

*The Persistence of Ethics and the Search for Solidarity: Feminist  
Internet Spaces in Spain*

*Margaret Andrews*

Contemporary Europe is expanding at a dramatic rate, both geopolitically and cyberspatially, as new nations, citizens, Web users and web sites are added to what formerly constituted the Continent.

Such rapid expansion sometimes gives those who identify themselves as European the impression of living in the newest of new times, in which key paradigms are being overturned. Yet some of the core questions raised by this expansion are millennia old and include 'Who are my neighbours?' and 'How should I relate to them?'

Such questions are important for matters of both governance and personal ethics. Moreover they have also been debated critically with reference to the imagined realms of cyberspaces. How do or should Web users relate to other subjects?

At times, however, debates about cyberspaces are inflected by the implication that it is not human agency and moral choices that determine relationships of need and provision, but the supposedly new nature of the spaces themselves that determine these outcomes.

Leading urbanists and communication theorists Stephen Graham and Simon Marvin (1997) offer a useful clarification of this issue. They identify dominant paradigms in Internet analysis as 'utopic' and 'dystopic'. The former presents the expansion of cyberspaces as deterministically good, bringing valuable resources to all, and is exemplified for Graham and Marvin by Timothy Leary's claim that 'never before has the individual become so empowered.' (Leary 1994, cited Graham and Marvin, p. 182)

Conversely, the dystopic view presents immersion in Internet spaces as determinedly harmful, an inevitable corruptor of the best aspects of off-line human care. This second tendency is exemplified for me in some of the claims made by media theorist Kevin Robins. He presents deep involvement in virtual spaces, among which he includes the Internet, as a 'pathology' in which technology responds to subjects' desires 'to make a complete escape from the demands of real life' and severely if not totally compromises their ability to address the needs of suffering others. (Robins 1996: 22)

Yet the accuracy of such paradigms has been called into question by later research. Countering early euphoria about the possibilities of cyber-connectedness, Stephen Lax (2000) and Laura Agustin (2000), for example, argue that inequalities of access and unequal power relations between influential providers and the majority of users remain and that these prevent the benefits of cyberspace being enjoyed equally by all.

Conversely, aspects of the dystopic view have been challenged by feminist academic and development worker Wendy Harcourt (2000), for example, and moral philosopher Graham Houston, (1996) who argue that Internet users can use on-line resources to address the needs of suffering others.<sup>i</sup>

Avoiding the extremes of utopia and dystopia I prefer to associate my own research into web sites designed by contemporary Spanish and Catalan feminists with the third main paradigm identified by Graham and Marvin. This views the Internet as neither utopic nor dystopic but as a socially constructed space, and one subject (like the social spaces that pre-existed) to the horrific inequalities and wonderful possibilities brought about by human imagining, action and interaction.

Yet, despite associating my exploration of Spanish and Catalan feminist web sites with this paradigm, I am still deeply interested in questions raised within the ‘dystopic’ strand of analysis, and most particularly in querying Robins’s claims that ethical behaviour designed to cause suffering others cannot be maintained in cyberspaces.

Graham Houston is a theoretical ally in this exploration. In contrast to Robins, Houston’s study of the possible relationships between virtuality and ethics suggests that accessing virtual worlds need not destroy individuals’ sense of moral accountability. The key determinant that he identifies as governing users’ relationships to new technologies is their conception of what is a ‘good’ use of technology.

Obviously ‘good’ is a relative term when applied to Internet use. For example, for dedicated white supremacist Web users in a Europe of softening boundaries a ‘good’ use of technology may appear to be building web sites that press for the construction of aggressively narrow national identities and the exclusion of those who do not fit them. As critic of supremacist politics Nick Ryan notes, such sites form one of the fastest growing sectors of Internet use worldwide, with monitoring group SurfControl estimating a 300 per cent rise since 2000. (Ryan 2004)

Nevertheless if, as Houston indicates, users' pre-existing moral philosophies and social practices inflect their Internet use, those who wish to remain open to the needs of new others in the sometimes troubling circumstances and migrations brought about by globalization might use new technologies to promote these aims.

