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Gender Trouble in Web 2.0: Gender Relations in Social Network Sites, Wikis and Weblogs

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores gender relations on social network sites, wikis and weblogs: the gendered design and use, presentations of gendered identities, possibilities for feminist, queer and gender politics, and the negotiations of gender topics in web 2.0. It provides a review of early feminist discourses regarding the internet and some theoretical considerations on web 2.0 and feminism. It goes on to discuss initial empirical results obtained from other studies about gender relevance in web 2.0 as well as my own findings based on considerations of online documentation and press reports about two gender relevant incidents in web 2.0. This overview shows that while an insistence on binary gender roles can be observed in the design and use of social network sites, weblogs offer space for diverse identity constructions as well as for queer subject construction and politics without referring to offline identities. Finally, wikis as well as social network sites appear to provide a platform for tough struggles about gender issues

KEYWORDS

Internet; web 2.0; gender; queer; social network site; wiki; weblog; MySpace; Wikipedia



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INTRODUCTION

With the multitude of weblogs, wikis, podcasts, and social network sites such as [YouTube](#), [MySpace](#) and [StudiVZ](#) available today, the internet promises an increase in user participation and new forms of cooperation. Hopes of democratisation, new public spaces, community building, networks, and a disempowerment of the mass media's role are arising and celebrating the 'web 2.0' as a revolution (O'Reilly, 2005; critically: Hirschorn, 2007; Schmidt, 2008).

From a gender perspective, web 2.0 also offers various new opportunities. This paper explores the gender relations in web 2.0. Following a review of the early 1990s feminist hopes and fears for the internet, both the characteristics of web 2.0 and the current situation of feminist, queer and gender politics are considered. This paper then moves on to discuss first empirical studies that investigated gender aspects of web 2.0 in the fields of science and technology studies; internet research, and gender and queer studies. Additionally, first results of my own ongoing study "Agency in Web 2.0" are presented and discussed. In my study I consider the gendered design and use of web 2.0 as well as discourses and interventions on gender and queer-feminism linked to web 2.0 to investigate the scope of action of feminist activists. My findings contain an initial classification of case studies. In this paper I exemplarily consider two cases of gender relevant incidents in web 2.0: the deletion of the profile of a gay-lesbian band on MySpace and discussions about the deletion of feminist entries in [Wikipedia](#). The findings are based on analysis of documentation of the discussions on the internet and press reports about these incidents to reconstruct the characteristics of the events.

This paper seeks to address the following questions: How does gender influence use and design of web 2.0 tools? What effects does web 2.0 have on gender relations, specifically with regards to the possibilities of presenting and performing different gender identities or on the possibilities for gender, feminist and queer politics? How are gender topics negotiated in web 2.0? The paper concludes with a discussion of further research perspectives formulated within the context of both the background of the early feminist discourses and the current situation of feminist, queer and gender politics.

A LOOK BEHIND: EARLY FEMINIST DISCOURSES ON THE INTERNET

In contrast to earlier phases of the internet's development, a surprising calm has now entered feminist discourses. In the 1990s, feminists had very different views on the internet; it was a contentious and negotiated subject

within feminist debates (Carstensen, 2008).

One side of the discussion called attention to the internet as a male domain, a 'gendered net' (Dorer, 1997; Neverla, 1998; Spender, 1996). This perception of the internet was influenced by the interpretation of the internet as 'technical'. Referring to the close link between technology and masculinity; the delayed access of women to the internet; androcentric content (Funken and Winker, 2002); and, male-dominated discussions in forums and chats (Herring, 1996) were central reasons cited. The internet was considered to be riddled with the same inequalities and power relations as the 'real world'.

At the same time, the internet was also linked with hopes and expectations for creating solidarity and closer connections between women, including the widening of participation in political discussions and decisions. Plant (1997) retold the story of technology and gender, interpreting the net as feminine. Feminists discussed the possibilities for new public spaces and expected changes through the removal of the boundaries between the public and private spheres (Consalvo and Paasonen, 2002). In addition, worldwide access to information and ease of communication were recognised as having the potential to strengthen feminist politics (Floyd et al., 2002, Harcourt, 1999, Shade, 2002). In this perception, the internet was interpreted less as technology and more as a medium.

Furthermore, feminists inspired by poststructuralist theories developed utopian projects for a world beyond binary gender relations. Cyberfeminists hoped that on the internet the boundaries between technology and human, as well as between men and women, would be broken down. Visions like Donna Haraway's 'cyborg' (Haraway, 1991) encouraged people to imagine a world without gender. The possibility of anonymous communication via the internet and 'gender swapping' in chats and forums, where the 'real' body is not present and identities could be apparently invented anew, made the internet a projection screen for postmodern and deconstructive future designs in which gender relations would be set in motion (Bruckman, 1993; Turkle, 1996).

