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Advancing Women In Leadership

Putting The Web to Work For Women

A Global Electronic Networking Structure To Support Women

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Women are no longer asking men if they can join the game. The Net has allowed them to route around men and start their own game.

Since May 1, 1996, Advancing Women, an international networking site for women in the workplace, has had over 4 million "hits" or accesses from women around the world. From their reports, "barrier" experiences for women cross national and cultural borders and affect every woman in the workplace. New technology, however, is giving women the capability to use the Internet to route around the power structure, transcend traditional and historic barriers to advance their goals by exchanging information and networking with each other. Increasingly, women in all professions in every country are realizing that access to the Internet is access to knowledge and power and the opportunity to advance their goals and careers by networking together.

The sheer volume of women's numbers on the Internet provides impressive leverage and its increasing dominance in business, educational and cultural exchange makes a global electronic networking structure to support women viable and extremely effective. To help delineate and support that effort, this paper seeks to examine 4 central questions:

1. What are the unique characteristics of the Net which make it an ideal vehicle for community formation and networking?
2. What is the role of women's communities on Web in establishing a global electronic networking structure to support women?
3. What networking and communication tools are available on the Web to form a support structure for women ?
4. Should women educators play a significant role in forming a global electronic networking

structure to support women and to help shape the future of the Web?

What is the Net and what are its unique characteristics?

The Internet is part of a new frontier called Cyberspace which is made of many "planets" reshaping communications, culture, and sense of community around the globe.

Everything across the spectrum from a simple community bulletin board, which may be a computer hook-up to a telephone so you can dial in to your local library, to telephone networks such as AT&T, MCI and Sprint, commercial on-line services like America Online, satellite and broadcast television, cell phone networks and the Internet itself, a global network of more than 50,000 interconnected computer networks, are all part of Cyberspace. Together, they can bring you news, entertainment, emergency messages, email, entertainment, movies and games. (Holmes,1995).

You can, and people do now, order a pizza, do their banking, their grocery shopping, buy a car, get a mortgage on their house, look for a college or a nanny for their child, all over the Internet. Going beyond those practical uses, one should recognize the increasing power of the Internet and its effect on your life.

Marshall McLuhan, the ground breaking writer and teacher who electrified audiences in the sixties with his vision of a "global village" formed by mass communication, foresaw that the characteristics of an electronic medium such as television, much more than its content, would attract the user and shape his experience. McLuhan summed up his views in his book "The Medium is the Message". Some mediums, particularly in the beginning stages, are so captivating that their power to transmit words, pictures, emotions, energy, transcends even the content which they are transmitting. This might be called the recognition factor: We recognize the power in the potential of a new medium. When radio was born, or motion pictures, then the talkies, and finally television, we were all mesmerized. Their day to day content--commercials, or serials or adventures or comedy --was not as transfixing as knowing they had the power to keep us all spell bound by overwhelming emotions at moments of national peril, tragedy or triumph. Such moments were D Day, the Abdication of the King of England for the woman he loved, Pearl Harbor, the death of John F. Kennedy, man's landing on the Moon. (McLuhan, 1996)

It is this power to focus the world's attention and to expand and deepen our experience by making us part of a transforming event, which captures the imagination of man with the media. The Internet, however, adds an entirely new dimension in that it frees from our dependence on a broadcaster and allows us the possibility for communication among ourselves, not through the lens of broadcasters or film or TV directors, or screened by the editorial boards and policies of newspapers, but each of us, on our own, may now decide to reach out and touch any one in any nation in the world instantly.

Because this new medium of the Internet is so powerful and so filled with promise, particularly the promise of community building, it is vital for women to understand the implications of having access to the most powerful communications network in history, to learn its dynamics and understand what is at stake in its future. 35 million people are on the Net today from all over the globe, many of them women. The means to communicate is here, the audience is listening and many sites have already formed on the Web to address the fundamental issues of providing a global electronic support system for women. (Cyberatlas, 1997).

Net a Tool for Living and Working - like Swiss Army Knife

The Net is not just one thing, but several things at the same time, comprised of different tools in the same shell, like a Swiss army knife. The Net is a communication tool, like the telephone, telegraph or TV.

The Net is also a repository of information, not just one library, but thousands of libraries, and

universities and museums. You can get on the Web and take a virtual tour of the Louvre without ever leaving your study. You can receive every medical journal published, right on your desk top. Or you can earn a graduate degree, at home.

But the quintessential experience on the Web is the formation of communities of common interests connected by a thread or web in space. That thread is the ability to communicate, instantly, with anyone in the world with an email address. Physical proximity is no longer required for someone to become close and part of your world. Your neighbor in cyberspace may be the woman in Australia writing a study on your specialized field.

