

Grrls Plugged In

How Canadian Rural Young Women Are Using the Internet

LISA CAMPBELL

En dépit du fait que les jeunes filles des régions rurales au Canada ont des difficultés à accéder aux TIC (techniques informatiques de communication), elles sont de plus en plus nombreuses en ligne. L'auteure examine la façon dont Internet offre à ces jeunes filles d'énormes possibilités au moyen d'espaces numérisés où elles peuvent être reconnues et acceptées au-delà des limites de leur communauté.

As the home computer develops into a must-have accessory for Canadian homes, access to the Internet has increased dramatically for the average Canadian. According to Statistics Canada, "Canadian students rank among the highest in the world in terms of access to computers both at home and at school ("Computer access at school and at home"). Current statistics indicate an equal amount of men and women are now online in Canada. Through the federal government's "Connecting Canadians" program, Canada is aiming to be the most connected country on the planet. In TakingITGlobal's Talk to Her dialog on Gender and Information Communication Technology (ICT) it reports that,

Young women, like young people in general, are among the earliest adopters and adapters of technology. Today, young people go online more than anyone else, they stay online longer, and they have more diverse online activities. For many young women, the Internet is becoming a major source of education, news, and entertainment, as well as a key new dimension of communication and community. At the same time, young women are often among the most marginalized and disadvantaged groups in the field of ICT.

On the whole, rural communities experience a number of significant barriers to Internet access, such as high costs, non-existent high-speed options, lack of public access centres, and a deficiency of technology training and

support. (Dryburgh). While rural Canadian girls face these barriers of access to ICTs, they are nonetheless going online at an increasing rate (Bell). Once online, the Internet provides rural girls with possibility-infused, digitized spaces where they can find acceptance outside of the boundaries of their physical communities. It allows them to access resources that they wouldn't normally have access to, as well as providing anonymous support networks where they can take their problems into their own hands.

My research objectives were to gain insight on the experiences of rural young women in relation to their use of ICTs and to examine the ways in which young women from rural communities use the Internet to empower themselves. Having spent several months in a rural community in Alberta, I was able to gain some understanding and appreciation of some of the challenges and perspectives of the rural young women related to the impact of Internet access. Through individual interviews with key actors in the field of ICTs and rural women, as well as interviews with a sampling of ten girls between the ages of 12 and 14 from a conservative town with a population of 1,000 in rural Alberta, I explored the different ways that rural Canadian girls are using the Internet.

The majority of the town's population are farmers and oil workers. It is also a very white community, where people of colour were accepted, but not without suspicion and hearsay. Often in my conversations with the local adults talk of the influence of Asian gangs, and the threat of Islamic fundamentalism came up with racist undertones. As well, the adults in the community often expressed negative attitudes toward homosexuality. This conservative climate had a significant impact on the lives of the girls interviewed for this study as they faced barriers to their multiple identities, and were often forced to conform to the conservative culture. The Internet thus becomes an important vehicle through which rural girls can assert their identities and expand their horizons.

Many of the rural young women I interviewed expressed their dissatisfaction about access to technical support. One family I talked to said that when their phone lines were down, they sometimes had to wait up to a week before the repair people came out to fix them. Technical training is also hard to come by away from city centres, and the majority of the girls that were surveyed stated that they have to ask either the male members of their family for help, or bring their computer into the shop—often in an urban center—when it breaks.

On top of these barriers to access there is the issue of

concept of a “Global Village,” bringing like-minded souls together (cited in Quinton).

For rural young women, the Internet can provide portals into other realities. This rings true for Jamila, a 13-year-old living in rural Alberta who recently immigrated from the Middle East. Jamila uses the Internet to keep in touch with her friends, and look up current affairs in her home country. Jamila doesn't like her town, because she says that “there is nothing to do, and it's boring.” In her small town over 65 per cent of the population is over 65, so it is hard for Jamila and other local youth to find

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safety. Many of the young women who were surveyed commented that they were wary of Internet chat rooms because of sexual harassment. Jen, age 14, stated that,

We don't have MSN because my aunt thinks that I will talk to dangerous people. I don't like going on chats, just in case you may not know the person... it could just be somebody pretending to be somebody else. One of my friends has an Internet boyfriend.... I think it's bad not knowing because you don't know who he is or what he's done. He could be a rapist or a criminal. That's why I don't go on chat rooms.

