Grrl explorers of the World Wild Web

Charlotte Halmø Kroløkke

ABSTRACT. Scholars in feminist rhetorical theory and linguistics have documented ways in which online environments reinstate patriarchal forms of control, leading to the continued online victimization of women. In this article, young women’s resistance to a narrative of victimization is seen through the lenses of a feminist reconstructionist perspective and a gender diversity perspective (Foss, Foss and Griffin 1997; Condit 1997). The author finds that grrls are best understood within a gender diversity perspective on rhetoric (Condit 1997; Butler 1990, 1997). Grrls appropriate the frontier metaphor and engender masculine talk to communicate resistance and change. The author concludes that the rhetoric of young women broadens the scope of feminist rhetorical criticism and calls for a re-visioning of feminist rhetoric.

Known by early writers as an unmapped, culturally and legally ambiguous landscape, the electronic frontier, the Internet is frequently compared to the American West of the late 1800s (Cleaver 2002; Miller 1995; Eubanks 2000). The use of a familiar metaphor such as the frontier to describe the Internet is hardly surprising. Metaphors map out consciousness, and in the case of the frontier, it is intimately tied to Western mythology (Miller 1995). The frontier metaphor conjures up dreams of limitless new environments while nightmares of frontier injustices lurk in the background. Conflicting narratives are imbedded in the notion of the electronic frontier. The focus of this article is on young women’s reclaiming of the frontier myth. Self-proclaimed Internet pioneers, grrls, approach the Internet with growl and bite. The goal of the article is to discuss grrl rhetoric in light of divergent feminist theoretical perspectives. But first an introduction to the intersectional field of feminist linguistics and technology is in order. This will be followed by an introduction to the field of feminist rhetorical theory and to grrls.

Computer cowboys and frontier justice

From within the intersectional field of linguistics, rhetoric and technology studies,
Feminist scholars early on documented women’s experiences in online environments (Kramarae and Taylor 1993; Sutton 1996; Spender 1995; Herring 1999, 2000). They came overwhelmingly to the conclusion that the Internet reinstates patriarchal forms of control. For example, feminist linguist Dale Spender (1995) maintained that communication patterns on the Web silence women. In her view, women on the Internet (in discussion boards and chat rooms etc.) are threatened, distressed or simply unable to get a word in. Adversarial discourse, aggression and intimidation flourish in online environments. Another feminist linguist Susan Herring (1999) agreed and added that men’s online communication bears an unfortunate resemblance to offline patterns of male conversational dominance. The picture seems clear: men are in control and women are left with the message “I TELL YOU THAT YOU ARE WRONG” (Sutton 1996, 175). The consequences are severe—women are discouraged or outright excluded from online environments.

Feminist writers also noted that male dominance is imbedded in narratives about the Internet. The frontier metaphor, in particular, is described as two-faced rhetoric (Eubanks 2000). According to rhetorician Virginia Eubanks (2000), the frontier metaphor professes key Western values (self-determination and individual freedom), while simultaneously engaging in practices that historically have been repressive to women:

On the one hand, it professes the ideals of self-determination, democracy, individual freedom, universal possibilities and connectivity. On the other, it authorizes selfishness, profiteering, lack of community responsibility, colonialism, and violent conquest. This two-faced rhetoric was deployed to justify many of the gross injustices of the geographical frontier; my concern is that it is justifying similar (albeit more subtle) behavior on the Internet (Eubanks 2000, 5).

Understood in this manner, the frontier metaphor lends itself to a narrative of male dominance and female victimization. Academic voices are not alone in expressing a concern over what could be termed frontier justice, popular media articulates it as well. Women on the Internet, the popular thought goes, frequently feel as welcome as a system crash.1 The hostilities that women experience on the Internet can, contemporary critics articulate, be situated in historical representations of women as victims. The stereotype of the frail, defenceless and reluctant female pioneer resurfaces or as posed by Internet critic Laura Miller (1995): “The imperilled women and children of the Western narrative now make their appearance in articles that focus on the intimidation and sexual harassment of women online” (p. 52). The conclusion is clear: men on the Internet are computer cowboys; women and children, the victims of untamed electronic landscapes.

