

# No Mere NET Consumers

Experiences from the APC Women's Program

by Pi Villanueva

**T**he statistics may fluctuate but various demographic studies conducted in the last two years about the gender make-up of the growing Internet community share a common conclusion: Men online still dominate, but the number of women who have access to the Net is slowly increasing. But what these studies, many of which had been conducted for commercial and marketing purposes, fail to make clear is how women are actually using the Internet.

Why do women go online? What online services do women use most? What makes women log on frequently, and what keeps them offline? A 1995 market study commissioned by the Internet Publishing Association (IPA) polled 300 women hooked up with North America's major commercial online services. The results of the survey was telling, prompting its main researcher to conclude that commercial service providers and other online businesses risk going bust if they think that women use the Net to simply go shopping.

The IPA survey confirmed what women online have always known based on their own experiences. Women use the Internet to communicate, to get in touch with family and friends and to exchange ideas and opinions as diverse as the women themselves. In the IPA survey, E-mail and bulletin boards won hands down as women's most used online services, with downloading and cybermallng as their least used services. Women, said the survey, will log on more frequently if they could have:

- ◆ online services and navigational tools that save them time and money
- ◆ virtual communities which are

friendly to women and women's ideas

- ◆ online services which cater to women's diverse needs and interests
- ◆ more information about the benefits of going online and
- ◆ online women mentors to help women new to the Internet

As a consumer, I should probably be glad about the IPA study which unequivocally tells online publishers, marketers and service providers that they "ignore women at their peril." But as a politically-conscious woman from the South, I know enough not to trust cybermerchants or to entrust them with women's visibility on the Internet, in-depth study or not. Besides, who needs visibility, real or virtual, when women are seen only through the eyes of men.

The Association for Progressive Communication (APC) Women's Networking Support Survey conducted in 1996 and published last May 1997 broadcasts that other picture of women online, the image women have of themselves and their engagement with computer networking technology. The survey, aptly titled "Global Networking for Change: Experiences from the APC Women's Program," polled women from 36 countries in Asia and the Pacific, Latin America, North Africa, Middle East, Sub-Saharan Africa, Eastern Europe, Western Europe and North America. The respondents were diverse, including women working in NGOs, grassroots groups, women's centers, UN agencies, foundations and funding agencies, computer networks, solidarity groups, media service agencies, information technology companies and universities. Together, these groups of women represented an equally wide range of issues of concern to women.

Initiated in 1993, the APC Women's Networking Support Program (henceforth, the APC Women's Programme) has been working to facilitate access and use of computer communication for women, and to promote greater traffic of electronic information between the North and the South as well as to help increase women's visibility in the area of information technology. Its parent organization, the Association for Progressive Communication (APC) is a global network of computer networks serving activists and cause-oriented communities worldwide. On the run up to the Fourth World Conference on Women, the APC Women's Networking Program played a key role in facilitating electronic information exchange among and between women and women's groups preparing for the Beijing conference. Its team of 40 women from 24 different countries ran a computer networking facility in China, providing Internet connection and electronic information services to those attending the World Conference and the parallel NGO Forum on Women. The APC women's global team ensured a continuous and fast flow of information between those attending the conference and the world at large. It also gave hands-on training on E-mail, electronic conferencing and other Internet tools to women attending the official conference and the NGO gathering.

Conducted a year after the Beijing conference, the APC Women's Networking Support Survey explores the progress that women have made in electronic networking globally. To mix cliché with metaphor: Yes, Virginia, women are making great strides in electronic communications and network-

ing, despite the big bad wolf.

#### PROGRESS AND SUCCESSES

The E-mail is now a routine part of day-to-day communications for women who three years ago knew very little about computer networking. Electronic conferencing, mailing lists and web sites ranked next to E-mail as the most commonly used online tools by women and, based on the survey responses, may soon be, like E-mail now, part of women's regular communications regimen.

