Electronic Communications and Feminist Activism: The Experience of PAR-L

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ABSTRACT

Do the new communications technologies, on balance, promote key feminist principles - such as democratic self-governance, equal access to resources, and women's equality - or do they have the opposite effect - creating new barriers and reinforcing inequalities? This study investigates the potential and limitations of electronic communications for social change by analyzing the experience of PAR-L, the first e-mail discussion list set up to encourage the development and dissemination of policy-oriented research and action on feminist issues in Canada.

RÉSUMÉ

Les nouvelles technologies d'information et de communication, dans l'ensemble, favorisent-elles des principes féministes tels que l'autonomie, l'accès égalitaire aux ressources et l'égalité des femmes ou, au contraire, créent-elles de nouvelles barrières et renforcent-elles les inégalités? Cette recherche aborde le potentiel et les limites des communications électroniques pour le changement social à travers l'expérience de PAR-L, la première liste de discussion par courriel créé dans le but d'encourager le développement de la recherche et de l'action féministes sur les politiques touchant les femmes au Canada.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past twenty years, electronic communications in Canada and around the globe have grown at an exponential rate. Hailed by many as a revolution comparable in scope to that produced by the invention of the Gutenberg printing press in 1434 or the Industrial Revolution of the nineteenth century, the development of electronic communications has been seen as profoundly altering key aspects of our lives: the way we work, create and use knowledge, experience relationships, and our very sense of time and space. Widely different visions of these changes have been proposed. Some advocates are wildly optimistic about the effects of electronic communications on social life, arguing that the new communications technologies, on balance, promote key feminist principles - such as democratic self-governance, equal access to resources, and women's equality. The decentralized, collaborative, and non-hierarchical nature of the new media is viewed as a means of fostering the development of virtual communities, democratizing access to knowledge, increasing democratic participation in societal debates, and organizing locally and globally for social change.

Such optimistic assessments have been challenged by more sobering analyses, however, which identify serious cultural and economic barriers to participation, and which express concern over the increasing commercialization of the new technology. Rather than lead to more democratic access to knowledge and information, electronic communications may not only reproduce existing power relations but also increase the marginalisation of groups which are already disadvantaged in terms of age, race, gender, language, income, education, or geographical location.

In recent years, these questions have been at the heart of feminist debates on the potential and limitations of the new technologies for social change. As co-founders and co-moderators of PAR-L (Policy, Action, Research List/*Liste politique, action, recherche*), the first e-mail discussion list set up to encourage the development and dissemination of policy-oriented research and action on feminist issues in Canada, we've been particularly concerned with evaluating our own

practice in light of these theoretical debates. This paper examines key aspects of our experience with PAR-L in an effort to understand, concretely, some of the advantages and limitations of communication technologies for social change. In Part I, we present the history and objectives of the PAR-L discussion list. In Part II, we examine issues of access to online participation (or, conversely, possible barriers) by looking at the sociodemographic characteristics of subscribers to the list and contributors to the discussion. In Part III, we discuss the usefulness of a forum such as PAR-L by analyzing the content of messages posted to the list in 1996-97 and respondents' comments to a 1996 user survey. Beyond both the hype and the gloom surrounding the new technologies, we hope to provide, through reflexive analysis of our own practice, a better understanding of how these technologies enhance or hinder feminist organizing for social change.

I. PAR-L : A PIONEERING FEMINIST POLICY, ACTION, RESEARCH LIST

PAR-L was launched on March 8, 1995, by the Research Department of the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women (CACSW), where both authors were employed at the time. The CACSW was an arm's-length advisory body set up in 1973 as a response to the Royal Commission on the Status of Women. Its role was to conduct research and advise the federal government on issues of concern to women in Canada. During the early 1990s, the $3.5 million allocation of the CACSW was cut back by successive federal budgets. In an attempt to make its operations more cost-effective, the CACSW had increasingly computerized its operations, and in the early 1990s it introduced e-mail internally and then externally to reach its two regional offices (in Montréal and Vancouver) and its approximately 20 members across the country. Within the CACSW, the introduction of the new technology had initially increased internal tensions between departments, and it became a stake in familiar turf wars. Few people knew what the technology was all about, everyone wanted to be hooked up, and access to electronic mail became perceived by many as a

measure of one's status within the organization. On the positive side, however, senior managers and presidents all needed to learn the new technologies from scratch - and often called upon very much more junior people to teach or help them, breaching the usual formalities and protocols, and altering some of the typically hierarchical group dynamics.

In January 1995, with the certainty of more drastic budget cuts coming and the rumour of the amalgamation or elimination of some "redundant" women's organizations, the CACSW's Research Department took action. We organized a teleconference consultation with an ad hoc group of women from across Canada who were knowledgeable about the new technology. Next, we quickly set up an electronic discussion list, intended as an inexpensive means of communication for individual women and women's organizations so that they would have the capability to share information swiftly and to take collective action if necessary. The main objective of the list was to provide an interactive space for exchanging information about policy, action, and research on issues of concern to women in Canada. It was intended as a means of bringing together feminist researchers and activists working in universities, in women's groups, or as independent researchers.

