Cyberfeminism in Northern Lights:
Digital Media and Gender in a Nordic Context

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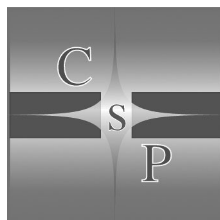
Edited by

Malin Sveningsson Elm and Jenny Sundén



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FOREWORD

The initiative to this book was taken in 2005, at a time when we were both working at the Department of Media and Communication Studies at Karlstad University. This university is beautifully situated in the midst of the deep woods of Värmland, and we could literally step out into the wilderness around the corner from our offices. Since we were both living in the two largest cities of Sweden, Stockholm and Gothenburg, spending the weekdays in Karlstad made for a quite dramatic change of scenery. It was in a sense to be transported into a different world – a world that gave us the inspiration for several collaborative projects.

Even though situated in a sparsely populated part of Sweden, Karlstad University is certainly not the end of the world, neither literally nor symbolically. It is rather a fairly young and thriving place for research and teaching. Even so, it is rare to work (physically) close to likeminded people with similar research interests and ambitions, and we missed our friends and colleagues from the larger international – or inter-Nordic as it happened to be – community of Internet research and digital media studies.

Thus, we started to plan for a symposium on gender and digital media in a Nordic context. The purpose was to gather researchers from the Nordic countries, to exchange experiences and knowledge, and also to form a Nordic network of scholars working in the interstices of gender and digital media. For various reasons, the symposium was instead turned into a book – this one. The contributions relate in various ways to the growing and changing tradition of cyberfeminism, although not always explicitly, and sometimes quite critically. An interdisciplinary compilation indeed, the authors come from various disciplines, such as media and communication studies, gender studies, sociology, educational sciences, and computer science. Although they all focus on gender and digital media, they do so from different angles.

The book gathers researchers from all of the Nordic countries: Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden. The chapters are based on empirical work carried out within a Nordic context, and/or work with theoretical considerations from what could be called a Nordic perspective. It is true that a Nordic perspective may perhaps not be best described as one, but many, for although often grouped together under the assumed homogeneity of Scandinavia, there are important differences between the countries. However, despite differences between nations, cultures, and subcultures, there are certain

qualities and aspects that traverse national borders, which compose an intriguing foundation of this book.

Editing a book is always a joint effort, and there are many people to whom we are indebted. First, we want to thank all the authors who have contributed to make this book. It has been a sheer pleasure working with you, and we look forward to future collaborations! We also want to thank our publishers, Amanda Millar and Andy Nercessian at Cambridge Scholars Publishing. We are truly grateful for having had the opportunity of working with you. Last but not least, the Swedish Research Council has largely contributed to making this book possible, by providing funding for the research projects "Young Swedes' Gender- and Identity Work in an Internet Community" and "Gender Play: Intersectionality in Computer Game Culture".

Gothenburg and Stockholm, May 2007
Malin Sveningsson Elm and Jenny Sundén

INTRODUCTION

JENNY SUNDÉN & MALIN SVENINGSSON ELM

CYBERFEMINISM IN NORTHERN LIGHTS

Northern lights is the common name for aurora borealis, a concept that was first used by the Italian scientist Galileo Galilei (1564-1642), who named it after two gods: Aurora, the Roman goddess of the red dawn, and Boreas, the Greek god of the north wind and the carrier of cold winter air. Northern lights is a luminous, otherworldly phenomenon in the night sky, consisting of ghostly overlapping curtains of greenish-white light, sometimes framed with pink, blue, and purple. These glowing, silent fireworks are often seen moving over clear winter night skies in a variety of shapes: beams, arches, draperies. Northern lights have a very particular way of illuminating the night sky, making people from all over the world go North to experience this peculiar arctic light dance caused by the interaction between the solar wind and the Earth's magnetic field. In a similar sense, we believe a Nordic perspective should be able to distinguish itself from other perspectives and ways of illuminating. Northern lights is clearly site-specific, but also constantly in motion. In a parallel manner, *Cyberfeminism in Northern Lights* is local and particular, but also moves across several fields of research, bridging together and contrasting multiple theoretical and methodological strategies.