The survey shows that women are not mere receivers or end-users of online information. Women are actually creating relevant and useful resources for and about women. The ranks of service providers, information monitors, webmasters, web designers, list-owners, forum moderators and database managers are being swelled by women. Women's resource and documentation centers and activist organizations, long active in gathering, repackaging and disseminating information about women's issues and concerns through print, radio and audio-visual means, are increasingly venturing into the use of electronic networking to expand their reach.

The APC Women's Program survey points out the strong impulse of women's organizations to share the information gathered from electronic networks to women's organizations and communities that are not connected to the Internet. Particularly in Southern countries and in Eastern Europe where poverty, lack of communication technology infrastructures and, in many instances, armed conflicts and political instability serve as barriers to Internet connectivity, women's organizations with access to electronic networks repackage online information and share these with other women using traditional and more accessible communication channels. Women's organizations with access to electronic networks are also instrumental in translating information from the grassroots and unconnected communities into electronic form, and sharing this with the online world.

Utilizing computer networking has gained women new experiences, new learnings and new successes. The



APC Women's Program's survey abounds with positive experiences ranging from achieving increased productivity and expanding the market for women's products, to broadening perspectives of the world and moving information that moves people into social action.

Whether to exchange materials with colleagues, to get important information about women and the United Nations, to get blood donors for a sick friend or simply to get in touch with friends and family who live in far places, women in the survey said that they appreciate the ease with which electronic communication makes it possible to reach as many people in as short a time as possible. Needless to say, for women who must juggle work, home and community, being able to save on time is a high priority.

And also on money. Computer networking, according to some of the survey participants, has allowed them to save money by cutting on costlier print information materials and communication tools like telephone, fax and telegraph, without sacrificing the quality of their work. Time, money and effort are also saved when organizations are efficient. Organizations based in different regions and time zones, for example, are able to collaborate more efficiently and thus work more effectively since electronic communication allows them to move information and resources and make decisions quickly.

Aside from gaining cost- and work-efficiency, women utilizing computer networking gain latitude in their work to promote democracy in the workplace and in the bigger world. The survey participants pointed out that electronic communication promotes decen-

tralization of access to information and, corollarily, democratization of the decision-making process. One woman from Nicaragua wrote: "I have found E-mail to be a strong tool. It helps procedures to be more democratic... more people can be involved more easily in the decision-making process."

#### TURN-OFFS AND DOWNSIDES

But the Internet is no wonderland, and computer networking can be an alienating experience for women without the necessary training and back-up environment. The participant who said that one downside of computer networking is "the amount of time it takes to learn and use the technology in the beginning" echoes a common complaint of women.

Another turn-off for women in the survey is the manner through which information is organized (or not organized) in the online world. For some, separating the chaff from the grain in the voluminous information they get can be daunting and even paralyzing, especially when one has limited time or does not know the best way to navigate to the relevant information. Women also have to deal with the dominance of English-based materials online. This not only turns away non-English speaking women; it also makes the work doubly difficult for women who act as bridge between the online world and the unconnected community.

Other negative experiences involved women's concerns for privacy and security as well as meaningful online concerns. There's so much "trash floating around in cyberspace," one survey participant complained; and "difficult types" and "people who are hostile to feminism," another lamented. Insecurity and vulnerability to virtual and actual physical attacks from ideological and political censors is another concern for some organizations. "We are also a little worried about security, particularly given that our network partners are often under physical threat from the religious right."

Equally frustrating, particularly for women from the South and Eastern Europe is the dismal or deficient state of telecommunications infrastructure and the prohibitive cost of Internet con-

nectivity. One survey participant summarizes the experience: "It [computer networking] is very frustrating for us who are in Third World Countries simply because despite being unable to access the interactive services such as WWW, Gopher, FTP, etc., it is also difficult to enjoy the normal E-mail services due to the existence of the most unreliable phone lines in the world."

Finally, there are the negative experiences wrought by women's historical marginalization from "Technology" with a capital T. Alienation, skills deficiencies and poor use of computer networking tools are some of the negative experiences resulting from the social exclusion of women from things technological, as well as from women's own preconceived ideas that technology is difficult to deal with. What these experiences underline is the importance of training and consciousness raising for women to use computer networking.

