

LA COMMUNICATION ELECTRONIQUE EN QUESTIONS

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**LA COMMUNICATION
ELECTRONIQUE
EN QUESTIONS**



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Hélène BOURDELOIE

Expressive Digital Media and Social Relations of Gender and Class

As part of a research project on the reconfiguration of identity and gender relations in light of digital devices¹, following several previous studies, we will presently examine the role of gender – as a variable through the notion of sex² which is part of it but also as a concept – as well as that of social class³ in order to conceptualize their relations to information and communication technologies (ICT), and more specifically to expressive digital media (Social Network Services called SNS, wikis, blogs, etc.). Several dimensions must be taken into account in order to understand the relevance of these media in relation to gender identity and social class. On the one hand, the notion of « digital writing » is inherently relevant from this point of view because it unites two traditionally opposed universes: the first, dominated by writing, belongs to the register of legitimate and scholarly culture, whereas the second, that of the digital, is the sphere of technical culture dominated by men. They differ from each other regarding the standards and values

- 1 Entitled ARPEGE (LA Reconfiguration des Pratiques culturelles Et du GENre à l'ère du numérique), this project (2012-2013) is funded by the Département des études, de la prospective et des Statistiques (Deps), of the French Ministry of Culture, and the Labex ICCA. Its' coordinated with Virginie Julliard (Université de Technologie de Compiègne) and Nelly Quemener (Université Paris 3).
- 2 Although gender is generally understood as the social construction of sex (the « social sex »), studies on gender do not agree entirely on the concepts of gender and of sex. We can, however, employ the useful distinction of Isabelle Clair according to which « sex is a mark of belonging to a social group » whereas « gender does not only designate belonging to a sex group » but « reveals a logic that organizes all of society » (2012: p. 11).
- 3 To emphasize the concept of « class » is not neutral. It involves naming the social hierarchy that makes groups as unequal (in material, social, political and symbolic resources) and showing that this hierarchy is not natural but results from « conflicts and power relations between the different groups to which it gives rise » (Bihl 2012: p. 6).

conferred to each, and the gendered attributes applied to each; significant studies have generally established a sex-based division in social and cultural interests, assimilating science and technology with masculinity, culture with femininity. Indeed, women are more likely to show an interest in writing (Donnat, 2005), whereas technology and masculinity are coupled in a *quasi* natural relationship. On the other hand, the expressive, or even expressivist⁴ character of these media (Allard, 2009), suggests forms of culture and self-expression that lead the individual to a performance of identity (*ibid.*). Emphasis is placed on the expressive individual and her or his capacity for autonomous self-construction. However, the question of gender and class-based social relations puts the emphasis as much on sex-based inequalities, that is « the social and historical production of antagonism between the ‘class of men’ and the ‘class of women’ and the resulting inequalities » (Pfefferkorn, 2012: 17) –, as on the inequalities of class, notably the position occupied in the social hierarchy depending on one’s socio-professional category or the possession of symbolic resources such as diplomas. We will presently examine the mechanisms that produce difference, in addition to the pressures from social structures and structural constraints, while recognizing, as Pfefferkorn reminds us, that the concept of social relations tends to imply that, although individuals are made according to the position that they occupy in social space, they « can construct margins of freedom and action allowing them to displace social relations » (2012: 122).

« Expressivism » (Allard, 2009) thus maintains an optimistic vision of these media, whereas questions of social relations of gender and class lead to a disenchanting vision of the world that reminds us that one’s relation to these media is largely conditioned by class and sex differentiation which is far from natural, since it is constructed within the framework of relations of domination. After having elaborated on the contents of the gender system and how it can determine one’s relation to technology and to ICT, we will examine the ways in which social relations of gender and class condition the uses of contemporary

4 Stemming from the notion of « expressivism », this adjective is, as we will demonstrate, specifically employed in France by Laurence Allard who is inspired by the work of the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor devoted to the origins of contemporary individualism, and notably in the expressivist current of the romantic period.

expressive digital media, revealing their extremely gendered expressivism.