There is an expanding body of research in the field of digital media and gender. However, most of the research to this date has been carried out from an Anglo-American perspective, while far fewer studies have taken as their point of departure the conditions and experiences of other cultural contexts. More often than not, the dominance of the field masquerades as the unmarked, universal version, referencing an apparently global Internet along with an online reality in which we all are supposed to feel right at home. The lack of site-specific awareness is highly problematic, since historical backgrounds, social structures and cultural contexts may differ significantly. A lack of national and cultural contextualization becomes perhaps particularly acute when it comes to research on gender – an area where conditions, representations and traditions may differ dramatically between cultures. Put differently, feminist studies of

digital media cannot afford to persist with their current Anglo-American obsession. They need to become more inclusive and aware of their own geographical and cultural biases and limits. It is our belief that the particular, local and concrete do make a difference in relation to the production and consumption of digital media. *Cyberfeminism in Northern Lights* looks at cyberfeminism and feminist studies of digital media from a Nordic perspective, taking as its point of departure the knowledge and experiences from the lands of the northern lights and the midnight sun: Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Iceland, as well as their close Nordic neighbor Denmark. It gathers together researchers from all these five countries, who have studied various aspects of gender and computer technologies.

A Nordic perspective may perhaps not be best described as one, but at least five (or actually many, many more). Although often grouped together under the assumed homogeneity of Scandinavia (which only includes Sweden, Norway, and Denmark, thus excluding Finland and Iceland), there are important differences between the countries, for example in discourses on sexuality, as well as in dominant national and cross-cultural images of femininity and masculinity. A Nordic point of view is differentiated, multiple, complex and contradictory. However, despite differences between nations and subcultures within the Nordic countries – which in themselves are interesting and will be explored by some of our authors – there are certain qualities and aspects that traverse national borders, which make an intriguing foundation for this book.

One of the aspects that unite the Nordic countries is our feelings of never being fully at ease within Anglo-American frameworks. Nordic cyberfeminists have a tendency to get stuck in the middle of debates, such as that between Anglo-American pragmatism and continental philosophy. In the same sense as Nordic people need to learn dominant languages to communicate with others, we also need to learn the dominant languages of various research traditions. We tend to end up playing the role of the mediator, as cultural and linguistic translators. But we also risk losing our specificity – if there is such a thing – forgetting how to make use of experiences and knowledge that diverge from those of our feminist sisters further West, South and East.

What, then, are these experiences and knowledge that make us different? What does it mean to study supposedly global media phenomena from a Nordic perspective? In which ways could a Nordic feminist perspective on digital media make a difference in relation to dominant research traditions? What would be particular and unique about Nordic cyberfeminism compared to the "unmarked" version of cyberfeminism dominating the field today? These are questions that the contributors to this book set out to address. This introductory chapter starts out with a partial history of cyberfeminism, leading to a call for alternative, empirically grounded cyberfeminist perspectives and projects that

make explicit their own cultural premises. Secondly, the chapter maps out the specificities of a Nordic perspective, starting with a brief historical overview of linguistic contiguities and shared traits among the Nordic countries. This is followed by some remarks on gender equality, state feminism, and technological development. Finally, as tangible examples of what Nordic cyberfeminism can look like, the chapters of the book are lined up and presented in order of appearance.

A partial history of cyberfeminism

To write the history of cyberfeminism is not an easy mission. The main reason is that cyberfeminism, like feminism in general, covers a lot of terrain and stretches across the fields of theory, activism, and all kinds of political and artistic practices in-between. A recapitulation of this will, by necessity, be partial and fragmentary.

Cyberfeminism has grown out of an emergent use of digital media and new communication technologies. These technologies have been ascribed with both promises and threats, with the potential of simultaneous empowerment and suppression. They offer the means to open up communicative spaces and communities, to engage in play and politics and to access information and create networks. But they also have the ability to monitor and keep track of their users, exclude non-users and divide the world into the "information rich" and "information poor", as well as multiply and sometimes reinforce different forms of oppression – sexism, racism, and homophobia. As Anne Scott Sørensen also observes in the closing chapter of this book, cyberfeminism positions itself as an uneasy but productive political project in the midst of this highly contradictory digital landscape of threats and promises for women and their allies. But if Scott Sørensen mainly focuses on the more recent versions of cyberfeminism, let us for a moment step back and trace the concept of cyberfeminism historically.[1]

