Beyond the Digital Diva: 
Women on the World Wide Web

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not been previously submitted for a degree at any tertiary educational institution.

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Carrie Kilpin
Abstract

In the year 2000, American researchers reported that women constituted 51 percent of Internet users. This was a significant discovery, as throughout the medium’s history, women were outnumbered by men as both users and builders of sites. This thesis probes not only this historical moment of change, but how women are mobilising the World Wide Web in their work, leisure and lives.

Not considered in the ‘51% of American women now online’ headline is the lack of women engaged in Web building rather than Web shopping. In technical fields relating to the Web, women are outnumbered and marginalized, being poorly represented in computer-related college and university courses, in careers in computer science and computer programming, and also in digital policy. This thesis identifies the causes for the low number of women in these spheres. I consider the social and cultural reasons for their exclusion and explore the discourses which operate to discourage women’s participation.

My original contribution to knowledge is forged as much through how this thesis is written as by the words and footnotes that graze these pages. With strong attention to methodology in Web-based research, I gather a plurality of women’s voices and experiences of under-confidence, humiliation and fear. Continuing the initiatives of Dale Spender’s Nattering on the Net, I research women’s use of the Web in placing a voice behind the statistics. I also offer strategies for digital intervention, without easy platitudes to the ‘potential’ for women in the knowledge economy or through Creative Industries strategies.
The chapters of this thesis examine the contexts in which exclusionary attitudes are created and perpetuated. No technology is self-standing: we gain information about ‘new’ technologies from the old. I investigate representations and mediations of women’s relationship to the Web in fields including the media, the workplace, fiction, the Creative Industries and educational institutions. For example, the media is complicit in causing women to doubt their technological capabilities. The images and ideologies of women in film, newspapers and magazines that present computer and Web usage are often discriminatory and derogatory. I also found in educational institutions that patriarchal attitudes privilege men, and discourage female students’ interest in digital technologies. I interviewed high school and university students and found that the cultural values embedded within curricula discriminate against women. Limitations in Web-based learning were also discovered.

In discussing the cultural and social foundations for women’s absence or under-confidence in technological fields, I engage with many theories from a prominent digital academic: Dale Spender. In her book *Nattering on the Net: Women, Power and Cyberspace*, Spender’s outlook is admonitory. She believes that unless women acquire a level of technological capital equal to their male counterparts, women will continue to be marginalised as new political and social ideologies develop. She believes women’s digital education must occur as soon as possible. While I welcome her arguments, I also found that Spender did not address the confluence between the analogue and the digital. She did not explore how the old media is shaping the new. While Spender’s research focused on the Internet, I ponder her theses in the context of the World Wide Web.
In order to intervene in the patriarchal paradigm, to move women beyond digital shoppers and into builders of the digital world, I have created a website (included on CD-ROM) to accompany this thesis’s arguments. It presents links to many sites on the Web to demonstrate how women are challenging the masculine inscriptions of digital technology. Although the website is created to interact directly with Chapter Three, its content is applicable to all parts of the thesis.

This thesis is situated between cultural studies and internet studies. This interdisciplinary dialogue has proved beneficial, allowing socio-technical research to resonate with wider political applications. The importance of intervention - and the need for change - has guided my words. Throughout the research and writing process of this thesis, organisations have released reports claiming gender equity on the Web. My task is to capture the voice, views and fears of the women behind these statistics.
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# Table of Contents

Copyright License ................................................................................................................ i  
Declaration .......................................................................................................................... ii  
Abstract .............................................................................................................................. iii  
Acknowledgements ............................................................................................................ vi  
Prologue .............................................................................................................................. 9  
Introduction ........................................................................................................................ 11  

## Section One: Commencing the Cyber-Conversation

*The Academic* .................................................................................................................. 29  
Chapter 1. Mapping a Digital Terrain:  
   Methodologies and Rational, Theories and Application ............................................. 31  

*A Housewife* .................................................................................................................... 63  
Chapter 2. Sampling a Digital Census:  
   Overview of the Web Population ........................................................................... 66  

*The Website Designer* .................................................................................................... 91  
Chapter 3. Game Over, Girls:  
   An Absence of Women in the Web’s Technical Development ............................. 94  

## Section Two: Techno-Texts: Writing (in) the Spaces

*The Journalist* ................................................................................................................ 121  
Chapter 4. Moving Beyond a Digital Girl Friday:  
   Women in the Media ................................................................................................. 124  

*The Online Fan* .............................................................................................................. 162  
Chapter 5. Heroines in a New Frontier:  
   Janeway and Scully in Online Discussion Fora .................................................... 165  

*The Book Reader* .......................................................................................................... 198  
Chapter 6. The Amazing Adventures of CyberWomen:  
   The Web in Fictional Texts ....................................................................................... 200  

## Section Three: Creating Change

*The Career Woman* ....................................................................................................... 225  
Chapter 7. Cyber (Super) Women:  
   The Web in the Workplace ..................................................................................... 228  

*The Man* .......................................................................................................................... 252
Chapter 8. (Un)Designing Digital Democracy:
  Women in the Creative Industries................................................................. 254

The Teacher ........................................................................................................ 278
Chapter 9. What Did We Learn Today?:
  Education in a Web Discourse................................................................. 280

Conclusion ........................................................................................................ 320
Appendix I ......................................................................................................... 335
Bibliography .................................................................................................... 338