Gender system, practices and technological objects

The construction of gender via objects and practices

In the field of sociology of uses or technologies, it is often suggested that sex-based differences in uses of technologies are based on thought patterns specific to each sex. However, we know that such differences are not the result of sex in the biological sense of the word but of gender, a more useful notion for grasping the social construction of (« sexed ») identity⁵ in which « power relations » (Scott, 1986) play into the man-woman relation and in the classification as masculine and feminine, on the basis of « perceived differences between the sexes » (ibid.). Using the notion of « gender » rather than that « sex » thus does not signify subscribing to any contemporary current but to take into account, in a critical perspective (ibid.), the cultural and social construction of identities and sex-based norms. The notion of gender thus allows one to « escape from the natural inevitability of sex » (Fassin, 2008: 374) – the gender identity being « the suppression of natural likenesses » (Rubin, 1975, cited by Fassin, 2008: 376) – even though, for some feminists, the notion of « sex » already implies, above all, a social categorization. In this sense, the use of the term gender allows, as L. Parini states, « to announce from the start that we are speaking only of the social even while considering ‘the natural’ as an equally socially and historically determined fact » (2006). This notion is thus relevant to the analysis of cultural and digital practices since it allows a denaturalizing of sexed differences which, in reality, construct themselves during the socialization of children when they are subject to specific expectations

5 In the Social Sciences, English-speaking anthropologists such as Gayle Rubin (« The Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex », in R. Reiter (ed.), *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, 1975) and Ann Oakley (*Sex, Gender and Society*, 1972), who used the concept of gender in the 1970s to signify social and cultural constructions of sex-based belonging (Parini 2006).

according to their sex; boys are socialized in a context that pushes them to use technologies and computers more than girls, who are guided to more scholarly cultural activities (October 2009). The construction of practices is in fact the product of the incorporation of social norms which, as M. Foucault indicates (1966), designate a diffused set of values that implicitly constrain the behavior of individuals in society and thus define « normal » functioning. The « gender system » employs gender norms that constitute beliefs and practices in which masculine and feminine are defined at a sociocultural level. Certain cultural practices, or those of socialization, are in fact the products of what is said to be feminine and masculine because they respond to current social norms within societies that predispose men and women to exercise certain practices rather than others.

To analyze practices in light of the gender question rather than that of sex also means understanding, as shown by the work of M. Mead⁶ and of F. Héritier⁷, that the attributes of each sex vary according to cultures and eras and that, due to this fact, sex identity is never fixed. This is why behaviors and practices evolve. Thus O. Donnat (2005) asserts that the sexed relationship to technology or to cultural activities is not the result of secular (or natural) predilection but that of profound social transformations experienced by society. This is why it is important to avoid making social facts into natural ones. Based on practices and behaviors, gender also influences objects, conceived by individuals assigned a gender identity since even though they do not have a sex, technological objects are nonetheless sexed, from their conception to their commercialization and their consumption. For example, the typewriter was thought of as a feminine object, promoted as such and accompanied by social discourse validating that idea (Gardey, 2001). As stated by D. Gardey, « in this way, the technical elements themselves – having a similar appearance to the sewing machine, and a keyboard like a piano's – were constructed as feminine (ibid.: 326). On the other hand, the laptop computer was conceived as an object marked with the seal of male domination (Turkle, 1986; Jouët, 2003), all the more since its potential of use was limited, initially, to programming. This issue has

6 Of particular interest are M. Mead, *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* (1935) and *A Study of the Sexes in a Changing World* (1949).

7 For example, Héritier F. (dir.) (2010), *Hommes, femmes, la construction de la différence*, Paris, Éditions Le Pommier, 192 p.

been the focus of many works that suggested that the incorporation of cultural attributes of the male gender into computers has been at the origin of the reticence women have left, since the 1990s, towards these objects (Turkle, 1986). Studies (Perry & Greber, 1990) have in fact indicated that women do not favor computers because the software does not correspond to their sex identity or because video games are inspired by stereotypes of sex-based roles excluding feminine roles. At the time when S. Turkle (1986) conducted her research, all women shared the same rejection, even the most competent in computer use. According to the author, women reject computers because they symbolize what a woman is not, and seem removed from ways in which women envision human relations.

