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## Resistances of Gender

Jonathan Marshall

[Index](#) | [Prev](#) | [Next](#) | [Comment on this Article](#)



### Bit 1

Online life is embedded within the complexes, organisations, power ratios, and conceptualisations of offline life. The ambiguities of the interaction between online and offline - the testing and questioning, asking and affirming of their match - make a vital part of their current phenomenology. One factor which seems to exert resistance - some form of implacability - however unexpectedly, is that of gender. Other categories, such as politics and nationality, seem to have similar, but more direct, effects.

### Bit 2

Online folklore is quite specific, and the folklore can be academic as analysts are affected by the same forces and experiences as other people. Firstly, it is claimed that gender is unimportant online - that you are free to be yourself, or whomsoever you choose. Mark Poster, who is not alone, claims: "one may experience directly the opposite gender by assuming it and enacting it in conversations" (1997: 223), which seems to confuse a temporary imagining with a long term imposed. Secondly, however, there are the repeated tales that online life is full of cross-gender impersonation and that, as a result, it is full of potential betrayal and disillusionment. Kolko writes:

The stories of online cross-dressing that abound... often culminate in narratives of betrayal. In this accumulated body of scholarship, participants talk of how their notions of the world and their selves and others has been destabilized, rocked beyond recognition, until they are left feeling adrift, at sea, that they 'cannot trust anyone,' that 'everything online can be a lie,' that 'no one tells who they really are.' (1997: np).

### Bit 3

These stories seem a little contradictory. If gender is unimportant online, then how come it is such a source of anxiety? Often the anxiety seems concealed under a discourse of futurity, in which attention is given to what life online might become - with contradictions deleted - rather than giving attention to what actually happens or has happened. This move maintains the theory that the Internet is free of the effects of offline life, perhaps in compensation for increasing restrictions and insecurities in offline life. It also keeps the Internet in the realm of science fiction, where it is without history, and is cutting edge by default.

### Bit 4

People generally seem sure they can detect the gender of others (Suler 1996). A person might use a lot of emoticons and be female (Witmer & Katzman 1998: 6, 9), they might flame and be male (Baym 1995: 158, Herring 1994), they might not know American pantyhose sizes and be male (irrespective of if they come from a country which uses different sizings - most of the rest of the world - or are a woman who does not wear pantyhose). People read books by academics describing how the sexes use language differently in order to detect these differences - while, at the same time, others read them in order to fake better (Wright 2000). If people select gender neutral pronouns in a MOO, then others will not assume they do not have a gender, they will generally attempt to work it out (Kendall 1996: 217), and some research suggests that if a person refuses to reveal their offline gender then they will be dropped from interactions (O'Brien 1999: 90).

### Bit 5

Most of these ways of determining 'real gender', use offline gender clichés to make that detection, or to manufacture that production. Thus McRae, after arguing in favour of absolute gender freedom, remarks that if someone plays a woman and

wants to "attract partners as 'female' [they] must craft a description within the realm of what is considered attractive" (1996: 250). They are likely to exaggerate conventions of gender (as with plastic surgery). As Kendall writes: "choosing one gender or another does nothing to change the expectations attached to particular gender identifications" (1996: 217). In fact, as people online can ignore the gender of those contradicting their expectations of gender, then those expectations may grow stronger. Categories of gender might strengthen rather than weaken.

Bit 6

A performance which follows rules and conventions in order to convey a message, which to some extent any successful performance must, may not challenge the accepted conceptual order at all. As not all the rules and conventions of performance may be conscious or understood by performers, their performance may unintentionally harden those conventions. This is especially so as in Western online social practice, whatever the complexity of our theory, gender seems to be treated as an 'essential' and equated with an offline body.

Bit 7

Further, gender impersonation appears to happen in specific circumstances, namely on IRC, or MOOs, or in games. It rarely if ever happens on Mailing Lists, where anonymity is rarer (names are often given in addresses, and email often signed with a gendered name), and people try to manifest real authentic identities, rather than play with possible identities. An experimental mailing list I was involved in, in which members, previously known to each other from another list, were anonymous and their gender not specified, was short lived. It did not become a site of play with, or 'beyond', gender.

Bit 8

As well, people seem only disturbed when males are thought to be impersonating females - which indicates a degree of gender specificity itself. I have never seen a list of ways to detect whether a male avatar was female, while the opposite is common. This is not just anxiety from heterosexual males seeking sex partners but, in a famous case, occurred when women found that a supposedly female confidant was male (Van Gelder 1996, Stone 1995: 69-81). So why does this happen?

Bit 9

Answers to such questions must be provisional, but it is probably connected with the role of women, in offline life, in maintaining and marking intimacy and support. We might over-quickly say that, offline (outside of male homosexual groups in which gender may function differently), an intimate relationship usually includes one woman. Emotional or support bonding is female. Male bonding has become almost suspect, particularly if it involves intimacy. We also live in a society with a common discourse about the decline of support through kinship, a rise in single person households, increased insecurity in work, and decline in state support for people in times of stress, at the very time that kinship no longer is able to give support (Castells 1997: 97). The Western generative atom of kinship, intimacy and support, approaches being the heterosexual pair bond.

