

SELF-PRESENTATION IN INTERACTION

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Identity Construction and
Self-Presentation on Personal Homepages

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How Many Personal Homepages Are There on the Web?

Although it is difficult to count the dispersed and ever-changing number of homepages on the Web, a look at the press relations sections of a handful of the sites offering free Web space shows that the numbers must add up quickly. Large community sites like Yahoo! GeoCities and Angelfire claim over 4.5 million active homepage builders each, for example, and FortuneCity claims a further 2 million (July 2003). Millions more homepages reside in the numerous other free webspace services, and within commercial and educational sites. Personal homepage websites are also a popular Web destination. Nielsen/NetRatings' MarketView report shows that Yahoo! GeoCities had more than 27 million unique visitors within one month (October 2002). ComScore Media Matrix surveys also show that Tripod and Angelfire had around 16 and 12 million monthly unique visitors respectively (September 2002).

INTRODUCTION

If you are curious enough to browse through some personal homepages posted on the Web, you may quickly observe the following phenomena.

- Generally, personal homepages are websites produced by individuals, or sometimes a couple or family. On a personal homepage,

people can put up any information about themselves, including autobiography or diary material, personal photos and videos, creative works, political opinions, information about hobbies and interests, links to other websites, and so on.

- People from all walks of life have started to use the personal homepage to tell personal stories about themselves: cancer patients,

retired scientists, kids with disabilities, vinyl collectors, kung fu movie fans, transsexuals, DIY enthusiasts, pornographic movie lovers, to name but a few.

- Certain personal homepages seem to be made to display the strong personality and identity of the homepage authors, as if declaring: 'It is me! I'm cool!' These pages usually have stylish design, and contain details of specific aspects of the author's life.
- Some personal homepages seem to be made more for self-exploration than for making a strong identity statement. These pages usually contain an online diary or journal, in which the homepage authors put down how they feel about what happens to them every day.
- Having said all this, many personal homepages tell you little information about the author. These pages are unbelievably dull—they only include things like vital statistics, one or two photos, some links to other websites, and nothing else.
- Even worse, many homepages are listed in Web directories but actually not available.

Personal homepages have their critics, of course. Some Internet commentators, for example, suggest that the contents of personal homepages reflect nothing but the narcissism and exhibitionism of many net users and the 'content trivialization' of the Internet superhighway. Some web designers are appalled by the amateur appearance of many personal homepages. But these responses are inappropriate. This chapter argues that, to make sense of the above phenomena, we need to take the personal homepage seriously as a significant social phenomenon. This article has two arguments.

1. The personal homepage is an emancipatory media genre. The distinctive medium characteristics of the personal homepage allow net

users to become active cultural producers, expressing their suppressed identities or exploring the significant question of 'who I am,' often in ways which may not otherwise be possible in 'real' life.

2. Nevertheless, the fact that many personal homepages are poor in content, or have even been abandoned by their creators, suggests that the emancipatory potentials of the personal homepage are limited and often not fully exploited. In daily life, there can be a range of factors which preclude some people from producing 'content-rich' personal homepages.

People tell stories about themselves by making personal homepages, but not—to paraphrase Marx—in conditions of their own choosing, as this chapter will show.

"THIS IS ME!": THE PERSONAL HOMEPAGE AS A STAGE FOR STRATEGIC SELF-PRESENTATION

The first emancipatory use of the personal homepage is strategic and elaborate self-presentation. In everyday life, we usually try in vain to tell our partners, family, friends, employers, or at times even strangers who we 'really' are. Although we can one-sidedly complain that other people misunderstand us, sociologists suggest that self-presentational failure in everyday life actually involves other factors, such as social interactional contexts and our presentation skills.

According to Goffman, in everyday encounters, the social settings and audiences we face always define the kinds of 'acceptable' selves we should present—a teenager performs as a hard-working student in front of teachers in class, an office worker as a responsible employee in front of his or her boss and colleagues, a CEO as a responsible company leader who cares for shareholders in front of financial journalists at press conferences, and so on.

