



## **BOOK REVIEW**

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Senft, Theresa M. (2008). *Camgirls: Celebrity & Community in the Age of Social Networks*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc. 150 pages. ISBN 978-0-8204-5694-2. \$29.95.

Theresa M. Senft's (2008) book, *Camgirls: Celebrity & Community in the Age of Social Networks* concerns women's participation in online social networks, especially that of self-identified "cam-girls," those girls and women who put their lives on display for online audiences. Through anonymity afforded by online social networks this transitional space between public and private can function as a venue for feminist consciousness-raising where the personal can become political (Hanisch, 1969; Kennedy, 2007). The book is organized in seven chapters, including the introduction and conclusion. Through narratives, each chapter follows the progression of camgirls' online social networking. The implications and discoveries of sharing personal experiences in public via webcam is the focus of the book and this book review.

In this book, Senft examines this relatively new type of media production and the relationships that form between camgirls and their audience. She articulates the desire for and instantiation of empathetic support networks offered via online interactions. I read the book because of my research and personal interest in online social networks. However, I had little to no knowledge of *camgirls*, and I had never viewed an individual's Web camera footage online. Senft's descriptive narratives involving her personal experience as a camgirl and interactions with other camgirls kept my attention as a reader, and I appreciated her personable

tone throughout the text. This book presents a unique ethnographic study, which would especially engage those interested in the phenomenon of camgirls. Reading this book may benefit those in academia who are particularly interested in online forms of feminist activism including consciousness-raising in virtual spaces, politicizing the personal, community formation, and online identity creation.

The book's author, Theresa M. Senft, is a Senior Lecturer in Media Studies at the University of East London in the United Kingdom. Her research is ethnographic and applies feminist and postcolonial perspectives to new media. The author presents her research of camgirls as strategic feminist activism in presenting their praxis that questions notions of public and private spaces, pornography, and pedagogy in new media through their online dialogue revelations, community formation, and identity construction.

This critical ethnographic study took place from 2000 to 2004, and is based on interviews with camgirls, video analysis of homecam footage that focuses on performance analysis of interactions between camgirls and their viewers, and the author's own personal experience as camgirl "Terri." In this book, Senft discloses her own camgirl activities as she observes, interacts with, and forms personal relationships with the other camgirls who consented to participate in her study. The camgirl participants are predominately White, straight or bisexual, able-bodied, under the age of forty, and have access to a private room for broadcasting. Senft specifically selected her participants to serve as "beta testers" for global networking techniques and goals, which she explores in her book such as creating celebrity personas and branded identities, as well as engagement in specific forms of emotional labor.

Camgirls are described as women or girls who stream live "homecam" video footage of themselves over the Web to fill a need for personal fame, identity creation, and community. Senft provides readers with a history of camgirls starting with the evolution of the "JenniCam" (1996) followed by others including "AnaCam" (1997). The camgirl's self-

presentation, aesthetics, and site content are unique to each individual. Jennifer Ringley, creator of JenniCam, sought to show reality. Ana Voog, creator of AnaCam, claims to be the first camgirl to refer to her webcam productions as art. Jennifer Ringley's knowledge of HTML coding enabled her creation of JenniCam, but today coding knowledge is not necessary for creation of a personal site due to technological advances and the availability of user-friendly tools such as online social networks including Facebook© and MySpace™.

### *Politicizing the Personal*

After observing camgirls' daily practice from their broadcasting rooms, Senft argues that the world of camgirls may aid feminists in addressing the question: what does it mean to refer to the personal as political in a new media driven society? Similar to real world consciousness-raising groups, camgirls may intend to politicize their personal by forming their own communities in virtual worlds that consist of like-minded individuals. Not all of the camgirls or audience members identify as feminists and their definitions of the term varied. In her book, Senft shares her insights on young women's web-practices that strategically embrace new media, and in this way is successful in her intention "to update Donna Haraway's 1984 figure of the cyborg to better reflect the concerns of feminists in the early twenty-first century" (p. 116).