The Australian artists' group VNS Matrix may have been the first to use the term cyberfeminism in 1991, but it is hard to tell exactly who coined the concept – which is quite illustrative of its fluid and hybrid nature. Its fuzzy origins aside, the term cyberfeminism visibly started to cruise the Web in the mid-90s, avoiding any final definition of its inner content and purpose. Despite this fluidity it is possible at this point to find at least two, somewhat contradictory

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[1] Parts of our discussion on cyberfeminism draw on material originally published in Jenny Sundén (2001) "What Happened to Difference in Cyberspace: The (Re)turn of the She-Cyborg", *Feminist Media Studies* 1(2), 215-232.
http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals

tendencies, which for reasons of analytical clarity could be called "theoretical" versus "practice-based" cyberfeminism.[2]

Cyberfeminism as theory

The "theoretical" version of cyberfeminism is clearly aligned with third-wave feminism.[3] Third-wave feminism, which gained significant influence in the 1990s, is primarily a critical response to the political exclusions and biases of the second wave, revealed as merely having included white Western middle-class straight women under the seemingly unifying category "women". The third wave, interlaced with poststructuralism, postmodernism, queer theory, black feminism, and postcolonial theory, is a multi-facetted acknowledgement of the many differences and power hierarchies that position women in relation to men, and in relation to one another. Female difference has fragmented into multiple differences, such as sexuality, race, ethnicity, and class (none of which translates transparently or un-problematically from, for example, a North American or British context to the varying contexts of other countries). Theory-driven cyberfeminism operates primarily on a sophisticated theoretical level of third wave feminism and techno-science studies, within which some of the most influential authors will be introduced here.

When working with cyberfeminism, there is little way around Donna Haraway's emblematic (1991) cyborg[4] (see also Scott Sørensen, this volume). Haraway uses the metaphor of the cyborg in order to move beyond dualisms, and beyond the limitations of traditional gender positions. In contrast to the use

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[2] This division is made even though theory certainly is a practice in its own right, sometimes with highly "practical" consequences, and practice-based work may very well be theoretically informed.

[3] The history of feminist theory and practice is sometimes divided into three different "waves". First-wave feminism in the 19th and early 20th century, with figures such as Mary Wollstonecraft, relied on Enlightenment liberal ideas based on "sameness" to protest against the subordination of women. Second wave feminism of the 1960s and 1970s turned the identity-as-sameness discussion on its head and instead worked to reclaim the "feminine". Women's liberation grew out of the declaration of women's irreducible difference, rather than their search for (illusory) equality.

[4] In 1960, researchers at NASA Manfred Clynes and Nathan Kline invented the term cyborg – a coming together of the two concepts cybernetic and organism – to depict a self-regulating human-machine system constructed for extraterrestrial environments, as well as to signify the increasing closeness between humans and machines in space research. Originating in the domain of military technologies and space flights, cyborg bodies have been reproduced in areas ranging from medicine and biotechnology, science fiction and cyberpunk, to feminist cultural theory.

of cyborgs in mainstream science fiction as an illustration of a hardened masculinity through the fusion of the (hu)man and technology (i.e. *Terminator* masculinity), she reads the cyborg as transcendence of dichotomous categorizations, such as mind/body, organism/machine, public/private, culture/nature, civilized/primitive, and centrally, man/woman. This transcendence takes us to the point where gender ceases to matter, or at least comes to matter in a different way. Haraway's cyborg interpretation has no commitment to an absolute base for knowledge, but emphasizes "situated" and "partial" knowledge, uncertain and sometimes contradictory subjectivities and identities. She regards the subject as an ongoing, open-ended process in the intersections of gender, race, and class, with a sensibility for local, material conditions that form female subjectivity. Cyberfeminism as represented by Haraway is clearly anchored in a postmodern feminist tradition, but is also affiliated with socialist feminism and its emphasis on women's material conditions.

A different strand of the deconstructivist, theory-driven, cyberfeminist paradigm is inspired by thinkers such as Sadie Plant and Sandy Stone, who have both envisioned the Internet as a realm of re-embodied subjectivities, and/or a space in which a feminist utopia could be realized. In her *Zeros + Ones*, Sadie Plant (1997) suggests a cyberfeminism that points out the existence of an intimate and maybe even subversive bond between women and machines. Her main argument is that women in the shadows of the male culture have been the ones who did the groundbreaking work: from the very first computer program to the latest incarnation of virtual reality.

