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2.0

Revisiting Girls, the Internet,
and the Negotiation of Identity

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Introduction

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Since the foreword by Dafna Lemish has so brilliantly captured the current state of Girls' Studies scholarship and the place of this book within it, I've opted instead to structure this introduction as an explanation for why I felt it was important to revisit the subject of my 2005 anthology *Girl Wide Web: Girls, the Internet, and the Negotiation of Identity* (Peter Lang). As I sit here typing this, I find it hard to believe that over five years have passed since the initial publication of that book. While the original book has been well received, I felt it was necessary to take a fresh look at the subject matter in order to more accurately reflect the current state of "girls, the Internet, and the negotiation of identity." My original thought was to do a revised version, but how does one "revise" an anthology? Does she keep some chapters/authors and discard others? On what basis does she make that decision? What if the original chapter authors do not want to revise their work? Given the logistical questions involved in producing a revised anthology, I opted instead to do a "sequel." No, sequels are not common in academic publishing, and I certainly do not intend for this to be the start of a *GWW* franchise. But I felt the best way to take another look at the topic was to do so within the realities of our current world—the realities in which today's girls and young women live. Since the mid-2000s, a great deal has changed in terms of computer technology itself (hence the title's reference to Web 2.0), the ways girls use that technology, and the way we as

scholars study girls and the Internet. Each of those changes is reflected in the content of this volume.

Two reviews of the original book, while applauding the content and approach overall, pointed out three gaps in the topics covered and methodologies employed. This book sets out specifically to fill these gaps. First, in a 2006 review published in *Communication Research Trends* Chad Raphael points out that the book's "perspective is limited mainly to American girls and U.S.-based Web sites" (p. 38). With the exception of Divya McMillin's chapter on girls in Bangalore, India, the original book was, indeed, U.S.-centric. The current book, however, includes chapters on girls in the Dominican Republic, Qatar, Thailand, and South Africa, as well as Korean diasporic girls in the United States.

Second, Denise Bortree (2006, p. 852), in *New Media & Society*, suggests that the studies in the original book "would have benefited from validation through interviews with primary sources: the teen girls themselves. A triangulation of methods would have strengthened the analysis and given more credence to the claims of how identity is, in fact, negotiated online." While many of the chapters in the original book employed content analysis methodology (as was typical of girls' studies scholarship at the time), all but a couple of chapters in this book privilege studies of girls themselves, in particular through the use of interviews.

Third, Bortree writes that "one regrets a lack of discussion in the book about other common uses of the internet among girls, such as blogs, games and downloading music. Teen girls are the largest group of creators and readers of blogs, so a chapter on that format would have fit into the book nicely" (p. 852). From social networking sites to game design, from blogs to game play, and from fan fiction to commercial web sites, *Girl Wide Web 2.0: Revisiting Girls, the Internet, and the Negotiation of Identity* offers a complex portrait of millennial girls online. Grounded in an understanding of the ongoing evolution in computer and internet technology and in the ways in which girls themselves use that technology, the book privileges studies of girls as active producers of computer/Internet content and incorporates an international/intercultural perspective so as to extend our understanding of girls, the Internet, and the negotiation of identity.

The book is divided into three sections—"Representing Self, Identity, and Lived Experience," "Girls as Cultural Producers," and "Online 'Spaces' for Girls." Many of the chapters could easily have been included in two or more sections, and I could have used a completely different organizational scheme altogether. The final organization of the book is what made sense to me at the time.

The book begins with Paola Prado's chapter on girls and young women in the rural town of El Seybo, Dominican Republic. Based on her interviews, Prado shows how affordable public Internet access at a local telecenter has enabled her respondents to pursue advanced schooling, communicate with friends and relatives

abroad, and envision a range of future possibilities. One use of the Internet discussed by Prado was social networking, a topic taken up more specifically by Rodda Leage and Ivana Chalmers in Chapter Two. Specifically, they document the creative ways girls in the conservative Arab country Qatar express themselves on Facebook. Based on their interviews with girls aged 18–22, Leage and Chalmers document a range of "approaches" used to negotiate the cultural restrictions against public displays of identity for females in this country. While some informants have chosen not to use Facebook, others have found creative ways to express themselves while staying within the conventions of the culture. Others still have chosen to disregard some cultural conventions in order to obtain more freedom of self expression.

Continuing the discussion of social networking sites and girls' online identity construction, Chapter Three focuses specifically on issues related to sexuality. From her longitudinal analysis of Black American girls' postings on the social networking site she identifies by the pseudonym "NevaEvaLand," Carla Stokes documents the double-edged nature of Black American girls' online construction of their sexual identities. On the one hand, they are creating a space to talk about and navigate the complexities of their sexual development and relationships, while simultaneously often reproducing repressive and hegemonic sexual scripts and beauty ideals found in hip-hop culture, music lyrics, and music videos.