Some of the empirical studies which followed seemed to indicate that not all the earlier hopes and fears regarding the potential of the internet were being realized. Although there are still fewer women using the internet than men (for example: USA 81% of men and 77% of women, Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2009, or Germany 72.4% of men and 58.3% of women, Initiative D21 and TNS Infratest, 2008), studies have shown that gender plays a minor role in explaining these differences in contrast to socio-economic factors, such as education, income or age (Bimber, 2000, Winker, 2005a). For example, the older people are, the bigger the gender difference in internet access becomes. In Germany, for example, 51.7% of men and 32.4% of women in the 60 – 69 age group have access to the internet. Within the 14 – 19 age group, however, 94.3% of girls and 93.2% of boys

have access to the internet (Initiative D21 and TNS Infratest, 2008). As such, we can expect an equal distribution between men's and women's access to the internet for the future.

On the other hand, studies on communication in forums, chats and online games have shown that gender roles play an unexpectedly significant role in 'bodiless' interaction. Even though the 'real' gendered body is not visible in virtual interactions, the gender of participants remains highly relevant and serves as an important reference point (e.g. Funken, 2002).

On a similarly negative note the possibilities offered by the internet for discussion and exchange of ideas and opinions, within personal separate spaces as well as in larger public arenas, and for initiating and organizing political action were hardly used within German feminist networks at the beginning of the new century (Carstensen and Winker, 2005).

WEB 2.0 AND FEMINISM AS CO-CONSTRUCTS

Over the last decade, it has been widely accepted within gender and technology studies that technology and gender are co-constructed, which means that they are mutually constitutive (Wajcman, 2004). The notion of mutual constitution recognises not only that technology and gender are socially constructed, but that each plays a significant role within the construction of the other. If we study gender relations in web 2.0 under the theoretical perspective of co-construction, we have to consider both the technological changes concerning the internet and the social transformations with regard to gender relations, feminist politics and the political conditions surrounding these, including how they are connected to and affect each other.

In the context of this paper, gender is understood as socially constructed, which means that gendered subjects do not exist previously with different interests and attributes, but are produced by embodied and discursive practices in social interactions (Butler, 1990). Gender becomes naturalized, is organized as a hierarchy and materializes on different levels (Harding, 1991): on a structural level, for example in a gender specific division of labour or a gendered segregated labour market; on a level of representations as images of femininity and masculinity or gender norms, symbols and discourses, which negotiate how men and women have to behave; and, on an individual level in the creation of identities, or subject positions as 'male' or 'female' or 'other'.

In order to examine web 2.0 and gender and feminist politics as co-constructs, it is necessary to view some central changes of recent years that have affected the relationship between gender and the internet. Beside the change from 'old' internet to web 2.0, these include the challenges to feminist politics presented by the critique of identity politics outlined by theorists such as Judith Butler (1990). A contrasting challenge is presented

by an apparent realized equality between men and women, which questions the relevance of feminism. Furthermore, the social circumstances have changed, too. Individuals nowadays are expected to manage themselves, to have responsibility for their own actions, and be more efficiency-orientated and economically independent than ever. These modified requirements are connected with a radicalized capitalist economy, an increasing economisation of all social fields and a reduction of benefits of the social state, which can be labelled as 'neoliberalism' (Chomsky, 1999, Kreisky, 2001). I will discuss each of these changes in more detail below.

From Internet to web 2.0

Web 2.0 refers to a 'second generation' of internet development and design, where websites enable users to do more than just retrieve information. Weblogs, wikis, podcasts and social networking sites¹ such as YouTube, MySpace and StudiVZ facilitate communication, information sharing, collaboration, community building and networking.

Weblogs are websites with entries of commentary, descriptions of events, or other material such as graphics or videos, displayed in reverse-chronological order. The handling of weblogs (often referred to as blogs) is extraordinarily simple. Many blogs provide news or statements on a particular subject. Blogs also incorporate a 'blogroll', a list of blogs recommended by the blogger, and a commentary function, which allows readers to comment on a blog entry. This ability for readers to leave comments in an interactive format is an important part of many blogs. Therefore weblogs can be used to exchange ideas, thoughts and experiences as well as for communication and discussion (Schmidt et al., 2005; Schmidt, 2006).

