

Girls With Digital Diaries: Empowerment Issues

by Claire Villacorta

I've been struggling with the issue of public vs. private a lot lately. Even though I keep up a couple of online journals, I feel like I need a lot of things to be private, thus there is restricted access to them. Though I can sometimes talk about myself nonstop, I am afraid of what other people can do with anything I tell them about myself, so I am very selective about who gets to know what. And even then I keep a lot of things to myself because the idea of anyone being able to see through me completely & know exactly what I am saying even when I don't say it [is] terrifying.

Athena, 17

from Public vs. Private (07.10.01)

<http://www.livejournal.com/users/historicaltheft>

Until I decided to acquire and maintain a Web journal of my own, I spent a good amount of Internet time reading other people's online diaries. Most of these diaries were linked from personal websites of female Asian-American zine writers of my age range who ignited the postcolonial warrior in me to delve into the complexities of Filipina-ness and racial identity in these times. Their entries read more like critiques of social construction, whether they're directly confronted with racial discrimination as a product of their families' immigrant status, or even double "minority-ed" by fluid sexualities. It didn't occur to me that the concept of a journal could be challenging, content-wise, and not just confessional as traditional print diaries read. And in contrast to what is usually considered private territory, the online diary is made public in a way that was more democratic than the privilege of a (sometimes posthumously) published autobio.

When my young zinester friend Athena jumped into the Diaryland bandwagon, she fervently posted bell hooks-inspired entries, re-contextualised discursives on Filipino-Chineseness, gender and owning up to her class privilege. She would also go on confessional mode when it came to her personal life at school or at home, at times feeling that she needed a separate diary to accommodate these thoughts. Her second journal would be locked and password-protected, limiting readership access either to herself exclusively or a select few. I admired the discipline in

the regularity of her updates and how attuned she seemed to the medium. She must have been only 10 when the Internet came to the Philippines in 1995, creating Websites to showcase her non-mainstream musical and literary tastes as well as the formation of views that were reflective of a critical mind. Like her coming-of-age, her Net identity was in flux. Being her own biographer enabled her to reinvent herself by constantly updating her personal info to highlight the more relevant aspects of her life.

Not that college-age people like myself couldn't be bothered to learn HTML at the time of its inception. My generation may have been celebrating the treasure trove of information on the Net that couldn't be obtained from the university library resources or bookstores. But we were also faced with yet another technological distraction that took precious minutes, sometimes hours, away from our basic responsibilities—our fascination with message boards and chatrooms to addictive heights. I was an E-mail person, surfer, and (to some extent) chatter, but I was also a writer without a Net presence to show for. Two years ago, I signed up for a page at Diaryland to keep my own writing from turning rusty and to personalise my content, something that was lacking in my previous work.

Even if it required the least of HTML skills, I was hardly good at updating in real-time. But I knew how it felt to revel in the anonymity of this vast global space.

There was a marked difference between presenting journal entries for public consumption and stashing away one's unbridled thoughts in a special notebook. The degree of confessional is always relative to the online diarist, from being an open book at the risk of coming off as vulnerable, to an identity in fragments. Danisha would exemplify the former with personal intrigue, crushes and Teenage Fanclub obsessions, while I was the latter, posting on spurts of inspiration fuelled by 1980s pop icons or the need to vent about the cultures I thrive in, with no sense of continuity between entries past and present, making

at the discretion of diarists who are willing take responsibility for their words in the face of (inevitable) criticism. In Diaryland, however, only fellow Diaryland users are entitled to post comments. When I came to know about LiveJournal (LJ), I immediately deflected from Diaryland because of its community-oriented interface.

LJ can be best described as a journal and message board rolled into one. The user pages are more accessible to public scrutiny, and LJers take the liberty to be self-indulgent when it comes to listing down their interests.

creative spaces. sometimes i forget that although relatively we can be anonymous in cyberspace, there is [still] a very slim chance of being unmasked. . . i like the anonymity of cyberspace, but at the same time, i don't think i can be truly anonymous, not if i continue to describe every true thing that happens to me here everyday. i don't give out this url to close friends, even. i do think about the consequences of m. (or a., for that matter) finding this diary in the vastness of cyberspace. . . and yeah, so f__king what? in the beginning, maybe i talked about him/her/ them a great deal, but looking back [at] some 160+ entries, it wasn't all about that. i've been visited by certain people i forget know some of people in my entries, and i'm like, "oh f__k." but you know what, these are my thoughts. i may have dissed people here, or i may have professed/confessed undying love, but whether you know me or not doesn't really bother me. (just don't forget to sign the guestbook, thanks.)