Nevertheless, sometimes we may wish to present certain identities but may not find the right social settings and audiences, and if we present these identities in inappropriate social settings, we experience embarrassment, rejection or harassment. For example, a boy may entertain his friends with rap songs about his sexual conquests, but his grandparents might be a less receptive audience.

In face-to-face interaction, we present ourselves through the use of sign vehicles such as clothing, posture, intonation, speech pattern, facial expression and bodily gesture. But Goffman also emphasizes that total control over these sign vehicles is difficult, since most face-to-face interactions proceed in a spontaneous manner and do not include an assigned block of time in which we can present ourselves in an orderly and systematic fashion. More often than not, our presentation of self in everyday life is a delicate enterprise, subject to moment-to-moment mishaps and unintentional misrepresentations. These mishaps typically lead us (again) to experience embarrassment, rejection or harassment and, consequently, the failure of self-presentation. To put it simply, the core problems of our self-presentation in everyday life are that we lack enough control over (1) what 'selves' we should display in a particular social setting and (2) how well we can present them. The personal homepage, however, can 'emancipate' us from these two problems.

First, the personal homepage allows much more strategic self-presentation than everyday interaction. The personal homepage is a self-defined 'stage', upon which we can decide what aspects of our selves we would like to present. As previously mentioned, in everyday life we may wish to present certain identities but may not be able to find the 'right' audiences. On the personal homepage, however, this is not the case: once we put up our personal homepage on the Web, its global accessibility of the personal homepage means that we instantly have a potential audience of millions (with the emphasis on *potential*). In addition, even if some

people dislike our 'homepage selves' and send us negative responses by e-mail, these responses are not instantaneous, so we feel less pressure to respond to them—in fact, we can even ignore these comments. For example, if a kung fu movie lover really wants to tell others that he is an expert in kung fu movies, his simplest solution is not to force strangers in pubs to listen to him but to construct a personal homepage. By creating a website featuring his essays on kung fu movies, photo collection of kung fu stars, or even digital videos of him doing karate, he would have millions of net browsers who also love kung fu movies as his *potential* audience. Of course, not everyone stumbling across his homepage will admire his identity as a 'kung fu movie fan', and sometimes people may even send him e-mails ridiculing his enthusiasm for these movies. But since these 'attackers' are not his targeted audience, he can always ignore their criticisms.

Second, the personal homepage is emancipatory for self-presentation since it allows the individual to give a much more polished and elaborate presentation, with more control over 'impression management', compared with face-to-face interaction. Indeed, the 'sign vehicles' used in the homepage self-presentation are more subject to manipulation. As discussed in the preceding paragraph, since we are less likely to experience immediate rejection from those who read our homepages, before releasing our personal homepage to the net public, we can always manipulate all the elements until we are satisfied: we can experiment with the colour scheme, choose the most presentable head shot, censor the foul language accidentally written in the draft biography, and ponder as long as we like before deciding whether to tell the readers that our partner just dumped us. Mishaps that may affect one's self-presentation in everyday life can be avoided on the personal homepage. Of course, not all responses can be controlled—I cannot prevent a homepage visitor from thinking that I am a self-indulgent fool.

Research evidence shows that people from all walks of life have started to use the personal homepage for strategic and elaborate self-presentation.

One prominent use of the personal homepage is to promote one's professional achievement in ways which may not otherwise be possible in everyday life. People seeking jobs, for instance, use the personal homepage to highlight and embellish aspects of their professional achievements, so as to reach potential employers or to create more lasting impressions than brief phone or face-to-face job interviews (Rosenstein, 2000). Likewise, artists use their websites to promote their artistic persona, and young academics use faculty homepages to gain wider exposure. As one young academic confessed: 'For the person visiting the webpage of my department, I am more visible than the professors [who don't have pages]'.

Some homepages are more relationship-oriented. On these homepages, the authors often highlight particular personal qualities (personalities, hobbies or political opinions), so as to share opinions and experiences with like-minded individuals, or to attract potential romantic partners who admire those qualities (Rosenstein, 2000).