Like a lifeboat from a sinking ship, the PAR-L electronic discussion list was officially launched on International Women's Day, 1995, with eight subscribers. Less than a month later, the CACSW was terminated. Although there was almost no coverage in the mainstream press of the closure of the Council - arguably Canada's premier feminist research organization - there was an outpouring of protest letters, faxes, and e-mail messages from women and women's organizations across the country. The widespread support was an empowering sign of solidarity, but it did not succeed in reversing the government's decision announced by Minister Sheila Finestone. Shortly after, the PAR-L discussion list was transferred to the University of New Brunswick in Fredericton. The discussion list has grown steadily since its foundation, and in its second year of operation

reached more than 500 subscribers across Canada and in 11 other countries. In the spring of 1997, it was selected for a Strategic Research Network grant by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC). It is now supported by a Web site (www.unb.ca/PAR-L), and, by August 1999, it reached 900 subscribers in 15 countries.

In the early days of the list, we shared the general optimism concerning the potential of electronic communications for feminist organizing for social change. Exploring the Net, we were amazed by the possibilities of this new technology for communications and research on feminist policy issues: gopher sites from different parts of the world with research documents on all kinds of issues, discussion lists for exchanging information and creating networks, e-mail for communicating with people all over the country, ftp for transferring documents, telnet for accessing remote computers. The potential for research and communications appeared staggering. Within the CACSW itself, and also amongst different sectors including government and academia, opportunities for new partnerships, better collaboration, virtual communities, and a real democratization of access to knowledge seemed to present themselves.

However, we soon became concerned that our activism was taking place within a medium which had built-in limitations. Foremost among these was the problem of access. For all the hype about democratization and participation, we knew that only a minority of Canadian households had home access to a computer and to the Internet. Statistics Canada's 1997 household survey showed that only 36 percent of Canadian households owned a computer and 13 percent had Internet access at home (Statistics Canada 1997). Numbers were even lower in Québec, where only 27.7 percent of households owned a computer and 8.2 percent had Internet access. Furthermore, user surveys consistently showed that there were more men than women on the Internet. The Graphics, Visualization & Usability Center (GVU) 1994 survey estimated that women represented only 5 percent of Internet users (Spender 1995); by 1997, this number had risen to 40 percent (GVU 1997). There were also more well-educated, wealthier, and, we can assume,

white Anglo-Saxon women on-line than there were women from lower economic backgrounds or from diverse ethnic and racial minority cultures (Balka 1993, 12). Barriers faced by individual women and women's organizations alike include economic costs associated with the purchase and constant upgrading of hardware, software, and Internet connection; economic and social costs linked to the time required to learn the new technologies and explore a still uncharted cyberspace; geographic constraints for women in rural areas; and cultural constraints for women with no or little knowledge of the English language (Relais-Femmes 1998; Shade 1997).

Another important barrier to participation in electronic forums is what Kurlan and Egan (1996) name the issue of voice, that is, being able to state one's perspective and being heard as a credible speaker by others (1996, 394). Even if access is readily available, active participation is not guaranteed. In fact, rules of language and reputation building partially determine the impact or the influence one has in computer-mediated communication. Gaining access to equipment and training is a necessary condition for participating in an online discussion list, but it is not a sufficient condition. Questions about who feels comfortable actively posting to a discussion list versus more passively reading (or, in cyber-parlance, "lurking") need to be considered also. Some studies suggest that electronic communications lead to the creation of inclusive networks which cut across social, geographical, and hierarchical boundaries, by allowing discussion among people who would otherwise be separated by geographical distance, institutional affiliation, or professional status (Korenman and Wyatt 1996). Other studies, by contrast, indicate that communications in cyberspace mirror the power relations of the physical world. In a landmark study on the dynamics of mixed academic forums, for example, Sandra Herring (1996) shows that men tend to dominate discussions by adopting an aggressive style, engaging in long monologues, and resorting to criticism to promote their own importance. Similarly, a 1993 study of the newsgroup *alt.feminism* shows that 74 percent of messages

were posted by men (quoted in Morahan-Martin 1998).

Issues of access and voice represent two potential barriers to participation in electronic forums. If access is limited to a relatively privileged segment of the population and if patterns of communication reproduce the power structures characteristic of social life in the physical world, promises of more democratic access to knowledge and increased political participation will not be realized. In Part II, we examine issues of access and voice in the context of the PAR-L discussion list. With regard to access, we analyze PAR-L membership to determine whether we have succeeded in reaching out to the diversity of researchers and activists interested in women's policy issues in Canada. Because PAR-L is a clearly focussed list designed primarily for people interested in the creation and distribution of knowledge for women's equality, we do not expect our membership to be representative of the Canadian population in general. Rather, we are primarily concerned with regional representation and institutional affiliation (e.g. universities, women's organisations, self-employment, private firms, and public sector). With regard to the issue of voice, we analyze the messages posted on PAR-L during the course of its second year of operation (1996-97) to determine whose voices are registered. Our concern is not so much that men would dominate discussion, since PAR-L membership is overwhelmingly female. Rather, we are concerned with issues such as accessibility for both university- and community-based participants, participation by individuals as compared with groups, and consideration of the extent to which discussion is open as opposed to being monopolized by a few subscribers.

