

Participation in Electronic Discourse in a "Feminist" Field

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Introduction

Studies of gender differences in amount of talk have shown that men consistently talk more than women in public settings. Talk in such settings – which include conferences, seminars, formal and informal meetings, and television discussions – draws attention to the speaker in ways that are potentially status-enhancing (Holmes 1992). Moreover, sheer amount of talk may garner speakers credit they do not deserve, as when subjects in a study conducted by Rieken attributed insightful solutions to those who had talked the most during the discussion, even when the solutions had in fact been proposed by other participants (reported in Wallwork 1978). In short, amount of talk is related to status, power, and influence in the public domain.

In recent decades, a new forum for public discourse has emerged: the Internet. The possibility of communicating via computer networks has led to the formation of multi-participant electronic discussion groups (known variously as lists, conferences or newsgroups, depending on the technology involved), in which individuals scattered in diverse locations around the world can participate in discussions on topics of common interest by sending electronic mail (e-mail) messages to a common site, where they are posted for others to read and respond to. Participation is typically open to all interested parties, and some groups are exceedingly active, generating hundreds of messages per week.

Enthusiasts of the new electronic medium claim that it exercises a democratizing influence on communication. Citing studies conducted in educational settings, Kahn and Brookshire (1991: 245) conclude that individuals communicating via computer "tend to participate more equally in discussions, and discussion is likely to be more democratic in the absence of nonverbal status cues". Users also wax enthusiastic. As one male member of a discussion list recently wrote to another:

One of the greatest strengths of e-mail is its ability to break down socio-economic, racial, and other traditional barriers to the sharing and production of knowledge. You, for example, have no way of knowing if I am a janitor or a university president or an illegal alien – we can simply communicate on the basis of our ideas, not on any preconceived notions of what should be expected (or not expected) from one another.

The electronic medium is claimed to break down gender barriers as well. Graddol and Swann (1989: 175) observe that "the introduction of [computer conferencing] ... [leads] to a change in the traditional pattern of contributions from female and male participants". A number of characteristics of the medium mitigate the likelihood of gender asymmetries: sex non-specific electronic return addresses,¹ the absence of physical (including intonational) cues signaling relative dominance or submission, and the fact that interruption and overlap are effectively precluded – a participant may choose to delete messages, but each message selected appears on his or her screen in its entirety, in the order in which it was received.²

Despite this optimistic early prognosis, what little research has directly investigated the relationship between gender and participation in electronic discourse calls into question the claim that computers exercise an equalizing effect. In a study of the participation patterns of professional linguists on the Linguist electronic discussion list, Herring (1992) found that female linguists contributed significantly less overall than male linguists – 20% and 80%, respectively. Moreover, when surveyed, both men and women reported feeling put off by the bombastic and adversarial postings of a small minority of male contributors who effectively dominated the discussions. Herring concluded that women refrain from participating on Linguist due in part to their aversion to the adversarial tone of such discussions.

In the present study, we report on an investigation of participation on a smaller list serving an academic field – composition and rhetoric – in which feminism currently enjoys considerable influence.³ This list, Megabyte University (hereafter MBU), is considered by its members to be especially "friendly" and "supportive" relative to other lists. We hypothesized that in a non-adversarial computer-mediated environment, women would be more likely to participate equally in discussions, as predicted by the claims cited above. However, this hypothesis was not supported: while the overall tone of the list was indeed less adversarial, women still contributed only 30% of the messages as compared to 70% contributed by men. Even more revealing patterns emerge when participation is considered on a day-by-day and topic-by-topic basis. In discussion of a feminist topic, the contributions of women at one point exceeded those of the men for two consecutive days. The subsequent disruptions that took place, including male accusations of being "silenced" in the discussion and threats from several men to unsubscribe from the list, provide support for the view that women and men do not have equal rights to speak in public; by contributing more, even temporarily, and on a feminist (and female-introduced) topic, women in the group violated the unspoken convention that control of public discourse belongs rightfully to men.