Nevertheless, online environments also have the potential to be sources of empowerment for rural young women. Through the Internet, rural young women can search out webpages and virtual communities that support their identities and aspirations. Living in a small and conservative town can often prevent rural girls from expressing their identities. Many times being silent is their best protection, which can however lead to feelings of isolation.

Isolation is in fact a key issue for rural girls. Often isolation is only seen as geographical. Donna Lunn, Coordinator of the Community Abuse Program of Rural Ontario, states that, “Isolation is not just distance from people, it can be distance from ‘like’ people.” Many times, it is social isolation that forces Canadian rural young women to adapt to the norms of whatever their community context is, acting as a “mute button” to their ideas, beliefs, and identities. Each rural community has a distinct set of norms and if one falls outside the margins, support networks can be hard to access (Lunn). The Internet takes a step toward eliminating this barrier by bridging geographical boundaries, allowing individuals to connect in a way that actualizes Marshall McLuhan's

recreation activities to suit their diverse interests and identities. Jamila uses the Internet to bridge her boredom, as well as to find information to support her identity and development:

I look up things that are different, things that you wouldn't see in Alberta. If pink is the latest style then I'd go and wear black. Sometimes I think that my parents trust me too much. I look at Goth websites and also check out information on sex. I look up vegetarian recipes on the Internet, especially tofu recipes.

For Jamila, the Internet is a place where she can connect with like-minded individuals and find solace in its diversity. While she may live in a town that's primary product is beef, she can still talk about tofu recipes online. To battle the lack of sex education in her school, she can search websites to answer her questions. While she may face controversy in a conservative town over her interest in Goth culture, online she can find friends and support. In her small town she is a minority on many fronts, but on the web, she is connected to thousands of people from diverse backgrounds who share her interests.

Besides geographical isolation, rural girls often find it difficult to access anonymous social support. For rural girls, it is also often hard to find emotional support for problems, especially because there is no way for them to protect their privacy. In the rural Canadian town examined for this study, many of the young women expressed concerns about gossip. When rural young women are faced with problems, traditional support networks are often felt to be unhelpful due to a lack of privacy. In a survey conducted through TakingITGlobal's Canada Network Susan, 19 years old and from Newfoundland, states that:

Young people in rural communities have less access to information and support. Through the Internet I've been introduced to many more ideas that have impacted my life. In my town there's no one to help with eating disorders, [but] I found support online.

Susan found the anonymity she needed on the Internet to explore options for help with her eating disorder. She stated that, "In many ways I can be a lot more authentic [online] because I don't have to worry what anyone thinks about me." Young rural women often find it is easier to go online to find answers to their questions or solutions to their problems as they see it as far more private.

Amanda is 21 years old and from a Hutterite Colony in rural Alberta. She uses the Internet and computers but has to keep it secret, especially from the rest of the colony. In the Hutterian tradition, "things of the world: are deemed evil, so the Internet and other forms of media have traditionally been banned. In the isolated world of Hutterite life, Hutterite women can use the Internet to access to ideas, support, education, and expression. There are many Hutterite colonies that already host websites. Online communication has the potential to support young rural women like Amanda, who face harassment and prejudice from the community at large because of their identities. When I visited with her she told me stories of people ignoring her on the street, things being thrown at her family members when they went into town, as well as bales of hay being set on fire on Halloween. "It is almost like they are racist," she said at one point in the conversation. On top of facing discrimination from her community, Amanda must also adapt to the traditional gender roles that the colony maintains. Women are expected to drop out of school and start working at the age of 15. Many of the young Hutterite women are challenging these traditional roles, and the Internet can be an aid to their journey.

