

TRUE CONFESIONS OF AN INTERNET NEWBIE

by Pi villanueva

The office finally took out a subscription to a local Internet Service Provider last November. We bought a new computer—a 16 MB, 100 megahertz Hewlett Packard with a pentium microprocessor—and a modem. To complete the ensemble, we threw in a new computer table. We have names for the different computers in the office. This one's called the "Internet computer" for very obvious reasons. Big, shiny, and very modern-looking, it is always the first thing people notice when they enter our office. Like a shrine to modern technology, it even sits under a retablo where we've placed a wooden mask of Kuan Yin, a laminated picture of Sarasvathi, the Hindu goddess of heaven, a plaster figure the child Jesus, a stone tablet engraved with the images of Isis and Osiris, and a cross stitched profile of Isis. Wood, clay, stone, paper, cloth. And now machine.

So what was it like, my first time in the world wide web?

Well, just like the first time, it was confusing.

I did read *Internet for Dummies* so I can make watchamacallits like URLs, search engines, listservs, gophers, Usenets, TCP/IP and FTPs sort of roll in my tongue. But I still was unprepared for the long list of sites and categories that came up on the screen after I keyed on "The X-Files" the hit American television show about conspiracies, extra terrestrials, and the paranormal. I wanted to find out what happened to the show's main characters, and this bright and shiny computer gave me 827 site matches. After checking out the first five sites on the list, I found my head spinning—literally. I realized I was lost in the information superhighway.

Navigating the Net gradually became easier. I started using my common sense and some imagination. The world wide web is like a real city. To move around you need to know the address of your destination. In Internet talk this address is called universal resource locator or URL. But there are millions of URLs, each one having as many as 20 words and characters. Memorizing URLs is simply impractical, and impossible. This is why we need a map or a tour guide to find our way in strange places. In cyberspace you have search engines that do just that—search the Web for the places that match the keywords you feed them. If you key in "feminist theories," the *Yahoo* search engine will probably tell you that it has found 65,030 matches to your query—which did happen to me. The trick I learned (by trial and error and by reading the contents of the help menus in each) is to be specific about what you're looking for by combining keywords and using the correct syntax or combination of words and characters. However, each search engine has its own language or set of characters, because they've each organized their database their own differing ways.

I'm still trying to figure out which search engine works well for what purpose. A newbie's day on the Internet is never really done. There's always something new and still unknown that's bound to come up.

Like a real child of the pop era let loose on the Internet, the first places I visited were those that pandered to my pop sensibilities: the *X-Files* sites, The Tolkien pages, the Bonnie Raitt and Sinead O'Connor pages, Net shrines to Tim Roth and John Malkovich, and sites created for Umberto Eco's and A.S. Byatt's works. Sure I added to the monstrous traffic jam on the Net, caused by surfers who have nothing better to do. But common sense tells me that learning should be an enjoyable experience. You could say that my first time on the Net may have been confusing but, at least, I had fun.

I don't get nauseated now when I log on, but the amount of information that comes up each time I jump into a site can still be staggering. The other day, while trying to find materials on feminism in Asia, I stumbled upon a list of 107 listservs devoted to feminist issues. I have also "bookmarked" for my co-workers 16 useful web sites and resources for women's concerns and feminist activism like the UNDP Women Watch, the UNIFEM's home page, and the Feminist Internet Gateway. All these sites have links to other women's resources on the Internet. In my own folder, I have saved the URLs of 12 sites of my favorite topics and themes ranging from my high school batch's home page, Bonnie Raitt's home page and other Women's Music Resources on the Internet, to a site called Critical Studies Central, bell hook's unofficial home page and the web site *Tribung Pinoy* (Filipino Tribe). Each of this site is practically a door opening to other doors, behind which are more doors that open yet to more other, and so on, leading to all sorts of information and links to people from other places and time zones.

What's the downside, you ask?

Women online have bewailed the gender imbalance in the Internet—95 percent of those with access to the Internet are men. Activists from the South have also raised the issue of the North's dominance on the Net as users and as suppliers of information, and as owners of the technology itself. Being an invention of humankind, the Net can not escape human society's image.

On at least two occasions, I have experienced being told—in so many words—to go find my own group by older men I have had the bad luck to chat with about global politics and food security issues. One time, the person on the other line asked me how old I am, and from which part of the world I come from. I told him I was born in 1964 and am from Asia. Don't

ask me how I knew, but the chatter on the other line "sounded" like a he. Maybe it's instinct I have developed from years of dealing with men, being patronized, and being treated, as a Russian woman friend said, like an "uncompleted man." The person on the other line left me high and dry, but not without first sending me this long sermon about how things in the world are really more complex than people from poor countries make it out to be. Bah.

