
UNIT 5 ENGENDERING NEW MEDIA - CYBERSPACE

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5.1 INTRODUCTION

As Internet and new media grows, concerns about a possible gender gap in use of these new media technologies have also emerged. In the Indian context, where mobility largely determines access to new media technologies - be it through accessing cyber parlors/internet cafes or through affording new technologies - young women may very well find it twice more difficult to use computer-based new media than young men, either teenagers or adolescents. The India Broadband Forum reports that 85% of Internet users are men. New media technologies are here to stay, these low numbers do give us cause for alarm. Some scholars, particularly a branch of eco-feminists, are of the view that women shun new media technologies because these media might not serve the purposes they value. Such writing, in turn, has been attacked by other feminists as furthering an idea of essential gender difference and hindering equality. It is important to note that in certain parts of the world, women's use of a range of new media is at par with or has even surpassed that of men and, of late, has also been accompanied by significant shifts in attitudes. These are some of the issues which we will discuss in this unit.

5.2 OBJECTIVES

On completing this unit, you will be able to:

- Describe and differentiate new media from what is now termed as traditional media;
- Describe the early history of cultural responses to technology;
- Discuss the different responses to women's relationship with technology; and
- Critically analyse the cyber world and its relationship with the gender.

5.3 UNDERSTANDING NEW MEDIA AND GENDER

While the question of inclusion is an important part of understanding new media and gender, there is another important frame within which the question of gender in relation to new media technologies has been asked. This is the question of how new media technologies necessarily break the very idea of binary gender difference i.e. the idea that there are necessarily only two sexes from which the two respective genders emerge naturally and universally. For instance, how does our immersion into these new technologies change our very understanding of how we experience the body as gendered? Does the idea of technology as extensions of the body (like our cell phones or Orkut and Facebook) break our simplistic ideas of women as nature and technology as male? Or as Donna Haraway claims in her work on Gender and Technology, have we, in our immersion into technology, been transformed into *Cyborgs*, with no fixed male and female gender identities but with multiple and fluid gender positions.

But, before we begin to understand the relationship between gender and new media we will first have to unpack the term New Media, a broad and often confusing term that refers to many historical and technological processes. Then we will proceed to offer a broad overview of how scholars have theorized the gender-technology relationship, with particular reference to new media technologies.

5.4 NEW MEDIA TECHNOLOGIES

Before the emergence of New Media in the latter part of the 20th century, communication used to take place through an analogue form of broadcasting, either on television or on print. About these, you have already read in the first two units of this block. But with the invention of digital computers, communication became so much easier. Crossing all geographical barriers, huge volumes of messages could be transferred at a much higher speed. Communication also became much more interactive than the analog media. Thus, with the birth of New Media, and its primarily interactive digital

media technology, a digital shift in human relationships also took place. For instance, Wikipedia and Facebook are good examples of new media phenomena that combine digital text, images and video with web-links, creative participation of contributors, and interactive feedback of users and formation of various networked communities. Other examples include CD-ROMS and DVDs, Internet, websites, blogs, computer multimedia, computer games and interactive mobile technologies. Unlike popular misconception, what differentiates new media from traditional media is not digitizing of media content. The difference has more to do with the shifts in ideas of production, distribution and importantly, interactivity that began with digital media.

For example, a high definition digital T.V receiving digital broadcast signals is still traditional media but graffiti that advertises a website like Orkut, where users are actively creating and shaping content, is digital media. What distinguishes the two is the dynamic nature of the content and flow of media. With new media the consumers have the opportunity to transform themselves into producers and distributors of content through digital technologies, whereas with traditional media the consumer is merely a receiver and the ability to create content is minimal. The following would all fall into traditional media: films screened in theatres, books, newspapers and magazines printed solely on paper and television programs.

Box 5.1 below gives you the key characteristics of traditional and new media. The dynamic features of New Media allow for active participation and feedback thus making it truly democratic.

Characteristics of Traditional Media vs. New Media

Box: 5.1

<i>Traditional Media</i>	<i>New Media</i>
Broadcasting: Mass Audience	Narrowcasting: Segmented Audience
Single or Few Channels of Flow	Multiple Channels of Flow
Zero or Little Feedback	More Feedback
Mostly Analog and Not Compressible	Mostly Digital
Not Networked	Networked
Separate	Integrated
Active Gate Keeping	Less Gate Keeping
Passive Receiver	Active Receiver
Less Interactive	More Interactive

5.5 GENDER AND NEW MEDIA TECHNOLOGIES

In many of the third-world post-colonial nations like India, technology has been simultaneously represented as both positive and negative. This relationship to technology is also something that one sees in the way *gender work* in India has progressed. Early responses to science and technology from nationalist thinkers like Gandhi and Tagore still inform cultural attitudes to technology, of which new media technologies are the latest.

