued of print literacy, often "when we speak . . . of "literacy" as though it were a basic, neutral, contextless set of skills, the word keeps us hoping . . . that there could be an easy cure for economic and social and political pain, that only a lack of literacy keeps people poor or oppressed" (355). Increasingly, this same kind of thinking is applied to online literacy practices: if only we could teach everyone to be "technologically literate" and give all easy access to computers, the world would rise above its poverty and ignorance. But as we have seen, such access-such technological literacy-is insufficient in and of itself. The "interacted," to use Castells term, are merely the pawns of society to be played with and targeted as appropriate consumers for particular markets. So, how do we go about trying to prepare students to be the "interacting," those who are able to benefit and profit from their online experiences?

Perhaps the place to start is in thinking about how we might transform our own teaching habits and pedagogies. Jay Lemke argues that schools and universities should consider transforming their pedagogy to what he calls, not surprisingly, "the interactive learning paradigm (294)." The interactive learning paradigm assumes that people decide what they need to know through their participation in various activities in which their needs become apparent and, then, through consulting with those who have the knowledge that will address these needs-sometimes teachers, sometimes other students. It is a pedagogy that invites collaboration, asking students to participate with others in coming to know and to attain their own particular and individually-tailored goals.

One way in which I've tried to transform my own pedagogy is in requesting students to construct throughout the semester what I call "online portfolios." Oftentimes, with the entrance of the Web, we see instructors moving online by putting their syllabus and all their lecture notes on the Web for students to access. This is a beginning, of course, but note that once again it is the students who are "interacted": they are primarily browsing and reading the material that the instructor provides for them. I would argue that in this model it is the instructor who does the learning; he or she is actively engaged in not only learning the selected material but also the "ins" and "outs" of web authoring, an increasingly necessary ability in the information age. What I do instead is to require the online portfolios for which students select and arrange their class writings at a web site they've created specifically for my class. (There is a handout that you will be provided with here at Aristotle University that describes how you can go about setting up the online portfolios I'm describing.)

Through their creation of these portfolios, then, they not only learn web authoring, but they also begin to understand how others arrange their web sites to make them rhetorically effective-to persuade-and they also learn how the visual and textual together make meaning and begin to develop strategies for bringing the two together. Through "doing," rather than merely "viewing," it is my hope that students will be able to take charge of their own interactive learning.

Having said that, however, I recognize that it is not enough merely to teach students the "doing" of the Web, but it is a beginning that prepares them and gives them confidence for critically and productively engaging with other web sites. They must also be taught how to view and read the Web critically. As Cy Knoblauch has written of print literacy environments, we need to teach in such a way as to help students in their "reading and writing abilities with a critical consciousness of the social conditions in which people find themselves, recognizing the extent to which language practices objectify and rationalize these conditions and the extent to which people with authority to name the world dominate others whose voices they have been able to suppress." (79). Among the many problems that persist in online (and off-line) literacy classrooms in the United States are the continued marginalization of individuals because of race, gender, age, sexual orientation, or handicap. And even when teachers are able to help students become more sensitive to the problems of those who are marginalized, translating this new awareness into venues for productive action remains one of the more pressing pedagogical challenges of the new millennium. These challenges will change as the Web itself evolves and as the cultural settings and contexts for learning themselves change, but the problems-how to teach our students to interact critically in Web environments-will persist.

Cindy Selfe and I began to see changing representations on the Web globally in our recent study of web practices from around the world. We learned through this study that literacies are always already local, that is, they are marked by particular cultural, linguistic, historical, and geographic roots. But more than that, we also learned that these new online literacy practices are an important means of creating and expressing identities in changing postmodern landscapes. We are also very fortunate in this book to have Aliki Dragona, a citizen of Greece, as one of our authors. It would be a far less important book if we could not have included Greece with its enormously rich historical legacy of literacy practices. In our book, *Global Literacies and the World Wide Web*, chapter authors from Greece, Australia, Hungary, Palau, Norway, Japan, Scotland, Mexico, Cuba, South Africa, and the United States represent and examine online literacy practices in their particular country and also comment critically on how these are determined by national, cultural, and educational contexts. The chapters highlight the simultaneous move toward the global network society and the need to stay rooted in particular cultures: the Greeks' penchant in the literacy environment of the Web to value English over other languages as the major linguistic medium of exchange but their accompanying uneasiness that English might rob from them their cultural heritage of polylingualism; the 14-year-old Mexican student's eschewing Spanish search engines in favor of the English, which she says provide her with everything she needs online, yet the necessity of using the Spanish word "conocer" (i.e., to have an understanding of) to describe Mexican students' and teachers' relationships with the Web; the Norwegians' strong sense of nationalism but nevertheless the recognition that when it comes to popular culture English is always "in the air"; the fact that 174 Web sites in Australia focus mainly on indigenous topics yet only 61% of them demonstrate any sort of indigenous involvement; and, in Palau, the obligatory western imperative to use two names instead of the customary Palauan single name so that children now sport their father's first name as a surname, which often causes mistaken identities. All these examples speak to the strong influence of western culture and the English language on the Web-in the survey, for example, that I mentioned earlier out of Georgia Tech University 92% say that English is their primary language.