It is this sense of community, this special capability of global networking, which is unique to cyberspace and makes it a special and distinct kind of experience. It is true that you can telephone Italy or Nairobi . But it is also true that you are not likely to find yourself chatting with a half dozen or dozen total strangers, one from Naples, another from Nairobi, one from Singapore, another from Sweden. There is a sense of connectedness and immediacy in being able to reach out to the most remote corner of the globe in an instant.

This capability of the Net to break down masses of people into communities of interest is a critical factor. Companies, like Kodak, which depend on fostering knowledge and transforming it into actual achievement, have found that knowledge is best achieved by communities of interest with concentrated , shared learning and a focus on action to achieve a particular goal. To achieve women's goals, we need a critical mass of women and women's organizations to share their knowledge and strategies. We need " to use more of what (women already) know, to create opportunities for private knowledge to be made public and tacit knowledge to be made explicit" (Stewart, 1997)

Electronic networks form the basis for shared knowledge and become powerful learning forums. Communities of interest foster teamwork, nourish social forms of learning and provide a means to capture, synthesize and formalize knowledge, to marshal its use into action plans (Stewart, 1997)

Women's Communities on the Net

A broad spectrum of traditional networks for women and educators exists on the Net today: the American Association of University Women, the National Educational Association, Women in Higher Education, to name a few. But perhaps the most exciting part of the Net are the new communities being forged in cyberspace with new perceptions, new alliances, new agendas and a focus on communication as a means to achieve their goals:

Women's Wire Women of the World

Virtually all women's sites on the Net support "Take Your Daughter to Work Day", and many display a pink ribbon for breast cancer awareness. Site by site these women's communities are forming a nucleus of a women's support structure on the web, not just to address a single issue, but to support women in all their multi-faceted challenges which are quite different than the challenges men confront.

Advancing Women is one such community, which fuses the power of the Net, as a communication, networking and information tool, with the compelling agenda of women seeking the most effective means of advancing their personal and career goals.

Advancing Women is based on the premise that women need to network in order to gain equal access to jobs and advancement in the workplace. Although 50% of the work force are women, only 5% make it to upper management; women still earn less than men, are stuck in middle management and ghettoized into "women's" areas of business. Women educators are challenged to make it to the top levels of

administration, in part, because of outmoded stereotypes and the prevalence of male role models for leadership positions. Exposure and discussion of these historic barriers, in itself, does much to start the process of demystifying and deconstructing them. And these are the barriers we must all overcome, in order to develop women in leadership positions. (Wellington,1996), (U.S. Merit System Protection Board, 1992).

Our first task, however, is to foster a sense of community, because that is the catalyst which drives communication and forms the foundation for both networking, and its further evolution into a support system. Ideally, a support system requires cohesiveness. A group with common goals can build on a shared history, shared experiences. Much women's history which has not been widely available previously, possibly because it was not thought to be important or useful, is now beginning to surface on the Internet. In this sense of being able to deliver so much uncensored information, and also because of it's bundled technology, software and applications, the Internet holds profound implications for how we all learn about our world and ourselves. Changes brought about by greatly increased access to raw data, speed of transmission, group learning and collective analysis are new paradigms on the Net, not only for education, but for all of us, particularly women and women's communities on the Net (Wallis, 1995).

Several of the exciting pioneering new programs are related to archaeology, and indeed, digging or drilling for information is also an apt metaphor to describe women's search for information about themselves and each other. Women's history and women's achievements have long been invisible. Only 13% of news articles are about women, and rarely on the front page. Usually they are found in the "women's" section, and next to the pie recipes and the social functions. But women on the Net are changing that. Like mining for gold, women search for their history and identity and find nuggets long buried or invisible. Sites like the Feminist Organization proclaim "Teach Women's History" and supplies the tools and information to do so.

Sites like Advancing Women bring women news about themselves. Too much of this news concerns discrimination on the job, or in the military academies or abuse of one type of another. But Advancing Women also focuses on role models, bringing news of outstanding women in leadership positions in politics, business, education. We are analyzing women's careers and identifying specific steps, including mentoring and networking, which have helped women succeed. Advancing Women takes a functional approach to career barriers, identifies and networks on strategy to deconstruct them. Webgrrls focuses on teaching and honing technical skills to use on the Net and creates excitement and a sense of community in young women who wish to design web pages. Community on the Net has a transcendent role as, simultaneously, the beginning, means and end product of networking.

Tools for Networking and Support Systems

To understand the networking capabilities of the Net, you might think of the communication aspect of it, also, as a Swiss army knife. You can "talk" in real time; you can exchange messages, you can send email to one person or a huge list instantly.