A wiki is a hypertext-system, whose content cannot only be read by users, but also changed online. Wikis allow different users to work on a common text and, as such, they are often used to create collaborative websites. Wikis allow many authors to contribute to a text, which opens up space for new forms of cooperative and collective creation and supply of knowledge. This is illustrated by the very prominent example of the online encyclopedia Wikipedia. Generally, there is no review before modifications to the text are published. Many wikis are open to the general public without requiring them to register and create user accounts. A further characteristic of wikis is that you can see the revision history of every entry, allowing previous versions of the wiki to be reinstated (Klobas, 2006; Stegbauer et al., 2007; Reichert, 2008).

Social networking sites try to build online communities of people who share similar interests. They are web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. After joining a social network site, an individual is asked to fill out forms containing a series of questions. The profile is generated using the answers to these

questions, which typically include descriptors such as age, location, interests or business information. Most sites also encourage users to upload a profile photo (boyd and Ellison, 2007).

Through these activities, web 2.0 promises an increase in user participation and new forms of cooperation, discussion and networking (Reichert, 2009 p. 9). These technological developments have the potential to be of benefit to feminist politics, however, this potential is challenged by the social changes that I outline below.

Criticising identity politics

While in the 1970s, activists accepted the discrimination against women as a whole as fact, and it was only a question of the correct political emancipation strategy (equality feminism versus difference feminism), from the mid-1980s the focus shifted to take account of the differences between women. Since the mid-1990s, under the influence of postmodernist theories and the reception of the book *Gender Trouble* by Judith Butler (1990), a sceptical attitude towards group identities has been becoming increasingly influential. Identities can be seen as repressive and creating exclusion (Carstensen and Winker, 2007). The queer movement in particular emphasises the problems of politics based on identities (Woltersdorff, 2003). The aim of queer politics is to fight against heteronormativity and pursue the aim that everybody can live his or her (gender) identity, sexuality and life form as he or she wants to, including outside the heterosexual-defined mainstream, e.g., gay, lesbian, transsexuality, transgender, intersexuality and polyamory. The accompanying demand to involve further dimensions of differentiation alongside gender, such as class, ethnicity, sexuality or age, has led to important new insights (Winker and Degele, 2009). It has also made it more difficult, however, to justify and carry out feminist activities.

Apparent equality

Furthermore, in the Western industrialised nations, an increasing number of women are being integrated into the labour market, the education level of young women and men has equalised to a major extent, and lifestyles have been becoming increasingly pluralized since the 1980s (Keddi, 2004). Young women nowadays take the existence of equality for granted (Koppetsch and Burkart, 1999; Klaus, 2008), so that feminist politics from some perspectives have lost their obvious relevance. Although there are still ongoing issues, for example, wage differences; implicit sexism; unequal valuation of male and female activities and jobs; inequalities in sharing domestic labour and childcare and violence against women, feminism stands under greater pressure of justification than it did in the 1970s and 1980s (Weingarten and Wellershoff, 1999). The subject of feminist politics is therefore becoming more difficult to define.

Self-government, freedom and neoliberalism

Finally, beside the changes of the situation for feminist politics, we can

observe a serious change in the way individuals are requested to manage themselves. The requirements to act on one's own responsibility, efficiency-orientated and to be economically independent have increased in the last years. Referring to Foucault's studies of governmentality, this moment of self-government is decisive for today's neo-liberalism (Foucault, 2008). By calling the subjects free, autonomous, enterprising individuals, they can be governed not through state control or moral standards under a religious mandate, but through structuring the possible field of action in which they govern themselves, to govern them through their 'freedom'. The ambivalence of freedom and self-government in contemporary societies is also a relevant point for Boltanski and Chiapello (2005). They argue that autonomy, self-realisation and creativity, which in the 1968 generation represented counter-models of social movements against all kinds of hierarchical power relations, have lost their critical impetus, and are now principles of the new capitalism. These aims, once meant as critique, are very well suited for the ideological justification of the neoliberal redirection of the economy, state and society. This aspect of Boltanski's and Chiapello's argument could also be applied to feminist claims of the 1970s, for example for occupational equality and equal access to the labour market. These liberal feminist ideas were collected and put into practice by mainstream politics and economic interests and thus institutionalised, losing their critical potential (Winker, 2007; Fraser, 2009).

Thus, although feminist politics have always been diverse and heterogeneous, these changes, in technology, politics and equality have led to changed conditions for those interested in feminist politics.

METHODOLOGY

In this section I will address the question of how the developments outlined above are connected with each other in such a way as to form a mutually constitutive relationship. How does gender influence use and design of web 2.0 tools? What effects does web 2.0 have on gender relations, i.e. on the possibilities of presenting and performing different gender identities or on the possibilities for gender, feminist and queer politics? And how are gender topics negotiated in web 2.0?

