CELL-ING OUT FEMINISM: THE DEMISE OF IDEOLOGICAL CRITIQUE IN "CONVERGENCE" THEORIES OF NEW MEDIA

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In his foreword to Lev Manovich's *The Language of New Media* (2001), Mark Tribe refers to the first wave of new media theory as "the California ideology," a euphemism for the "Oh Wow!" attitude towards both the technological advancements of new media and their social implications. More than just a cute fad that media studies went through, this initial period of technological fascination and speculation worked to keep critical perspectives out—Manovich's work was one of the first interventions. With the dot-com bust, critical perspectives found a more receptive audience, but contemporary trends in new media theory, specifically, convergence theory and social networking scholarship, are ushering in a second-wave California phase. As the 2009 Media in Transition conference (MIT6) held at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in Boston demonstrated, I would argue that this is a disturbing trend for feminism.

Normally an interesting mix between critique and industry-oriented research, the balance at MIT6 decidedly shifted to a fascination with industry's increased strides in harnessing the power of digital media—as with the panel on "New Media Business Models," which uncritically tracked the gains in target marketing and public space advertising. Just as significant, however, was "Television in a Post-Network Era," a panel that passively examined industry strategies for market viability in a shifting technological landscape. The disturbing trend of these approaches is bypassing the hegemonic issues that are at stake in favor of what can only be described as fascination with the industry: as if broadcast television has no history or vital role in the operations of social hierarchies like race, class, and gender. Indeed, these approaches function within a broader hegemonic process of passively accepting the colonization of yet another dominant media form by corporatism. As the massive amount of corporate spending in the struggle over Net-neutrality demonstrates, there is an enormous effort, however decentralized, to restructure the digital domain into one of exclusion, hierarchy, and privilege—to reconfigure the architecture of the Internet so that it functions through structures of control and access like broadcast television before it. Rather than being alarmed by this development, those who work within the framework of convergence theory and similar approaches mask their industry fascination by deftly—if rather hazily—acknowledging broader hegemonic operations while dismissing them in favor of a generic but empowered "user," who is now conceived as a "producer" and not just a "consumer" of media. As Robert Samuels (2009) points out in his book *New Media, Cultural Studies, and Critical Theory after Postmodernism*, however, the only resistance and ideological contestation in convergence theory "is the isolated individual

talking back to the media by repurposing cultural representations for unexpected and unintended reasons" (p. 30).

Samuels also demonstrates that convergence theory is another evolution of technological determinism, a paradigmatic approach which represses history, and, in this instance, refuses to see that despite all the tools empowering the user-as-producer, corporate media still drives the agenda and produces the dominant cultural discourses that users respond to. Digital media offers no significant difference in how media technologies and patterns of consumption first draw upon then subsequently reinforce categories and discourses of gender.

In her examination of mobile technology, for example, Leopoldina Fortunati (2009) describes how the cell phone was specifically conceived of, and targeted to, male users as primary or early adapters. When the market became saturated, manufacturers then switched to more attractive designs as a means of attracting female consumers. The marketing of the cell phone thus drew on the cultural categories of male/production/ functionality and subsequently female/consumption/fashion even as it worked to reinforce those same categories in the creation of a new digital culture. As Fortunati demonstrates, it is therefore not enough to historicize the technology itself, but also the socioeconomic conditions and cultural concepts that the technology works through and responds to.

In this respect, mobile technology needs to be analyzed as more than a site of technological convergence (telephony, email, text-messaging, music, and video) but also as a site of socioeconomic convergence. Indeed, two socioeconomic trends are significant to the early adapters of mobile technology (children born in the mid-1980s and through the 1990s) and its continuing reinforcement of categories of gender. The first such trend— seemingly innocuous—is that these early adapters are the first generations which grew up with the computer and computer technology as a fixture within the domestic sphere. The computer was a part of everyday home life like the television and the telephone, and like the former technologies, understood as a technological extension of the self: a convenient means for overcoming the spatial/temporal limitations of the physical self through technology. Moreover, for these generations, learning the computer and the logic of computers became a part of the developmental learning curve itself. Adapting to other digital technology is easier for this generation because the logic of the digital is cognitively mapped at an early age—making it seem natural in later years.

Growing up with computer technology as a natural part of the domestic sphere is significant in itself, but this socioeconomic factor (itself subject to the operations of class and geographical biases) converges with another emerging trend in early childhood development: substitute care. As Sandra L. Hofferth and Deborah A. Phillips (1987) show, the use of day care exists prior to this generation, but it began increasing dramatically in the 1970s, when women began entering the workplace in significant numbers. With the late 1980s to 1990s generations, however, the number of children cared for by non-parents— frequently by day care—rivaled the number of children cared for by parents. In the case of children with working parents in the United States, US Census Bureau statistics (2003) show only 21 percent of children under five were cared for by their parents (with 22 percent in a child care center, 17 percent in private home-based care, and another 7 percent cared for by some other non-home arrangement). For a great number within the generations of early adapters, childhood—and indeed the early stages of infancy itself—was structured around substituting their primary caretakers (mothers and fathers) for another. This temporary, but repetitive loss, and its concomitant substitution, structures socialization as an early,

necessary coping mechanism. Whereas in prior generations, the progression to elementary school was a rite of passage symbolizing the move from the familial to the social, for a significant amount of this generation, socialization is already a core part of identity formation—especially as a means of reassurance in the face of loss. As problematic as social science studies of day care are, they consistently point to what will be described late in life as "networking" skills acquired and exercised at an early age.