II. ACCESS TO PAR-L
Who Subscribes?

Ultimately, the goal of PAR-L is to contribute to greater equality for women in Canada by providing a forum where researchers and activists from across the country can exchange information, coordinate action, and discuss substantive policy issues. To determine to what extent (if at all) the PAR-L discussion list was succeeding in reaching out to the diversity of women in Canada and in bridging the much-lamented gulf between university- and community-based activists and researchers, we decided to undertake an online survey of subscribers and to augment this with an analysis of our list of subscribers and of all messages posted during a one-year period. Our goal was to obtain information about the sociodemographic characteristics of subscribers, how they accessed PAR-L, which aspects of the list they found most useful, and what could be improved.

A questionnaire (see Appendix) was posted to the list three times during April-May 1996. We received 91 completed questionnaires, which, given the size of the list at the time, represents a response rate of 27 percent.[1] In addition, we examined the complete list of PAR-L subscribers which contains the names and e-mail addresses of all subscribers. Compared to the survey, this information is limited but it is also more accurate, being available for all subscribers rather than for a small sample. Names provide information on whether subscribers are individual women, individual men, or organizations. E-mail addresses give information on the type of service provider used by each subscriber and the geographical location of college and university addresses. While there is no way to determine whether those who answered the survey are representative of all subscribers, the similarities between the survey and the list of subscribers indicate that, in important respects, respondents to the survey are not very different from other PAR-L subscribers.

The analysis of the list of subscribers showed that in April 1996, PAR-L had 333 unconcealed and 2 concealed subscribers (meaning that their names were unlisted). Almost all (95 percent) had female first names, 11 (3.3 percent) had male first names, 3 (1 percent) had first names whose gender could not be determined, and 3 (1 percent) were organizations.[2] We classified service providers into four categories: (1) colleges and universities, (2) community, non-profit, and labour

organizations, (3) governments, and (4) private providers and companies.

The majority of subscribers (60.1 percent) had university addresses. The rest were distributed in the following way: 20.7 percent for private providers, 9.6 percent for community, non-profit, and labour organizations, 4.8 percent for governments, and 4.8 percent from other countries. Most addresses outside Canada were in educational institutions in the United States, but PAR-L also had subscribers in New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and Peru. Among university-based addresses, Ontario had the largest share with 100 subscribers (50 percent). This number was slightly inflated by a fairly large number of undergraduates (38) who were asked to subscribe to the list as a requirement for a Women's Studies methods course. Without this large contingent, Ontario still represented 38.3 percent of university-based subscribers. The rest were distributed among Atlantic Canada (18.5 percent) and the West (26.5 percent), with only 10 subscribers (5 percent) from Québec.[3] The most remarkable feature of these data is the under-representation of Québec and over-representation of Atlantic Canada compared to their share of the Canadian population.[4]

On three issues where comparable information is available, data obtained from the list of subscribers and from the survey were very similar. Not surprisingly, almost all (99 percent) of those who answered the survey were female, 54 percent worked in universities, colleges, or other educational institutions, and their geographical distribution was very similar to data obtained from the list of subscribers: 40 percent of respondents were residents of Ontario, 16 percent were from Atlantic Canada, 29 percent from the West, and 5 percent from Québec. There were no respondents from the Yukon, the North-West Territories, and Prince-Edward-Island, and few (11 percent) from rural areas.[5]

Most of those who answered the survey (over 80 percent) said they were members of equality-seeking organizations. Subscribers who were not university-based indicated a variety of occupations, including researcher, writer, consultant, administrator, librarian, journalist, clerical worker, policy analyst, activist, and community worker. These respondents worked in a variety of organizational settings, including women's and community organizations, governments, media, private business, and self-employment. The university-based subscribers were more or less equally divided among students (44.7 percent) and faculty (51.1 percent), with 4.2 percent in library and administrative occupations. Students and faculty came from a wide range of disciplines, including the humanities, social sciences, urban planning, communications, women's studies, computer science, and health sciences. A majority of respondents (56.5 percent) were aged between 35 and 54, 34 percent were between 15 and 34, while only 9.5 percent said they were over 55. Women over 55 are, therefore, greatly under-represented compared to their share of the Canadian population.[6]

Among those who answered the survey, about equal numbers indicated that they accessed PAR-L from home and from work, and none accessed it through libraries or other public access points. The relatively high volume of mail generated by a list such as PAR-L means that subscribers need to check their mail regularly, and this is more easily achieved when access is at work or at home. Furthermore, it came as a surprise that almost all subscribers who answered the survey (90 percent) owned a computer, given that according to Statistics Canada (1997) only 36 percent of Canadian households owned a computer at the time of the survey.