The personal homepage is also particularly valuable for those with difficulty presenting themselves in face-to-face interaction, such as introverts with weak self-presentational skills, and people with any kind of visible or invisible disability such as amputees, the visually impaired, or the hearing impaired. As one homepage author with traumatic brain injury said concisely: 'Our disability is *invisible* so people can't respond (original emphasis; Hevern, 2000: 16). These homepage authors may feel better able to express themselves through the use of biographies, online writing or their photos (Chandler, 1998). People with Downs syndrome, for example, have used the personal homepage to assert that in many ways they are no different from other people, because, like anyone else, they have distinctive cultural tastes and are

knowledgeable about certain things—such as making webpages.

The personal homepage may be most emancipatory for those whose identities are misunderstood or stigmatized in society—teenagers, gays and lesbians, fat people, the mentally ill, and so on—since they can reveal their identities without risking the rejection or harassment that may be experienced in everyday life. One gay respondent, for instance, explained how the personal homepage helped him to come out 'steadily':

I was looking for some way of having a gay presence in the world and still feel protected from the adverse effects. [Making my personal homepage] was great because I didn't have to just come out to somebody and risk rejection. I could do things a little at a time and build levels of trust along the way. (Hevern, 2000: 15)

Another gay author reports a similar experience. He would say to friends, 'Check out my website', and let them see his positive expressions of gay identity, and 'think about it before reacting' (Chandler, 1998).

In fact, the emancipatory value of the personal homepage for self-presentation is even more evident if we look at how traditional mass media represent ordinary people. Generally, the mass media do not allow ordinary people to represent themselves on their own terms. Rather, ordinary people are represented by the creative personnel of the mass media, perhaps in stereotypical ways: the stupid teenager, the helpless disabled person, or the sexually available woman, for example. There may be radio phone-ins and TV audience talk-back programmes for the 'users' of these media to express their points of view, but the limited access to these shows, as well as the commercial nature of their topics, means that these media never allow people the degree of creative freedom offered by the personal homepage. Media scholars have longed for a medium which can help people who are often misrepresented in the mass media to

move 'from silence to speech' (hooks, 1989: 9). The personal homepage can serve this very purpose.

"Who Am I?": THE PERSONAL HOMEPAGE AS A SPACE FOR REFLEXIVE CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY

For some people, however, the personal homepage is emancipatory not because it is a stage for self-presentation, but because it can be a space for identity construction. My previous discussion on self-presentation more or less assumes that homepage authors have a stable sense of self-identity, and the only problem for these authors is to find some ways to present aspects of their identities. Some confident academics may use their webpage to advertise their academic persona, for example, and some lesbians who are very sure of their sexual identity may use their homepage to celebrate their lifestyle. However, for many people, their sense of 'who I am' is not that obvious, and may be highly uncertain. Their problem is not so much about presenting their identity, but concerns their exploration of 'who I am' and re-establishing a stable sense of self-identity. Much has been written on the sources of uncertain identity; here I have selected three examples for our discussion.

Multiple and contradictory identities. Unlike traditional society in which people only have a narrow range of ascribed identities, in late-modern society we are usually offered a bewildering range of choices over social and cultural identities, including those based on gender identity, nationality, religion, family relationships, sexuality, occupation, leisure interests, political concerns, and more. As Giddens (1991) suggests, these identity 'choices' are not marginal but substantial ones, since they allow us to define who we want to be. But Giddens (*ibid.*: 73) emphasizes that '[t]aking charge of one's life involves risk, because it means confronting a diversity of open possibility'. One 'unfortunate' consequence of this condition is identity confusion.

Take for example a Chinese-American lecturing in the USA, who feels passionate about gay fiction but also about heterosexual pornographic movies, who loves both academic books and PlayStation games, and who supports feminism yet likes Sylvester Stallone's movies a lot. Who is he actually? Gay, straight or bisexual? Is he really an American? Is he an intellectual or just a lowbrow who loves video games but pretends to be an intellectual? Can someone who loves macho movie stars like Sylvester Stallone still be a feminist?