*Cyberfeminists*, a term established around the mid-1990s, "investigate the ways in which technology, especially new media and Internet technology, and gender interact" (Flanagan & Looui, 2007, p. 181). Contemporary *cyberfeminism* aims to include multiple diverse voices of young women (i.e., 18-30 year olds), who may be reluctant to identify as feminists (Fernandez & Wilding, 2002). By providing examples of the various reasons why women choose to partake in webcamming in her ethnographic study, the author demonstrates the complexity of the camgirl world. She disproves the rumors that all camgirls' video content is pornographic, which is often assumed due to the frequent use of webcams to capture nudity and sexual acts in exchange for money. In contrast, the camgirls she studied use webcams as a vehicle for self-expres-

sion, self-exploration, and community building. They form relationships and a sense of identity and community when they connect with others who share their personal stories in virtual spaces. For example, Senft discusses the LiveJournal of ArtVamp, an artist and pornographer. The FBI interrogated ArtVamp because she posted a comment on her site that predicted the next suicide bomber to be a White woman. ArtVamp later shared her FBI interrogation story on LiveJournal, which caused thousands of LiveJournal members to visit her site. According to Senft, many of these LiveJournal users did not know ArtVamp prior to this incident. However, because of her publicized interrogation viewers realized her personal issue was political in nature and collectively supported webcamers' desire to freely express themselves.

By telling her personal narrative and sharing narratives of other camgirls, Senft enables readers to experience their drama, trauma, and personal fulfillment, as well as their efforts to politicize the personal in a networked society. She provides evidence of how the ideology of publicity, commodity, epistemology, pornography, and social capital impact camgirls and their audience. This study reveals both positive and negative consequences of participating in a virtual space that allows the personal to become public. The virtual world can facilitate communication for silenced and multiple voices if individuals have access to the Internet (Blair, Gajjala, & Tulley, 2009; Keifer-Boyd, 2007); and the anonymity offered in virtual space may protect camgirls and reduce the potential repercussions of their acts. However, anonymity can offer a false sense of protection. Images that a camgirl posts for public viewing may haunt her in future years despite the seemingly anonymous nature of online social networks. Anonymity also allows for online social network participants to negatively misrepresent others. There are both positive and negative consequences of revealing the personal to the public in a globally networked society.

One particular compelling story is in chapter three, *Being and Acting Online: From Telepresence to Tele-ethicality*. Karen, a camgirl whose suicide attempt was made public via her webcam, clearly showed the efforts or lack of efforts made by her online "friends" to save her. Senft argues that women are virtualized in public space. Camgirls tend to serve as entertainment, and their well-being is not always a concern of

the viewers. The viewers may feel safely distanced from content they are viewing online, but Senft points out that this does not mean that they are exempt from ethical caring practice. Karen's tragic story demonstrates an unfortunate reality. Senft stresses that online participants practice ethical behavior in virtual, as well as physical space.

### *Community Formation*

In chapter five, *I AM a Network: From 'Friends' to Friends*, Senft acknowledges the potential for hostility through online exchange, and admits to receiving hate mail from an individual who believes her study is an assault to feminists and that physically embodied activism would better serve feminism. In response, she includes a personal admission of being in an abusive relationship and turning to her online community of "friends" for support in the conclusion of the book. Senft acknowledges, "for feminists, network society presents a double-edged sword" (p. 6). Yet, Senft believes, and I agree, that her efforts and those of other members of online communities can be considered legitimate feminist actions. In the case of Senft's study, camgirls challenged gender roles and stereotypes by strategically broadcasting their personal viewpoints and experiences online, and formed supportive communities in which camgirls and their audiences collectively mobilized in order to promote freedom of self-expression for all, which I consider a legitimate feminist act. Feminist efforts are needed in both the physical and virtual world. Virtual feminist consciousness-raising efforts may facilitate social justice when women's share their personal experiences of abuse, rape, isolation, abortion, sexuality, marriage, family, and body image portrayal by the media, and, subsequently, the group recognize these experiences as structural and socially-institutionalized, and, therefore, political in nature (Hanisch, 1969, 2006; Redfern, 2001).

