Gender struggles in Web 2.0

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Although Web 2.0 is claimed to be democratic and user-centred, from a queer-feminist perspective a range of exclusive, stereotypical and discriminating characteristics of social network sites, wikis and weblogs come into view. In my contribution, I focus on gender relations in Web 2.0. First, I consider the gendered design and use as well as the presentations of gendered identities in social network profiles and weblogs. Second, I investigate the opportunities for pursuing feminist, queer and gender politics and for negotiating gender topics in Web 2.0 (see also Carstensen 2009).

Web 2.0 – democratic and user-centred?

Web 2.0 refers to a 'second generation' of Internet development and design where websites enable users to do more than just retrieve information. Weblogs, wikis, podcasts and social networking sites, such as Facebook, YouTube, MySpace and studiVZ, facilitate communication, information sharing, collaboration, community building and networking. Web 2.0 is considered to be user-centred, supporting dynamic content, openness, freedom and collective intelligence by way of user participation. The agency of users is expected to increase enormously; every user is a potential sender who is able to publish content on the Web and link it to other content. Again, hopes of democratisation, new public spaces, community building, empowerment and participation arise (critically: Reichert 2008, Schmidt 2008).

Gender relations in social network sites, wikis and weblogs: design, use and identity constructions

First studies on gendered aspects of Web 2.0 show a heterogeneous picture: Analysis of the scripts of the registration forms on social network sites as well as of users' self-presentations in personal profiles display stereotypical constructions of gender identities on the part of both designers and users. Wötzel-Herber (2008) shows that there are only few networks where individuals can become a member without defining themselves as either male or female. Only few offer options allowing users to declare their gender as 'unknown' or 'other'. However, in networks such as Facebook, MySpace or the German community studiVZ, a social network for students, users are forced to position themselves clearly as either male or female. If a studiVZ user identifies with other genders and refuses to choose one of the two alternatives, they are confronted with the following statement: "Only male or female entities

can register with us!'" Besides, in studiVZ all functions are named using the German male form, i.e. "Administrator", "Student" or "Moderator", expressions in which women are not visible (the female form would require adding the suffix –in).

Internet research once saw the Internet as an 'identity workshop' (Turkle 1995) with the potential for deconstructing binary gender roles. Contrary to such visions, authenticity has emerged as the decisive norm, requiring that one presents one's 'real' identity and disposing the user to disclose as much personal information as possible. Wötzel-Herber (2008) and Manago et al. (2008) show how users insist on the category of gender in a remarkable way. They come to the conclusion that users voluntarily provide a great deal of information about their gender and their sexual orientation. Thus, we can observe a strong relevance of gender binarity and role stereotypes in social networks. On the one hand, the technical design of the platforms often is androcentric and does not allow for options other than male and female, therefore reifying the dual gender system and excluding persons with identities that do not fit the two categories. On the other hand, despite opportunities for realizing diverse and non-conforming gender roles, most of the users present themselves in a stereotypical manner. Gender seems to be the most important category for self-presentation.

Another picture arises when we consider weblogs from a gender perspective. Here, we first come across the fascinating finding that there is a higher percentage of female than of male authors. In particular, more teenage girls than boys appear to author blogs. Harders and Hesse (2006), for example, found that in their sample of German bloggers nearly 85% of the teenagers and at least 67.4% of the entire group were female. In the USA, the PEW Internet & American Life Project (2007) reports that 35% of all online teen girls blog compared with 20% of online teen boys. The medium appears to be particularly attractive to women and girls. Furthermore, weblogs are also interesting concerning the identity constructions and self presentations of users. In their study of Dutch and Flemish weblogs, van Doorn, van Zoonen & Wyatt (2007) state that different versions of femininity are used to create a heterogeneous interpretation of female gender identity and multiple performances of femininity can be observed. Although the bloggers in this study present their gender identity by referring to their 'offline' lives and do not change, experiment or 'play' with their gender identity, they constantly perform their gender in multiple different ways as they post new entries. Landström (2007) also emphasizes the opportunities the Internet provides from a queer perspective. On the Web, lesbians and gay men have created new, non-heterosexual spaces where identity is not determined by an individual's past. She argues that the experience of being a different subject online than offline erodes the causal link between individual biography and political subject and sees this as offering significant opportunities for the advancement of queer politics.

By contrast, Wikipedia is clearly male dominated. Whereas in Germany 76% of men and 70% of women read and use the online encyclopaedia passively (Busemann & Gscheidle 2010), different studies come to the result that the proportion of women among the active users, that is the authors of Wikipedia, only lies between 6 and 15%.

We may conclude that while we observe a tendency to insist on binary gender roles in the design and use of social network sites, and Wikipedia seems to be a male domain, weblogs have developed into a place for girls and women to express themselves, offer space for diverse versions of femininity as well as for the construction of queer identities detached from offline identities.

Opportunities for feminist, queer and gender politics

Besides design, use and identity constructions, Web 2.0 has also given rise to a great variety of ways of using and designing Web 2.0 technologies in feminist contexts.