Then there was the incident in a chat room for thirtysomethings where one chatter whom everybody referred to as "Doc" (how much more male can you get with a handle like "Doctor Dawgystyle") made the ignominious comment that with a handle like "Mandaya," I probably come from a lost African tribe of "insanites and inanites." I told him the name's not African but Malayo-Polynesian, and asked him what he meant by "insanites and inanites." It turned out he meant insanities and inanities, and he said these applies to people in West Africa where people are killing each other for food while their presidents are vacationing in some ritzy resort. When I wouldn't let him off the hook on that, he simply ignored me. The rest of the chatters, perhaps because they have exchanged "inanities" before, took the cue from the Doc.

So the Internet is not exactly egalitarian, gender- or race-wise. Neither is the real world. But this has not stopped us—women and members of minority groups—from claiming our space and working to change the terrain. And what is cyberspace but another terrain of power. In her book *Nattering on the Net*, Dale Spender, erstwhile feminist editor, now self-confessed convert to the information technology makes a similar, but better-argued point. She said that the computer is not a toy, despite the belief of some people, and that cyberspace is the site of wealth, power and influence now and in the future. Women, Spender, said really have no choice but to take up the challenge of shaping a world where cyberspace is a fact of life.

In five months I gave gone from a completely illiterate Web browser to a fairly literate user and a gender- and race-sensitized chatter. I can't wait to see what happens in the next seven months. ☺

Drakulics,... from page 39

She spends time listening to the dreams, problems, and vexations of friends and co-workers. We don't seem to have enough time for and with each other. I don't think she has neglected me, though in my dark moments I thought she sometimes did.

Has she changed? Apparently, she did; but, in truth, I think she did not. She remains imbued with a humanity I can only aspire for, a humanity that my books, academic degrees, and lofty ideas cannot automatically provide. Have I changed? Apparently too; but, in truth, I may have not. I have loved the people in the abstract and had vowed to serve them unselfishly. Up to now, I think I have not been able to care for them in the concrete. I have not been able to give myself fully. I thought I did when I endured torture, imprisonment, deprivation, hunger and solitude, and persevered in work. But it looks like most of the time, I have served from afar, by myself, rather than with comrades and the people. I thought myself unselfish, but this was just my conceit.

Is it principally my male-ness and her female-ness which accounts for the difference? Weren't most of the selfless male comrades actually engaged in power games, ego trips, and selfish, petty pursuits? I can only recall the ruses, the subterfuges I myself had to engineer not for the benefit of the 'enemy' but for comrades and sympathizers. Can I ever get rid of the needling notion that for the male, what is political is actually trivial?

Should there be a Great Wall between the personal and the political, between tedium and substance? Rosalie has repeatedly admonished that it should not be the case. That I should learn to reconcile both. That imperceptible details add up to magnificent wholes in the long haul. Drakulic's work is Rosalie's latest vindication. ☺

Notes:

1. Ference Feher et. al., *Dictatorship Over Needs: An Analysis of Soviet Societies*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983.

2. UP is for University of the Philippines, the state university where the "best of the brightest" of each generation of Philippine intellectuals are supposedly bred. The University Belt, a.k.a. U-Belt is an area in old Manila dotted by private universities and colleges notorious for charging exorbitant tuition fees. Intellectual snobs generally look down on graduates of U-Belt schools.

3. FDC is Freedom from Debt Coalition, a progressive, multi-sectoral and politically-pluralistic alliance in the Philippines.

4. "Reaffirmists" and "rejectionists." In 1992, the Philippine national democratic movement was split between those who adhere to the Communist Party program encapsulated in the document, "Reaffirm our Basic Principles and Rectify Errors" (thus "reaffirmists"), and those who rejected this (rejectionists).

The Reviewers

A.M. Mendoza, Jr. teaches Political Science at the University of the Philippines. At the Isis office, he is known as the husband of Sali, erstwhile administrative associate and "mother of perpetual help" for staff members in distress.

Myrna J. Arceo is research associate of the Institute for Popular Democracy, a research and training group in the Philippines. She is also co-author of [De]scribing Elections, a trailblazing study of the workings of power on the daily lives of ordinary people in a Philippine rural village.