Disrupted lives. Late-modern society is always undergoing rapid and extensive change, and accordingly, our lives and sense of stable self-identity are prone to disruption more than ever: a CEO who loses his job and cannot find another post for years may have serious doubts about his identity as a member of the middle-class elite; an American girl who moves to Paris to be with her French fiancé may feel totally disoriented in a new country; a man who has been divorced five times may seriously question whether he can really be a good husband in the future. Furthermore, victims of serious illness or injury may also feel uncertain about their identities and their ability to function as 'normal' people.

Stigmatized identities. We may be doubtful about certain identities of ours if these identity categories are controversial, stigmatized or unacceptable in society at large. For instance, a young woman who is attracted only to females may still feel uncertain about her sexuality, because she has been told for years in her traditional Catholic school that homosexuality is sinful.

So how do people with uncertain identities re-establish their stable sense of self-identity? Giddens (1991) argues that, in late-modern society, we construct our sense of self-identity by creating a 'coherent' self-narrative. In such a coherent self-narrative, we successfully make ourselves the protagonist of the story, and we know clearly who we are, how we became the way we are now, and what

we would like to do in the future—all these elements help to give us a stable sense of self-identity. However, if our identities are being challenged by new events or experiences, the coherence of our self-narrative can be disrupted, and we may experience an unstable and confused sense of self. In order to re-establish a stable sense of identity, we have to reflexively reappraise and revise our 'disrupted' self-narrative until its sense of coherence is restored. Take, for example, how the aforementioned CEO may rework his self-narrative when his identity as a member of the middle-class elite becomes uncertain as a result of his long-term unemployment. He may insist on finding work as another CEO, and interpret his long-term unemployment as just one of the roadblocks that all successful people might face at some point. In this case, he makes minor modifications to his middle-class elite self-narrative, but the overall meaning of the narrative remains unchanged. Alternatively, he may choose to abandon his middle-class elite identity and adopt a new 'simple-life-is-good' identity, and interpret his previous middle-class life as a worthwhile experience, without which he would not have been able to discover the true value of his new simple life philosophy. In this case, he almost completely rewrites the overall meaning of his self-narrative. Anyhow, our concern here is not which concrete self-narrative this CEO finally adopts. Our point is rather that, if our sense of self-identity becomes uncertain, it is only through reflexive reappraisal and revision of our self-narrative that we can re-establish a stable sense of self-identity. Giddens describes this process as the reflexive project of the self.

The personal homepage is a form of media which facilitates the reflexive project of the self. I mentioned in the last section that people who use their homepages for self-presentation can lay out, arrange, retouch and manipulate their 'homepage selves' until the outcome reflects the self-identities they intend to present. But for people with uncertain identities, or with a more free and fluid sense of self, this flexible creative process has a totally different meaning—experimentation and

exploration of different identities. As Rosenzweig (2000: 153) suggests, the 'hyper-media qualities of the home page can support linear, chronological narratives, but . . . they also lend themselves to a more episodic, situated and associational organization of materials that may be quite diffuse thematically and even spatially'. In other words, the hypertextuality of the personal homepage enables those authors who are in search of their self-identities—or who are happy to 'play' with their identities—to construct different self-narratives on their homepage and mull over which narrative (or narratives) makes most sense to them. This self-exploration process is akin to conducting internal dialogues within one's mind: 'I can be this or that, but who do I want to be?' However, the internal dialogue as a method of self-exploration has one major limitation. Since this dialogue is an internal mental process, it does not have any physical record. It is impossible to retrieve our internal dialogues conducted in the past without any loss and distortion of thoughts. In contrast, self-narratives on the personal homepage have a physical existence (at least as stored in webpage format) which can be completely retrieved for further self-contemplation whenever the author wants to. Undoubtedly, the self-narratives we compose in traditional written media such as a diary or biography also have a physical existence, but these forms often lack the revisability of the personal homepage, which allows or even invites the author to continually amend his or her homepage self-narratives. As Chandler (1998) suggests, completion of any personal homepages 'may be endlessly deferred' since every homepage is always 'under construction'.