In contrast to the 'old' Internet with more or less static homepages, we can observe a wide range of weblogs from queer-feminist contexts, which are noticeably well linked, self-organized and actively discuss questions of politics, pop culture, sexuality etc., commenting and supporting each other as well as influencing wider discursive arenas. Also on Facebook, we find groups like "Girls on Web Society". And, recently, Twitter became an important space for feminist action. For example, in the Twitter-based campaign "#MooreandMe", feminists protested, initiated by Sady Doyle, against the misrepresentations of the rape allegations against Wikileaks founder Julian Assange by TV moderator Keith Olbermann and the author and film maker Michael Moore. With the hashtag #MooreandMe and the possibility of sending direct messages to Moore and Olbermann, obviously the pressure grew, and, after only one week, both took back their comments and publicly apologized.

At the same time, queer-feminist weblogs face sexist and homophobic attacks. Especially the possibility to comment articles in weblogs is used by "trolls" to provoke offensive hate campaigns ("shitstorms"). In Germany, extensive debates within the feminist Web community on how to deal with these attacks have recently lead to the idea of systematically collecting discriminating comments on a common website called "hatr.org".

However, feminist content is also attacked in Wikipedia: In August 2007, the entries on "Ladyfest" and "riot grrrl" in the German version of Wikipedia were suggested for deletion. Both were criticized for their lack of relevance, quality and significance, also doubting the facts presented in the entry. After a short, vehement discussion, the administrator decided against deleting both entries. This controversy shows that feminist content has to be defended and that feminist agency in Wikipedia therefore depends on the number of actively

participating proponents of feminism while it also testifies to the central role of the administrators.

Gendered controversies over photos occurred on Facebook 2007 when it started to delete pictures of breastfeeding women, citing "contempts of the terms of use", which prohibit pictures of naked breasts. As a reaction, the group „Hey Facebook, breastfeeding is not obscene!" was founded. It grew fast, now has 260,000 members and shows more than 7,000 photos of breastfeeding women on its site.

Beside these struggles for content it is remarkable that technological design becomes subject of conflicts and negotiations, too: In the case of studiVZ, the above mentioned binary registration forms as well as the taken-for-granted use of the male forms for "Administrator" or "Freund" triggered the foundation of the group "gender-sensitive language on studiVZ". The group formulated the goal of also using female forms with the German suffix "–in", like "Moderatorin" or "Studentin". A student had expressed this concern to the responsible persons at studiVZ and posted her mail and the administrator's answer in the group forum. The administrator responded that implementing gender-sensitive language would be "highly difficult". The demands to change the registration forms were unsuccessful as well.

Also on Facebook 2007, a group was founded that fights "For a queer positive facebook....". The members of the group lobbied the site operators to make certain changes to the way user profiles are currently formatted. The users wanted Facebook to add new features to the user profiles that would allow a more inclusive representation of a wide range of personal self-identities. For example, the drop down menu for "sex" should be changed to "gender" and switched to a "fill in the blank" format. Furthermore, the next category "interested in" should have extra boxes for "none" and "other", followed by a "fill in the blank" box added to the selection of "men" and "women". They also developed and offered an application that provides the requested options. However, Facebook did not change the profile forms yet.

Conclusions

So, how user-centred and democratic is Web 2.0 from a gender perspective? The short overview shows ambivalent and contradictory results: discrimination, androcentrism, stereotypes and exclusion, on the one side, diversity and room for new experiences, on the other. Furthermore, new spaces for feminist politics arise, which offer room for discussion, networking, protest, requests, agenda setting, mobilization and influencing wider public areas. Thus, we can state that, to some extent, the technological possibilities for user participation may also strengthen feminist politics.

It is evident that the possibilities for users to create feminist and gender-relevant content, like entries in Wikipedia and groups in social networks, have increased with Web 2.0. Users have

lots of possibilities to take part in content production (texts, pictures, groups), which allow establishing feminist issues on the Web. At the same time, these opportunities for user participation lead to a situation where feminist content has to be defended and justified against the attacks of other users, thus hindering feminist politics. Which aspect prevails depends less on technological constraints but more on formal and informal power structures of administrators and moderators, which are crucial for the success of feminist aims. Especially in the case of social network sites, it becomes clear that user agency is hierarchically restricted by the operators and their decisions about design, language, profiles and registration forms etc. User efforts to change the design to be more inclusive and less stereotyping have failed completely; the gender scripts in the design are claimed to be unchangeable, and there exist no – social and technological – possibilities for the user to intervene.

Gender and feminist issues are negotiated in Web 2.0 in more manifest and more controversial ways than in the earlier times of the Internet. Feminist users engage in struggles over content, design, language, attempt new forms of politics and experiment with the new technologies. However, although feminist users have a voice, develop clear ideas of desired design and are able to articulate them on Web 2.0, their power and agency to participate and change the content and design of Web 2.0 are restricted, both socially and technically.

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