Until now, little empirical research has been done on these issues. The background to the following discussions is firstly based on a review of current literature, where I draw on studies which have investigated gendered scripts in web 2.0 technologies (Wötzel-Herber, 2008); the gendered self-presentations and the social construction of femininity and masculinity on social network sites or weblogs (Wötzel-Herber, 2008; Manago et al., 2008; van Doorn et al., 2007); spaces for feminist or queer politics (Landström, 2007); and, gender aspects of the so called 'blogosphere', the entirety of all weblogs (Herring et al., 2004; Harders and Hesse, 2006; Hesse, 2008). Several studies exist, which emphasize gender differences in the use of weblogs, wikis and social network sites (for example Thelwall, 2008 for MySpace). Such studies normally act on the assumption of men and women

as given social groups, which are just compared with each other concerning their internet use. Beside the problem of reifying and reproducing gender differences while distinguishing men and women during the research process, this approach does not produce new insights on constitution, changes or negotiations of gender relations and identities. For this reason I do not consider such studies.

Secondly, I draw on initial results from my own current study 'Agency in Web 2.0', in which I consider the gendered design and use of web 2.0 as well as discourses and interventions on gender and queer-feminism linked to web 2.0. My findings are based on an initial classification of case studies, where I considered examples of gender relevant incidents in web 2.0: i.e. the censorship and deletion of the profile of a gay-lesbian band on MySpace or the discussions about deletion of feminist entries in Wikipedia. I analysed documentation of the discussions on the internet and press reports about these incidents to reconstruct the characteristics of the events. Both examples were chosen because they attracted attention and caused discussions either in the mass media or in feminist discourses. They do not represent every day occurrences, but demonstrate prominent incidents of gender relevant struggles. This sample does not claim to be representative or a systematic investigation, but only tries to spotlight some interesting negotiations of gender topics in web 2.0.

GENDER RELATIONS IN WEB 2.0 – SOME EMPIRICAL RESULTS

Unsuccessful struggles: Insisting on gender binarity in social network sites

Social network sites such as MySpace, [Facebook](#) and [XING](#) are disseminating rapidly. In these contact and relationship networks, users present themselves via a profile, typically containing information about gender, birthday, location, education and business data, interests and activities as well as political, religious and sexual attitudes. They provide diverse functionalities to enable networking and communication with other members. In Germany, 13% of internet users make a visit to one or more social network sites every day, 14% of these users are women and 12% are men, so that gender plays no significant role concerning the frequency of use (Busemann and Gscheidle, 2009 p. 359).

If, however, we consider the design of and self-presentations in the social network sites, we can state a strong relevance of gender. It starts with the registration form. Wötzel-Herber (2008) shows that there are only few networks where individuals can become a member without defining themselves as male or female. Two examples are the music platform [last.fm](#) and the photo community [flickr.com](#) where users can choose to declare their gender as 'unknown' or 'other'. However, in networks such as MySpace or the very prominent German community studiVZ, a social network for students, users are forced to position themselves clearly as either male or female. If a studiVZ user refuses to choose one of the two alternatives, they

are sent to the following statement: 'Only female or male entities can register with us!' (Wötzel-Herber, 2008 p. 38). This is interesting, bearing in mind that other gaps in the registration form do not necessarily have to be filled out. Thus, gender binarity is inscribed into the technology by the developers and administrators. Even discussions within the community with the aim of using gender-sensitive language have been appeased with reasons which fall back on biologically-deterministic ('the two genders are a biological fact') and technology-deterministic arguments ('it would be too difficult to program more than two alternatives for gender in the registration form'). These determinations undoubtedly have effects on the users. A positioning as other than male or female is made technically impossible. On the one hand this attitude is not surprising, because the logic of two genders is commonly inscribed in the formatting and programming of databases and can be seen as an expression of the predominant gender relations in society; on the other hand it shows that web 2.0 is not as participatory as some claim.

Furthermore, in contrast to previous hopes and findings in internet research, which saw the internet as 'identity workshops', authenticity has now become the decisive norm, that is presenting one's 'real' identity and being disposed to tell as much information as possible about oneself. Wötzel-Herber (2008) shows how users also insist on the category of gender in a remarkable way. He comes to the conclusion that users provide a great deal of information about their gender and their sexual orientation voluntarily, even when no information is required by the network forms. The presentations are often sexualized, with a very clear demonstration of male or female gender, for example photographs of near-naked men under the shower, showing off muscles and tattoos, or women in bikinis. Many presentations show heterosexual scenes. Central motivations to use social network sites such as studiVZ seem to be flirting and couple formation. Gender, mostly in combination with heteronormativity, can be considered the most important category in the self-construction of the users' identities.