In fact, recent research shows that people with uncertain identities have started to use the personal homepage to reflexively explore and reconstruct their identities. Personal homepages 'permit some authors to explore aspects of themselves in ways that they have never previously done,' claims Hevern (2000: 14). As one homepage author admitted: 'It helps to define who I am. Before I start to look at/write about something then I'm often not sure what my feelings are, but after having done so, I can

at least have more of an idea' (Chandler, 1998). Another author commented: 'as a process for doing, for seeing yourself reflected on a screen, being able to draw connections where there weren't connections is really rich' (Rosenstein, 2000: 154).

By continually exploring and clarifying their thoughts and feelings, some people use the personal homepage to reclaim a sense of identity which is continuous with their previous one. As one homepage author who relocated from New York to California said: 'Moving to a place where I had to make so many changes, I needed a way to convince myself I was still okay and the things that were important to me are still important' (Rosenstein, 2000: 159). Some authors, however, may fashion new identities. For example, by building websites which provide health information, people whose lives have been disrupted by serious accidents or chronic illness may successfully re-establish a positive identity, as a health information producer (Hevern, 2000).

The personal homepage surpasses the internal dialogue and other traditional media in one more respect. The internal dialogue and traditional diary writing are 'private' identity construction activities, the audience of which is generally the author himself. But the global reachability of the personal homepage enables the homepage author to get 'validatory' feedback from net browsers who empathize or share with the author's identity or narrative. I am not arguing that we cannot consider our self-identities in the absence of others, but getting recognition from other people is still important for establishing affirmative identities. After all, if no one ever tells you that you are smart, for how long can you convince yourself that you really are?

This identity validation function of the personal homepage is also identified in recent research. Undeniably, some homepage authors do not actively seek readers at all (Rosenstein, 2000: 96–9). As one author said: 'I was the intended audience, as strange as it sounds' (Chandler, 1998). Yet, many homepage authors use the personal homepage to re-establish their self-identities by getting positive comments

from other net browsers. One disabled homepage author said: 'Do you have any idea how many people wallow in self-pity, spend the rest of their lives crying about what happened to them? Through the Internet I have been challenged to grow, to blossom, to meet others who understand me' (Hevern, 2000: 15). A gay author said: 'I think we all sometimes need to know that, no matter how alone we feel, there are witnesses' (ibid.: 14). A Spanish-speaking homepage author explained his motive for homepage publishing this way: 'I was looking for other people that were my color or listened to my kind of music or spoke my family's language... I was really looking for a part of me out there that I could make contact with' (Rosenstein, 2000: 168).

REALITY CONSTRAINTS ON THE MAKING OF PERSONAL HOMEPAGES

So far, our story of the personal homepage appears quite heartening. But some critics tell a more gloomy story, cautiously warning us not to uncritically celebrate the emancipatory potentials of the personal homepage and the creative autonomy of the homepage author. This more pessimistic story can be divided into two parts: (1) concern that social background may preclude certain people from making personal homepages, and (2) the view that commercial and ideological factors may work against the expressive creativity of homepage authors.

Who Can Build Personal Homepages?

One key factor that influences people's chances of reaping the emancipatory benefits of the personal homepage is their Internet access. The reason is simple: if a social group has less Internet access than others, members of this social group will have less opportunities to build personal homepages and, accordingly, they are less likely to benefit from the emancipatory potential of this media genre. One factor which influences one's opportunities to access the Internet is country of residence. Take some

countries as examples: the Internet access rate of people living in China is 3.5 per cent; France, 28.4 per cent; Germany, 38.6 per cent; Greece, 13.2 per cent; Iceland, 79.9 per cent; Malaysia, 25.2 per cent; Russia, 12.4 per cent; Singapore, 51.9 per cent; Sweden, 67.6 per cent; Spain, 19.7 per cent; Thailand, 7.4 per cent; United Arab Emirates, 36.8 per cent; United Kingdom, 57.4 per cent; United States, 59.1 per cent (these are 2002 figures; see Nua.com, 2003). Indeed, Internet statistics show that, in many countries, additional factors such as ethnicity, gender, age, educational attainment and income level may also affect Internet access, although the significance of individual factors varies greatly from country to country.