What do these numbers tell us about access? On the positive side, the diversity of PAR-L subscribers in terms of geographical representation, age distribution, and institutional affiliation suggests that we have succeeded in our goal of reaching out to women beyond researchers in universities. The data show that university researchers represent only slightly more than half of PAR-L subscribers, that young women are well represented, and that we have subscribers in most regions of the country. It should be stressed that not only subscribers actually gain access to PAR-L. Subscribers sometimes send messages on behalf of people who are not on the list, and we

have frequently been told that subscribers redistribute posts by fax, paper copy, or e-mail to friends or co-workers. These findings support scholarly and journalistic evidence that one of the major strengths of e-mail discussion forums such as PAR-L is their ability to reach out across geographical, social, and institutional boundaries to create inclusive networks. These networks foster the emergence of new communities of interests (Korenman and Wyatt 1996; Rheingold 1993), wider and faster circulation of knowledge (Brody 1998), and global organising for social change (Vidal 1999).

On the down side, however, we identified several barriers which are not easily eliminated. First, the results of our survey suggest that PAR-L subscribers, like most users of the Internet, represent relatively privileged segments of the Canadian population, if not in terms of income, certainly in terms of education and computer access.[7] The high proportion of PAR-L subscribers affiliated with universities, their occupations in sectors dealing with the creation and distribution of knowledge and information, and the fact that 90 percent of survey respondents owned a computer at home are instructive in this respect. This finding is hardly surprising, however, given that PAR-L is a list designed primarily for people whose work involves the creation and circulation of knowledge. Participation in a discussion list such as PAR-L supposes a high level of literacy, basic knowledge of technology, and regular access to a computer.[8]

A second barrier identified by our data concerns the under-representation of women over 55 years of age compared to their share of the Canadian population. While this low participation may reflect a lack of interest on the part of older women for the feminist action and research focus of the list, it also mirrors the lower level of Internet participation of older people compared to younger generations (RISQ 1997). Finally, a third barrier concerns the under-representation of francophones on the list. Originally, PAR-L was designed as a bilingual list where messages from the moderators would be posted in both official languages and subscribers could send messages in the language of their choice. The very low number of subscribers from Québec and the quasi-absence of messages in French, however, testify to the difficulties involved in establishing bilingual forums in Canada. Of the 772 messages sent to the list in 1996-97, 739 (95.7 percent) were in English, 18 (2.3 percent) were in French, and 15 (1.9 percent) were bilingual.

This low level of francophone participation on the list may partly reflect lower Internet use among francophones compared to anglophones in Québec and in Canada, which affects individual women (RISQ 1997) as well as women's groups (Relais-Femmes 1998; Shade 1997). Research on Internet use among francophone women's groups in particular shows that language is a major barrier to participation (Relais-Femmes 1998) and suggests that there is a time lag of five to six years between francophone and anglophone women's groups for integrating new technologies (Shade 1997). Lower Internet use among francophones may in turn partly reflect the low level of French content on the Internet, which was recently estimated by researcher Kenneth Rivers at 2 percent (quoted in Peterson 1999). The high costs and time constraints of translation involved when posting bilingual messages, as well as the distinct character of the women's movement in Québec and among francophones outside Québec, may also be contributing factors. English remains the *lingua franca* of communications in electronic media in this country as in many others, and this raises important issues of access and cultural homogenization, both locally and globally.

Whose Voice?

It is one thing to have access to a discussion list such as PAR-L but quite another to actively participate and get one's voice heard on the list. In order to determine who most frequently posts messages on PAR-L, we examined the 772 messages posted to the list from March 8, 1996, to March 7, 1997. In 1996-97, a total of 204 individuals and organizations posted messages to the list. It is impossible to determine what percentage of subscribers this number represents since the number of subscribers changes on a daily

basis as people join and leave the list. We know that in April 1996 the list had 335 subscribers, while in April 1997 this number had jumped to 481. The 481 subscribers, however, do not necessarily include the 335 who subscribed in 1996 since any number of them may have left the list during the year. Taking the smaller number of subscribers (335) as a base for computing the percentage of subscribers who posted at least one message to the list yields a percentage of 60.9 percent and taking the larger number (481) yields a percentage of 42.4 percent. Neither number is an accurate reflection of the proportion of subscribers who actively participate in discussions on the list, but taken together they suggest that approximately half the subscribers contributed at least once to the list in 1996-97, which we find a positive indication of a general level of comfort.

The interesting question is the extent to which discussion on the list is monopolized by a small number of subscribers. A frequency count of the number of messages posted by each subscriber shows that a few people posted a disproportionately high number of messages. One subscriber posted 79 messages, another posted 47 messages, and a third posted 20 messages to the list. Sixteen very active subscribers sent between 10 and 19 messages each, 48 moderately active subscribers sent between 3 and 9 messages each, and 138 occasionally active subscribers posted 1 or 2 messages each. These results indicate that while a very small number of subscribers are extremely active and post a large number of messages, they do not monopolize discussions since 138 subscribers, representing about two thirds (67.6 percent) of those who posted, sent one or two messages each.