Gendered relations to ICTs

This approach also allows us to understand why women's reticence towards computers is lessening. It is true that the machines, having undergone changes in shape (for example, use of *design* in some technological objects) as well as the diversification of modes of use available, notably via the web, have become general. These evolutions influence skills and reconfigure gendered relations towards technology. Thus major national and international studies show that today men and women are – at least in Western countries – nearly the same in terms of numbers of Internet users (Comscore, 2010). It is also relevant to note that women devote more time (*ibid.*), contrary to what was observed in previous studies (PEW, 2005). However, the relevance of the data regarding the sex variable is above all in the distribution of content, women favoring evidently relational activities, but also websites concerning issues related to domestic life and raising children (Comscore, 2010). In addition, these results affirm qualitative works on uses which observed that women devote themselves more frequently to practical uses whereas purely technological uses are more often masculine interests (Jouët, 2003). This reflects sex-based social roles, since the uses of the web tend to reproduce the sexed division of interests, which determines one's perspective on ICT and regarding one's own skills. Many studies have indeed shown that women consider themselves as less competent than men, who have a very high esteem for

their own skills (Le Douarin, 2002; Hargittai & Shafer, 2006). On a more general level, these studies have also shown how self-esteem does influence one's use of ICT. Thus the « variable » of sex is an important factor when examining the differences in use and ways of perceiving one's own skills. Hargittai and Shafer (2006) recall that in the 1980s, studies confirmed that women felt less pleasure than men when using a computer and that they considered themselves as inefficient (*self-efficacy*). Although nowadays women express more confidence, sexed differences in computer use and relation to the machine persist, since gender pervades not only machines but also social discourse, marking it with preconceptions attributing supposed skills according to sex (*ibid.*). Hargittai and Shafer (2006) demonstrate how the gendered relation to technology goes beyond the question of efficiency of skills, in that this relation is strongly influenced by social and cultural representations which disqualify women on this level – they would be considered as less competent with computers – and contribute to maintaining this belief for them. Conversely, men are more numerous in considering themselves as competent experts (*ibid.*; Le Douarin, 2002) since technology is, according to stereotypes, a masculine field.

However, as L. Le Douarin (2002) observes, there is a considerable gap between actual competence and auto-evaluation. Evaluation of one's own skills is more a product of hierarchical sex relations, of the place held within the household and *ipso facto* derives from the assignation of social roles. Since the ideology of skills is distinct from the skills themselves (Le Douarin, 2004), we can understand that the idea that men have of their skills is the result of the perception of their sex identity, produced by a system of norms and social relations between the sexes. The individual is forced to conform to a gender norm which, for men, involves a large basis of technological skills *versus* a deficit for women on this level. Faced with this norm, men and women adopt behaviors and attitudes *ad hoc*, notably regarding self-esteem. We might also suppose that this is equally true for other fields considered as « masculine », in which women consider themselves to be less competent. Although it is true that the technological dimension to computer science generally does not interest most women, the evolution of the computer machine towards a communication media due to the web and the rise of relational platforms has allowed women to take control, more and more « naturally » though according to modalities distinct from those of men

since their uses remain dominated by interpersonal exchanges (Comscore, 2010).

Expressive digital media and Gender relations and Class relations

Social changes and the rise of expressivism

It is now clear that gender norms are culturally and historically contingent. In addition, the factors that destabilize them today are numerous. Profound social and structural changes have affected contemporary western society, such as transformations of family dynamics (decrease in patriarchal authority and emerging of alternative family models for example), the redefinition of conventional sex-based roles (de Singly, 2002) and changes in women's status, amplified by transformations and shifting values during the 1970s in favor of a hedonistic and individualist ideology. In this context, the framework of traditional socialization such as school or family have lost influence and the individual has become increasingly obliged to choose an identity. Traditional institutions no longer fulfill their role in the construction of the individual's identity, and certain sociologists have suggested that identity is no longer assigned *de facto* but rather fashioned by the individual him or herself according to « expressive work » (Allard, 2009), an individual that constructs his or her identity and reflects upon it; a process some sociologists have named « expressive individualism » (ibid.)⁸. Concerning changes in family structures and the decline of

8 The hypothesis of Laurence Allard that expressive individualism « puts emphasis on expressive work through which individuals perform their identities » is particularly based on the suggestions of U. Beck (*Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. London: Sage, 1992), of C. Taylor (*Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity*. Harvard University Press, 1989) and of A. Giddens and his concept of « reflexive modernity », *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, 1991).

authoritative parenting, A. Giddens⁹ speaks of the process of « democratization of the private sphere », characteristic of our post-industrial societies, in which the reflexive concept of self takes on a considerable importance (cited by Pasquier, 2005: 22). According to F. de Singly¹⁰, these new family models, in which values of autonomy are prominent, create « conditions for children to participate in the construction of their own identity » (ibid.: 23). Expressive digital media participate precisely in a form of culture and of self-production which – according to L. Allard –, allows subjects to perform their identity (ibid.). The author shows how, in reversing cultural roles (Allard & Blondeaux, 2007) – individuals taking on the role of cultural producers – users become cultural creators. This optimistic assessment nonetheless allows little place for ordinary creativity and for the influences on creativity resulting from gender relations and class relations. The individuals certainly do not devote themselves to the same expressive work according to their sex and their social class. We shall examine the contribution that expressivism – or at least certain forms of it – has made to inequality from the point of view of sex relations and class relations.