Manago et al. (2008) come to a similar finding, suggesting that social networking sites provide valuable opportunities for emerging adults to realize possible selves. They also argue, however, that increased pressure for female sexual objectification and intensified social comparison may also negatively impact identity development. They explore the ways emerging adults experience social networking within the cultural context of MySpace and point out that male-female differences in self-presentation parallel, and possibly intensify, gender norms offline. Gender roles are constructed for women as affiliative and attractive and for men as strong and powerful. The authors state an increasing pressure for men to display their physical attractiveness on MySpace as well as a pervasiveness of sexualized female self-presentation. However, young women negotiate discrepant cultural messages concerning female roles and identities 'that communicate their value as sexual objects while at the same time punish those who embrace sexual behaviour with the label of 'slut'' (Manago et al., 2008 p.455).

Thus, we can observe a strong relevance of gender binarity and validity of stereotyped role models in social networks. On the one hand the technical design of the platforms often does not allow positions beyond male and female and fixes the system of two genders. On the other hand, despite opportunities to realize diverse and non-conforming gender roles, most of the users present themselves in a stereotypical manner.

Female weblogs?

Finally, considering weblogs from a gender perspective, we come across the fascinating finding that the percentage of female authors is much higher than that of male authors. In particular, more teenage girls than boys appear to author blogs. Harders and Hesse (2006) for example, found that in their sample of German bloggers, nearly 85% of teenagers and at least 67.4% of the entire group were female. In the USA, the PEW Internet & American Life Project (2007) reports that 35% of all online teen girls blog, compared with 20% of online teen boys. Schönberger (2008) states similar distributions for France and Poland. This gender gap appears to have grown larger over time. Older American studies, for example, reported that only 45.8% of bloggers were female (Herring et al., 2004). With the emergence of the blogosphere the percentage of women has increased. The medium appears to be particularly attractive for women and girls (Harders and Hesse, 2006).

Schönberger (2008) argues that the increasing use of the internet as an aspect of everyday life may be one reason for the increasing participation of both women and men. However, the more widespread use of the internet is, the more it loses its image as technical (Winker, 2005b; Schönberger, 2008). As a consequence, the interpretation of the internet as a male domain or male practice vanishes. Furthermore, Schönberger interprets this result against the background of writing diaries as a cultural pattern that is female dominated and finds its continuation in weblog diaries, in both form and content. With the expansion of broadband, it becomes easier to realize different means of communication as pictures, audio and video can be integrated into texts and therefore make complex communication processes possible. Thus, weblogs with their functions greatly resemble diaries and especially friendship books, books in which 'friends' sign in with their data and interests, make drawings, use stickers or write down poetry.

However, Herring et al. (2004) and Hesse (2008) point out that despite the female dominance among weblog writers, the so-called A-bloggers – the most-read weblog writers – are almost 70% male. The main reason cited by Herring et al. and Hesse is the choice of the topics written about in weblogs. While a large proportion of women and girls write personal weblogs, adult men write journalism-orientated filter blogs on 'political' issues. These information based blogs dominate the public sphere and attract much more attention. In the sample studied by Harders and Hesse (2006) 75.9% of the weblogs written by women and only 37.1% of the weblogs written by men

were online diaries. In contrast, at least 24.2% of all weblogs written by men are focussed exclusively on information, without any reference to the everyday life of the writers, while only 1% of all weblogs written by women concentrate solely on information. Weblogs that mix both information and personal topics – and break down boundaries between private and public spaces – are authored by 29.5% of the blogging men and 10.3% of the blogging women (Harders and Hesse, 2006). Thus, traditional mechanisms of gendered public spaces still have an impact on digital publics. Even if new media technologies always offer the possibility of shifting the boundaries and the hierarchical dichotomy between public and private, in the case of weblogs these boundaries remain relevant.

In their study of Dutch and Flemish weblogs Van Doorn et al. (2007) conducted a qualitative content analysis to explore how authors present their online gender identity. This analysis focused on the use of images, the use of hyperlinks, the choice of topics and language use and included the use of emoticons (textual portrayal of a writer's mood or facial expression, e.g. a 'smiley'), evaluating these aspects as different dimensions in which gender identity can be expressed. As a result, they state that different versions of femininity used to create a heterogeneous interpretation of female gender identity can be observed. For example, weblog entries of one woman included sexualized images alongside descriptions of domestic work being undertaken but also scenes of technical competences. Another weblog is written by a 'pony girl', identifying herself with the group of girls passionate about horses. In a third weblog a woman writes about her body "modified" by breast cancer and the experience of how it feels to live with only one breast. These three examples already show that in weblogs multiple performances of femininity are presented. At the same time the authors also observed more implicit presentations of masculinity, showing a typical portrayal of a man as tough and composed, professional, loyal to his work and interested in typical male activities. Thus, it can be stated that weblogs are able to facilitate multiple and diffuse gender presentations, although referring to real life and everyday experiences. Furthermore, bloggers can present different interpretations of their gender identity on the same weblog. The bloggers in the study of van Doorn et al. (2007) present their gender identity in relation to their offline lives, using images, hyperlinks or discursive invocations of their everyday experiences. They do not change, experiment or 'play' with their gender identity, but are constantly performing their gender in different ways as they post new entries.