I argue in this paper that some Spanish and Catalan feminists are using the Internet in such a manner, and conclude from this that entering Internet spaces does not extinguish the possibility of acting to try to support others, including those who may be suffering.

Feminist Rosi Braidotti's cybertheory has produced valuable insights into why feminism as a moral philosophy and praxis might predispose some feminists to use new technologies to support other women, particularly in a Spanish context where forms of difference feminism have arguably been influential.

While Braidotti notes that postmodern theories of difference caution against constructing feminine gender as a stable and homogenous identity, she argues that a female 'nomadic subject' – one constructed over 'multiple axes' of self-identification and experience – may still make an ethical commitment to promote what is viewed as positive about female difference and collectivity. (Braidotti 1994: 171)

When considering how such a subject might approach new technologies, including the Internet, Braidotti argues that ethical commitments should precede and rule the use of any new media. This is because, '[f]or feminism, in the beginning there is alterity, the non-one, a multiplicity. The founding agent is the common corpus of female subjects who posit themselves theoretically and politically as a collective subject. This communal bond comes first.' (Braidotti 1994: 203) It is to this collective, conceived as both material and symbolic, that feminists in her view owe an ethical allegiance, whichever medium they engage in. This is the case, she argues, even when the category 'woman' can no longer be rendered as unproblematic and essential.

The problematization of the concept of 'woman' informs a usefully complex view of the type of gendered and committed subject that might develop in cyberspaces. Braidotti's theoretical model is weak in certain other areas, however. Her analysis of the construction of 'community' tends to be less cogent, for example, and pays little attention to the ways in which gender is inflected by ethnicity and class when the formation of community is attempted. I would nevertheless suggest that these questions resonate in the

discourses that Spanish webmistresses such as Leonor Taboada of the health journal *Mujeres y Salud (Women and Health)* and María Angustias Bertomeu Martínez of feminist network *Eleusis.net* use when describing what impelled them to construct their sites.

Although self-identifying as feminist may form only part of such webmistresses' overall self-identifications, their discourses imply that, for them, being a feminist is a meta-identification that has guided their ethics and praxis through a number of life stages and chosen tasks. In their introductions to their sites, for example, Bertomeu Martínez and *Eleusis.net*'s co-founder Concha Colomer Revuelta signal clearly that their desire to construct this network was informed from the outset by feminist ethics worked out at a communal level. Revuelta, for example, stresses her desire to access virtual space in a way that will promote 'long term objectives', which include campaigning against 'gender inequalities.' (Colomer Revuelta 2002a: 1)<sup>ii</sup> Bertomeu Martínez claims that from the very beginning of her political life she has seen promoting women's knowledges as an ethical task (Bertomeu Martínez 2002: 1) The establishment of *E-leusis.net* is presented as a continuation of this task in a new period of Martínez's life, one marked by personal maturity and the ability to use new technologies to celebrate female difference. In the next sections of this paper I will make reference to particular sites and projects in order to explore further such feminist attempts to use cyberspaces to support other women.

One way in which contemporary on-line projects develop is when types of initiatives to which feminists have made an ethical commitment earlier in their lives are revisited in cyberspace. In 1978, for example, Leonor Taboada published *Cuaderno feminista: Introducción al self help*, one of the first Spanish guides to urge women to promote their own health; she now uses cyberspaces to enhance women's knowledge of their own bodies in the twenty-first century. The context has changed but the central impulse of her work remains unchanged. In 1978 Taboada was encouraging women to explore their bodies and become agents of their own health care after years of repression under the Franco regime. In the early 2000s, she argues that it is important for women to counter the type of 'industry pressure and bias' that can pathologize their bodies for profit by promoting invasive procedures and excessive medication. (Braidotti 1999a: 1) This issue has particular local resonance, as the globalization of the health industries has seen the

establishment of Barcelona's *Centro Médico*, a massive mixed-funded medical centre in Barcelona that actively advertises for clients.