Examining the negative experiences shared by the survey participants, the APC Women's Program's Survey attributed these to barriers that are deeply rooted in the existing political, economic and technological complex as well as to gender stereotyping and the double-burden of women. The gravity of these barriers, however, vary depending on which side of the world a woman comes from. For those in the South and in Eastern Europe, lack of training, the punitive cost of equipment and poor telecommunications infrastructure ranked highest among the barriers to women joining the online community. For those in the North, lack of women-friendly training is the most felt obstacle. But no matter which region the woman is from, lack of time and skilled human resources are significant and universally shared constraints.

#### TEACHING BY SHOWING, LEARNING BY DOING

Women who teach by doing make the best recruiters and initiators of other women to the big wide world of computer networking. This is another important insight from the APC Women's Program's survey. From using humor and "nagging" their co-workers to making E-mail mandatory in office processes and offering hands-on training,

the survey shows that women have a deep cache of often effective, sometimes ineffective, but always inexpensive ways of convincing other women to adopt electronic communication tools.

But getting started on the computer and modem is only half the picture. Women also feel challenged by just staying online and being able to innovate on their participation. Access to training and training materials that consider women's specific conditions and varying cultural backgrounds are therefore high on women's priority needs. Lack of training, in fact, emerged as a common denominator among those who participated in the survey—across cultures, geography and class.

Of those who responded to the survey, 65 percent said they have received training of one kind or another from a variety of sources: APC members or partner-networks, the APC Women's Program, a group funded to train women, the UN, development agencies or the staff development program of one's own organization. These training were often provided for free or at minimal cost to the participant. There are also respondents who were self-taught and rely for guidance from computer mentors or relatively more computer-literate workmates. And then there are those who learned "on the job," mostly on their own time.

One of the main objectives of the survey is for the APC Women's Program to find out what women want and need in terms of training in the use of electronic communication. The open-ended survey method is put to good use by the APC Women's Program. Those who participated were very generous and very specific in their suggestions for improving women's training in computer networking: from selecting the group to be trained to the size of the group; from ensuring accessibility and replicability of the training to formats and teaching types that work for women.

#### THRIVING IN CYBERSPACE, BUILDING A WOMEN'S CYBERCULTURE

Women are thriving in cyberspace, and every second that we are online and in touch with other women's organizations builds on and deepens our knowledge of what we can do to

make this new technology work for women, and not the opposite.

Though it is informative and valuable, the statistics or the quantification of how far women have gone or how much we have learned in the last three years in the area of computer networking is not necessarily the most compelling part of the APC Women's Program's Survey. A question mulled by members of the program on the eve of the survey's presentation to the public was how to convince the media that the results are in themselves newsworthy. But none of the general findings seemed to be the type of information media would fall all over for a scoop: ELECTRONIC TOOLS BECOMING ROUTINE FOR WOMEN. COMPUTER NETWORKING BOON TO WOMEN'S RESOURCE BUILDING AND SHARING. ELECTRONIC TOOLS HELP WOMEN ACHIEVE GOALS. LACK OF TRAINING UNIVERSAL WOMEN'S BANE.

Reading the survey report, I realize that its most compelling insights can be found in the women's anecdotes and commentaries, text that could easily have been lost in your normal, conventional demographic study. The experiences from the APC Women's Program may not satisfy the media's taste for drama, disaster, gore and porn. Do you really think the story of an office secretary from Peru who, after discovering E-mail and computer networking, also "discovered within (herself) unknown areas and a great inclination for information and telecommunications" compete for media space with news of IT giants Microsoft and Oracle rescuing profit-challenged Apple computers?

But even if it doesn't, who cares? If in the real world, news is a 15-minute thing, in cyberspace, its even more fleeting. The experiences from the APC Women's Program are the short stories in a saga whose future popularity will leave on the wayside critics who don't pay attention. <save><exit> ?