Statistics show that demographic factors like gender, age, occupational status and educational level have noticeable effects on levels of Internet access. For example, a survey shows that, in 15 Western European countries, females, manual workers, the elderly and the less educated have less Internet access than males, professionals, the young and the well educated (European Commission, 2002). The USA shows similar Internet access patterns (except that females and males have virtually identical Internet access rate in the USA; see below). Nevertheless, the specific extent to which each demographic factor affects the Internet access rate of individual social groups varies from country to country. Take gender as an example. According to a recent survey of Internet users in 25 developed countries, the Internet access rate of females varies from country to country: in France, females make up 40.8 per cent of total Internet users; Germany, 38 per cent; Sweden, 46 per cent; the UK, 44.5 per cent; the USA, 51.9 per cent. (Nielsen/NetRatings, 2002). In some countries like Romania and Ukraine, females occupy less than one-third of the total population of Internet users (Taylor Nelson Sofres Interactive, 2002).

But will equal Internet access bring about equal opportunities in making personal homepages? Not necessarily. In a study of the homepages produced by students at four US universities and four German universities, Döring (2002) finds that

females only make up 27 per cent and 13 per cent of the student homepage authors in the US and German universities respectively, despite the fact that at all of these universities there was an equal balance of male and female students. One possible explanation is that females tend to feel alienated from the male-dominated computer culture, making them less motivated to learn website-building skills. In other words, even if females and males have similar opportunities to 'log on' to the Internet (as is already the case in certain countries), females may not have the same degree of motivation and learned skills to create and maintain personal websites. In short, equal Internet access does not necessarily mean equal opportunities in making personal homepages.

Dominick's (1999) study illustrates how factors such as gender, age and occupation may influence people's chances of making homepages. From 317 English-language personal homepages randomly sampled from the Yahoo! homepage directory, Dominick found that 87 per cent of homepage authors were men, 79 per cent were under the age of 30; more than half of those who mentioned an 'occupation' were students, and around 90 per cent of the rest were white-collar workers. This data suggests that females, the unemployed and blue-collar workers may have less chances of building homepages than other people. (Note, however, that the gender balance, at least, is likely to have changed since the mid-to-late 1990s when this study was conducted; and note that the sample is based only on those homepage owners who submitted their site to the Yahoo! directory, and had that submission accepted by Yahoo! staff.)

The Poverty of Self-Expression and Creative Constraints

Undeniably, those who have no opportunity to make personal homepages are unable to enjoy the emancipatory benefits of the personal homepage. However, it is not necessarily the case that people who have already made personal homepages for themselves are able to fully realize the emancipatory

potential of this media genre. From his sample of 500 English-language personal homepages, Dominick (1999) found that 30 per cent of the pages were either abandoned or no longer available, and most of the remaining 'analysable' homepages had been produced with little creative effort, offering predictable elements such as a brief biography, an e-mail address, some authors' photos, or links to other sites. Only 12 per cent of those analysable homepages included in-depth biographies, and only 23 per cent contained creative expressions like original poems or stories. Dominick argues that most personal homepages show nothing but superficial self-expression. It is perhaps no wonder that some critics will say that many personal homepages lack creativity and thoughtfulness, since many homepage authors build their websites not for self-presentation or identity construction, but for instrumental reasons like passing time, learning HTML, distributing information to peers, and so on. This argument, however, cannot really explain why some personal homepages which are built for the purpose of self-presentation or identity construction still lack thoughtful and in-depth self-expression (Killoran, 2002). To answer this question, we need to examine how commercial homepage providers and ideological forces suppress the expressiveness of homepage authors.

Commercial Homepage Providers

Using Yahoo! GeoCities as an example, Harrison (2001) offers a number of compelling critiques of how major commercial homepage providers may undermine users' freedom of self-expression on the personal homepage. Two of these criticisms are as follows.

Standardizing homepages. Yahoo! GeoCities provides novice homepage authors with sets of pre-created homepage 'templates'. These 'templates' offer homepage authors standardized suggestions of where to place text, images and links, and encourage them to add Yahoo! services to their homepages. (Other major commercial homepage providers like

Tripod, Angelfire and AOL Hometown also offer similar 'simple' homepage building tools.) Although these 'templates' enable novices to build homepages without the need to learn more advanced website-building tools like HTML, they indirectly lead homepage authors to produce 'cookie-cutter' personal homepages (ibid.: 55-62).