You may not see the concept of being able to write to someone as very new, and, indeed, the concept is not new. The speed and ease is new, the ability to simply click a button and reply in a moment. The ability to filter and sort your mail so instantaneously and efficiently without a secretary doing it for you is new. But the most significant new aspects of Email on the net is the sheer size of the audience you can reach, relatively easily, and the core fact that people on the Net are clustered around communities of interest, letting you identify immediately those people who are likely to have a common interest or goal as you.

Email is the most fundamental means of networking with large communities of informally and quickly, collapse time, and increase your own contacts and resources. You may register your email address with a

site whose philosophy or content you find compatible with your own and start immediately to network with those who have a common interest.

Message boards, on the Net, serve a different purpose and have a different dimension to them. Message boards, as opposed to a message, have longevity. A thread of discussion begins and can go on indefinitely, fed by many different viewpoints. Women on the Web are refreshingly supportive of each, even in such practical, everyday matters, as figuring out how to get a hot meal on the table for their family, in record time, after possibly managing a large business or administering a university department all day. Messages are as diverse as the women authoring them.

Chat is, without a doubt, the most mesmerizing and, by far the most popular tool on the Net. Chat is not really "chat" as we know it, just yet. You must remember that all these forms of communication are just now evolving on the Net. Chat is really "typing back and forth" to each other in real time.

Not only are the mechanics and applications for chat constantly evolving but the role or concept of chat, itself, is changing. A short while ago, engaging in chat on the Net was a lot like being a ham radio operator. A lot of the thrill was in being able to do it at all. And the hobby was so much fun....getting on with no phone charges and being able to make a friend in Finland or Spain, or finding someone who shared your interest in bird watching or whatever, that many became addicted to it and spent 4 to 8 hours a day on chat. As the web has evolved and matured, chat is changing also.

In the old days --meaning less than a year ago -- the primary system of chat was a separate system called Internet Relay Chat system or IRC, which had various hosts around the world. There, chat rooms would be lined up, like young girls at a dance, waiting for someone to select them. Inevitably some became wildly popular and others were wall flowers. Adolescent boys being what they are, their chat rooms became so numerous and popular that these rooms, as they evolved, became segmented, so you would see names like "boys, 9-12" which was a pretty good labeling system, since you can gather the kinds of things they'll probably be talking about.

Another evolution was that, just like in one's preteen years, the boys like to give girls, or women, as hard a time as possible, sometimes by shocking them, not with a wriggling frog or scaly fish, but often with some breathtakingly crude remarks, and ,in situations where it was possible, pornographic photographs. Many respected researchers believe this was a form of power grab in which the "boys" were labeling cyberspace as "male territory", like college computer labs, gym locker rooms, military academies, board rooms and the executive suite. So unless you wanted to hear some pretty unsavory remarks, a woman had to watch her step.

That led to the moderated chat room, which was a "safe haven" for women. It was not a question of men not being allowed but of everyone's behavior being monitored, and rules of conduct enforced. That generally took the fun out of it for anyone who wanted to misbehave anyway. Simultaneously, an ignore button was put on the controls of chat room and a kick out button for the moderator, should someone be truly unruly.

In this protected environment women were able to talk more freely about issues which concerned them, and in some instances the conversation became more thoughtful and directed towards issues facing women.

The newest forms of chat are on the Web itself, rather than a separate system. This new capability is based on the creation of Java, an exciting new programming language, which has had a major impact on the Net because Java can create tiny programs, called applets which run on a Web page on either a PC or a Mac. A Java applet can create motion for a graphic, have a stock and news ticker cross your screen, or

display the Rockettes high kicking.

One of the most exciting uses of Java is the Java chat applet which makes chat available to a wider audience and much more functional. One simply downloads a screen which floats on your web page and you click on commands, such as sending public or private messages while you continue to browse your favorite sites. You can communicate in real time with someone else a thousand miles away or across the globe about what you're both seeing on the web, or the paper or project you're working on together.

In fact, this aspect of the net, two way communicating and working together on an active, shared screen, is the basis of the intranet, an organization's private internet, the fastest-growing segment of the \$500 billion Internet business.

So communication on the Net continues to evolve at warp speed.

Women's Educators Role in Networking on the Net

But there is much which remains to be done. We are only on the threshold of this new networked world. We should recognize that the Internet is a tool for communication, not communication itself. Just as the telephone, radio and television are means of communication, they may empower us to communicate with each other, but they do not produce a 911 call, or Shakespeare's sonnets, or the 6 o'clock news, they can only transmit them.