The "Men's Literature" Discussion

Our investigation focuses on a particularly lively discussion that took place on MBU between November 7 and December 18, 1991. It began as a request by one of the subscribers for reading suggestions for a university course he planned to offer on "men's literature". The "men's literature" question soon revealed itself to be controversial, with participants becoming polarized along gender lines regarding the legitimacy of offering such a course.⁴ Some women feared that the course might be used to perpetrate male hegemony, e.g., by co-opting resources that might otherwise be used for women's literature courses. The men, in turn, argued that women on the list were trying to deny them the right to talk about how gender shapes their identity. In addition to being concerned with gender issues, the "men's literature" discussion contains meta-commentary on gender and "silencing" in the discussion itself.

Participation by Gender

The first and most obvious indication of gender-based inequality comes from the figures for participation in the "men's literature" discussion as a whole. These figures are summarized in table 1.

Table 1 Participation in the "men's literature" discussion

	<i>Female</i>	<i>Male</i>
Number of contributors	18 (30.5%)	41 (69.5%)
Number of contributions	87 (36%)	155 (64%)
Average words per contribution	162	211.5
Total words contributed	14,114 (30%)	32,774 (70%)

As table 1 shows, men contributed significantly more than women to the discussion overall, 69.5% of the participants were men, who in turn were responsible for contributing 70% of the total words and 64% of the total messages.⁵ Moreover, the average message length for men was 211.5 words, as compared with 162 words for women. Rather than demonstrating a new, democratic form of discourse, these figures support "the traditional pattern of contributions from male and female participants" alluded to by Graddol and Swann, whereby men dominate (i.e., in face-to-face conversation) by taking longer and more frequent turns.

A rather more complex picture emerges if we consider a day-by-day breakdown of the number of messages contributed by participants of each sex to the "men's literature" discussion, as shown in figure 1.⁶

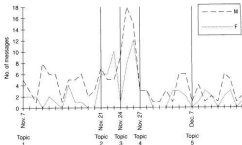


Figure 1 Number of messages by day

Figure 1 shows that males (M) contributed more than females (F) nearly every day on which the discussion took place. However, the number of contributions by both sexes rose dramatically in the period between November 21 and November 27, and during a two-day span (November 22–23), the contributions of women exceeded those of the men. Immediately thereafter, participation in the discussion soared to a peak of intensity (November 24–27), dropping off and stabilizing after Thanksgiving, which was celebrated on November 28 that year.

What accounts for this variability in participation? Explanations begin to suggest themselves when we take into account what MBU-ers were talking about at any given time. The vertical lines in figure 1 indicate transitional points at which new topics of discussion were taken up by the group. Five such topics arose in the course of the discussion as a whole:

- Topic 1: Men's literature course (M)
- Topic 2: Silencing of women in the discussion (F)
- Topic 3: Threats of three members to unsubscribe, and reactions to this (M)
- Topic 4: Male hegemony in English departments (F)
- Topic 5: Statistics posted by one of the members (similar to those in table 1) showing male and female participation in the discussion to date (M)

Topics 1, 3, and 5 were introduced by males; Topics 2 and 4 were introduced by females. Participation by gender and topic is shown in figure 2.

As figure 2 shows, men contributed the greatest number of messages on Topics 1 and 3, both introduced by men, and the least on Topic 2, which was introduced by

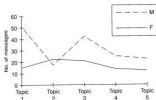


Figure 2 Number of messages by topic

women. Women, on the other hand, contributed the most on Topic 2. Indeed, this is the only period in the discussion when the usual pattern of men posting more messages than women is reversed. We suggest that this reversal – the fact that women were participating more, and on a female-introduced topic – made men uncomfortable to the point of threatening to unsubscribe, and that it was ultimately responsible for male perceptions of having been “silenced” and of women having dominated the discussion.