Contemporary rhetorical criticism critically examines young women’s rhetoric about the Internet. Against what appears to be staggering odds, some young women venture to resist male Internet domination and claim spaces of their own in cyberspace. Yet, this resistance does not come without its own set of criticism. For example, rhetorical critic Barbara Warnick (1999, 2002) is sceptical of young women’s (read grrls) reclaiming of frontier and pioneer rhetoric. Notions of women as explorers and first-comers marginalize their less resourceful sisters, she says. Grrl rhetoric is hierarchical and elitist: paradoxically it excludes women, while simultaneously it invites them online (Warnick 1999). According to Warnick, an ideal type of woman is created—one who is career oriented, opportunistic, and a risk-taker:

Rhetorical analysis of invitational rhetoric addressed to women to get them to come online showed that such talk and writing masculinized the feminine. That is, it constructed an “ideal” type of woman—one who was career oriented, opportunistic, and prepared to take risks and try new things. This discourse spoke of taking control of powerful tools and praised individuals who could take care of themselves on the new cyberspace frontier (Warnick 2002, 86).

Warnick’s concern derives from a desire to see more women involved with the Internet, but her
claim that grrls “masculinize the feminine” raises several issues. To argue that grrl rhetoric masculinizes the feminine is to imply that there is something inherently masculine about projecting women as risk-takers and pioneers. Risk-taking and pioneering is, then, not feminine. Thus, she operates with a dichotomy of feminine and masculine behaviours.

Warnick’s perspective on grrl rhetoric is overwhelmingly sceptical and accordingly, it does not ask questions such as: can grrl rhetoric be understood in terms of other feminist rhetorical goals? And it fails to question the definition of so-called feminist rhetoric. I therefore suggest that Warnick’s criticism of grrl rhetoric needs to be situated in a broader discussion of feminist rhetorical theory.

Feminist rhetorical theory needs to be explained in order for an analysis of grrl rhetoric to take place. Insight into feminist rhetorical perspectives in general and invitational rhetoric in particular is, therefore, needed. Furthermore, an overview of contemporary feminist rhetorical perspectives will add a different and much needed understanding to the discussion of young women’s rhetoric.

**Contemporary feminist rhetorical perspectives: feminist reconstructionism and gender diversity**

Rhetorician Kahrlyn Kohrs Campbell begins her 1989 book *Man Cannot Speak for Her* with the observation that men’s rhetorical history has been unmatched for women. There is no recorded parallel rhetorical history for women—and indeed for much of history, Campbell says, women have been prohibited from speaking. Rhetoricians Sonja Foss, Karen Foss and Robert Trapp (1991) agree and point to what they see as the feminist challenge: the inclusion and revisionist stage provided by feminist rhetorical theory. The first step in feminist rhetorical theory is the inclusion of women. This must be followed by a critique of the rhetorical constructs themselves (Foss, Foss and Trapp 1991). Are women’s experiences and women’s forms of rhetoric included in existing rhetorical constructs? A re-examining of rhetorical constructs is, therefore, the next logical step. In an attempt to give voice to women’s experiences and to re-vision the concept of persuasion, Foss and Griffin (1995) point to *invitation* as an overlooked type of rhetoric. Invitation provides us with a departure from what Foss and Griffin see as patriarchal language to one grounded in the feminist principles of equality, immanent value and self-determination:

Most traditional rhetorical theories reflect a patriarchal bias in the positive value they accord to changing and thus dominating others. In this essay, an alternative rhetoric—invitational rhetoric—is proposed, one grounded in the feminist principles of equality, immanent value, and self-determination. Its purpose is to offer an invitation to understanding, and its communicative modes are the offering of perspectives and the creation of the external conditions of safety, value, and freedom (Foss and Griffin 1995, 2).

Foss and Griffin (1995) envision that invitational rhetoric is a type of rhetoric in which change and domination is not the rhetor’s goal. Invitational rhetoric invites the audience to enter the rhetor’s world and see it as the rhetor does. It uses a non-hierarchical and non-judgmental framework. Invitational rhetoric embodies what Foss and Griffin (1995) call the “feminist principles of equality, immanent value and self-determination” (p. 2). Change may occur, but it is not a prerequisite. If it does occur, it is the result of new understandings, they argue. Although Foss and Griffin (1995) here put the spotlight on invitational rhetoric, they also stress that invitational rhetoric encourages the exploration of rhetorical goals that are not purely based on patriarchal notions of persuasion.