Homepage content control. All Yahoo! GeoCities homepage authors have to abide by the Yahoo! Terms of Service, which allow Yahoo! GeoCities to delete without prior warning those homepages with content the company and its advertisers deem inappropriate (ibid.: 62-4). Indeed, most commercial homepage providers such as Tripod, Angelfire and AOL Hometown, also have content regulation policies, which grant them the right to remove any homepages at any time, for any reason, with or without notice. According to some journalists and homepage makers, personal homepages deleted by commercial homepage providers often contain 'sensitive' content, including anti-abortion, death penalty and anti-Malaysian government opinion, nude photos of the author, and information that directly criticizes certain commercial homepage providers. Recently Yahoo! has signed a voluntary pledge with the Chinese government, promising that Yahoo! China will avoid producing, posting or disseminating pernicious information that may jeopardize state security and disrupt social stability; it also pledged to monitor personal websites and will 'remove the harmful information promptly' ('Yahoo's China Concession', 2002).

Ideological Forces

Killoran's (1998, 2002) study shows that the poverty of self-expression on personal homepages is also caused by the ideologies of commercial and bureaucratic organizations as well as commercial homepage providers. He argues that since the personal homepage is a new media genre, it has no established generic conventions which homepage authors can follow when representing themselves in this medium. Under these conditions, the

well-established, powerful and prevalent ideologies of commercial and bureaucratic organizations tend to 'colonize' the speaking spaces of the authors. Consequently, homepage authors abandon the opportunity to explore their distinctive self-identities, and represent themselves as 'domesticated, innocuous subjects and objects of a capitalist and bureaucratic order' (Killoran, 2002: 27). Killoran describes this process in which personal homepage authors adopt commercial and institutional ideologies to express themselves as 'synthetic institutionalization'. He argues that when individuals present themselves using visual styles borrowed from brands, organizations or corporations, or with devices designed to attract returning viewers (such as the promise of regular updates), they suppress their own creative identities in favour of institutionalized conformity. (Of course, it could be argued that the homepage authors are often wittily parodying corporate language, and that the promise of a regularly updated site does not necessarily represent some kind of tribute to capitalist 'customer loyalty' schemes, as Killoran seems to think.)

Gender ideologies may also affect personal homepage design. . . . Hess (2002) found that, generally, female academics were more hesitant and cautious than males about putting their personal photos on their faculty homepage. Many female academics explicitly admitted that they feared their photos may 'give off' sexist impressions and encourage people who read their homepage to focus on their appearance rather than their academic work. As one female lecturer said:

Putting my own picture on my webpage . . . seems like something that would allow people to see me as vain (like, Oh, she thinks she's so good looking she put her picture on the Web) or at least read outside a professional context. (Hess, 2002: 181)

Instead of resisting these ideological pressures, some female academics opt for self-censorship—they choose not to put their pictures on their homepage and become 'faceless' authors (see also Cheung, 2000, for a discussion of self-censorship).

CONCLUSION

My analysis clearly demonstrates that, although the personal homepage is an emancipatory media genre for some people, its emancipatory potentials have not yet benefited everyone. Many people may still lack the resources and technological knowhow to build their own personal homepage. Even for those who are capable of making personal homepages, their individual expressiveness might still be suppressed by content censorship of commercial homepage providers or ideological pressures. Some statistics show that the Internet access gap between countries is narrowing (UNCTAD, 2002), and that in many countries the Internet access gap by gender is closing rapidly (Nielsen/NetRatings, 2002). These trends certainly imply that more people will be able to build personal homepages. But it remains the case that many constraints upon making personal homepages will not disappear in the near future: low-income groups in many countries still have great difficulty accessing the Internet; ideologies of various types will continue to exist and suppress individual expression; and control over homepage content may also be further heightened by some homepage providers. If more people are to enjoy the emancipatory benefits of a personal homepage, we must endeavour to remove these constraints. Homepage authors need to protest against any censorship of homepage content practised by commercial homepage providers; non-profit organizations may seek ways to provide free Internet access, censorship-free website hosting services, and even free training courses on website-building skills; academics and critics should also find ways to raise awareness among homepage authors about the commercial and ideological constraints which may suppress self-expression on the personal homepage. Only through such efforts can we hope that more people will be able to use the personal homepage to work through their identities, or present their suppressed selves to audiences around the world. Indeed, in a world where many people are plagued by identity

problems, enabling more people to fully realize the emancipatory potential of the personal homepage is a timely and important task.