Who will produce the content on the Net? Much of it so far has been produced by advertisers who want you to buy a certain shampoo or young techies, mostly men, who are anxious to use and display all the technical wizardry and innovation they are learning and bringing to us. This definitely advances the technical science, but does it advance and deepen our souls and spirits? Does it provide us with insight and lead the way to change and improvement in our lives?

Women must understand that the Internet is like the early days of cable TV, when everything was formative and no one yet knew the reach and power of the medium because, literally, it had not been built yet.

But who will build it? The question is, what do you really want the Internet to be? Cyberspace is not only where the future of commerce, entertainment and education are headed, it is where new communities are being formed which will shape the future in each of those areas. A broad range of issues are at the center of the computer revolution; everything" from sexual harassment to questions of distribution of wealth and power" will be put into play and ultimately settled on the Internet (Spender,1996).

In one sense, the Internet will become more and more like TV. It will become increasingly visual, with motion and audio. It will become segmented into many channels of interests, like TV, with a Sports Channel and an Arts and Entertainment Channel and a News Channel.

And there will be channels for women. A few years ago, only 10% of the people on the Net were women. Now it's 30% and climbing and undoubtedly this group will be broken down into smaller groups with specific interests whether they are cooking or gardening or astronomy.

There will be a merging of mediums so you can read your email on your cell phone, or "surf the Net" on your TV.

But there are also great differences between the Net and TV as it is today. The Net is not a passive experience in which you are fed news or entertainment; the Net is an interactive medium which encourages participation and response and features two way communication, forums, group discussions,

debate, voting. You can get on the Net and , by participating, help shape it into what you want it to be.

So, the choice, ultimately is yours; you can decide if you want the Net to be a place with electronic billboards and catalogs, soap operas and ezines solely about cooking and gardening, herbal baths and cosmetics. Or you can choose to harness the power of the Net to make progress for women so their voices will be heard and they have equal access to pay and power and benefits.

After all, who will lead women's charge onto the Net? And who will help write the rules of cyberspace? Who should that role fall to? The men? The technicians? Java programmers? Microsoft?

The Internet is very much like democracy in that ,even if you are entitled to vote, you must still get out and do it yourself. You can't assign it and you can't delegate it . You must do it yourself.

Women educators are leaders who have the capability and the tools to improve the future for other women everywhere. Strong parallels exist between access to knowledge, access to levers of power, and the ability to enter and advance in the workplace. A recent book, *Nattering on the Net, Women, Power and Cyberspace*, by Dale Spender makes a compelling case for women seizing the moment and gaining equity in cyberspace as a key to their future equity in the world community (Spender, 1996). Spender traces for us the historic barriers to knowledge for women which strongly parallel barriers in the workplace since knowledge is required to gain entry to any profession or occupation except the most menial. Just as there is a gap for women in the workplace, there is an increasing gap between the information rich and the information poor. It is critical that women have access to the wealth of information which resides on the Internet in the form of news, research, information exchange, debate, communication and the intellectual growth and stimulation which interaction with new technology brings. It is equally important that a meaningful part of that content be fully inclusive and representative of women, that it be shaped and produced by women and offer new paradigms to support women in their attempt to advance. Already some women educators have recognized both the scope of this challenge, and the milestone nature of this newly created opportunity to speak directly, across the globe, to women everywhere.

Some women educators here today, Dr. Beverly J. Irby and Dr. Genevieve Brown, of the Center for Research and Doctoral Studies, Department of Educational Leadership and Counseling, Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, Texas, have launched the first international women's on-line professional refereed journal, *Advancing Women in Leadership* , published by, *Advancing Women* web site, www.advancingwomen.com. This new journal seeks to expand the feminine leadership paradigm by revealing and celebrating actual voices and visions from national and international leaders and researchers who have experienced common pasts and who can offer insights, perspectives, and advice to future generations of women leaders. Authors will represent women from business, arts, economics, engineering, medicine, education and other professional areas. This is an historic landmark in serious communication. It advances women's hope that women around the world will accept this historic challenge and choose to become key players in this new game to use the advantages they have been blessed with -- their education, talent, abilities and determination -- to advance women everywhere.

Hopefully, many more of you will come forward to produce more landmark pieces for a women's electronic support structure: forums, discussion groups, strategy sessions, all focusing on specific steps to advance women and support us in our common goals.

Women are no longer asking men if they can join the game. The Net has allowed them to route around men and start their own game. We invite you, and women everywhere, to step up and join us in creating this new global electronic network to support women. As an old proverb says, you make the path by walking on it. And you put the Web to Work for women by networking on it. Who better to shape the future of the Net, than you?

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