Danisha, 23
from Privacy Issues (11.12.01)
<http://faith-sparks.diaryland.com>

known only certain aspects of my existence while consciously omitting other details. No matter who lets on more about herself, the online personas that we carve on our own terms would never sum up who we actually are as individuals in so-called meatspace. Detractors are likely to come and go, using our words against us by claiming they know us based solely on the traces of our selves left in Cyberspace.

The chances of being found are highly likely. For instance, a journal could be linked from a friend's website, another online diary, or discovered through a Google search for a list of interests in the Diaryland profile pages. Diaryland and blogs such as Blogspot operate as standalone diaries with the option to activate the comments sections

They can add other LJ users to their friends list on grounds of reading enjoyment and common interest, and these relationships can likewise be reciprocated. LJers can also read their friends' entries all in one page without having to visit each and every individual journal. Unless blocked, LJers are encouraged to post comments on other users' journals, or to reply to posts that other LJers leave on their own journals. Online journaling LJ-style has become more of an open forum, though LJers can avail of the security options if they so desire. They can prevent anonymous posters from leaving comments on their journal, or they can make use of the lock, posting "friends-only" entries when they don't feel up to disclosing personal information about themselves in public. Some LJers like Athena stick to friends-only posts on their journals, so that any-

one who is both friend and friend of these diarists is granted the privilege to read her private thoughts just by logging on to LJ. While there is a modicum of trust in these reciprocal friendships, LJers can drop friends from their list if they wish to, and while such action shouldn't be taken too personally, there are users who do get affected.

A diarist is inclined to discuss whatever s/he wants in an online journal, given a flexible application of content and style. LJ, however, has somehow maintained a reputable outlet for mundane one-liners, long-winded entries, or even answers to polls, survey questions and online personality tests. Shallow as it may sound, this format has not exactly outlived its potential to be used as a tool of resistance, especially where gender issues are concerned. Brushes with sexual harassment, or the protest surrounding one theologian's refusal to stage *The Vagina Monologues* at a liberal Catholic university in Quezon City amidst the V-Day (Valentine) celebrations last February (a hot topic among college girls) saw documentation in a few LJs. These voices further call attention to a social dynamic that would otherwise warrant only perfunctory recognition as the experiences of female youth, particularly those with no direct access to mainstream media forms yet are smart and hold some degree of class privilege. Sure, such accounts increase an oft-misconstrued representation of the youth as being caught up in self-definition after being boxed in for so long. But they also challenge the notion of a level playing field within digital space, one that assumes gender equality. As it is, the increasing presence of girls with digital diaries is an extension of (mostly white) diversified independent girl cultures, where dedicated participants took the lead in the creation of such space through Websites. Their adeptness in the medium made them as entitled as the boys. As a benefit,

however, empowering Net visibility alone is oversimplification; any issue worthy of feminist critique somehow finds its place at the Net threshold. The struggle against hetero-patriarchy continues.

In addition to the far more interactive facility that gives it an edge over other online diaries, LJ's distinctive qualities have no bearing on the users it attracts. Lumping together my LJ friends on these terms certainly don't do them justice. I have Manila-based university students and media practitioners as well as a Southwestern phone-sex operator and a thirty-something NY-based doctorate holder specialising in Webcam desire and Cyberfeminisms on my friends list, and their net identities defy pigeonholing. While it may not matter where a person is from, how old or young, or what his/her gender identification is, come the time to register for an online journal, these intersections, if alluded to in hypertext, make all the difference. Geographical boundaries in the World Wide Web appear invisible, providing an imagined liberative potential that can empower marginalised communities or people of colour almost as easily as it can oppress others.

The reasons that bring together online diarists are the desire to participate in varied forms of online communities and the convenience of the Net. Since participation in Net activities depends on Internet access and connection, i.e., an up-to-date computer system and a price tag on hours spent, whether at home, school, or workplace, the idea of democratic spaces in the Philippine context is still classed. For young Filipinas now only taking part in Cyberculture, empowerment remains a privilege, not a right. ♪

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With all the rhetoric about the need to liberate unheard voices, we miss an essential point: those voices have been talking all along. The question is who is listening.

Laura Agustin, "They Speak, but Who Listens?"
Women@Internet: Creating New Cultures in Cyberspace, edited by Wendy Harcourt.