This capacity for networking—operating now at a core level of identity—is particularly significant for women and for feminism. As Fortunati (2009) argues, women must now function under two mandates: the professional sphere with its expectations (and limitations) and in the reproduction and maintenance of the domestic sphere. These combined and competing mandates, referred to in popular culture as the Super-Mom phenomenon, operate hegemonically in the socialization of adolescent, teen, and college-age females. As women, they know that social expectations dictate that they are good facilitators, organizers, and communicators—all necessary skills for the efficient maintenance and functioning of the domestic sphere. In addition, however, women have these same expectations—and more—in the professional sphere. In order to be productive, women must also be a certain kind of facilitator, and communicate in specific ways lest they be perceived as too masculine or too "bitchy." Furthermore, with this generation in particular, the demands for multi-tasking are increasing and rely specifically on digital technology skills.

These socioeconomic conditions and mandates converge at the site of mobile technology, where technology as an extension of the self operates within the circuit of identity confirmation and regulation. Sherry Turkle's (2008) work on the psychodynamics of teen cell phone use argues that the nearly constant need to text and talk on the cell phone functions within the broader drive to reconfirm and reconstitute identity. Her concept of the "tethered self" and its consequences for social-psychical development is fundamental for understanding the complex interactions between technology, identity, and the social realm. Moreover, by drawing upon Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, Turkle reasserts that it provides a model that integrates the operations of identity to specific historical and social conditions—allowing us to analyze the broader convergence at stake in a hegemonic process.

That college-age students in the US need to constantly check in, check it out, and receive reassurance is not solely the domain of the unconscious, but rather, a condition of, and a strategy (called networking) for a high-stakes and competitive social domain known as "the professions" (which for this generation will change three to four times). Moreover, it would be hard to describe as "false-consciousness" the ideological belief of this generation that a productive career in the professions is the only defense against the marginalization that this hierarchical society, with increasing economic disparity, produces. Here too, more socioeconomic conditions converge at the site of digital technology and its increasing use—most specifically, the radical shrinking and off-shoring of the manufacturing base. An entire segment of the middle-class economy—manufacturing management—has almost entirely disappeared from (ironically) most western industrialized nations. Once the domain of middle-class, college educated, white males, its disappearance has created more competition (and a backlash against feminism) for high-wage careers in non-productive labor. The promises of the new economy to overcome the shrinking industrial base have fallen flat, demonstrating that far from a comfortable and stable realm of wealth, the knowledge economy will be both volatile and competitive.

Given these cultural and economic dynamics, the question for feminism is how best to intervene in this process. Insightful analysis of ideological, hegemonic, and social operations is no longer enough, not when the potential for effective methods of contestation is so great. Even the glib assurances of convergence theory, with its overestimation of the active user, point to the hegemonic gaps and limitations created in the fluctuations of digital media culture's transitional period—a period that is giving every indication of coming to a close.

In this context, critical and feminist studies can no longer be content with the consciousness raising goal that underlies its project. As Fredric Jameson (1981) pointed out in *The Political Unconscious*, feminism can ill-afford to abandon this important goal, but it must progress onward to a positive hermeneutics. The need for such a hermeneutic is demonstrated in the current young generation's dependence on digital media and networking as a functional survival skill against economic marginalization. Rejecting technology is not an option, and likewise, a more critical consciousness of the technology they employ will fail to suffice as well. Rather, this generation and the ideological demands made upon it require theory to do more: to go beyond analytic critique and venture into theories of effective contestation and transformation.

Jameson is not alone in calling for a new hermeneutic. Twenty years ago in "Banality in Cultural Studies," Meaghan Morris (1990) threw down the gauntlet and criticized cultural studies for amounting to "thousands of versions of the same article about pleasure, resistance, and the politics of consumption" (p. 21). The American academy ignored that stinging critique, continuing to produce, not to mention overvalue, microanalyses of countless cultural signifying practices examined in a nearly endless list of texts. Framed by the reactive limitations of analytic critique, this work creates a cultural vacuum for solutions to the everyday problems generated by social hierarchy and inequity—a void that gets filled by pundits, politicians, and corporate strategists (culture, like nature, abhors a vacuum). This is precisely the business as usual that cannot continue in the face of corporate media's incremental but growing success to realign digital media culture into variations of the tightly controlled hegemonic structures of broadcast television culture.

Net-neutrality remains the law of the land, however, an enduring (and endangered) ideological thorn in the side of dominant neo-liberalism. The primary effect of Net-neutrality is to maintain an egalitarian structure on the distribution system of culture's dominant media form. Critical and feminist studies are now challenged with effectively expanding and advancing the potential for effective contestation and transformation not enjoyed in other periods of media ascendancy. If we fail, we cannot be surprised when students eschew the consciousness raising of our analytic critiques and turn instead to their iPhones as an important training ground for the new career of choice: event planning.

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