Uses of expressive digital media and social relations of gender and class

Observations in the field, whether concerning young junior high school students¹¹, Parisian college students or adult learners in a public digital space (PDS) in the city of Amiens, have shown the relevance of gender as a useful concept for analyzing sex as a considerable demographic variable, even though it is necessary to consider other variables such as generation or social class. During adolescence, the sex gap is strongly apparent in the cultural and leisure domains – an observation that figures prominently in the work of D. Pasquier (2005) according to whom the opposition between the masculine and feminine poles of culture are subject to classification conflicts (ibid.: 65); boys tend to impose the definition of situations in terms of cultural codes (ibid.: 11). D. Pasquier

9 Anthony Giddens, 1993, *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 216 p.

10 François de Singly, 2003, *Les uns avec les autres. Quand l'individualisme crée du lien*, Paris, Armand Colin, 268 p.

11 Observation of adolescents in their last year of junior high, in Picardy.

has shown for example that there is a hierarchy at the core of adolescent sociability « that places boys' practices above those of girls » (ibid.: 104); from an early age, boys learn disdain for sentimentalism, the classic feminine pole (ibid.). This sex gap at adolescence varies, however, according to social class since among the working class « male values penetrate the female universe, whereas in the upper classes, virility is no longer absolutely necessary » (Duret, 1999, cited in Pasquier, 2005: 104). The author indicates that the sex segregation has become more obvious with the rise in technological media which have « contributed to maintaining the condescending perspective that boys have towards feminine tastes for 'traditional' activities such as reading or television, as well as their tendency to favor self-expression through interpersonal communication rather than through shared activities » (Pasquier, 2005: 105). As D. Pasquier has observed that the « tyranny of the majority » is evident in the canons of media and cultural consumption, we can thus speak of a tyranny of the male gender that tends to dictate norms of « good » cultural and media consumption. These power relations were observed in the context of a study¹² conducted in a junior high where digital writing was taught. Since the composition of the groups was made according to the student's choice, groups were extremely gendered: each student seeking proximity with a same-sex individual. More generally, these sex distinctions are extremely revealing in self-exposition via Social Network Services and can even have dramatic consequences, for example the young female adolescent from this same junior high who attempted suicide after her reputation was dragged in mud on Facebook.

As adults, the sex differences in use seem to consolidate themselves but are no longer subject to rivalry between the sexes: women use these media of expression especially for interpersonal relations whereas men use them for shared activity. Accordingly, during the observation of a workshop devoted to learning to use Facebook in a PDS, we noticed to what extent the uses of the learners reflect a significant difference according to sex, a factor that remains correlated to cultural and social gaps which it reinforces (Bourdaloie & Julliard, 2012). Indeed, the sex variable is strongly linked to that of social class, as shown by numerous studies (Granjon, 2009). In this PDS, which trains rather socially-

12 Experimentation on collaborative writing practiced in the context of the PRECIP <www.precip.fr> project, whose goal is computer literacy.

isolated individuals, the creation of a Facebook profile and its use are a means for insertion and conformity to a social norm. Their uses take root in their very gendered cultural and social universes. Thus, among two profiles that are subject to particular attention, a woman expressed requests exclusively linked to relational use of the media whereas the man wanted to share cultural information. The uses of the first one were marked by the seal of gender and class: disqualified both socially and culturally, she developed the use of Facebook only for entertainment, in the continuity of her leisure activities, whereas the second user used it as a platform for sharing cultural preferences (Bourdeloie & Julliard, 2012).