A more interesting way to look at these numbers is to divide the list of posters into groups at fixed intervals, e.g. quintiles, and to see the percentage of messages posted by each group.[9] Subscribers in the fifth quintile, which contains the 20 percent of posters who have been most active on the list, posted 63.5 percent (490) of all messages sent to the list. The fourth quintile, which includes the next 20 percent most active posters, accounts for 15.1 percent (116) of all messages posted to the list. The remaining 60 percent of those who posted

contributed only 21.4 percent of all messages. While these data would be more meaningful if we had data from other e-mail lists to compare them with, the share of posts in each quintile indicates a fair degree of concentration of the discussion among a relatively small number of posters.

Knowing that some people contribute more than others is useful, but even more interesting would be detailed sociodemographic information on the people whose voice is most often heard. The only information available on people who post to the list, however, comes from the names and e-mail addresses provided by message headers. Names provide information on gender and on whether posters are individuals or organisations, while e-mail addresses provide information about institutional affiliation. The issue of gender is complicated in a number of ways, including the unverifiability of posters' gender despite their signing messages with names that may be recognizably male or female. The picture is undoubtedly clouded by the fact that organizations have been counted based on the identity of the person who signed the message and by the phenomenon of reposting messages, so that a man may serve as the conduit of a woman's voice or vice versa. Analysis of PAR-L posts by gender is merely suggestive, then, of the relative occurrences of female and male voices on the list. It indicates that 716 posts (93 percent of all posts) appear to have been sent by women, who represented 95 percent of all subscribers in 1996-97, as indicated earlier. Men contribute more messages to the list than their share of membership, but the numbers are relatively small. While men represented only 3 percent of all subscribers, they sent 55 messages to the list or 7 percent of all messages posted. Of the three most active posters to the list (each posting 20 or more messages per annum), one was a man and two were women. While men's voices are slightly over represented compared to their membership on the list, PAR-L remains overwhelmingly a list for women by women. Even if this finding is not surprising, given that PAR-L is a feminist list, it is worth emphasizing that this is not necessarily the case in all feminist forums (Herring 1996;

Morahan-Martin 1998).

It is also interesting to observe that by far the greatest proportion of posts to the list are made by individual women, not by spokespersons for women's organizations. Admittedly, it is sometimes a judgment call as to whether a post should be categorized by its e-mail address, its signed sender, or the format and content of its message. We based our judgments principally on the latter. By our count, 22 posters to the list were organizations (out of 201 total) or 10.9 percent of all posters; these organizations contributed 127 posts or 16.5 percent of the messages on the list in 1996-97. The precise numbers may be challenged, but the general picture is clear. Unlike some official government consultations where only national women's groups are recognized, the list clearly gives voice to individual women as well. The relative numbers in fact suggest that electronic communications can potentially lead to a more direct democracy by facilitating the participation of individuals in public life, even from the privacy of their own home.

Finally, a breakdown of messages by type of Internet service provider shows that, while PAR-L gives voice to the full diversity of its membership, the majority of messages come from people who subscribe through private service providers. Analysis of a sample of 300 messages posted to the list during three periods (September/October 1996, January/February 1997, and May to August 1997) indicates that 123 messages (41 percent) were sent via private Internet service providers, 114 messages (38 percent) came from university addresses, 48 (16 percent) came from non-profit/community providers, and 15 (5 percent) were posted by governments. The proportion of messages from university addresses, however, steadily declined during the year, from 53 percent in May to August 1996 to 20 percent in January/February 1997. Messages from private providers, by contrast, grew from 19 percent in May to August to 60 percent in January/February. University women now contribute less than their share of membership. It is not easy to interpret the meaning of this trend without detailed content analysis of messages posted by each group, but it is perhaps an indication that women affiliated with universities had a head-start in gaining computer access and training, compared with those in women's groups in the community. A survey of women's organizations across Canada conducted in April and May 1996 for Status of Women Canada showed that 49 out of the 70 groups surveyed were on the Internet and 19 others were at least exploring the possibility of getting connected (Shade 1996, 89).

So, whose voice is heard on the list? Analysis of PAR-L membership and of messages posted clearly show that PAR-L is a list for women and by women. While men post a slightly higher proportion of messages than their share of membership, the overwhelming majority of messages come from individual women and from women's groups that subscribe to the list through private providers. Although a few very active subscribers contribute disproportionately to the discussions, they do not monopolise it since about half of PAR-L subscribers posted at least one message in 1996-97. In the following section, we discuss policy issues around decisions by the list moderators to post or reject messages, the content of messages posted to the list in 1996-97, and subscribers' comments to a user survey.