'While weblogs facilitate a mode of gender presentation that remains closely related to the binary gender system that structures people's daily lives, they also offer a 'rich' environment (through the various technological features that weblogs are able to combine), resulting in multiple heterogeneous performances of gender. In practice, these bloggers present themselves as 'men' and 'women', but this presentation is achieved through various performances of 'masculinity'

and 'femininity', incorporating both discursive and visual means to create an image of a gendered self whose embodied identity is shaped offline' (van Doorn et al., 2007 p. 155).

The study of van Doorn et al. (2007) therefore suggests that weblogs are an important forum for both men and women to present their gender identities in multiple ways.

Furthermore, we can observe a wide range of weblogs from queer-feminist contexts. Conservative estimates dating from as long ago as 2006 refer to 240,000 feminist weblogs (Cochrane, 2006). Two examples are the German [mädchenblog](#) and the [Genderblog](#), which both claim to enrich web 2.0 through feminist interventions. The mädchenblog describes itself as an open feminist community project and aims to broach issues such as the body, sexuality, love, politics and pop culture in a different way from traditional girls' and youth magazines. In the Genderblog, authors and readers discuss the new equality law, parenthood, queer politics or the question of why we still need gender. Books are presented and recent issues or newspaper articles are discussed. Both weblogs are spaces for involved discussions about feminism, they detect sexism and criticize anti-feminism. Furthermore, they provide a large number of links to other weblogs and websites, which show a well-linked and active community of feminists in web 2.0.

Landström (2007) also emphasizes the possibilities of the internet from queer perspectives. On the web, lesbians and gay men have created new, non-heterosexual spaces, in which identity has proved not to be determined by the past of an individual, but by their future. The subject online is not reducible to the subject offline. Online and offline practices are linked, but neither in a linear fashion, nor reducible to one. She argues that the experience to constitute as another subject online than offline erodes the causal link between individual biography and political subject, and sees this as offering significant opportunities for the development of queer politics:

'Grounding political struggle in a desire to open up new possibilities for subject production (rather than re-enacting what is already established) clears space for thinking differently about identity and the human. In contrast to identity politics, that argue for equal rights for subjects that are already stabilised, politics for the subject multiple would aim to create spaces where subjects never seen before could be produced, in ways that do not repeat previous mistakes of defining, excluding and policing subject positions believed to derive from singular identities' (Landström, 2007).

Considering weblogs from a gender perspective, we can come to a heterogeneous result, which ranges from the reproduction of gendered structures in public spaces, to enthusiastic female bloggers, to chances for creating various gender identities and even political subjects for queer

politics.

After this overview of existing empirical studies, I now consider two incidents that illustrate how gender issues are being contested in web 2.0 environments

Homophobic deletions on MySpace

In March 2007 MySpace deleted the profile of the Canadian band [Kids on TV](#), citing, 'contempt of the terms of use' as the reason for the removal of the gay-lesbian band's data and about 14,000 contacts. Contempt of the terms of use is generally applied to naked pictures or objectionable and violent pictures, covering of the banner advertisement with html codes, harassment of other users, spamming forums or guest books or underage users. Large pornographic banner advertising on the MySpace site shows that these rules have been only half-heartedly followed by MySpace in other cases. It is still not clear which terms of use Kids on TV violated or whether there were other reasons for deleting the profile. After vehement protests, MySpace backed down and allowed the profile back on the site, claiming a mistake had been made. It is not possible to clarify conclusively why the profile was deleted. Accusations of homophobic motives can be found in [discussion forums on censorship](#), where members mention other deletions of gay, lesbian and queer content (Czuderna, 2007; von Lowtzow, 2007; Mühlbauer, 2007; Neidhart, 2007). Independently of the real reasons of MySpace, this incident makes clear that social network sites are places of tough struggles for gender and sexuality. Whether it has been an act of heteronormativity or not, is not to clarify, but it is remarkable that the regarded press reports unanimously discussed this scene as such.