Plant translates the operations of computer code, the zeros and ones, into a set of gendered relationships where the digit 1 stands for male dominance and 0 marks female absence. She argues that when it comes to typing as well as telecommunicating, women have, aside from doing the actual work, provided the male world with a living interface to the machines through their bodies. Her idea is that women have always been the "machine parts" in a male culture by reproducing both the species and the communication. Through this notion of the female capability of translation, she fills the previous absence in the history of the machinery by inscribing women's activities, bodies and emotions in a very close, or even symbiotic, relationship to machines. When machines get more autonomous, women go the same way, and between them a highly charged, sexual alliance is developed, "naturally" linking women's qualities to the new electronic world.

Plant has made an invaluable contribution to cyberfeminism by making women visible in the history of computing. But she has also been criticized for essentializing the relationship between women and technology – in making the Internet a quintessentially "female" technology – as well as excluding women

who do not belong to the inner circle of white, Western, middle class, highly theoretical cyberfeminists (Wakeford 1997).

In a very different mode, using his/her own transsexual body as a powerful line of reasoning in the area of political transgressions, Stone (1993) argues that the transsexual currently occupies a position of nowhere, outside the binary oppositions of gendered discourse. But this does not necessarily mean that it would be impossible to speak from this non-location, but rather that the violence inscribed in the transsexual body can be turned into a deconstructive force – even though this process may be severely painful. Stone reads the transsexual body in its internal dissonance to unveil elements of gender in new and unexpected compositions. In cyberspace, Stone (1995: 180-181) claims these unexpected compositions of the cross-dressed or transgender body to be the norm: "The nets are spaces of transformation, identity factories in which bodies are meaning machines, and transgender – identity as performance, as play, as wrench into the smooth gears of social apparatus of vision – is the ground state." Through the ever-present possibility of radical performance and play with gender and identity, the "unnatural", problematic position of the transgendered body can, according to Stone, potentially be turned into a "natural" starting point.

Even though cyberspace provides us with environments where bodies momentarily can be (virtually) altered, Stone simultaneously points out that interfaces have the ability to hide power asymmetries. As opposed to Plant, who operates in a de-contextualized virtual environment, in which women's emancipation is "beautifully effortless"[5], Stone takes a close look at all those skills and requirements that are necessary for online participation. Under the illusory equalizing surface of the screen, a wide range of knowledge and privileges is being hidden, of which Internet access, technical knowledge, and an understanding of online cultural codes are indispensable.

Cyberfeminism as activism and art

The material and cultural foundations of online practices may sometimes be invisible to participants for whom access, tech skills, and familiarity with online cultures have come to be perceived as natural. On the other hand, aspects such as information inequality and differences between men and women, as well as between women, constitute a certain strand of "practice-based" cyberfeminism. This cyberfeminist formation is overall more openly connected to a (second

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[5] See interview by RosieX, http://206.251.6.116/geekgirl/001stick/sadie/sadie.html, under "RosieX: Can I infer from your work that the term cyberfeminism implies that patriarchy is doomed?"

wave) feminist political movement, searching to form networks between women worldwide, and to create, through their different experiences with computer technologies, exclusive women's spaces of resistance on the Internet. The focus, like in second-wave feminism, is primarily on women as a collective, and on the strength that can be gained if women come together and, by united efforts, work towards change. However, this activist version of cyberfeminism is not a unified, collective movement, which lends itself to straightforward comparison with earlier women's movements. Nevertheless, the tendencies are clearly there, connecting women from a variety of different fields from activist postcolonial criticality, to the practices of techno-artists, science-fiction writers, and game designers (see Flanagan & Booth 2002).

One such formation with clear political implications, which at the time set the tone for a certain kind of cyberfeminist collaborations, is an alliance between UNESCO and the Society for International Development that goes by the title "Women Working on the Net" (cf. Harcourt, 1999). Through an analysis of how women are creating their own non-marginalized spaces of online dialogue and action, they try to understand how women in different cultural situations have reacted to and integrated new communication technologies into their daily lives. The idea is to explore how the new possibilities presented by the Internet can help change the cultural environment in which women find themselves. Access to technology is far from taken for granted, but rather problematized in terms of the unequal relationship between the information elite in the "north" and the information poor "south". According to Wendy Harcourt (1997: 2), an important part of the project is therefore to consider "how to expand the opportunities the Net offers to women from the academic, activist and professional circles in the North to other women particularly in the South".