Asha Achutan (Achutan, 2010) in her work on women and technology notes “four responses to technology - **presence, access, inclusion, resistance**. Reflected from the vantage point of women as one of the disadvantaged constituencies with respect to technology, these are voiced as the demand for **presence** of women as agents of technological change - either through presence in production or through incorporation of their ‘native’ wisdoms into the system; sometimes as the demand for improved **access** for women to the fruits of technology; at other times the demand for **inclusion** of women as a special constituency that must be specially provided for by technological amendments. And then again, the demand for a need to recognize technology’s ills particularly for women, and the consequent need for **resistance** to technology on the same count” (Achutan, 2010, p. 5-6).

This inclusion model can be seen today, for instance, in the aims of the Dynamic Coalition on Gender Equality, which is a part of the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) which states on its website that it “aims to ensure gender perspective is included in the key debates around internet governance issues, such as content regulation, privacy, access, freedom of expression among others. Among others, the coalition wants to promote women’s visibility at the IGF and related fora; to conduct research and input on the main topics of IGF debates; to support capacity building of gender advocates and to promote more effective linkages between local, regional and global initiatives on gender and information society” (IGF, 2010, 22-23 November).

The plethora of news reports that caution women against invasions of privacy, objectionable and malicious content, cyber harassment and other forms of ‘cyber crimes’ point us to the simultaneous attitudinal resistance that exists in Indian society. Similarly, cyberspace also provides a platform for people belonging to alternate sexualities to interact openly on certain websites which cater exclusively to them. About their life, you have already read in Block 4 and Block 6 or MWG 001.

Check Your Progress 1

Do any of your friends have a cyber account? Discuss with your friends the benefits and disadvantages of such accounts.

5.6 PARADIGMS OF DEVELOPMENT

The Women in Development Paradigm: The presence, access and inclusion responses to new media world come under the Women in Development (WID) approach to building gender just models of development. WID emerged in the early 1970s to increase women's presence in development related work, particularly through increasing access to the latest development technologies and inclusion of women in the process of achieving economic growth. The goal of WID was economic growth through investment in women. Even though these efficiency-based arguments proved to be effective as a political strategy for having women's issues taken up by development work in the third world, it also entailed a number of debatable results. Because of the WID model, emphasis was placed on how women could contribute to economic development, while their own demands from development (including gender equity) became secondary and conditional upon showing positive economic growth. The WID paradigm gave way in the early 1980s for the Gender and Development (GAD) paradigm.

Gender and Development Paradigm (GAD): A major flaw noted in the WID analysis was that women were assumed to have common, homogeneous interests simply because of their sex. This ignores that women have varied and often conflicting interests depending on their class, race, ethnicity, religion, and sexual orientation and the GAD approach with its focus on gender and not women, sought to correct this imbalance and recognized that a woman's interests will vary depending on a complex interplay of her social, political and cultural contexts.

We can see that there is still a connection between these two approaches, which is that both of them see technology as separate from the human who is either in control of such technology or its victim. The gender and technology relationship therefore is caught in an endless argument between the benefits and damages that accrue to women from the use of new technology. One way out of this debate can be seen in the cyborg theories of Donna Haraway and other feminist scholars.

5.7 GENDER AND CYBER WORLD

The relationship between the gender and cyber world has undergone drastic changes, which are easily noticeable. For instance, the access to home based internet is more accessible to boys and men than girls or women. The reason may be the division of household labour. According to Ellen Seiter, it is quite often noticed that while male family members gravitate towards the cyber world as favourite past times and leisure habits, the "loads of chores relegated to female family members will only increase, and make it more difficult for female members to get time on the home computers"

(Seiter, 2003, p. 691). Very interestingly the involvement in the cyber world has given rise to a culture of anxiety. Surfing the net and lengthy downloading may often lead to ennui, boredom and depression.

But quite often, as Roger Silverstone explains, the ability to use the cyber world intelligently as a kind of extension of the personality in time and space, is also a matter of resources. “The number of rooms in a household relative to the number of people, the amount of money that an individual can claim for his or her own personal use, the amount of control of his or her own time if the often intense atmosphere of family life, all these things are obviously of great relevance” (Silverstone, 1991, p.12). Take for example, if you have your desk top computer with internet connection in your house, your usage may depend upon how much internet time is shared between you and other family members. However, if you have your own lap top, the usage of the internet increases significantly.