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28

Body Troubles

Women, the Workplace and Negotiations of a Disabled Identity

Isabel Dyck

(1999)

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the social sciences the influence of cultural studies, feminisms and the challenges of post-modernism and post-structuralism have made space for sustained debate over the nature of human subjectivity, its constitution and its transformations. Difference, identity and the notion of the embodied self are being explored from various disciplinary perspectives, with geography focusing investigation on issues of space and place. The body, too, is attracting attention as the linkages between identity and the experience of specific spaces and places are theorised.

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Centring the body in inquiry in geography has primarily been through work of feminist geographers interested in the connection between the body and situated knowledges, and geographers concerned with questions of sexuality, but recently the 'deviant' body of disability has also emerged as a focus of investigation (see, for example, Dorn and Laws 1994; Moss and Dyck 1996; Park et al. 1998; *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 1997). This work points to the discursive construction of ideas about the body and its abilities, and how dominant representations may be negotiated and contested in the context of particular spaces and places as 'disabled' women construct the meanings and materialities of their everyday geographies.

The purpose of this chapter is to investigate such contestation as this occurs in the workplace, as the subjectivity of women with chronic illness, specifically multiple sclerosis (MS), is transformed as they struggle with their 'body troubles'. The women were living with a sometimes failing, often unreliable body and one difficult to control. The severity of the women's impairments varied, but at some point most had experienced a period of 'invisible' disability. That is, although women experienced symptoms that caused feelings of illness and prevented, or made difficult, certain activities, the women appeared healthy. While workplace experiences varied, identity issues were a common and sometimes a profoundly disturbing concern....

BODIES, IDENTITIES, SPACES:

THE EMBODIED SUBJECT

In this chapter I am interested in how ideas about the body, identity and space nexus can inform the interpretation of the stories of women with multiple sclerosis and their experiences in the workplace. The body is receiving growing attention in discussions of social theory. Several different approaches have been used in theorising the body, ranging from essentialist understandings, through social constructionism,

to the 'body as text' of post-structuralism.... The body... is rejected, for it is understood as constantly in the making, embodying and contributing to social relations, and with its capacities constituted within cultural and historical specific moments (Grosz 1994; Shilling 1993). Shilling (1993: 4), for example, suggests that bodies are malleable and that the body is an ongoing project, never finished, but always in the process of becoming.

Anti-essentialist feminist scholars have been interested in the ways dominant discourses, constructed within gendered power relations are part of this process of 'becoming', mediating women's experiences of the body and providing ways of interpreting such experiences....

Microscale studies, focusing on the materiality of everyday life, provide a useful entry point to the interweaving of the discursive and the material in investigating the formation of identities (Moss and Dyck 1996). They also permit exploration of competing discourses as subjectivities are constituted and transformed. In this chapter, I am particularly interested in the tensions between the inscriptive processes of biomedicine as a powerful, cultural construction depicting the body as an 'object of science' (Fox 1993; Good 1994), other inscriptions of the body, and women's own experiences of living with chronic illness, as these interplay in reconstituting the body and subjectivity. Wendell (1996: 117) writes of the social and cognitive authority of Western scientific medicine in describing 'our bodies to ourselves and others' but its lack of ways of talking about and explaining the lived experience of illness or disability. As she wryly comments (1996: 122) of her own illness experience, 'my subjective descriptions of my bodily experience need the confirmation of medical descriptions to be accepted as accurate and truthful.' This comment picks up a central issue faced by the women in the study discussed here. Their bodies have been 'marked' through the language and practices of biomedicine, but this inscription interweaves with their bodily and social