It might seem strange that when men participated significantly more than women in the five-week discussion overall, two days in which women happened to contribute more would be perceived as a threat. Several factors may have contributed to producing this effect. First, the number of women’s contributions took a leap on November 21 relative to what had come before, as can be seen from figure 1. Second, female participants continued to contribute actively the next day and the next, exceeding the contributions of men for two days straight, a situation without precedent in the discussion thus far. Finally, Spender (1979) found that male academics perceive women as dominating in public when they contribute as little as 30% of the talk. What would men then feel if women contributed more than half, as they did in this case?³ It is likely that from the perspective of the men in the group, the women’s increased participation was not only unexpected, it also appeared to be more than it actually was.

In support of this view, note that during Topic 2 men posted no fewer messages in absolute terms than they had previously. Yet on November 23, a male contributor (the one who posted the original request for texts on “men’s literature”) wrote and, addressing two of the more vocal women in the group by name, complained, “You may not feel very powerful outside this net or this discourse community, but here on the inside you’ve come very close to shutting all of us men up and down”. The perception that men had been shut up (or down) is clearly contradicted by the fact of their participation – this man’s message alone is 1098 words, the longest in the entire discussion, and four other lengthy messages were contributed by men on the

same day as well – yet it is consistent with Spender's observation that women need not truly dominate in order to be perceived as doing so.

What happened next is also revealing. The evening of November 23, and the morning of November 24, three men (none of whom had participated in the discussion thus far) posted public messages in which they announced their intention to unsubscribe from the list.⁶ The reasons given were that the discussion, having begun as a well-intentioned request for help in selecting texts for a course, had degenerated into "insults", "vituperation", and "vilification". It was not, of course, that they had any problem with discussing gender issues; rather, what upset them was the "tone" of the debate.

However, if one examines the messages posted during the immediately preceding days, one finds little evidence of a vituperative tone. With one exception, the contributions of the women appear to be aimed primarily at furthering communication: they raise questions about the interaction at hand (specifically, the lack of male response to female concern about the proposed course), explain their own views, and encourage others to respond in kind.⁷ The only message indisputably negative in tone was posted by the man who proposed the men's literature course in the first place. In it, he accuses women on the list of "posting without thinking [their contributions] through carefully first", of leveling "charges" (rather than questions) at the men, and in general, of "bashing", "guilt-tripping", and "bullying" men who didn't toe a strict feminist line. A man who overtly sided with the female participants also comes under attack: he is accused of betraying his brothers out of feminist-induced guile.

If the only vituperation comes from the man whose cause they allegedly support, why then did the three men threaten to leave the list? The real reason did not escape the notice of participants on MBU at the time: it was a "boy"cott, a "power play" intended to silence those women who persisted in speaking uncomfortable truths about the gender/power dynamics on the list. It is no coincidence that threats of withdrawal occurred on and immediately following a day when the majority of messages were posted by women.

Ironically, however, the boycott had the reverse of its intended effect – it shamed the other men on the list into cooperating, at least temporarily, with the women's attempts to change the topic of discussion to one of feminist concern: the issue of male hegemony within the field of English. The period labelled "Topic 3" in figures 1 and 2 above was thus a turning point in the gender dynamics of the discussion, a turning point, as we demonstrate below, that is reflected on various levels of the discourse.

A Temporary Reversal of Control

Responses

The first evidence of a temporary reversal of influence in the discussion comes from a consideration of how – and how often – participants of each sex were responded to.

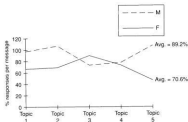


Figure 3 Responses received in relation to messages posted

Male participants received more responses than female participants overall: 89.2% of male postings in the "men's literature" discussion received explicit responses, as compared with only 70.6% of female postings. This disparity led one female participant to observe:

I am fascinated that my thoughtful . . . response on the "men's lit" thread was met with silence . . . while an anonymous man . . . with a silly little 3-liner gets fascinated and committed responses. . . . When threads initiated by women die from lack of response that's silencing; when women do not respond on threads initiated by men for reasons to do with fear (and the fear may be fear of verbal or other reprisal, ridicule, whatever) . . . — that's silencing.

Lack of response to postings questioning the proposed "men's literature" course prompted another frustrated woman to write, "Are you (in general) listening to what's being communicated?", and a third to conclude a message by "shouting" in capital letters: "IS THERE ANYBODY OUT THERE?"