Bit 10

Wuthnow claimed in 1994 that, faced with these kinds of insecurities, 40% of American adults became members of small groups meeting regularly to provide support for members (1994: 45-50). There is no reason to assume the percentage has declined. Internet groups can be seen to function similarly; they are means by which people make contacts, provide help, discuss problems or interests, and sometimes get work - fibreculture being a case in point. There is often, in such groups, a fairly active 'off-group' life of correspondence and contact between particular members. Structurally, life which is off a mailing list, or in a private MOO room, approaches the structure of the dyadic, private and intimate pair bond, which should contain at least one woman. Finding out that a person you have been intimate with was not female, almost automatically changes the relationship from the realm of intimate and private into a public betrayal. Our private role and its vulnerabilities has broken

into the public male domain and symbolically been exposed rather than shared.

#### Bit 11

Gender functions as a way in which people interpret the actions of others. As Ten Have argues (2000), categorisation is one of the ways in which people decide what kinds of messages others are emitting, whether they have much in common and whether they can be trusted. The importance of particular categories can frequently be ascertained by how often they are requested - and gender is one of the most requested when unknown and when people are seeking support or intimacy. Because authenticity, or trying to find the truth of others, is important in Western thought about relationships, this truth becomes anchored in the 'real' body and the customs surrounding it. 'Truth' is confirmed the more private the information, and the more it is received offline. As a result, and because of models of intimacy, 'real gender' then becomes important and is central to current online life. It may also point to other ways in which the tension between the online and offline manifest, or in which an apparently abstract flow meets resistance.

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#### Links

<http://cpsr.org/cpsr/gender/herring.txt>

<http://www.arch.su.edu.au/kcdc/conferences/VC97/papers/kolko.html>

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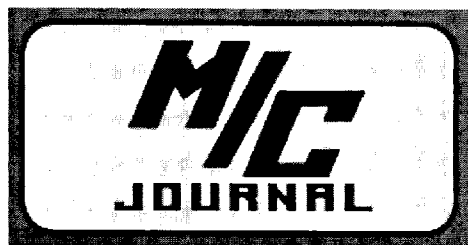
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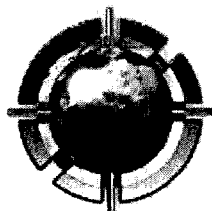
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## Submission



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### Before you write: Topic

*M/C Journal* is a journal for media and culture, with each issue organised around a central topic. The topic will usually be a single term with a large number of possible ties to issues in media and culture. For an indication of how widely article topics can spread from the focal term, please have a look at the *M/C Journal* [past issues](#). Articles must be written specifically for a particular issue's theme, and submitted directly to the editor/s of that issue unless otherwise stated in that issue's call for papers (see the [upcoming issues](#) page).

### Before you write: Abstract and biography

Before you start writing an article for *M/C Journal*, please email the editors of the issue you are interested in with a 100 word abstract of the piece you intend to write. This will be used both to check whether the article is suitable for a particular upcoming issue of *M/C*. In the same email, please send a brief biography. The biography should be three to four sentences in length and should include at least your institutional affiliation and research interests. For style and content examples, see the [contributors page](#).

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Each issue of *M/C Journal* consists of a feature article of about 2000-3000 words, and a number of shorter pieces of 1000-1500 words. The major article will usually be a contribution from an academically established guest writer we have invited, but if you feel your intended topic would qualify for the major article, we will certainly consider your offer. For topics and deadlines of upcoming issues, please see the [upcoming issues](#) page.

### Writing: Style

*M/C Journal* is a crossover journal between the popular and the academic, so your submission should reflect that aim stylistically. You should present your thoughts in a way that is open to readers not involved in your field. Again, the articles we have already published (see [past issues](#)) will give you an indication of how to approach writing for *M/C Journal*.

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You can submit articles in the following formats. Please email the editors directly, with your submission as an attachment.

Plain text (ASCII): You can simply include your article in the body of an email (with no formatting), or attach it as a plain text file. Clearly indicate italics, bold, centering and other formatting instructions. Provide a key for your formatting instructions (eg. Italicised words are enclosed in `_underscores_`).

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If you are sending a graphic, send it as a separate file with a note in the document indicating placement. Please include both a 50 pixel square thumbnail plus the full size graphic. Save drawn graphics in .gif format. Save photographs in .jpg format.

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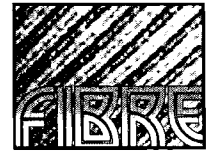
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<b>"Fibre"   Volume 6 Issue 4   26 August 2004</b>		
<b>Edited by The Fibreculture Collective</b>		
<b>Editorial</b>	Fibre	
<b>Feature</b>	Broadband	Gerard Goggin
<b>Article</b>	The Geography of Cyberspace	Emy Tseng & Kyle Eischen
<b>Article</b>	When Fibre Meets Fibre	Andrew Murphie
<b>Article</b>	The Infrastructural-Political	Adrian Mackenzie
<b>Article</b>	Resistances of Gender	Jonathan Marshall
<b>Article</b>	Idiotypic Networks, Normative Networks	Andrew Goffey
<b>Article</b>	A Spam Scam Slam	Grayson Cooke
<b>Article</b>	Something Third, Other	Petra Gemeinboeck
<b>Article</b>	Fragments on New Media Arts and Science	Geert Lovink

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