In their comparative analysis of the home pages of Thai and American girls Narissra Maria Punyanunt-Carter and Jason M. Smith (Chapter Four) seek to understand whether there are differences in how girls negotiate their identities and in how they choose to present themselves online. While they find some differences between girls growing up in a collectivistic culture (Thailand) and in an individualistic culture (the United States), they find more similarities. The final chapter in Section One continues the discussion of girls' use of personal homepages in their negotiation of identity. Specifically, in Chapter Five, Michelle Bae looks at how diasporic Korean girls in the United States use their cy *hompis* (personal homepages) on the Korean social networking site Cyworld to construct a culturally hybrid form of ethnic femininity. Through her focus primarily but not exclusively on girls' pictures, Bae documents the playful and nostalgic way in which these girls are recreating an imagined Korean girlhood.

Moving into Section Two on "Girls as Cultural Producers," Jaime Warburton (Chapter Six) examines online fan fiction written by young female fans of the wildly popular *Harry Potter* and *Twilight* franchises. Surveying authors on a variety of fan fiction sites, she shows how active involvement in online fan communities facilitates the fluidity of "fangirls'" identity construction. While there are online spaces for girls to post and share their writings, the Internet also offers girls opportunities to create content specific to computer technology. The next three chapters in Section Two focus on girls actively learning about and using computer technol-

ogy—notably game designs and blogs. In Chapter Seven, Kristine Blair, Erin Dietel-McLaughlin, and Meredith Graupner Hurley take us on a journey through the Digital Mirror, a 4-day computer game camp for middle-school girls. Focusing primarily but not exclusively on Web portfolios designed by three campers, the authors document the girls' growing digital, critical, and rhetorical literacies as a result of their experiences at the camp—literacies that they then employed in their identity work.

Highlighting the work of another adult-run program designed to expose girls to computer technology, Claudia Mitchell, John Pascarella, Naydene de Lange, and Jean Stuart reflect on a series of workshops designed to educate girls about computer use in a rural secondary school in the KwaZulu-Natal province of South Africa, a region hard hit by HIV and AIDS. The chapter, which focuses on the blogs of five Zulu girls who participated in the workshops, reveals how such a "youth-centered approach to knowledge production and behavior change in the context of HIV and AIDS" could potentially be used as an educational tool. Situating blogrings as online communities, Jacqueline Vickery in Chapter Nine conducted an in-depth analysis of blogs authored by girls aged 14–19. The chapter, which highlights the blogs of three specific girls, demonstrates how creating blogs enables girls to both find their own voices and to create communities, in particular when opportunities to do so are missing from their online lives.

While many of the previous chapters address online spaces for girls, as well as the opportunities provided by such spaces, the chapters in Section Three foreground the concept. In Chapter Ten, Jill Denner and Jacob Martinez study 16 middle school girls who participated in the Girl Game Company (GCC). Designed to introduce computer literacy skills and game design to girls who otherwise would not have such opportunities, GCC provides a fertile ground from which to examine Internet spaces for girls. Specifically, Denner and Martinez compare two groups of girls distinguished by their affinity for either the social networking site MySpace or the virtual world Whyville, and find fascinating differences in girls' use of the sites for negotiating their identities.

Taking us in a slightly different direction in Chapter Eleven, Lillian Spina-Caza offers suggestions for researchers seeking to study girls' online play, specifically play on popular commercial pet adoption sites such as Webkinz.com and virtual communities such as Millsberry.com. Using unique methods for capturing and coding the real-time online play of her daughters, Spina-Caza's exploratory study provides researchers with the beginnings of a "methodological framework," for understanding girls' online play.

The last two chapters in the book offer content analyses of commercial websites targeted to girls—teen girl magazines and "magalogs." Denise Sevick Bortree specifically examines how environmentally focused articles in online teen girl mag-

azines such as *CosmoGirl* and *Seventeen* enable girls to engage in a conversation about environmental issues. Through her examination of nearly 600 responses by girls posted to a variety of articles, Bortree documents the manner in which consumerism rather than activism is often presented as the primary way for girls to respond to the environmental crisis. Consumerism is again raised in the last chapter by Sharon R. Mazzarella and Allison Atkins who conduct an analysis of the online "magalog" alloy.com. The authors argue that, while serving ostensibly as an online catalog for girls seeking access to the latest fashions, alloy.com has become an interactive, magazine-like virtual community for tween/teen girls, one that celebrates commodity femininity, a celebrity-based cult of personality, and enforced heterosexuality. They find that alloy.com constructs an idealized, normative tween/teen girl identity while simultaneously providing spaces for girls to interact with each other.

Lynne Edwards chapter in the original *Girl Wide Web: Girls, the Internet, and the Negotiation of Identity* documented the mainstream news media's proclivity to frame the Internet as a dangerous place for girls, and to frame girls themselves as passive victims of untold evils lurking online (Edwards, 2005). While the general public and journalists alike often focus on the negative potential of the Internet in girls' lives, taken together, the chapters in this book paint a compelling picture of girls as active and engaged users of the technology—using it to negotiate their identities, flex their creative muscles, educate others, and just have fun.

References

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