Bundling and defending feminist knowledge in wikis

Such attacks on queer-feminist content as in MySpace are not unique to social network sites. In August 2007, the entries on [Ladyfest](#) and [riot grrrl](#) in the German version of Wikipedia were suggested for deletion. The Ladyfest entry was criticized for its lack of relevance, quality and significance. The critics labelled these entries as 'free associations', which were 'not objective'. The fact that women and girls are underrepresented in the music industry cited in the entry was doubted. Furthermore, the statement of gender as a social construct was questioned. The proponents of the deletions argued "I always thought gender is concerned with genetics." Five minutes later, one of the persons involved also suggested the deletion of the riot grrrl entry. He also questioned the relevance of this entry and the male dominance in the music industry with the argument "When I listen to the radio, I have the impression that I hear more women than men." He also criticized the relevance by characterizing the bands mentioned as "not really famous music bands" and the cited literature as "articles in magazines with still very very narrow readership". He ends with the statement: "I can't help getting the impression that something is being blown up out of proportion that hardly anyone ever took any notice of." (Wikipedia, 2007). Many people intervened

and campaigned for the preservation of the articles with solid, vehement and well-founded arguments, and fought for the relevance and the quality of the entries. However, this example shows that feminist issues still have to be defended and justified, perhaps especially in fields where knowledge is jointly produced such as in Wikipedia.

On the other hand, we can find very interesting feminist uses of wiki technology. Students in Berlin developed the project [Gender@Wiki](#) to collect and link information, developments, knowledge and actors in women's, gender and queer studies. Users can find entries on different terms and concepts in the field of women's, gender and queer studies. Here, the use of gender-sensitive language is a matter of course, and there is an extended article about Ladyfest.

In conclusion, wikis offer possibilities for collective supply of knowledge, which can be used for creating feminist spaces where knowledge and resources can be combined, while at the same time the characteristic that everybody can participate in writing and creating knowledge leads to hard fights for the relevance of gender issues.

CONCLUSIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES

This paper has provided an overview of the research landscape regarding gender relations and web 2.0. If we remember the early feminist hopes and fears, firstly it appears that male dominance is no longer a problem in web 2.0 i.e. many weblogs are written by women, especially younger age groups. The internet can no longer be considered a male technology – whether it has become a female medium as Plant (1997) suggested is open to doubt, however. We still need to consider that there is a reproduction of patriarchal mechanisms in public spaces, where weblogs written by men earn more attention because they deal with 'public' issues, while blogs written by women contain primarily 'private' issues. So, whilst it is interesting to address the issue that men's blogs get more attention, it is also important to examine why women do not write about more political issues.

Further, we find a lot of examples of active networks, solidarity and participation in the field of queer-feminist politics. More than ever, web 2.0 technologies support mutual linking and reciprocal references and invite collaboration, cooperation, comments and discussion. Web 2.0 seems to be an appropriate place for queer-feminist projects which work together closely and strengthen each other.

These results are thus similar in some respects to earlier findings on feminist use of the internet, which showed that most of the investigated feminist websites contain link lists and refer to each other (Carstensen and Winker, 2005). However, the internet is now being used for co-operative work, discussion and opinion-forming. Working together on a common text or statement in wikis, or discussing, commenting or criticising current issues in

weblogs is now common practice. The potential of the internet for feminist politics which were assumed in early years have been advanced slightly since the advent of web 2.0.

An interesting question requiring further research is the relationship between the development of queer politics and the use of web 2.0. We can observe intense and visible use and design of weblogs in queer contexts in particular, but it has yet to be proved whether the number and visibility of queer internet sites have increased with web 2.0. If this is the case, one reason may be that while 'static' websites represent a closed and finished presentation of an institution, group or person, weblogs are much more transitory, spontaneous and elude categorisation. They allow users to position current issues quickly and briefly and to form temporary alliances via comments and blogrolls. On one day bloggers can support one opinion or issue, on another they can show their solidarity with someone else. On a traditional website, however lists of links do not change very often and tend to exhibit permanent closeness and relatedness. These characteristics could be one reason for the extensive use of weblogs in queer contexts in contrast to earlier uses of internet tools. As Landström (2007) argues, weblogs offer possibilities for multiple subject construction where political subject and individual biography are no longer inevitably linked. One could claim that weblogs are the technological answer to some of the problems with identity politics. Following the idea of co-construction, it would be promising to do further research regarding how the technology of weblogs and the queer-feminist refusal of identity politics influence and shape each other.