If the distinctions "theoretical" versus "practice-based" cyberfeminism may serve the purpose of bringing forth two different cyberfeminist tendencies and traditions, the two become increasingly entwined in a third strand of cyberfeminism, namely cyberfeminist art practices. VNS Matrix is a good example of hybrid cyberfeminism, shuttling intensely between art, politics, and theory. The VNS Matrix shares with Sadie Plant an idea of technology as feminine and sexual, and they have also used a lot of ironical force in their quite literal efforts to contaminate technology with corporeality: blood, slime, and cunts. Sentences like "The clitoris is a direct line to the matrix", from their *Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century*, is not only bad girls talking dirty, but a female appropriation of computer technologies that otherwise may stick to

a masculine domain of "joysticks" and William Gibson's (1984) console cowboys "jacking in" to cyberspace.[6]

VNS Matrix's strategies of irony, parody and appropriation of sexual obscenities come close to the strategies of the grrrl-movement, central to third-wave feminism. Third-wavers have challenged the second wave definitions of constructive feminist agendas, by finding signs of empowerment and resistance in areas that the second wave paradigm had deemed misogynous or suppressive. One example is the feminist re-appropriation of ultra-feminine areas such as fashion and make up. Wearing high heels and lipstick was no longer necessarily seen as conforming to a male gaze, but as a recognition of femininity as a constructive force to be used against patriarchy "from within". Armed with ironic and parodying strategies, the grrrl movement positions itself right between the rather nice "girl" and a much more edgy, beastly, and not so nice "grrr". Feminist groups like the Guerilla Girls[7] or the Riotgrrl[8] have played a significant role in the fight over representation. Grrrls on the Web work through a mixture of active resistance, having a lot of fun and doing it all their own way. They are the bad girls, smart and proud of having tech skills, guiding other women online to express, empower, and, not least, *encode* themselves. Their sites and zines stand for diversity and independence, but nevertheless it is possible to find certain unifying strands, like the unmistakable ironic tone in their voices (see, for example, Ladendorf 2004).

While certainly being third wave in their ways of deconstructing, mimicking, masquerading, exaggerating, and playing with the bits and pieces of femininity in ways that feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti (1996) defines as "the politics of the parody", they simultaneously hold certain separatist beliefs that rather come across as a second wave faith in all women collectivity. They do not seem to believe that the creation of women-only spaces is a way to set women back, but that this is a way of using the Internet as a powerful medium for their message. According to Braidotti (1994: 173 ff.) and her politics of the parody,

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[6] VNS Matrix' Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century can, for example, befound at: <http://www.sysx.org/gashgirl/VNS/TEXT/PINKMANI.HTM> (September 5, 2006).

[7] From The Guerilla Girls website, http://www.voyagerco.com/gg/gg.html: "The guerilla girls are a group of women artists and art professionals who make posters about discrimination... We wear gorilla masks to focus on the issues rather than our personalities. We use humour to convey information, provoke discussion, and show that feminists can be funny... The mystery surrounding our identities has attracted attention and support. We could be anyone; we are everywhere."

[8] The early days of riotgrrl started in Olympia, Washington as grrls answer to boy-dominated punk and grunge music. With bands like Bikini Kill, Bratmobile and eventually Babes in Toyland and Hole, the riotgrrl movement came of age in the early nineties. See also http://www.riotgrrl.com.

or what she also names the philosophy of “as if”, feminist women keep on acting *as if* traditional patriarchal definitions of Woman are still their location – at a moment in a time when gender categorizations are increasingly contested. In putting on this act, femininity is treated as a set of multiple positions, possible to simultaneously affirm and deconstruct.

Braidotti emphasizes that “woman” is not only the objectified Other, tied to patriarchy by its negation, but also the very basis for female identity and therefore containing a resistance to patriarchal identity. When “woman” is regarded as a set of options to choose from and play with, and sometimes even avoid, it becomes possible to use traditional patterns in playful and unexpected ways to create new femininities and meanings. Self-distance and humor function as the means to at least momentarily dissolve the contradiction between accentuation and deconstruction of femininity, to imagine new gender identities by moving through the heart of traditional bi-polar definitions of gender. Then, again, there is of course always a risk that the irony is lost and that such cyberfemmes are read along the lines of highly traditional gender representations, locked into a dependency on satisfying a male gaze (Cf. Kroløkke, this volume).