For her, the Social Network Services serves as a relational platform for friendly sharing; for him, it is a cultural platform that allows the possibility for friendly meeting, or even romantic encounter, but is not described as such. The woman is in the culture of feeling and the man in the culture of shared activities. The uses of these learners in the context of the PDS are representative of social relations of sex and class parallel to use of Social Network Services. In the PDS for example, the learners wanted to enlarge their circle of sociability, while ruled by a form of homogeneity. Thus, the learners are incapable of enlarging their network and remain in a polarized sociability based on strong ties. The Social Network Services shed light on considerable social disparities between individuals with the effect of exacerbating inequalities (Cardon, 2011). Their modalities of use exist within social relations that demonstrate the limits of the expressivist model.

Considering expressivism in light of gender

Shouldn't the expressivist model be examined in light of the social constraints that limit the subversive dimension of these practices? If Social Network Services allow individuals to choose an identity according to situations, they nonetheless remain, as Facebook, universes of consummation wherein the individual is above all defined as a *consumer* (Mondoux, 2009). We can thus reverse the model of analysis and no longer think in terms of acting subjects but subjects enduring the prescriptions of a service with its many restrictions and obligations. One might thus wonder if this type of device – which encourages addiction –, does not lead, conversely, to a form of alienation (*ibid.*), as previously

stated in the dissertations of Frankfort (Jouët, 2011: 72). Construction of one's identity on the Social Network Services does not in fact seem to favor personal autonomy and can even, according to O. Voirol, reinforce « pathologies of the digital self » (2011: 152). In this perspective, in spite of expressive potentials of these media in terms of identity play, these may actually reinforce socially-attributed sex identity, confining women in their inferior status. For example, it would seem that the « expressivist current » (Allard & Blondeaux, 2007) of the social web is divided by sex. If this current contributed to a significant reversal of cultural roles, similar changes were not observed regarding gender. And if cultural production is not only the product of specific authorities but also of ordinary individuals, it can also come from women, capable of producing « feminine points of view ». This is one of the changes in the rules of the game regarding the production of content on the web, since initially imbued with androcentrism as it has been constructed by men, ICTs have included female productions, although always bearing the mark of the masculine. For example, the case of the encyclopedia *Wikipedia* is symptomatic, with a different rate of participation according to sex – the proportion of readers and contributors being much larger for men, who comprise 80% of contributors (Dejean & Jullien, 2012) –, so that the production of « feminine » content constitutes a real challenge for the Wikimedia foundation (Bourdeloie, 2012). Some studies state that there are more male readers because of the types of content, in majority produced by men (Lim & Kwon, 2010). In any case, the technological argument is no longer valid¹³ (Glott et al., 2010) contrary to other arguments such as the sex-base distribution of time – women having less free time due to their greater investment in the organization of the household (Hargittai & Shafer, 2006) – or even the relation women have to culture. Just as they feel less competent in computers due to self-conviction, they feel less legitimate as participants in cultural production, as if this activity was outside of their enclosed field, that is, their sex identity. This is a reflection based on a number of facts. Each is of course « transfugitive », but women continue to be underrepresented in the construction of the web. Another significant example is the staging of oneself on Social Network Services, always highly gendered. Dedicated to uses of Social Network Services, the

13 Only 8,8% of respondents declared that they would be more likely to contribute if « the technology was easier to use ».

Sociogeek study (Aguiton et al., 2009) has thus shown that modalities of expression differ according to sex; men expose themselves more than women and are more inclined to favor the most expressive modes of expression notably « provocation trash » (15,7% for men compared to 5,8% for women). *A contrario*, women are more numerous to expose themselves along traditional lines (33,4% compared to 20,3% for men) where they emphasize daily life and family-based events, or even display a form of « bodily immodesty » (22,8% compared to 17,4% for men). There is thus a definite « gender expressivism » though the specific content of it is yet to be explored.

Expressive digital media offer an interesting opportunity for analyzing gender, due to their hybrid characteristics. Reconciling technology – a field said to be masculine due to the acculturation of boys into its universe since early childhood – and written communication – primarily a feminine universe – they present an interest for the study of transformations of gender norms of which they are, along with other institutions and social mechanisms, upholders. They contribute to trouble the distribution of masculinized and feminized activities. There is nonetheless a « gender expressivism » which manifests itself through persistent gender relations behind the curtains – we can recall, for instance, arguments surrounding the writing of an article on Wikipedia – as well as on the front stage of these media, revealing a reproduction of gender norms that force women to live socio-digital experiences that, far from liberating them from their assigned status, disqualify them both sexually and socially.

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