In such an era, Taboada believes, cyberspace offers 'an open space in which interested women can intervene [in debates] from a basis of knowledge and reflection.' (Taboada 1999a: 1) In particular she expresses the hope that those already addressing issues of women's health off-line might also use cyberspaces to promote the well-being of women in general. She suggests the move to virtual space will create 'credibility by uniting the voices of women who have worked to promote women's health one way or another all their lives [and encouraging them to comment on the situations] in which women find themselves now.' (Taboada 1999b: 1)

The embodied subjects who started this process are represented as being willing to make their accumulated knowledges available on-line in support of other women. Like Braidotti's theorizations of the possibilities of new technologies, such discourses are informed by a form of difference feminism insofar as they assume that women experience and know the world in ways that are different from those of men. Moreover, Taboada implies that the move to implant such knowledges in cyberspace might extend the reach that any one such subject can achieve. This is because the 'cyberonaut' subject and her knowledges become, by extension, part of a shared movement that is also incorporated into the flux of the extensive networks of cyberspace itself. (Taboada 1999b: 1)

Taboada appears to envision a multiplicity of knowledges released into cyberspace through the texts of women dedicated to promoting the health of other women, and sees these as potentially forming a cyber-kinship network of mutual support. This offers exciting possibilities for the extension of the on-line 'nomadic' subject; it suggests that not only can the wired female subject incorporate a range of self-identifications, but that she may also be multiple in other ways – may be composed, for example, of a range of women's knowledges. Indeed the formation of different types of female kinship networks is often the key to the development of successful on-line initiatives that aim to facilitate an ethics of care between women. Yet networks rarely exist exclusively within cyberspaces and can span on-line and off-line relationships in a variety of ways. The next section looks more closely at this phenomenon.

Research by Chris Berry and Fran Martin (2000) on queer Taiwanese and Korean Internet users suggests that when subjects use cyberspaces to form new self-identifications against the grain of what is socially dominant, they are most successful when positive contacts made on-line are reinforced off-line. In such scenarios the Internet can become a medium for testing new formations of the subject with potentially sympathetic partners, prior to or in conjunction with their strengthening off-line. Catalan group *Ciberdonees* appears to follow this logic. It is made up of women who work in the world of new technologies in a professional capacity. They mix association on-line with more traditional networking off-line to combat their potential isolation in male-dominated environments. Certain other groups of Spanish feminists, meanwhile, approach the mixing of face-to-face and Internet-mediated relationships from a different angle, choosing to establish and link cyberspaces with other feminists with whom they already have fruitful off-line relationships. Bertomeu Martínez, for example, describes founding *E-leusis.net* with a group of close female friends. Her hope, expressed in a poem celebrating the founding, is that the histories, personal contact, and campaigns these women have shared off-line will inform their on-line work. This, she hopes, will inspire them to create positive representations of female identity in cyberspaces and to offer concrete resources (such as training in new technologies) to other Spanish women.

As well as informing the development of particular sites, connections between feminists and feminist groups are also often reflected in the creation of hyperlinks and the routing of e-mail traffic between sites. Such links have allowed Spanish and Catalan feminist web sites to play a significant part in interpolating allies for specific campaigns to support women's health and welfare. The centrality of Spanish women's networks in such initiatives is highlighted in the case of Nigerian woman Safiya Hussaini, who was condemned to death in 2002 by male leaders in Katsina, Nigeria, for allegedly having a baby outside of marriage. As Spanish journalist and cyberfeminist Montserrat Boix notes, the campaign to save Hussaini was introduced to Mediterranean Europe when Italian journalist Ettore Massina broadcast information previously published in a little known missionary journal. (Boix 2002: 1) According to Boix, the transfer of information from newspapers to the Internet was decisive in escalating the campaign, with 650,000

signatures protesting at the proposed execution collected from Spain alone, catalysed in part by effective on-line campaigns. (1)

Spanish feminist web sites were able to play a key role in relaying calls for support because their pre-existing dedication to building forms of associative feminism had led them to construct a rich network of on-line links between their own sites, to NGOs such as Amnesty International, and to other feminist groups worldwide. These enabled them to launch a lobbying campaign across many linked sites and nets including Catalan women's site *Espai de Dones* (Women's Space), *Pangea*, on-line Women's Rights Organization *Plataforma por los Derechos Humanos de la Mujer* (Platform for Women's Human Rights), *Mujeres en Red* (Women on the Net) and Andalusian women's on-line journal *La hora violeta* (The Violet Hour), in conjunction with many other NGOs.