The need for alternative cyberfeminisms

The internal dissonances in cyberfeminist theory and practice have at times been intense, but no matter the disparity of voices, there are still certain voids that have not been productively or sufficiently addressed. *Cyberfeminism in Northern Lights* is a response to what we see as the main problems with contemporary cyberfeminism: its unreflected universalism, its tendency towards rather uncritical technophilia, and its relative lack of empirical work.

First, as stated previously, cyberfeminism as a political project has more often than not been carried out as nationally and culturally unmarked (i.e. from an Anglo-American perspective), its universal claims being seldom discussed or even acknowledged. Writing a book that chooses to focus on gender and computer technologies in a specific cultural context, notably another context than what is generally implicitly referred to, is a way to make visible the politics and meaning of local specificity in a supposedly global world. Within a cyberfeminist framework, taking a closer look at the concept of “gender” could be a step in this direction. Nordic feminists, in their many translations into English and back again, use the word gender frequently. What is at stake here is precisely these practices of translation, what it means to *gender* one’s “mother tongue”, so to speak, and what it would mean to translate oneself differently. Without doubt, gender has been useful in contemporary feminist thought in pointing out, for example, how “masculinity” and “femininity” are cultural and

historical formations (that, logically, might be subject to change). But one good reason to critically examine "gender" is linguistic, and thus political. Gender is not a traditional concept in any of the North-Germanic languages. In Danish, Norwegian, and Icelandic, there is no word for gender at all (only sex). Speaking from a Swedish location, apart from *kön*, our close equivalent to the word "sex" (although with a slightly different sexual connotation), another word has only quite recently been developed – *genus* – which corresponds to "gender", but it doesn't translate perfectly.[9]

Secondly, cyberfeminist theory and practice have often been performed under the sign of liberal humanist understandings of cyberspace, in relation to which access to and use of new communication technologies have mostly been understood as inherently emancipatory. There are obvious parallels between cyberfeminist utopianism and the rhetoric circling around information technology in the early days of the Web. This is not surprising, given that both discourses emerged during the same period of time, and can thus be seen as two sides of the same coin. In other words, early cyberfeminism was a product of its time, giving voice to similar concerns and hopes as those circling in society at large. Many cyberfeminist projects have productively challenged the image of women as victims of computer technologies (see, for example, Wakeford 1997). But even if computer technologies have been seen as a means of challenging strict gendered identities and thus offer a critique of identity politics, they have also been theorized as reinforcing traditional, bi-polar understandings of gender – something that is at risk of being glossed over by rosy information technology rhetoric and utopian cyberfeminism alike. Technology can never be either a curse or a blessing, but encompasses the potential of both. *Cyberfeminism in Northern Lights* is an attempt to move beyond discussions of whether computer technology is good or bad, to perform a more productive balancing act in a shifting media landscape where technologies simultaneously may trap us and free us.

Thirdly, although the body of work that explicitly relates to a cyberfeminist framework is expanding (see, for example, Fernandez, Wilding & Wright 2002, Flanagan & Booth 2002, Gajjala 2004, Kember 2003, Reiche & Kuni 2004), there is still a pressing need for empirically sound – but nonetheless theoretically intriguing – work. *Cyberfeminism in Northern Lights* is an attempt

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[9] The discussion in Swedish academia concerning the past decades' translation problems and possibilities between the Anglo-American "sex" and "gender" versus the Swedish terms "kön" and, more recently, "genus", has produced and continues to produce innumerable publications. Some key references are: Gemzöe 1989; Hirdman 1988; Landby Eduards & Manns 1987; Widerberg 1992.

to present the growing tradition of empirically grounded cyberfeminism in the Nordic countries.

Finally, if black feminism and postcolonial feminism have contributed substantially to de-mask the privileged positions of white Western feminists, then *Cyberfeminism in Northern Lights* brings yet another challenge to the table. We argue that there is a need to distinguish more clearly between the different kinds of feminisms of the "West" in ways that do not settle for a simplified division between, for example, "North American" and "European" (cyber)feminism. If cyberfeminist collaborations, such as "Women Working on the Net", make clear that geographical place indeed makes a difference, they still tend to differentiate merely between North and South, conflating northern localities such as the Nordic countries and North America. In short, there is not only a need for more empirically grounded work, but notably work that makes explicit its own cultural contexts, premises, and promises. As will become clear throughout this introduction, the history of gender relations, notions of gender equality, and technological development in the Nordic countries are quite unique and cannot be confused with, for example, their North American equivalents.

