The Internet: This network is not just for "old boys"

"The statistics say that more men are using, but the truth is, I don't see the gender gap - even if the statistics say that there is one."

-- Jim Brody
Central Penn Computer Systems

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Editor

If an Internet surfer chooses a cyberspace search engine link titled "Where the Girls Are: Click Here for Pictures of Naked Women," that person may soon discover, as the screen jumps to Susan Dennis' web site, that the title was misleading. Although this page contains vast amounts of data about women, there won't be any nudity, just the punch to Dennis' joke: "Ah Ha! I'll bet you thought you were going to find the usual Internet rationing of naked women. . . ."

Dennis says that she titles her site's search links that way to prove a point. "I want men and women to know that there is more information about women out there on the net than just naked pictures of Pamela Anderson."

Her World Wide Web page, which can be located at http://www.eskimo.com/~susan/girls.htm, is a "hotspot" of links created by and about women and their issues. From her site, "Where the Girls Are," an Internet user can be launched to such Web pages as: The Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing 1995; The National Organization for Women Homepage; The Global Women's Fund; Women's History Month Encyclopedia; Cybergrrl, an Internet network site for women; as well as numerous links to resources on women's health, economics, equal rights, and feminist studies.

Dennis first hooked her phone up to a computer in 1980, when she started a public relations career for IBM. She's says that although she made many friends in cyberspace, most of them were primarily of the "male persuasion."

"I would get so excited when I would find another woman on the

net," she explains. "It was like, Wow! Another girl geek."

She says that she decided to build the site, "Where the Girls Are," so that she could help other women find "virtual sisterhood." The Web site went online in Feb. 1995, with 15 links. Today, there are more than 600 links listed.

In addition to maintaining "Where the Girls Are," and her own personal Web site, Dennis is the "Webmaster" for a new company, Commercial Space Online, which assists businesses on the Internet. As Webmaster, she creates and maintains

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> **"Where the Girls Are" Webpage**

business Web pages and on-line functions. Her computer knowledge and experience enabled her to leave her job at IBM for this position in which she can work out of her home in Seattle, Wash.

Dennis believes that there are easily just as many women on the Internet as men, if not more. She says that people may assume that there is a gender gap because there aren't as many commercial Web pages created by women.

"There are a preponderance

of men on commercial Web sites because there are a preponderance of men that run the world," she explains.

She insists that this is in no way an indication that the Internet is a man's domain, and hopes that her Web site will continue to help dispel that myth and allow women to connect to each other in order to realize that they are not alone in the cyber-world. Dennis says that she personally encounters more women on the Internet than men through Email.

"The Internet can offer women a community of support and resources if they know how to find each other."

Dennis says that this community of support is particularly important when women first go on-line. In terms of technology, she says that women "fair better" with sympathetic support. She acknowledges that this is an "awful stereotype," but that "women feel more alone when they do new things, like go on-line." This is because men, relatives and teachers, in the past thought they were "too stupid" to understand computers, she says.

Los Angeles author, Carla Sinclair, agrees with Dennis that it is essential for women to be able to locate each other in cyberspace. Her book, "Netchick" is an Internet source book and directory filled with 236 published pages of on-line addresses to discussion groups, entertainment, fashion, 'zines, social activism, and other issues that are written by, about and for women. Sinclair calls her book a guide to "modem grrl culture."

Sinclair went on-line a year ago and decided to write her compilation of women's sites when she attempted to buy one herself at a local bookstore. In the introduction to her book, she says that a clerk told her that there weren't enough women on the

net to warrant such a publication. So, she says, she began a private World Wide Web address book of female-sites that she found. That collection was the foundation for "Netchick."

Sinclair found it hard to believe, that in a world where more than 4.9 million computers are connected to the Internet, that there weren't "enough" women there.

Ron Simmons, a technical support operator at America Online (AOL), says that Sinclair's suspicion was correct. At the end of 1995, 40 percent of AOL's subscribers were women.