In the case of Safiya, petitions raised in European Internet networks and elsewhere helped to avert her death, with mass global lobbying and skilful legal representation in a Nigerian court commuting the unofficial death sentence in Spring 2002.

What does this example tell us about the ways in which Internet connections might support feminist, ethical self-identifications dedicated to challenging the suffering of others? I need to continue to avoid utopianism, for the Internet is not a magic medium through which all women can be saved all the time; the most effective on-line interventions accompany pressure for off-line change and do not mitigate the need to make structural changes in unjust societies. Nevertheless, as political theorists Alan Scott and John Street note, the medium does allow lobbyists the opportunity to 'create an effect disproportionate to the size of the [original] enterprise through the rapid and exponential accretion of supporters on-line.' (Scott and Street 2001: 46)

As well as addressing concerns relayed into a better-connected Europe from elsewhere, linked networks that span virtual and more concrete spaces have also sought to promote redistributive social justice at a more local level. Examples of this include cases where the working patterns of a globalizing competitive economy are leading to the devaluation of women's labour in Spain. This can be illustrated in relation to actions in Barcelona between 2000 and 2002: around the Barcelona Summit (15–16 March 2002), for example, International Women's Day (8 March of the same year) and the occupation of churches in 2001 by undocumented immigrant workers contesting the Spanish

government's strengthening of immigration laws. In these cases on-line and off-line networks were used to coordinate mass demonstrations and Internet campaigns to protest at the devaluation of labour – including women's labour – within emerging transnational service industries and to resist the deportation of immigrants, the majority of whom were also female.

On-line, links between sites hosted by feminists, feminist and other trade unionists, anti-globalization campaigners and immigrant groups among others, allowed for what Scott and Street (2001) term 'mesomobilization': that is, the strategic alliance of on-line and off-line networks to increase lobbying power in relation to causes which are of interest to a range of activists.<sup>iii</sup> In some cases, such alliances reflect pre-existent formalized on-line connections. In the case of Spain, for example, several groups associated with NGO metanetworks *Pangea.org*, *Sindominio.net* (Freedom.net) and *Nodo50* (Node50) – each of which is cyberhome to more than 100 groups – campaigned on behalf of *sinpapeles* (undocumented workers). Conversely, the Internet was also used during these and other campaigns to send out calls for support to previously unrelated groups.

In all of these campaigns the Internet and the actions of feminist sites played key strategic roles. These included acting as a cyber-enhanced version of the anarchist printing press by quickly and effectively calling thousands of supporters to street demonstrations to protest against the threatened expulsion of the *sinpapeles* and the economic exploitation inherent in some forms of globalization. Vital information about the siting and timing of demonstrations was spread rapidly and rhizomatically to a global constituency of Internet users.

Moreover, Internet sites were used to present alternative accounts of the effects of key political actions, such as the strengthening of immigration laws. These accounts bypassed the gatekeeping of official government media and, once again, had the potential to reach a global audience.

It is extremely difficult to assess the impact that Internet and related campaigns have on structural and other intractable problems such as the devaluation of labour, and women's labour in particular, within post-industrial economies. However, some limited but concrete outcomes can be identified in the case of the undocumented workers involved in

the church protests. It has been claimed in reports in the *Workers Solidarity* journal that 90 per cent of those involved in the protests were issued with the documentation they needed to remain in Barcelona. (Scott and Street 2001) However, it must be noted that this positive result relied on a number of factors, not least among which was the campaign leadership of skilled Ecuadorian trade unionist Norma Falconi. Nevertheless, what the Internet added to the campaign was the ability to massively amplify and rapidly update information about the church protests, adding influence by introducing a localized protest to a global public.