"Feminism has changed considerably over the last thirty years; the days when groups of women met in person to discuss their personal experiences of social inequalities are now few and far between" (Kennedy, 2007, p. 1). New media provides a means for facilitating interactions based on intimate revelations and has the potential to foster social

transformation (Kennedy, 2007). Feminists can strategically intervene in ubiquitous online spaces to participate in "feminist virtual consciousness-raising" (Kennedy, 2007, ¶ 5). This may provide empathetic support to women who feel socially isolated in physical space, allow for crossing of physical barriers, and have far reaching potentials for enacting social change. Online social networks may provide a supportive community comprised of others with similar experiences, values, and beliefs that may be difficult to establish in physical space.

### *Online Identity Creation*

Individuals may feel more comfortable sharing intimate revelations online because it is a space that allows for anonymity and alternate identities (Turkle, 2005). Yet the mistreatment and objectification of women in physical space is often transferred to virtual spaces where they remain neglected issues (Blair, Gajjala, & Tulley, 2009). Nakamura (2002) argues that marginalized individuals in physical space, including women, are frequently marginalized in virtual space. Moreover, there is danger in what Nakamura (2002) refers to as "identity tourism," i.e., trying to pass as a race, class, or gender that differ from one's own, because assumed representations are often negative and stereotypical. Having personally experienced a slanderous attack in virtual space, I agree with Senft's argument that more should be done on the Web and within online social communities to prevent unethical practices from occurring. She offers recommendations for what can be done in the concluding chapter of her book.

### **Concluding Recommendations**

Senft concludes the book, not with one grand narrative or universal solution for how to politicize the personal in the age of global online social networks, but instead provides readers with five detailed recommendations that derive from her prior experiences and questions she poses in previous chapters for feminists seeking to politicize the personal.

These recommendations encourage current and future feminists to:

1. make their voices heard by freely and critically expressing themselves and questioning *how* rather than *why* oppressive behaviors become socially and culturally acceptable;
2. respect self and others by knowing when to cross personal borders and when to allow our borders to be crossed by others;
3. take ethical and tele-ethical actions by participating in online dialogue and supportive communities with the intention of helping self and others;
4. practice local social responsibility by acknowledging individual issues; and
5. seek solidarity with friends as well as strangers via online social networks so that women can unify through shared personal issues that are realized to be political in nature in order to enact positive socio-cultural change.

Senft sufficiently supports her generalized recommendations with personal examples that may help others apply her suggestions.

I appreciate Senft's surprisingly honest revelations and personal accounts throughout the book, which were enlightening and at times shocking. In chapter five, Senft shockingly reveals that her dying mother claimed that Senft was the cause of her brain cancer. In the book's conclusion, Senft discloses that she spent a year in a mentally and physically abusive relationship. In both negative instances, Senft claims that she found support from her LiveJournal online network of friends.

While this book is a good introduction to the phenomenon of camgirls, I found that this 2008 study of camgirls is somewhat outdated in 2010, which is acknowledged in the book. The current plethora of new technological innovations ages webcams. There is a need for future studies to explore politicizing the personal, community formation, and online identity creation, and particularly when these acts take the form of

feminist activism in their critical and strategic intent to promote social justice rather than focusing solely on self, through more currently popular social networking technologies such as Facebook©, MySpace™, and YouTube or even the newest version of the iPhone.



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## About the Author

**Jennifer Motter** is a doctoral candidate in art education at The Pennsylvania State University. With a background in art education and educational technology, Jennifer's research focuses on politicizing the personal via online social network participation and online social networks as sites for informal learning and art education. She is particularly interested in the empowerment potentials of online social networks such as PostSecret (<http://www.postsecret.com>) for women.

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