The Internet is a also prime place for rural young women to discover and create new opportunities. For example, *Marigold Zine*, a Canadian feminist and girl culture e-zine, features online journals, political views, profiles of Canadian women, views and reviews, and forums. The founder of Marigold is rural feminist Audra Williams. When Audra first started Marigold she lived in Annapolis Royal, Nova Scotia, the nation's smallest incorporated town:

I moved there when I was 21, to interpret for a Deaf kid as he went through high school. I was just in this tiny town, and had no real community, and thought that if there had been a site like Marigold already, I might have met more people. I started it to build a national network of feminists. I decided to get a writer from every province and territory to keep an online journal on the site, like to be an ambassador. Then I put on the message boards, making sure to have a split of serious and frivolous topics. I was too ambitious with the sections, at first I started too

big. And I didn't really know what I was doing. How much work it was going to be, even just the HTML part, which I learned when my dad took the train to Annapolis to spend a week teaching me over Xmas. I had a lot of support, I was lucky.

Audra generated the income to host the site, support herself, and to pay the writers, through selling ads on ChickClick.com. After the dot.com crash the website went down and she lost funding. "It was so sad, because people were making a good living building community and paying grrl writers and all sorts of things like that." For Audra, *Marigold* was an exciting place for rural young women because of the opportunities it opened, as well as its great mentoring capability for young Canadian women:

Like, this one Marigolder, "carrot," started posting on Marigold when she was 16. She later (she's 21 or so now, and played the violin at my wedding!) said that for four years, Marigold was the only place she felt cool. And that's huge! I mean, "cool", whatever. But on Marigold she had all these great role models, in a very unstructured way. It's pretty great to only be able to do work that I think is meaningful. And I wouldn't be here if I hadn't had all sorts of great opportunities that stemmed from Marigold, like being on Judy Rebick's show, or sitting on the MediaWatch board, attending the World Social Forum, and other things like that.

Conclusion

For rural Canadian girls the Internet can be a gateway for them to independently voice their experiences and to build networks of social change. As a decentralized communication network, the Internet is a prime place to do this important work, allowing rural girls to create and distribute their own content. In communicating over the Internet, rural young women are able to express themselves, share their realities, explore alternative perspectives, and build support networks. Male or female, gay or straight, rural youth who are facing marginalization in their communities can utilize and build online networks to understand themselves and how they fit into the wider world. By encouraging access and creating opportunities for digitally progressive infrastructures, we can forge a future where rural girls can use the media they consume and create to truly represent the changes they want to see in the world.

Lisa Campbell is a multimedia artist and scholar currently attending York University in Toronto. She is on the Board of Directors of Kimbrecote Farm, a not-for-profit retreat centre dedicated to promoting healthy rural revolutions.

¹The interviews took place on December 15th, 2004. Note that the names of the individuals who were inter-

viewed have been changed in this article in order to protect their identities. Consent was obtained from each of the individuals interviewed to participate in this qualitative study. I conducted all the interviews and the content was then analyzed according to common themes that emerged.

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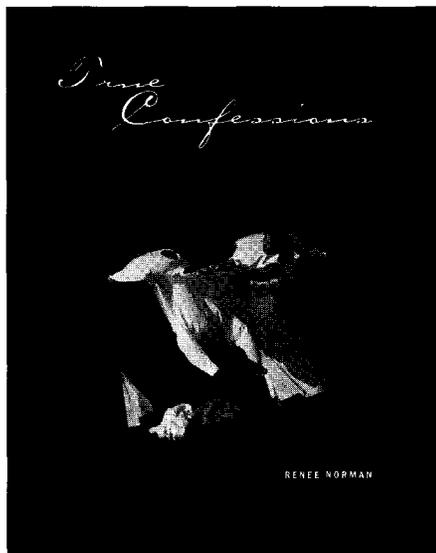
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