Central to Foss and Griffin’s perspective on invitational rhetoric is a focus on women as communicators and women’s topics. Other contemporary perspectives such as standpoint...
theory and queer theory beg the question of difference among women and, consequently, the goal of feminist rhetoric is diverse and at times conflicting (Houston 2000; Butler 1990).

Whereas Foss, Griffin and Foss (1997) articulate the goal of a feminist rhetoric to be the “eradication of the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture”, others suggest differently (p. 129). Condit (1997), for example, sees the implementation of a “multiplicity of genderings” as a primary goal of feminist rhetoric and she poignantly criticizes what she sees as a feminist dichotomous perspective (p. 101). Instead, she promotes a gender diversity perspective in which the study of persuasive endeavours in the public sphere is compatible with other feminist projects. According to Condit, rhetoric is the grounds on which gender is constructed and her primary focus, then, is on the ways in which rhetoric constructs gender. She critiques a feminist dichotomous model for offering us two back findings only: women talk differently from men, and all existing discourses are patriarchal.

Imbedded in this contribution and analysis is a set of tenets derived from gender diversity and feminist reconstructionism respectively. I agree with Foss, Griffin and Foss’ criticism that rhetorical studies have historically privileged elite men’s rhetoric. While I share their desire to include young women’s rhetoric from the perspective of young women, I also turn to Condit’s criticism of gender dichotomy as an important reminder that gender essentialist thinking fails to critically examine the ways in which rhetoric constructs gendered voices. Thus, the goal of this contribution is not merely to examine girl rhetoric but also to illuminate the ways in which girls appropriate speech patterns traditionally ascribed to males. My claim is that these speech patterns are not inherently masculine, but rather exist as rhetorical strategies that girls strategically engender in their attempts at inviting women and girls online.

Grrl explorers: electronic performances

Prior to an introduction and analysis of the rhetoric of two Internet grrls, a quick visit to the “grrl” phenomenon itself is in order. Feminist scholars Anne Scott Sørensen (2002) and Martina Ladendorf (2002) situate grrl rhetoric in a larger European and North American third wave feminist context. In her article *Girl-Power*, Anne Scott Sørensen (2002) maintains that the grrl phenomenon was inspired by early 1990s North American Riot Grrls (most notably the music group Bikini Kill) and later the British music group Spice Girls. Whereas “girl” often has been used in a derogatory manner, “grrl” brings bite back into “girl” by spelling and subsequently pronouncing the word differently.  

As suggested by Martina Ladendorf (2002), the pronunciation of “grrl” brings associations with dangerous animals to mind. These attempts have not been solely North American or British in nature, however. Ladendorf (2002) points to the Swedish words “flikka” as an attempt to reclaim “flicka” and similarly, Sørensen suggests reclaiming the Danish word “pi’r”. Grrl rhetoric is thus diverse. It is characterized, however, by appealing to younger women, and as such sets out to depart from second wave feminist agendas.

To narrow the focus of this contribution, only two grrls are chosen: Carla Sinclair and Aliza Sherman. Sinclair and Sherman are chosen because they were prominent early Internet grrls who sought to reclaim frontier and pioneer rhetoric. They invite women online in their introductory texts (not available online), and the focus of this discussion will exclusively be on these introductory texts. Sinclair’s and Sherman’s grrl rhetoric, coupled with a feminist rhetorical theoretical discussion thereof, will be highlighted.

In her text *Net Chick: A Smart Girl Guide to the Wired World*, Carla Sinclair (1996) welcomes her readers in the following manner:

Loosen your bra straps and take a deep breath—you’re about to embark on the most sumptuous,

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estrogenic journey ever taken through online culture. Thousands of smart, opulent and entertaining salons await you in cyberspace, and this book will escort you to the best of them. On your way, you’ll meet some of the sharpest, baddest, raciest Net Chicks who’ve helped shape the feminine energy now flooding the Internet (Sinclair 1996, 3).