But we also found evidence in our study that when people have equitable and sophisticated access to the new technologies, they increasingly bend and shape the Web for their own purposes. In a study I did of the online literacy practices and web sites of women in different parts of the world, I saw women constructing identities that cross national and ethnic boundaries and enlist gender as a basis for *hybrid* identities. In three international feminist sites I looked at-Russian Web Girls; Russian Feminism Resources; and WyberNetz, a German site-identities were no longer fully defined by history or geography. The identities these web-spinners carve out for themselves are multiple-at once Russian or European, but participating, too, in the marketplace economy of the Web dominated by Americans. I would argue that these

web sites, in Ilana Snyder and Cathryn McConaghy's words, "transform, rather than simply reproduce, particular social and cultural formations."



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A virtual club that redefines the term Russian Women and increases their presence on the Internet

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 **Хочешь у нас работать?**
Russian Web Girls 
ищут молодых и энергичных  

When Chanel redesigns the classic suit, the course of fashion changes for the next decade. And when five women get together to break down the stereotype of Russian women, the world will never look at them again the same way. Russian WebGirls was born to make way for a new view of the Russian woman--professional, beautiful, smart, sexy, multi-talented.

In the halls of www.russianwebgirls.com we highlight Russian women who are creatively involved and aim to help them achieve the new paradigm through a virtual club, which offers interaction, internet services and a camaraderie with people all over the world. Russian Web Girls will interest those who would like the first taste of the newest image to hit the World Wide Web.

Let me show you briefly an example here of the Russian Web Girls site, whose express purpose in its web authors' words is to "break down the stereotype of Russian women." (Show first overhead) Note the bold use of color-solid communist red, with a sidebar blaring "Russian Women Unite," which at once asserts a Bolshevik and proletarian identity before immediately undercutting it with a text that reads,

When Chanel redesigns the classic suit, the course of fashion changes for the next decade. And when five women get together to break down the stereotype of Russian women, the world will never look at them again the same way. Russian WebGirls was born to make way for a new view of the Russian Woman-professional, beautiful, smart, sexy, multi-talented.

(<http://www.russianwebgirls.com/>; 4 July 1998)

GALLERY

Which image better reflects a Russian Woman?
Please take a closer look at each image (click),
and then come back to vote.

GIVE US your image of a Russian woman
and become a featured artist!

VOTE! Dasha Ziborova

VOTE! Michael Fiorito

VOTE! Araz Mirhadi

VOTE! Iana Bowden

VOTE! Peter Gorman

Identifying and illustrating common stereotypes of Russian women, the Russian WebGirls then play with the images (show second overhead), asking viewers to choose from Babushka Gallery "which image better reflects a Russian woman"-Art Lebedev, Inge Grape, Lena Secret, Dasha Ziborova, or Mel DiaGiacomo? Mel DiaGiacomo? A little bit of Italian mixed in too I guess. In any case, each image (show third overhead) when clicked upon is also accompanied by a little babushka-ed figure, who walks energetically alongside the chosen stereotypical

representation (show fourth overhead) and, in this last case, the Russian nested doll is depicted holding a pack of Marlboro cigarettes while puffing "USA." All these renderings are slightly ironic representations of Russian women's identities, identities which the women who maintain the WebGirls' site themselves constructed



Peter Gorman

[\[Previous\]](#)

[\[Gallery\]](#) [\[Contents\]](#)