III. ORGANIZING FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

Work for feminist change may take many different forms, including individual strategies of resistance in everyday life, self-help and consciousness-raising groups, empirical research and theory construction, and collective action in formal organizations. From our experience on other e-mail lists, we knew that PAR-L could not attempt to be everything for everyone. In the array of possible strategies for social change, we wanted PAR-L to be a tool for researchers and activists interested in research and action on policy issues of concern to women in Canada. We were not interested in a chatty conversational forum, where the sharing of personal experience develops in participants a sense of common identity and empowerment. As important as these experiences might be for feminist change work, they did not correspond to our needs as researchers and

activists interested in policy issues. We were also concerned to avoid long and acrimonious debates about basic feminist issues such as male/female relations, rationales for feminism, the relative oppression of men and women under patriarchy, etc. Our goal was not to avoid discussion of substantive issues, but to create a forum in which some fundamentals of feminism could be taken for granted and no longer needed to be debated.

What Is the Role of Moderators?

As moderators of the list, we are responsible for maintaining the focus and setting the tone of the discussion. This is accomplished in two different ways. First, the objectives and guidelines for posting messages to the list are stated in the welcome message which is sent to all new subscribers, as well as in cybernotes which are regularly posted to the list. Second, PAR-L is a moderated forum, where each message is read by a moderator before being posted to the list. Messages which do not correspond to the list guidelines are not posted. A major advantage for subscribers is that moderators intercept all messages which clearly do not belong in a public forum. This includes warnings about computer viruses, advertising and junk e-mail, garbled messages, and commands to subscribe or unsubscribe from the list. More importantly, it includes personal messages which people inadvertently send to the entire list rather than privately. On numerous occasions, we have sent back highly personal messages which, if they had gone directly to the list, might have caused harm or embarrassment to the persons involved.

The main disadvantages of a moderated list, apart from the time commitment required from the moderators, are a less than instantaneous posting of messages and the possibility of censorship by moderators. Since PAR-L membership is almost exclusively female, there has been none of the problems reported by Herring (1996) in mixed academic forums. No subscribers ever reported to the moderators that fear of being flamed or harassed had prevented them from sending messages to the list. A remarkable feature of the PAR-L list is indeed how rarely we've rejected messages on the

grounds that their language or tone was inappropriate. From 1995 to 1998, we rejected only four messages because of inflammatory or accusatory language. Ostensibly, these four messages were written by women. One message expressed vehement opposition to gun control, another expressed what we perceived as an anti-feminist position on feminist psychiatry, and another described a statement on funding cuts to women's groups by the minister responsible for Status of Women Canada as "sheep excrement"! On these three occasions, we asked posters to rephrase or better explain their positions. Finally, one message was a strongly-worded protest against a foreign language sentence used as a signature by one subscriber. Because of its tone and subject matter, we forwarded this message directly to the person involved. The overwhelming majority of rejected messages were either too long (exceeding our guideline of three to five standard computer screens) or outside the parameters of the list, that is, they concerned neither women nor Canada.

How Do Subscribers Use the List and How Useful Is It to Them?

The PAR-L online discussion group seems to function as a kind of electronic "salon" or public space, where ideas are exchanged amongst individuals and groups from disparate milieus, including the university, community, and government sectors. That this list is used for linking and mutually supporting women's organizations and feminist researchers and activists can be demonstrated further by a content analysis of postings. Content analysis of a sample of 200 messages posted in 1996-97 shows that the subject which is foregrounded more than any other on the PAR-L discussion list is women's organizations and organizing (48 of 200 posts or 24 percent). This includes organizing around legislative and policy issues, petitions, calls for action, comments on government initiatives, fax numbers for senators, and the sharing of power within women's organisations. The widespread interest in women organizing is underscored by evidence from the online survey which showed the very high

participation rate of subscribers in equality-seeking groups. In second place came discussion of resources for action on social issues such as date rape, surviving foster care, and stalking, which represented 16 percent of messages posted. About half of these messages were posted by individual women seeking help for themselves or for a friend and the other half came from groups setting up programs on these issues.

It is difficult to distinguish messages which concern action and organizing from those which contribute to the development and distribution of research, since these two aspects of feminist change work are closely interrelated, but the analysis indicates that the action component of the PAR-L list takes precedence over research in the discussions. Requests for help with research projects and replies to such requests represented 14.5 percent of messages posted, while discussion of women's studies and administrative issues in universities accounted for 5 percent of messages. The list is also widely used to share information about upcoming events and conferences (15.5 percent), books, films, journals and reports (12 percent), web sites (3 percent), and job opportunities (3.5 percent). Topics of frequent concern were the media, violence against women and children, legal issues, education, tax, other economic and social issues including poverty, and health.

The scope of PAR-L is issues of concern to women in Canada. Of all the messages posted in our second year of operation, 83 percent concerned Canadian events and issues while only 13 percent were international in scope. This focus on material from across Canada may possibly also serve to break down isolation and create a sense of connectedness. We are also aware, of course, that the opposite may be true for francophones when the list is dominated by English.