Sinclair’s choice of “salons” to describe online spaces is intriguing. As noted by feminist scholar Anne Scott Sørensen (1998a), salons were historically not limited to men. They most certainly privileged the intellectual elite of 18th and 19th century Scandinavia, many of whom were men. Sørensen (1998b) demonstrates that prominent European women such as Charlotte Schimmelmann, Frederikke Bruun and Kamma Rahbek hosted salons to engage in dinner, music and conversations with invited guests. These women saw salons as political, aesthetic, artistic and social venues (Sørensen 1998a, 10–11).

Quite comparable to Sørensen’s analysis, Sinclair (and later Sherman) describes computer-mediated environments as opulent and entertaining—social places as well as political venues aimed at creating a space for women to network. In this manner, Sinclair eloquently connects a forum of the past to a contemporary space. Internet salons attract, she articulates, sharp, educated, and by implication, therefore, privileged women. Albeit with an elitist undercurrent, 18th and 19th century salons and today’s Internet salons strike a challenge straight to the core of what constitutes public and private. Internet salons take this a step further by challenging national, geographical, cultural borders as well as notions of public and private, anonymity and intimacy. It would seem that 18th century salons have ventured into 21st century computer-mediated environments.

According to Sinclair, salons are flooded with the feminine energies of sharp Net Chicks (Sinclair 1996, 3). Rhetorically she motivates girls to venture online by bridging femininity with stereotypically masculine traits. A Net Chick is both grrly and strong. As proposed by Sinclair (1996): “She no longer hides her grrrly traits but flaunts them as symbols of strength and power (p. 11). Grrls approach the Internet with attitude—they have a “sassy-ass attitude and a sense of adventure” (Sinclair 1996, 6). As such, Sinclair envisions a pioneer who flaunts her femininity, is adventurous and daring. Put differently: grrl Internet pioneers are the ancestral image of the pioneer women of Western expansionism:

It appears that our lot is to be the pioneer women of this medium. Hardly like our female predecessors, we should stand strong and firm, remembering that we are actively plowing the way for the grrls who will follow us (Spence in Sinclair 1996, xii).

The analogy between geographical pioneers and Internet pioneers is striking and interesting. To grrls, it facilitates an immediate connection with strength, audacity, and adventure, while it places them on the frontier. Grrls go where no one (at least no girls) have gone before. The role of grrls, in this narrative, is consequently twofold: to stake a claim in cyberspace and to pave the way for others. But the appropriation of the pioneer analogy, however, begs the question of women’s involvements in the overall injustices on the geographical and electronic frontier. Stated differently: in what ways did female pioneers contribute to the gross injustices on the geographical frontier? And do grrls reinstate these injustices in online environments? Without a doubt, grrls rhetorically want to appeal to resistance, but the pioneer analogy opens up a Pandora’s box of questions related to women’s general role on the geographical as well as the electronic frontier.

Yet this critical lens is clearly not the purpose of Sinclair’s book which, by and large, is an easy read in perceived sites of interest to grrls such as cybersex, hot sites for fashion, e-zines, sizzling entertainment sites, and smart stuff (an introduction to Ada Lovelace). The book surveys online grrly opportunities in an adventurous manner. Grrls figuratively (and literally) “zoom down every lane on the Net, blasting through chat rooms and newsgroups, creating incredibly hot pads where people can drop by (if they dare)” (Sinclair 1996, 6). These
adventurous girls label themselves chicks, geeks, and webgrrls. Their motto is a chorus of voices yelling: “Grrls need modems”. Australian webgrrrl Rosie X, for example, says:

‘Grrls need modems’. So have a modem—use it, grrrl! We wanted to get that zine on the Web and get the girls to follow! Sure, though, we’ve still got our hard copy for the gals and boys who don’t have their modems yet, and that’s important, too. But we mostly like the immediacy, the color, the cool, the experimentation of the Web version. Heh, it’s a cool place to be, and an important place for grrrls to grab onto, get a foothold and help others to come on up (Rosie X in Sinclair 1996, 89).

Rhetorically grrrls appeal to a third wave feminist audience to seize the Internet tool as their own. Rosie X implies that the Internet offers a higher state of knowledge and experimentation—perhaps a new promised land where differences are minimized or at least hardly worth mentioning. Even though Rosie X alludes to the fact that not all girls (or boys) have modems yet, diversity in general disappears in grrl rhetoric. In spite of these precautions, the reader distinctly suspects that grrrls are white and educated members of a largely privileged Western girl culture. They speak from their vantage point of privilege when they through agency stress the need for other girls to be involved with the Internet.

