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**Gendered spaces and digital discourse: Framing
women's relationship with the internet.
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REVIEW

This book gives an insight into the gendered discourses of women's Internet spaces. At a time when women are highly represented in terms of access to the Internet, Royal's research highlights how the digital divide goes beyond access and includes how women and men use, contribute to and are represented within technology.

The book is based on an American study that analysed the content of websites targeted at a female demographic. Analysis involved a multiple-method approach in order to understand the frames¹ and discourses presented in online gendered spaces. Royal concentrates on answering four main research questions: what is meant by an online gendered space; what categories exist for gendered spaces; what are the major sites in each of these categories; and, how are the major women's sites framing women's relationship with the Internet? The book gives the reader an understanding as to how a women's magazine model, which tends to promote and position its content through gender stereotypes, is utilised by many popular websites aimed at women.



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My interest in this book stems from my general interest in women and technology. I am from a psychology and women's studies background and have a particular interest in women's under representation in the ICT workforce and SET sector. My current doctoral research is looking at women working in the computer games industry.

The book starts with an overview of the definitions of, and background to, Internet technology and gendered spaces, before discussing relevant literature and theory on the topic. Relevant theory includes a discussion of feminist theory with particular relevance to the study: post feminism and cyber feminism. As the analysis uses multiple-methods, the methodology section discusses, at length, the theories behind the methods. For this research on framing and content analysis, particular attention is paid to qualitative, discursive and textual analysis. The study utilised multi-methods to identify relevant Web content across a variety of online gendered spaces. Discourse analysis and qualitative content analysis identified the major frames used to construct women's relationship with the Internet. A multi-methods approach was appropriate since the research considered a number of different research questions. However, despite the analysis consisting of multi-methods, the methods utilised were all qualitative methods, with no quantitative analysis involved.

In the study a number of websites were analysed as gendered spaces selected either due to their title or through their mission statement and content. [iVillage](#) whose slogan is 'The Internet for Women' is the book's main site of analysis, a site that falls into the category of 'women's lifestyle'. Within the study, *iVillage* is compared with a similar site which focuses on men's lifestyle, [AskMen](#), as well as three feminist sites, [The Feminist Majority Foundation](#), The [National Organisation for Women](#) and [Women's eNews](#), and three sites which focus on women in technology, [Cybergrrl](#), [Digital Divas](#) and [Girlgeeks](#).

In order to better understand the discourses of women's online spaces, chapter four analyses women's magazines and their coverage of women and technology between the years 1997-2001. The print publications focused on were: *Better Homes and Gardens* (BHG); the feminist magazine *Ms*; and, *Working Woman*. A number of differences were found. For example, *BHG* tended to reinforce more traditional views of women's place in the home, in contrast to *Ms*, which focused more on the accomplishments of women in technology. *Working Woman* was viewed as providing a compromise between the stereotypical discourses found in *BHG* and the feminist stance found in *Ms*. Royal expected the analysis of the websites to reveal similar differences in their representation of women, which they ultimately did.

The book then moves on to an overview of the websites in the study, in terms of their history and evolution. *Askmen* is one of the few sites that offer an overtly demographic focus on men in the same way as sites such as *iVillage* target women. Therefore Royal compares the two. Both sites,

although targeted to different genders, have a similar lifestyle focus. Also reviewed, but to a much lesser extent, are the three feminist sites and the three women and technology sites. The focus of the following chapters details the analysis of these sites in comparison with each other and how they differ in terms of frames and women's usage of technology.

What the book reveals confirms what Royal expected, that gender differences in the significance of frames were found between the two sites (*iVillage* and *Askmen*) consistent with the gender divide of women=private and men=public. The women's site indicated that the home/family frame was most prominent, consistent with women's magazines such as *BHG*. The author views this prominence as: 'reinforcing women's role in the public sphere of the home and their role as mother and primary caregiver' (p71). In contrast, none of the *Askmen* articles dealt with issues of children and family. For the men's site the most significant frames were business, dating/relationships and sports/gambling. One interesting finding was that both sites dealt with articles that met the business frame criteria, but the articles differed considerably in their content. The *iVillage* articles tended to deal with encouraging women to work from home in order to spend more time with their family, whereas *AskMen* covered issues such as job hunting and career advancement. The frame of dating/relationships was highly prominent for men and, although not as prominent for women, the content on each site was found to be similar. *AskMen* was also found to differ from other male focused sites such as *Maxim* or *FHM*, especially in the lack of discussion of pornography.

The book moves on to the analysis of the feminist websites. Feminist sites discuss issues not discussed in mainstream publications such as political issues on abortion, sexuality, women's health, violence against women, pornography, race and class. The differences in the prominence of frames of the different sites reflected the mission of the sites, but, unlike *iVillage*, the feminist sites all talked of women in the public rather than solely the private sphere. When comparing *iVillage* with the three feminist sites, similar findings were found between the print publications of *BHG* and *Ms*. One particularly interesting finding was that the *iVillage* articles discussed filtering software in terms of safety, in particular the safety and protection of children, with no discussion of censorship issues. Whereas, censorship and the fact that some legitimate sites get filtered was the main focus of articles regarding filter software for the feminist sites. The analysis of the women and technology sites in chapter eight reveals similar findings.

A major premise of Royal's study is that if women do not become more involved in online representations they will be subjected to the representations of women similar to those in print publications. Royal is able to tackle the subject in a comprehensive and stimulating way. Royal argues that analysis shows that: 'the Internet provides an important venue for women to create their own spaces and discourses around technology' (p102). The book highlights the fact that without women as developers and

innovators who drive technology, their voices will be missing. Royal achieves her aim, and answers the four main research questions in an insightful and novel way. The book advances an understanding of the field of women's representation, usage of technology and relationship with Internet technology. Overall, this is a well researched study and the book provides the reader with a clear understanding of the issues and theory of gendered Internet spaces and discourses about women and the Internet. The book also leaves the reader with many thought provoking questions for future research around the subject. For instance, questions around women's motivations for using technology: if there are any subtle gender differences in the way women are socialised and educated to deal with technology and what other issues can impact technology usage. I would recommend this book to anyone interested in women and technology, gender and the Internet and gendered spaces.

ENDNOTE

¹ Frames make some information more noticeable or salient than others. They define social situations. The communicator will use frames either consciously or unconsciously in order for a particular view to be interpreted. According to Royal: 'framing can serve to promote certain values and discourage others' (p. 30).