Yet the Internet's role as a great amplifier of information about potentially needy citizens and non-citizens can be problematic as well as positive where the construction of new European identities is concerned. Many new Europeans are multilingual and see their diverse language heritages as part of their self-identifications. However, because America is domain zero for Internet use and American English is the dominant language of communication, as the network of messages widens across the Internet subjects such as the immigrants at the core of the Barcelona church protests may find themselves increasingly represented in languages that are not their own and in ways over which they may have little control. In respect of the building of more localized new European identities, non-cyberspace practice may sometimes be more forward looking. For example, the alternative government assembly formed from the immigrant groups in the church of Sant María del Pi was deliberately multilingual, in contrast not only the prevalence of English in Internet networks but to the regional identification of Catalan as the language of local politics. Yet these linguistic issues embedded in the development of the Internet are not insurmountable. For example, some anti-globalization sites within the metasites established to support the cause of undocumented workers have scanned and uploaded Arabic texts for their use.

The Internet is also amenable to the expression of difference in the case of groups which seek to distinguish their needs from those of more dominant groups that seek to represent them. During the church protests, for example, the women's group occupying the church of Sant Pau del Camp issued their own web pages within the metaset of pages supporting the protest. These were designed to draw attention to the ways in which their

needs differed from those of male community leaders who normally represented individual ethnic communities.

In some cases, then, marginalized groups' difficulties with self-representation and determination in cyberspaces can be embedded as much within the networks of power that pre-exist their engagements with new technologies as within the development of the technology itself. Yet even in areas where inequitable power relationships and inhospitable access to technology are combined feminists can be identified rallying on-line and off-line resources to improve conditions. This is apparent in Catalan feminist trade unionists' responses to the problems of women working within certain call centres in Barcelona. Within these centres, use of new technologies is embedded within exploitative employment practices marked by low wages, unsociable hours and poor or non-existent welfare and childcare provision. (CONC 2001a)

One of the overarching arguments made in this paper is that some Spanish and Catalan feminists who have made a clear off-line ethical commitment to address the needs of others are now pursuing this objective on-line, in forms that complement and are informed by pre-existing praxis. In Barcelona there has been a long tradition of female trades unionists challenging the exploitation of female labour, and the women's secretariat of *Comisiones Obreras de Catalunya* (Workers' Commissions of Catalonia, or CONC) has continued this on-line and off-line in relation to new Internet-dependent industries. CONC undertakes workplace campaigns to press for better conditions, yet also works on-line to promote the long-term objectives of giving women greater control over the means of production. This is done by offering training courses dedicated to increasing women's technological skills so that participants might renegotiate their working conditions or set up in business on their own account. The sites reflect an ideological heritage. Unlike liberal web sites, which tend to offer 'access' to cyberspace, CONC urges women to 'guanyar' (to 'win' or 'take') economic spaces on-line, a battle metaphor implying that such spaces are already occupied by others who are reluctant to share power. (CONC 2001b)

To conclude, CONC's praxis, and that of the other feminist groups and individuals referred to in this paper, offers a glimpse into ways in which web sites constructed from technical bases within Europe offer training and other resources to women, and also

contest cases in which particular women are oppressed both in Spain and beyond. Yet it is difficult to associate these practices with any overarching 'European' Internet identity. They tend to be more deeply embedded within local and global networks. For example, the webmistresses cited tend to use providers or domains local to their region (particularly in Catalonia, where burgeoning Internet provision has been linked to the strengthening of regional political identities) and they contest the oppression of women, both at home and abroad. Yet most of the webmistresses referred to in this paper are also second-wave feminists who developed their political self-identifications in opposition to Franco, drawing on Italian, French, and American feminist praxis but also incorporating more local characteristics in a European country in which until 1958 a woman committing adultery could be killed legally by her husband or father. (Brooksbank-Jones 1997: 76) This heritage still informs their contemporary Internet praxis, which mixes old concerns with new. Such contingent forms of identity, developed predominantly within Europe but not confined there, may yet prove to be more prevalent and productive on the Internet than more formal, overarching 'European' identities.

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<sup>i</sup> Harcourt, for example, highlights the role of Internet lobbying in the successful campaign to free members of Rajasthani women's NGO Bal Rashmi, who had been arrested by fundamentalists (Harcourt 2000: 151)

<sup>ii</sup> This and all other translations are my own.

<sup>iii</sup> I refer to 'anti-globalization' cautiously in this context because the movement identifies itself as such; it is not opposed to all forms of globalization, however, and is itself transnational.