Sinclair is not alone in encouraging women and girls to venture online. Another fellow pioneer, Aliza Sherman, also stresses online opportunities when she invites her readers online. In Cybergrrl! A Woman’s Guide to the World Wide Web, Sherman (1998) introduces her readers to the Internet in the following manner:

Cybergrrl says… if you think the Internet and the World Wide Web is too hard, is too expensive, is too dangerous, offers you nothing professionally, offers you nothing personally… then think again (p. 1).

With the use of an online alter ego, cybergrrl, Sherman reconciles differences between herself and her readers. She starts by describing her own story. “I’m not a techie”, she says (Sherman 1998, 8). It was not until she acquired a job as a secretary that she learned about computers. She initially feared the computer: “something about that cold, plastic machine and glaring screen seemed really scary to me. But once I learned how to turn the thing on, open a program, type a letter, save it, and print it, I was hooked” (Sherman 1998, 4). Sherman’s story is a familiar one. Her first computer was bought from money that she had from selling her car. A neighbour helped her pick out the right computer (one that she could afford). This is where the familiar story ends: with stunning and sudden success, she launched her website in January of 1995: The World according to Cybergrrl. Her story, she suggests, testifies to the notion that women do not have to be nerds to find a place of their own in online environments:

I am living proof that you don’t have to be a techie or computer whiz to benefit from the Internet. Going online isn’t really about computers; it’s about communication as well as making connections to both information and people. And making connections can help you in many aspects of your life—personally and professionally. Cybergrrl says… Get online! (Sherman 1998, 8).

Cybergrrl champions getting women and girls online, preventing them from being left behind in an increasingly technical world, Sherman says. Cybergrrl articulates a no-nonsense approach to the Internet: just do it! In Sherman’s text, cybergrrl rhetoric is balanced with her own pragmatic, you-can-do-it approach to the Internet. The book is divided into the “nuts and bolts” of coming online, safety tips, netiquette, blocking bad stuff, making the Web work for you and interviews with online pioneers. And unlike Sinclair, Sherman addresses issues of harassment and intimidation. In her section on female Internet pioneers, she includes women of different age groups who are all engaged in careers enhanced or directly facilitated by their Internet involvement. For example, Stephanie Brail’s online harassment experience inspired her to start a business to support women online. Joan Korenman’s interpersonal relationships are enhanced through online connections with people from various parts of the world. Each of
them stress information, personal relationships, and professional success. Korenman ends her statement by saying:

I think it’s vitally more important that more women become involved with electronic communications. Increasingly, that’s the channel through which all of us, women and men alike, will get our information. People without access to this technology, or who are afraid of it, will be like those in earlier time (and even some today) who lacked access to books and literacy. A disproportionate number were/were women. I hope that, at least in a small way, I’m helping to change this (Korenman in Sherman 1998, 152).

A comparison of the two authors show that Sherman speaks more directly to women whose fears of technology may keep them from entering the Web. In her plot, the main character, Sherman herself, roams the margins. Subordinated by a dominant male culture, lack of knowledge and few financial resources, she is barely able to buy the absolute essentials. The plot changes, however, into a success story. Sherman resurfaces as “cybergrrl”—a heroine of the Internet. This type of subaltern story is, as expressed by historian Kerwin Lee Klein (1997), almost always romantic: “The subaltern has been tragically oppressed but heroically surmounts these barriers and emerges triumphant, autonomous, and independent” (Klein 1997, 272). In Sherman’s story, the creation of The World According to Cybergrrl and cybergrrl herself are triumphant. And so are the other heroines in the book: Stephanie Brail and Joan Korenman—to name a few.