Figure 3 charts the percentage of response (100% = 1 response per message posted) received by females and males according to topic.¹⁰

As figure 3 shows, men were responded to more than women at all times during the discussion, except during Topic 3, the period immediately following the threats by several men to leave the list. The reversal of the usual pattern of response during Topic 3 appears to be a reaction to the reversal in participation during Topic 2 (see figure 2 above), and reinforces the notion that amount of talk is power: by contributing more, women earned a higher rate of response to their messages.

Also of interest is the matter of who responds to whom. The most frequent direction of response is men to men (33.4%), followed by women to men (21.3%), men to women (15.8%), and finally women to women (11.2%). (The remaining responses (18.3%) were addressed to the group as a whole.) Both men and women thus

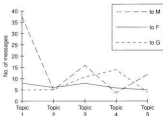


Figure 4 Responses to males, females, and group by topic (men only)

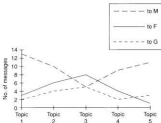


Figure 5 Responses to males, females, and group by topic (women only)

respond more to men, an indication of the more powerful status of men in the group overall. The number of responses directed to participants of each sex is shown for men in figure 4, and for women in figure 5.

Men on MBU are consistent in responding most to men on topics introduced by men, as shown in figure 4. Their rate of response to postings by women is consistently low throughout. Note that in acknowledging the women's topic of hegemony – Topic 4 – men avoided responding directly to women (to do so would be to concede power) by addressing most of their postings to the group (G) as a whole.

Women show a different pattern. As figure 5 indicates, women respond most to men throughout, except during Topic 3, when the pattern of response is temporarily reversed.

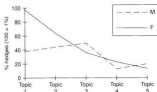


Figure 6 Percentage of words that are hedges

It might appear from figure 5 that women responded most to other women about the threats of men to leave the list (Topic 3). In fact, however, many women at this point are virtually ignoring Topic 3 and pursuing the topic of hegemony (Topic 4) among themselves instead. This is further evidence that the control of the discourse has shifted; the women, after struggling throughout the earlier part of the discussion to make themselves heard, and having succeeded in gaining the floor on the topic of silencing (Topic 2), are finally empowered to talk about what they want, and they do so among themselves. The increases in both women's responses to women during the time period identified as Topic 3, and men's responses to the group during Topic 4, can be seen as reactions to women having gained control of the conversational floor.

Hedges

Yet another revealing piece of evidence comes from the use of hedges. Hedges – qualifiers such as *sort of*, *a little*, and *somewhat*, the modals *may* and *might*, and expressions such as *perhaps*, *conceivably*, and *it seems* – have been observed to occur more frequently in the speech of women, especially in situations where women are relatively powerless (Lakoff 1975; O'Barr and Atkins 1980, reprinted in this volume, p. 377). In the "men's literature" discussion, women use more hedges than men overall.¹¹ However, while women's use of hedges *decreases* steadily throughout the discussion, men's use of hedges *increases* as the discussion builds in intensity, dropping off after the worst of the conflict has passed. This is charted in figure 6.

Men hedge most during the period identified as Topic 3, thus exhibiting features of powerless language at a time when women are relatively more empowered in the discourse. This results in another temporary reversal of the overall pattern.

Survey results

Finally, the hypothesis that power relations underwent a reversal in the discussion is supported by the results of a survey we created and disseminated on MBU two

Table 2 Survey results for question (1): Who won the "men's literature" debate?

	<i>Pro</i>	<i>Con</i>	<i>Neither</i>	<i>Other</i>
Female	10.0%	30.0%	40.0%	20.0%
Male	11.1%	50.0%	33.3%	5.6%
Both	10.7%	42.9%	35.7%	10.7%

months after the "men's literature" discussion had ended. The survey included the following two questions:

(1) In the course of the debate, two basic positions were expressed: a "pro" position, which essentially supported the offering of courses on men's literature, and a "con" position opposed to or concerned by the offering of courses of this type. If you had to choose, which side would you say was ultimately more successful in persuading the group as a whole to its point of view?