"Now, 48 percent of our subscribers are female, and their use is on the rise," Simmons says.

In "Netchick," Sinclair says that "Women approach the Internet with different expectations than men. We see it as a tool, not a toy. I hope 'Netchick' helps women exist on the Internet with and without the boys."

things and embracing technology at break neck speeds." She adds that she got the league to start thinking about computers, and that because of her efforts, her local chapter was the first to get an Email address and experiment with chat groups.

She says that Internet technology has even altered the role of her organization. When she joined over 25 years ago, Thorne says the purpose of the league was to help women become knowledgeable about political issues and confident in expressing themselves through public speaking at meetings and to legislators. Thorne now believes that the purpose of the organization is also to assist women, through the league's presence on the World Wide Web, to become more comfortable at expressing themselves on the Internet.

Thorne adds that the technology offers women (and men) who don't have time to attend league meetings an

sexes is "fifty-fifty." Brody says that whether a person is computer literate or computer phobic depends upon the individual mind, not on the individual's gender.

"The statistics say that more men are using, but the truth is, I don't see the gender gap, even if the statistics say that there is one," he says.

Brody says that his clients, men and women, want computers and the technology for the very same reasons: to improve their businesses and careers, to keep in touch with other people, and for a variety of personal interests, from music to religion.

Deborah Mallek, a senior communications student at Penn State Harrisburg (PSH), is an example of a woman that utilizes the Internet for personal reasons, such as maintaining her religious connections.

This mother of three from Harrisburg, Pa., went on-line last April and it has now become an integral part

Despite statistics, women like Deb Mallek (above), don't notice a gender gap on the internet. The world wide web is becoming a place for men and women to find business and personal support.

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- - Olivia Thorne
Webmaster
League of Women Voters

Olivia Thorne believes that directories and links such as those maintained by Dennis and Sinclair are not only important for women to network, but because "women are also less confident that their spaces will be found."

She explains that if someone is looking for the Web sites for companies such as ABC or IBM, it is easy to guess what their on-line address is. However, finding pages for women and their issues isn't always as simple as guesswork.

As Webmaster for the League of Women Voters, Thorne understands how difficult it can be to locate sites dedicated to women and their issues. She agrees that because commercial Web sites are so easily found through search engines, a prevailing myth about the Internet is that it is occupied primarily by men.

"Don't think that men are the techies," she says. "My husband has to call me when he makes a mistake on the computer."

Thorne describes herself as "one of those people always trying new

opportunity to become a part of the governmental process. She says that because of the organization's link to the Internet, people no longer have to feel disenfranchised because they have another way to address public officials.

In addition to providing the League of Women Voters an alternative way to provide their voter service, organize lobbying and inform the public about what the League does, Thorne says that using the Internet is just good business. It cuts overall costs because it is cheaper than using the phone. She adds that it allows the organization to conduct research and get answers to questions "fast and cheap."

Jim Brody, of Central Penn Computer Systems in Camp Hill, Pa., says that not only is it good business for organizations like the League of Women Voters to be on the Internet, but it's beneficial for individual women as well, for the same reasons.

As an Internet specialist, consultant and instructor, he introduces men and women to computer technology everyday. Based on his experience, he says that Internet usage between the

of her life.

She accesses the Internet several times a week to join Jewish reform discussion groups or for Torah studies. Recently, she took a two-day course on building Web sites and now plans to create a Web page for her synagogue, Bethel Temple.

This computer technology allows Mallek to be at home for her children, but simultaneously allows her to remain connected to the outside world and even enhance her education. She just completed two on-line courses from her living room, which were offered by the New School for Social Research in New York City.

Mallek also uses the Internet to help her elementary-school-aged children with their homework and to keep in touch with her family who live across the country and in Brazil.

"I have not yet used the Internet to its fullest capacity," Mallek says. "I don't even know if that is possible."

Mallek says that many people resist technology and change, but says

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