In contrast, Sinclair presents another plot. In her story, the heroine—Net Chick—is a cyberbabe. Appropriating words such as BITCH to “Babes In Their Cyber Hangout”, Sinclair positions Net Chicks as feminine kick-ass individuals who belong in cyberspace. These grrls are not ridden by fear, but guided by a feistiness characteristic of third wave feminism and, I argue, inspired by early pioneer women. The story is, at no point, even remotely tragic (except perhaps for the individuals who choose not to follow them). Net Chicks are rhetorically portrayed as a dominant force. They are triumphant and they challenge others to dare join them. Positioning Net Chicks as autonomous, strong, independent young women allows Sinclair to present a narrative of young women’s presence on the Internet that far exceeds the more familiar picture painted by Sherman. It is a narrative that challenges the conventional idea that women are afraid of technology.

Invitational rhetoric and grrls revisited

Grrl rhetoric demonstrates that linguistic resources are not only available to one group. This necessitates a move away from identity categories to ways in which individuals appropriate linguistic resources to materially position themselves as gendered (Kulick 2000). Linguistic anthropologist Don Kulick (2000) poses that the notion of masculinity, for example, must be taken out of its identity category. It must be understood as a linguistic performance, which means that others (non-males) also can appropriate so-called “masculine” speech. Masculinity, then, is reduced to (speech) performances—a performance that resembles cultural and social stereotypes associated with speech performed by males (Kulick 2000). Kulick draws his inspiration from the work done by feminist rhetorician and philosopher Judith Butler (1990, 1997). Butler creates gender trouble by bringing performativity into gender studies—deconstructing “gender” in the process and placing “sex” as a discursive category. Butler’s work has been groundbreaking, and it is her attention to language that is most salient to this discussion of grrls. To Butler, language is both agent and agency. We do things with language, produce effects with language and we do things to language, but language is also the thing that we do, she says (Butler 1997, 8). Vulnerability to language as in the example of hate speech—and resignification of hate speech, as in the
example of “queer” and “bitch”—the speaker regains an opportunity to talk back.

Inspired by Butler, an analysis of grrl rhetoric suggests that words such as frontier, pioneer, geek, chick, babe and bitch have no fixed meanings. Rather, grrls detach them from their referents. And it works, Butler argues, because a form of critical agency is attributed to the speaker. A form of critical agency that foregoes what she calls *speech foreclosure*, a kind of unofficial censorship or primary restriction in speech that simultaneously constitutes the possibility of agency in speech:

The resignification of speech requires opening new contexts, speaking in ways that have never yet been legitimated, and hence producing legitimation in new and future forms (Butler 1997, 41).

In new media contexts, grrls appropriate former derogatory terms to suggest alternative understandings. In so doing, they demonstrate that masculine or feminine rhetorical styles must be understood as resources available to both women and men. Hierarchical discourse is, thus, not inherently “male” nor necessarily non-feminist. Rhetoric may never be free of an element of persuasion. Grrls appropriate what I choose to term the *frontier repertoire of signifiers* exactly, because historically it has connoted victimization of women and people of colour. They wish to challenge the affective meaning of the frontier by resignifying it—in a new context to mean resistance and change. Refusing to belong in one gendered category only, grrls put existing gendered rhetorical resources to use—they bite back.

**Concluding thoughts**

Sherman and Sinclair see themselves as capable, strong, assertive, societal agents and consequently they claim that gender identity politics does not appeal to them. Feminist writers Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards (2000) speak to these young women’s approach to feminism when they say that the third wave is “buoyed by the confidence of having more opportunities and less sexism” (p. 83). Grrls do not see themselves as cross-dressers in a man’s world, rather they articulate a need to explore what Condit (1997) refers to as human styles of communication. This includes different enactments of feminine and masculine styles that challenge a dichotomous gender position. Grrls position themselves as differently gendered in different contexts. They engage in gendered speech to promote and articulate their perspective, as they best see fit. Their audience consists of third wave young women, thus, tools of empowerment—challenging elite men’s domination of cyberspace by creating online spaces of their own—are cherished. They depart from notions of invitational rhetoric, while they also share a desire for rhetoric to take place in safe communication environments. Grrls claim spaces for young women in cyberspace by appropriating the notion of the “salon” as well as the notion of the “frontier”. Their main rhetorical goal includes a refusal to be left behind and an insistence that more grrls need to join the digital world. Grrls demand change through resistance.

**NOTES**

2. Notice that grrls is sometimes spelled with two and other times with three ‘r’s.

**REFERENCES**


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