(2) How satisfied were you personally with the outcome of the debate?

Twenty-eight people responded to the survey ($M = 18$; $F = 10$) either privately or by posting their responses publicly to the list.¹² Their responses to question (1) are summarized in table 2. While the greatest percentage (40%) of women responded that neither side had been more persuasive, the majority of men (50%) indicated that the "con" (i.e., female) position had prevailed. These responses are especially revealing in that the original question could be interpreted as biased towards a "pro" response: the person who suggested the "men's literature" course did, in fact, go on to teach it, and survey respondents were aware of this fact. Why did more men than women say that the "women's side" had won the debate? Clearly, they perceived the women to have been more powerful than the women perceived themselves to have been, or than the external circumstances warranted.

Not coincidentally, male survey respondents also indicated a lower level of satisfaction than females with the outcome of the debate (question 2). On a scale where 2 = very satisfied, 0 = indifferent, and -2 = very dissatisfied, the men's responses averaged -.06 (indifferent to somewhat dissatisfied), while the women's averaged .6 (somewhat satisfied). Additional comments made by survey respondents on the issue of the debate provide further evidence of differing levels of satisfaction. Female respondents tended to comment that they found the discussion "interesting", "provocative", "gratifying", and "impressive", although several also expressed weariness at having to fight the "same old battles". The comments of the male respondents, in contrast, range from "initially shocked", to a "no-win" discussion, "whining", "yelling and screaming", and (from the man who posted the original "men's literature" request) "a bad-tempered festival of condemnation and defense". Such comments are consistent with Spender's (1980) observation that women who express feminist views, no matter how rationally and calmly, tend to be perceived as hostile and emotional by men.

Ironically, these attitude differences emerge despite the fact that subscribers to MBU – male and female alike – overwhelmingly consider themselves to be feminists. In response to a question on the survey asking: “Do you consider yourself to be a feminist, and if so, how strongly?”, 100% of respondents of both sexes indicated that they were either strong feminists or supporters of feminist principles.

Conclusions

We have presented data to show that despite considerable external evidence to the contrary (amount of participation, rate of response, real-world outcome of the debate), men perceived women as having dominated the “men’s literature” discussion. This perceptual reversal of dominance can be traced to a two-day period during which women contributed more messages than men. Immediately following this period, men threatened to leave the list, began hedging more, and ultimately abandoned a male-introduced topic to talk about a female-introduced topic instead (although without responding directly to the women involved). Moreover, when surveyed later, men were more inclined to state that the women’s side of the argument had “won”, and to express dissatisfaction with the discussion overall.

The feminist overtones of the women’s contributions, along with the fact that they were critical of a topic introduced and supported by men, no doubt contributed to the discomfort experienced by the men in the group. Yet the implied accusations that the women were “vituperative” and “unreasonable” are not supported by our analysis, nor indeed is such a characterization consistent with the women’s supposedly greater rhetorical effectiveness in persuading others to their point of view, as male survey respondents claimed. In fact, we suggest that women on the list were neither vituperative, nor especially persuasive – what won them the floor was their persistence in participating, and male (over)reactions to that persistence.

These findings have implications for participation in electronic discourse more generally. It is significant that after their brief period of more-or-less equal participation, women on MBU retreated back to a lower level of participation, such that their contributions to the discussion overall did not exceed 30%. Moreover, in discussions on MBU in the four months following the “men’s literature” discussion, women’s contributions averaged slightly less than 20%, even on topics of broad general interest.¹¹ The 20% figure is also consistent with earlier findings (Herring 1992) for women’s participation on the Linguist list. If it is true that women, including successful, well-educated, academic women, are accorded less than equal speaking rights in mixed-sex public discourse on the Internet, then it appears that the amount they are expected to speak, all other factors being equal, is between 20–30%.

