New Media and Post-feminist Critical Pathways
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Look at Me: The Selling and Commodification of Identity

One interesting "object of study" these days is the identity created using Web 2.0 tools such as Facebook or Twitter. Much social networking theory is concerned with "user-created" content and the way social networking venues are supported through the efforts of millions of us working for free to sustain them and whether this is utopian (as Clay Shirky implies) or evil (as Andrew Keen suggests). Every time a user of social networking tools makes a comment, creates a link, comments or clicks a "like" button, she is creating content that allows Web 2.0 communities to continue to exist. This contribution is equally important as the contributions of those who write the cited articles, upload photos or create videos. For example, many young girls (and grown women) are using their sexuality and looks, and others' reactions to them, to sustain the sites. Hypothetically, this could lead to more acceptance of fatness or color or disability, as girls work to sell themselves as sexy and attractive despite, or even because of, their differences from "the norm." Yet I am not convinced that this is entirely so. Many YouTube videos featuring a girl or woman, or articles or blogs about television shows or movies starring a woman are accompanied by comments that editorialize on her looks and compliance to or deviance from the ideal, often including extremely crude references to whether or not the posters want to have sex with her (and by what means). This suggests that we may be more open as a culture, but not necessarily more enlightened or safe.

If we simplify greatly and think of the "traditional" culture industries as creating media in order to get us to buy things, and Web 2.0 as including a great deal more user created media, then is there an opportunity for other types of production/consumption models? Of course there is, but the fact that most statistics these days seem to claim that "in most online communities, 90% of users are lurkers who never contribute, 9% of users contribute a little, and 1% of users account for almost all the action" (Nielsen, et al) implies that those very few who take the time to create have similar influence to those in the culture industries of the past. While the gender and racial breakdown may be more representative of the general population than the boardrooms full of mostly white men still making decisions at television networks, movies studios, publishing firms and record companies, there is still a requirement that the posters have ample leisure time, access to equipment, and a confidence that anyone might care about what they wish to produce or say, which may be more the domain of males.

Most media designed "for women" by larger media companies seems less feminist or even post feminist than patronizing and isolating. Looking at the *O Magazine* site mentioned in the question, it's unclear even what has changed since I read *Seventeen* in the 1980s and *Cosmopolitan* and *Mademoiselle* in the early 1990s, before I gave up on women's magazines. The issues and articles seem basically the same as they were then—how to attract and keep a man, how to improve your sex life, how to get by at work, and what to buy, even if there is more openness about things like sexual positions and

homosexuality. I had never looked at The XX Factor before and found it unclear why those stories were chosen "for women" out of all the others on *Slate* and other sources.

I reject the notion of "post feminism" in general and am not sure that this is the most useful approach to answer these important questions. There is still a use for the aims of the earlier feminist movements in our own society. In many cultures, women are essentially living in "pre feminism," something to consider as we take a more transnational view. Although those denied literacy clearly have less access to social networking, it is worth wondering how women in cultures where they are confined to homes or are veiled in public might express themselves and use these tools given literacy, technology, and opportunity. Any transnational analysis must consider these matters.

A few questions I would like to answer about our own culture: Are men and boys increasingly held to high "looks" standards by female and gay male viewers and, if so, will this cause the men to be more tolerant or become more insecure? Are white women and girls held to different or "easier" (or more difficult) appearance standards than women of color? Is there a need for a code of conduct for Web 2.0 comments that does not substitute anonymity for civility and a feeling of safety?

Jakob Nielsen's Alertbox, October 9, 2006: "Participation Inequality: Encouraging More Users to Contribute." http://www.useit.com/alertbox/participation_inequality.html