I found this to be a wonderfully intriguing site, but the site is somewhat peculiar not so much because of the one Italian or Italian-Russian WebGirl or because of the wonderfully kooky Babushka story that also greets viewers. What surprised me most is that the Russian Web Girls site was not created in Russia. Instead it owes its origins to six mostly Russian women, all of whom now live in New York. (show fifth overhead) Most were born in St. Petersburg; are fairly recent arrivals in the United States; and all, to my eyes, are amazingly talented. Among them is one who owned an Internet Service Provider in Russia and continues it in New York; three are artists; one an engineer; another a jeweler, portrait artist, industrial designer and cartoonist. The one who came to the United States at a young age is the English translator, a journalist at the Riverdale Press in the Bronx who has aspirations to go to Russia as a foreign correspondent. There is also a Russian translator by the name of Inna Kolobova, who, incidentally, now lives in Dallas, Texas. Through their active web constructions, these women-Donna Haraway would call them cyborgs-commit themselves to "partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity" (151). But the zany and playful identities we encounter here are only part of the narrative.

RUSSIAN WebGIRLS IS BROUGHT TO YOU BY:



Tanya Aleksa
executive
producer

For two years I've owned an internet service providing company - [Octet Media](#) It started in Moscow, and continued in New York. The company keeps growing and developing new directions for its business.

Alona Makeeva
art
director

I was born in a great city - St.Petersburg, and now I live in an other great place - NYC! There are many things I could try to be, but nothing brings me more pleasure than being an artist. By creating my images, I make the world a more interesting place for myself and, I hope, for others.

[Stuffed Tomato](#)

Vica Vinogradova
creative
producer

Going from St. Petersburg to New York has added to my being both an artist and a business woman, and I finally combined the two at my multimedia focused [Ladno](#): writing, designing, making video and doing PR. I believe that human communication is the most fantastic part of our existence and at I hope the thrill will never end.

www.ladno.com

Olya Nikolaeva
programmer

I want to become a great programmer, and even though I am working for the internet only 2 years, I consider myself a professional. I was born in St.Petersburg, where I went to school to study engineering. But if you want to know more about me, you can visit our [Russian-club](#) and read about me at [my page](#).

Marina Lakhman
English
editor

In commemoration of Marina Lakhman...

" I came here at a young age and virtually forgot the Russian language by the time I entered high school, but determined to hold on to my native language, I began studying, and now speak it fluently. Now 24, I work as a political reporter for The Riverdale Press, a weekly newspaper in the Bronx as well as The New York Times and @NY, the New York Internet Newsletter and hope to become a foreign correspondent in Russia.

Anna Frants
artist/
promoter

Since I came to United States from St. Petersburg, where I was trained as an artist and an industrial designer, I have worked as a photographer, a jeweler, a portrait artist, made cartoons and had my own business. Presently, I work for [Music Pen\(r\) Inc.](#) one of the nation's leading interactive media creators for the consumer market.

Inna Kolobova courageously translated the whole 4th issue into Russian. She lives in Dallas, and works as a translator.



Marianna Trofimova - contributes her art work and web design. Artist, designer, illustrator.

Technologically and educationally privileged, with full access to the workings of the Web, the Russian Web Girls and other women involved in this study of feminist web sites write themselves online in sophisticated ways. As practiced and narrated in these web pages, feminism takes on multiple identities that embrace cultural specificity and globalized culture all at once and in complex and, sometimes, contradictory ways. At these sites, we can begin to see how expanded identities expressed and enacted in, and through, online literacy practices can work to contribute to transformations of the very societies in which individuals participate.

So, to sum up, what I've been arguing here this morning is that we have to work diligently for the benefits of full access to the new technologies for our students and ourselves. Access that is only partial-that restricts users to merely viewing the Web is insufficient-there must be "doing" in addition to "viewing." And even the "viewing" must be accompanied by a critical eye; it must entail the same sort of careful and thoughtful practices that we ask students to bring to their reading of print and books. When such access does exist-despite the heavy influence of western culture-we begin to have a hint of what the Web might become, an electronic neighborhood inhabited by active individuals who read and write the "webs of power" (Haraway) and forge new worlds through online literacy practices. Let us continue in our efforts to make the neighborhood a welcome and accessible electronic meeting place for all. We cannot, when all is said and done, afford to live in the "gated communities" of Cyberspace.

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