The feeling of "groupness" - of community, sisterhood, and a shared sense of purpose is also evidenced in a distinct salutation unique to PAR-L. On April 13, 1995, former CACSW librarian Josée Lescault began her message, "Dear Parleuses" - a term which has become the most frequent form of address on the list in those messages which contain a formal salutation. Variations include the anglicized "Parlers"[10] or, occasionally, "Dear Par-L Friends." A breakdown of the occurrences of these terms reveals that slightly less than half (47.3 percent) of PAR-L posts contained no salutation; that 19.9 percent of all posts were addressed "Dear Parleuses"; 13.3 percent used miscellaneous generic expressions such as "Greetings" or "Hello"; 11.8 percent began by addressing or referring specifically to an individual other than the moderators; 6.7 percent used a form of group salutation ("Dear Sisters"); and 0.9 percent addressed the moderators.

But finally the most compelling evidence about the climate or culture or general conversational tenor of the list comes, not from graphs or numbers, but from the words and comments of "Parleuses" themselves. Responses to the open-ended request for additional comments which concluded the PAR-L survey, as well as messages annually sent to the moderators at the time of PAR-L's anniversary, which coincides with International Women's Day, testify to the list's value and uses. Positive comments, on the survey and in private messages, enormously outweigh negative ones, and overall there is a sense of enthusiasm, intense support, and even pride in what women across Canada are doing and what we are sharing with others. This is balanced by widespread concern about lack of training and access for grassroots women, individually and in women's groups. There is also some concern over the volume of messages on e-mail lists such as this one, and over how the information posted on PAR-L will be archived and accessed for future reference. Most often cited were such things as the speed, ease, and low cost of online organizing. People feel connected to one another and are gaining a clearer sense of "what the issues are." There is a shared sense of the "fabulous" potential for mobilizing and responding collectively. Above all is that exhilarating new feeling of an almost personal connection. The experience of participating in PAR-L led several writers to re-name it our "interactive discussion," "dialogue," and - the one we like best - "conversation." As other analysts have described it, the phenomenon

of e-mail lies at the intersection of public and private and of written and oral communications (Korenman and Wyatt 1996). It is a phenomenon perhaps best labelled, then, a written conversation.

CONCLUSION: SUMMING UP AND REACHING OUT

So, is the glass half empty or half full? Do these findings, based on our observations and experiences with PAR-L, put us in the company of the optimists or the more "sobering" analysts of the new electronic technology? Does the evidence, on balance, support the promotes-more-democracy or the promotes-more-elitism position? Or is it some of both? Our observations are consistent with what we know of the patterns of diffusion of other technologies, such as the printing press, telephone, television, and fax machines; these means of communication at first were costly and owned only by a few, but eventually they became means of mass communication. The exponential growth in numbers of Internet users, the increasingly strong proportion of women in Canada coming online, and the clear commitment by equality-seeking organizations to use the new communications technology, both locally and globally, are hopeful signs for the collective sharing of feminist research and action.

This case study of PAR-L in its early days reveals that serious regional, linguistic, economic, and age barriers exist which limit or eliminate many women's access to the new technologies. It also suggests that other factors beyond issues of access, possibly linked to the high level of literacy required to contribute to public written exchanges, may prevent many from actively being heard in public forums. However, for those who do have time and access to equipment and training, whether or not they actively participate in discussions, the evidence suggests that participating in a feminist electronic discussion list may create a new form of community which includes women previously isolated or separated from one another, often bridging the gap between community and university-based activists. It may also foster empowerment by giving voice to a larger segment of the feminist community than has usually been possible, and forge a valuable tool in organizing for change.

ENDNOTES

1. According to Korenman and Wyatt (1996) this number most likely underestimates the response rate because, for various reasons, not all people who subscribe to discussion lists actually receive mail. In a survey similar to the one presented here, they estimated that only 62.9 percent of subscribers to the list WMST-L were receiving messages.

2. These results do not mean that only 2.3 percent of PAR-L subscribers are organizations as opposed to individuals because groups often subscribe under individuals' names rather than as organizations.

3. It should be noted that only university and government addresses, for the most part, can be identified by geographic location, not private or commercial providers, so that our data are incomplete. We have no information about access by women in the North, for example.

4. In 1997, the distribution of the Canadian population by region was 7.9 percent in Atlantic Canada, 24.3 percent in Québec, 37.5 percent in Ontario, 29.9 percent in the West and 0.3 percent in the two territories. Statistics Canada (1997), online at http://www.statcan.ca/francais/Pgdb/People/Population/demo02_f.htm, page consulted on February 5, 1999.

5. In the spring of 1997, we updated this information by re-analyzing the list of subscribers. On April 10, 1997, PAR-L membership had increased to 479 unconcealed subscribers and 2 concealed subscribers, for a total of 481. Although there was an increase in the number of university-based subscribers from 200 in 1996 to 263 in 1997, their relative share of the total fell from 60.1 percent in 1996 to 54.9 percent in 1997. This relative decrease was counterbalanced by an equivalent gain among private providers, whose share increased from 20.7 percent in 1996 to 26.1 percent in 1997. The percentages remained relatively stable in all other categories, with 5.8 percent for governments, 8.8 percent for nonprofit, community, and unions, and 4.4 percent for foreign subscribers. Among university-based subscribers, Ontario still represented the largest share with 120 subscribers (45.6 percent). Atlantic Canada had 28.1 percent, the West 21.6 percent, and Québec came last with 4.5 percent.