At the same time, we can observe a strong return of insisting on performing a 'real' gender identity, which refers to the offline identity. Older studies on communication in forums, chats and MUDs already showed that gender roles play a significant role in 'bodiless' interaction (e.g. Funken, 2002) as they are an important orientation even in anonymous situations. Studies on the content of social network site profiles also suggests that, in places where users present themselves with their 'real' identity, gender is also deliberately displayed in an extraordinary way. In social network sites, the binarity of gender is central to the design of the platforms. Thus, as gender and technology studies has shown previously (e.g. Cockburn and Ormrod, 1993, Wajcman, 1991), once again gender relations are inscribed into technology on a structural level. In addition, many users of these sites negotiate and construct gender as a biological fact. Instead of a breakdown of gender, we can observe a new reinforcement of exclusively male and female gender identities and their significance. Another key area for research might be to explore this desire for authenticity and this insistence on gender binarity in web 2.0 as a turning away from postmodernity and how it is linked with the seemingly realised equality.

However, web 2.0 is also a space within which meanings of gender are contested. Anti-feminist, sexist and homophobic comments question the

relevance of gender politics and feminism every day. In addition to the social changes which lead to increasing doubt of the importance of gender issues generally, because of the aforementioned apparent equality, this phenomenon could also be technologically reinforced. In contrast to the internet era prior to web 2.0 these contrary opinions confront each other in a much more obvious and direct way. In the days of the 'old' internet with websites, forums and chats, every subculture had its own separate place in cyberspace, not linked or connected and often unaware of the others. Now, Wikipedia, MySpace and studiVZ are popular places and meeting points where people of different attitudes, religions, hobbies and, not least, political opinions come together. As a result, gender issues are not only discussed in (queer-feminist) niches among like-minded people, but in large communities. Feminist perspectives have to be defended, and struggles for the relevance of gender issues and an understanding of gender as a social construction have to be managed on a permanent basis. I suggest more research into the interrelation between the justification constraints of gender politics in general and the struggles in web 2.0 would provide interesting and useful insights.

To summarise, we find a heterogeneous picture of gender relations in web 2.0, which includes: a reinforcement of stereotyped representations of masculinities and femininities; experimentation with various gender identities; and, the possibilities for queer politics without recurring to singular identities. Furthermore, we can observe a great many struggles, attacks and defences of gender issues as well as strong networks, links and communities of queer-feminist politics. As pointed out, every web 2.0 tool shows different effects and corresponds with different social practices, constructions and negotiations of gender relations.

In concluding this paper I would like to highlight one final aspect that could prove to be a fruitful area for ongoing research. As mentioned above, nowadays individuals are defined as free, autonomous and enterprising individuals and thus 'governed' by their freedom. Critiques of autonomy, liberation and equality on the labour market, once the domain of feminist politics, are now collected by mainstream politics to raise everybody's willingness to work, to act self-responsibly and economically independent. How are these discursive formations linked with web 2.0? There has been no feminist analysis to date, but in other, recent non-feminist debates the connections between self-government, self-control, self-management and web 2.0 have been raised. Among others, Reichert (2008) shows how far social network sites, weblogs and e-learning tools correspond with requirements for the subjects to practice successful self-presentation, flexible self-management, self-framing and self-reflection. Thus, the internet, and especially web 2.0, can be considered a prototype of liberal governing technology (Reichert, 2008). The discourse of self-reflection and self-presentation demands everybody's willingness to learn, control and develop the new forms of medial self-control. Thus, self-presentation in social networks has remarkable potential for managing gender identities.

To summarise, on the one hand important and valuable tools are available for queer-feminist politics, which support networking, communication, empowerment and solidarity and realise queer-feminist demands; on the other hand these feminist issues have now been merged into neoliberal politics (Winker 2007). Feminist claims and strategies have interfused with economic ideas and support the economization of society.

Therefore, queer-feminist activists who use web 2.0 willingly and enthusiastically should be aware of this dynamic and reflect to what extent they follow the same principles of subjection to hegemonic norms while networking, presenting themselves and empowering, and thus practice exactly that which is expected (see also Paulitz, 2005). Feminist politics should not content themselves with the simple use of network technologies, but must also prove consistently and critically how web 2.0 practices relate to calls for self-government and government by others. Discussions as well as interventions into use and design are necessary to try to develop subversive and critical opposite strategies, countercultures and alternative ways of design and use (or disuse). Alongside this, more research is needed to investigate the scope of action for feminist politics. Questions of how feminist agency can be conceptualized in web 2.0 and how interventions into technological design as well as into use practices are possible, need further exploration. Therefore, intersectional perspectives on feminist internet and technology studies could be promising, for not only studying gender but also other identity categories like ethnicity, class or age particularly with respect to their meaning for design and use of social network sites, weblogs and wikis. So, once again the challenge is to link new technological developments and their effects on gender relations with the theoretical discussions within gender and queer studies.

ENDNOTES

¹ Brief overviews of these Web 2.0 tools via Youtube: [wikis](#); [blogs](#); [social networking](#); and, [podcasting](#)).

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