The 20–30% figure is supported by evidence from a variety of other public discourse types, both spoken and written. In an academic seminar, Spender (1979) found that 30% was the upper limit before men felt that women were contributing more than their share. In publishing, women writers average only 20% of those published; despite the fact that more women than men buy books, male publishers

consider that to publish more women authors would be "risky" (Spender 1989). Finally, in two recent surveys of American television commercials, students in sociolinguistics courses taught by the first author of this article found that although women are frequently depicted, they have significant speaking roles in only 28% of the commercials aired. This last observation is particularly interesting, given the normalized appeal of commercial television: it suggests that society at large recognizes as normal a less than equal amount of talk by women. In a society where such an expectation is conventionalized and even exploited for commercial ends, it is small wonder that the electronic medium does not – cannot – by itself make for equal communication between the sexes.

Nevertheless, increased feminist awareness may help. The fact that MBU women spoke up, persisted in speaking up even when ignored, and appealed successfully to other women in the group for support can be attributed to widespread feminist consciousness within the field of composition/rhetoric. Further, the political reality of feminism in the field constrained the males in the group (according to self-report) to hedge their objections and ultimately to concede the floor – at least temporarily – to the women. Of course, these results did not come about without effort (as one woman later put it, "a small war was necessary on MBU for a bit of consciousness raising"), and female participants' communicative efforts were met with resistance as soon as they appeared to be taking up more than their rightful "share" of the discussion.

Women may never gain the right to equal participation, however, unless we assume that the right is ours already, and act accordingly. Given the growing importance of computer-mediated communication in the current information age, electronic discussion groups might well be a good place to start.

NOTES

This is a slightly revised version of an article by the same title published in 1992 in *Locating Power: Proceedings of the Second Berkeley Women and Language Conference* (Berkeley, CA: Berkeley Women and Language Group). An expanded analysis of male reactions to women's participation in the "men's literature" discussion can be found in Herring, Johnson and Delferickto (1995).

- 1 Gender non-specific return addresses (such as those containing sender's last name only, or a more or less random sequence of letters and numbers) were apparently used in the communication observed by Graddol and Swann, which took place at the Open University in the United Kingdom. In the lists reported on in this paper, however, the sex of participants is generally known, either because their first name is part of their return address, or because they sign their messages, or because their address is otherwise known within the community.
- 2 Messages on lists and computer conferences are typically posted to an intermediary machine, or listserver, before being distributed to subscribers. Some lists have a moderator who exercises a degree of editorial control over the content (and less commonly, the order) of messages; generally, however, messages are distributed on a strict "first come, first served" basis.

- 3 For example, at the 1992 College Composition and Communication Conference (CCCC) in Cincinnati, the number of sessions on "gender and feminist theory" ranked third out of 27 topics. The only two topics that had more sessions were devoted to practical teaching issues.
- 4 One man supported the feminist position throughout, and several others supported parts of it during the later portions of the discussion; overall, however, most men favored the idea of a men's literature course, and all participating women expressed concerns about such a course.
- 5 The subscription figures for MBL are 42% female and 58% male (out of a total of 178 subscribers), based on a count of names from which gender can reliably be determined. The majority of subscribers are teachers and graduate students in English departments at United States universities.
- 6 The intervals between dates in Topics 1, 4, and 5 are fewer than the number of calendar days, as we have included in figure 1 only those days on which messages related to "men's literature" were contributed.
- 7 At the height of the "reversal", on November 23, women contributed 66.6% of the day's messages. However, since the women's messages were shorter, men still contributed more words on that day.
- 8 One man did in fact unsubscribe; the other two were persuaded to remain on the list.
- 9 The one exception is a contribution in which the writer presents her feminist views dogmatically, rather than cooperatively; this message accuses one of the male participants of "intellectualizing".
- 10 Responses were counted as only those messages which explicitly acknowledge an earlier posting. Excluded were messages pertaining to the topic under discussion but addressed to the group as a whole, as well as first postings on a new topic.
- 11 Hedges constitute .48% of the words contributed by women, and .36% of the words contributed by men.
- 12 Of these, 18 (M = 13; F = 5) had participated in the original discussion.
- 13 For example, in a discussion of the usefulness of composition theory in teaching writing, contributions by women accounted for only 16.9% of the 142 message total.

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