6. In 1997, the Canadian population of women aged 15 and over was distributed as follows: 35.2 percent were aged between 15 and 34, 37.6 percent were between 35 and 54, and 27.9 percent were over 55. Statistics Canada (1997), online at www.statcan/english/Pgdb/People/Population/demo10a.htm, page consulted on February 23, 1998.

7. Because we were mainly concerned with regional and institutional representation, our questionnaire included no question about other pertinent indicators of social inequality such as income, education, ethnic or racial origin, and disability.

8. This supports the argument put forward by Shade, that community access points are "band-aid solutions to deeper access problems" (Shade 1997, 11).

9. An intuitive way of understanding quintiles is to imagine a list of all subscribers who posted at least one message to the list in 1996-97. At the top of the list are people who posted the highest number of messages. At the bottom are those who posted only one message. The list is then divided into five equal parts, called quintiles, each of which contains 20 percent of all posters. The next step is to compute the percentage of the total number of messages posted by each quintile. This technique is most often used to analyze income inequality.

10. We are indebted to Roseanne Lepine of the Women's Centre at the University of Ottawa for adding to our discussion of the pun "Parlers" and "parlours" the concept of the live discussion groups or "salons" of women in earlier centuries in France.

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APPENDIX
Questionnaire

Dear Parleuses,

We are organizing a roundtable discussion on online activism for the Canadian Women's Studies Association at Brock University at the end of May. In preparation, we would like to have feedback on your experience with this (and other) online lists.

We know how busy you all are, and we will be grateful for answers to ANY of the following questions that you have time for.

The questions are designed to find out about you; women's groups you belong to; what you find most/least useful about PAR-L; how we can improve PAR-L; your general computer experience; and other comments.

Bien entendu, vous pouvez repondre aux questions ouvertes dans la langue de votre choix.

With thanks,

Wendy and Michèle
PAR-L Co-moderators

I. DEMOGRAPHICS
A. What is your sex?
___ Female
___ Male

B. What is your age? _____

C. In which province or territory do you live? _____

D. Do you live in an urban or rural (under 50,000 population) place?
____ Urban
____ Rural

E. What is your primary occupation? _____

F. If you are in the paid labour force, what kind of organization do you work for?
____ college, university, or other academic institution
____ women's organization
____ other community or non-profit organization
____ government
____ media
____ private sector business
____ freelance or self-employed
____ other (please specify)

G. If you are associated with [employed by or attending] a college, university, or other academic institution, what is your main discipline or area of study? _____

II. ACTIVISM AND THE NEW TECHNOLOGY

A. Are you currently a member of one or more women's or equality-seeking groups (local, regional, national, international)?
____ Yes
____ No

B. If so, please specify which one(s), and list their email address if possible.
_____

C. Do any of the organizations of which you are a member use the new information technology for organizing?
____ Yes
____ No
____ Don't know

III. USING PAR-L

A. For how long have you been a subscriber to PAR-L?
____ Less than three months
____ Three to six months
____ More than six months

B. How did you hear about PAR-L?
____ from a friend or colleague
____ from a bibliography or list of online discussion lists (please specify)
____ from seeing the PAR-L brochure
____ other

C. PAR-L is concerned with policy, action, and research on issues of concern to women in Canada. Which component are you most interested in? Please rank the following 1, 2, and 3, with #1 being the MOST important aspect:
____ policy issues
____ action and organizing
____ research

D. To what extent does PAR-L help you to keep informed about current events of interest to women in Canada?
____ a good deal
____ a little
____ not at all

E. Which aspects of PAR-L have you found to be useful and satisfying? Please explain why these aspects are important to you.

_____

F. Which aspects of PAR-L have you found to be problematic or frustrating? Please explain why these aspects are important to you.

_____

IV. POSSIBLE IMPROVEMENTS TO PAR-L

A. Would you like for PAR-L to provide any of the following services? Put an X by any service(s) that you would find useful.
___ government news monitoring
___ brief summaries of new research on women
___ brief summaries of non-government news in the press of concern to women in Canada
___ other (please specify)

B. Would you be willing to make a financial contribution to PAR-L to enable it to provide any of these services? Put an X by any service that you would be prepared to support financially.
___ government news monitoring
___ brief summaries of new research on women
___ brief summaries of non-government news in the press of concern to women in Canada
___ other (please specify)

C. Do you currently subscribe to The Women's Monitor?
___ Yes
___ No

D. If you are familiar with The Women's Monitor, would you like to see it
available online through PAR-L?
___Yes (and I would be willing to make a financial contribution)
___Yes (but I would NOT be willing/able to pay)
___No

V. COMPUTER AND LIST EXPERIENCE

A. Where do you generally access PAR-L?
___ at home
___at work
___at a community access centre (e.g. public library)
___other (please identify)

B. Do you subscribe to any other women-related email lists? If so, which one(s)?

_____

C. Do you own a computer?
___Yes
___ No

VI. OTHER

What else would you like to tell us about PAR-L or online activism?