These sort of subtle differences that emerge because of the cyber world among the family members are giving rise to drastic psychological changes in human behaviour. In today’s world, we often spend more time in our individualised cyber world than with our family members. In fact, cyberspace research also observes that even physical friendships are sometimes explicitly shared and contained within this domain of the cyber world. Human beings become more expressive in communicating through this virtual world than in the physical world.

5.7.1 Cyber Relationships

The information-intelligent generation depends increasingly on the cyber world for social relationships. Chat rooms have emerged rapidly as a popular ‘space’ for this purpose, and offer almost complete privacy, leading to cultural shifts in friendship and sexual behaviour. Modell comments that this has resulted as a rebellion from establishment and traditional values. People have “moved from ‘thrill’-based innovation half a century before to a somewhat fading bastion of essentially ‘traditional’ values” (Modell, 1989, p.303). Very interestingly, cyber relationships have revolutionised the expression of emotions by making this space available to everyone, whether girls or boys, or women or men. Today no more, males no longer need to hide their emotions, but can enthusiastically express or display them in a public, cyber domain. People, who are technology savvy, are “able to express and experiment with aspects of their personality that social inhibition would generally encourage them to suppress” (Baym, 1995, p.143). This has led to a shift in the manner in which heterosexual and homosexual relations get played but in the cyber world. Chat rooms have provided a personal space for alternate sexuality, with social networking sites catering to this group of people and offering an alternate and private space for communication. Therefore, one can begin to see some of the positive, emancipatory effects of the cyberworld on gender relations and sexuality.

5.7.2 Cyborg

Cyborg originated as cybernetic organisms in the 1960s. The science fiction writer, Simon Wright uses this term in his story *After a Judgment Day*, to describe the ‘mechanical analogs’ of one of the protagonists. Cybernetic organism is usually used to describe larger networks of communication and control, for instance, cities, networks of roads, networks of markets, and the collection of these things together. This organism may be considered as an artificial intelligence that makes use of replaceable human components to function. People at all ranks can be considered replaceable agents of their functionally intelligent government institutions, whether such a view is desirable or not. For instance, within the parameters of a huge organisation, there are several divisions headed by different people, under whom several more work, and this chain of labour force penetrates downwards from the topmost levels. However, the whole organisation can be brought into one frame by the gridiron on which the foundation lays, like a CEO keeping a tab of how many products are being sold through the sales executives. This happens when the executive reports back to the team leader, who further informs the sales manager (who might be somewhere else), then it passes on to area sales manager (who also would be somewhere else), and then the report reaches the general manager of the sales division and thus filters to the CEO of the organisation. Thus the physical location of the individual doesn’t hold importance here; what matters is the filtering of information through a proper channel. This entire analogue is basically a cyborg.

Donna Haraway, in her 1985 essay, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century”, challenged the traditional notions of feminism, using the metaphor of a ‘cyborg’ (a biological being that also has artificial (electronic, mechanical or robotic) parts) to overcome the limitations of thinking in terms of duality and binary oppositions of male and female. Haraway suggested that women are often talked of only in terms of their body; within a patriarchal society as objects of desire and control, while feminist criticism centered on the idea of freeing the same ‘body’. The idea of a cyborg blurs the idea of binary sexual and gendered identities, and the boundaries between feminine and masculine, and can therefore have great political significance. She says, “*we are all chimeras, theorised and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs*” (Haraway, 1985, p. 150). Marisa Olson, another media theorist, agrees with Haraway’s thoughts and considers that there were no separations between bodies and objects. Human life force flows through every individual and comes out into the objects they make. There may be no distinction between the so-called real or natural organisms that nature produces and the artificial machines that humans make. Thus, there might not be any hierarchies between genders and sexualities in the cyber world, since social sanctity is managed in a global public domain, rather than at the level of individuals.

5.8 LET US SUM UP

New media offers users a certain level of freedom from the realm of 'bodies' and the anonymity of cyberspace offers a forum unhindered by hierarchies of sex and gender. It can therefore be an enabling and politically charged space. In recent times, the internet has been used by women's and feminist groups as forums for both discussion and activism -allowing for a plurality of discourses that may have otherwise not been possible.

5.9 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) Define New Media. Explain its difference from other media you have studied.
- 2) What are the similarities and dissimilarities of WID and GAD in the context of New Media?
- 3) What do you mean by a cyber relationship? In your view, how has this generated a shift from the way we define 'real relationships'?
- 4) Does the idea of the cyborg affect our lifestyle? Explain with relevant examples.

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5.10 SUGGESTED READINGS

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