Historical and linguistic contiguities in the Nordic countries

Prior to the existence of nation states as we know them, most of what today constitutes the Nordic countries showed considerable cultural and linguistic affinity. Frontiers have been moved and included different land areas at different times, meaning that the Nordic countries have sometimes also shared nationalities. Founded by exiles from Norway, Iceland for a long time belonged to Norway and later to Denmark. Norway, as well as parts of Sweden, has at times been ruled by Denmark. Finland was for several hundred years (until 1809) part of Sweden, and between 1809 and 1917, Finland belonged to the Russian empire. The shared history of the Scandinavian countries is also manifested in the unions. The Kalmar union united Denmark, Norway and Sweden from the end of the fourteenth century until 1523. It was followed by a Danish-Norwegian union, which lasted until Sweden gained control over Norway in 1814 and formed a Swedish-Norwegian union. Norway finally gained independence in 1905.

The Nordic countries also share a linguistic kinship, originating in Old Norse. Together with Faroese, Danish, Norwegian, Icelandic and Swedish constitute the branch of North-Germanic languages. Geographically close, Norwegian, Danish and Swedish developed in similar ways, and still have enough common traits to allow citizens of the three countries to speak their own respective mother tongues and still understand each other, albeit sometimes with

difficulties depending on the speaker's local accent. Finland and Iceland, however, diverge from this linguistic community. Finnish does not belong to the Indo-European family of languages at all, but to Finno-Ugric. However, Swedish has remained an official language (since Finland belonged to Sweden) spoken by approximately 5 percent, and Finnish children are taught it in school. Being an island, Iceland was for a long time quite isolated from the rest of the world. Its citizens have also been careful to protect the Icelandic language against foreign influences, which means that it has retained many elements from Old Norse. A similar ambition to guard against the influence of other countries and languages can be found in Norway – although not as strongly as in Iceland.[10] Recently, both Iceland and Norway have striven to translate technological terms into their own languages, which can be seen in the Icelandic word for computer "tölva" being put together from the Icelandic words "tala" (number) and "völva" (prophetess), and in the Norwegian direct translation of the Latin word "television" into "fjernsyn" (on the other hand, the Norwegian word for computer is, actually, "computer").

The shared history, the linguistic connections, and the similar experiences among the Nordic countries have given rise to a shared frame of reference in certain respects, resulting in similar ideas and opinions. The five Nordic countries all belong to the secular protestant Northern Europe. Together with Germany, Switzerland, and the Netherlands, they all score high on secular rational values and self-expression values.[11] In the Nordic countries, religion is of relatively low importance in society. An emphasis on individualism, subjective wellbeing, and self-expression – although with support from the government – tends to overshadow the importance of, for example, traditional family values. Similarities are visible in many more domains of the Nordic

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[10] As Scott Sorensen notes in her concluding essay, the reason may partly be found in historical power relations between above all Iceland and Norway on the one side, and Denmark on the other, where Norway and Iceland both have a history of belonging to Denmark. One has therefore sensed a need to draw boundaries against the former ruler by opting out Danish as the second language. In a similar manner, there still exist class tensions in Finland between the Finns and the Finland-Swedes whose ancestors were sent out to administer and govern the Finnish lands during the years of Swedish reign. This shows that the relations between the Nordic countries include both closeness and distance. Or, perhaps, the closeness in terms of geography and culture has created a need to mark a distance against the neighbors.

[11] See, for example, The Inglehart Value Map, part of The World Values Survey – a major comparative study of people's values and belief systems covering everything from religion to politics to economic and social life. The study has been carried out since the 1970's and includes 80 countries with up to 2000 respondents in each country. See: <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/> (September 10, 2006).

cultures, but in the following section we will concentrate on two aspects of specific interest for the book: gender equality, and the early adoption and diffusion of information technology.

Gender equality and state feminism

There is a widespread belief that equality is well ahead in the Nordic countries, which certainly holds some truth. Without doubt, speaking from a Nordic point of view, women, as well as other marginalized or disadvantaged groups in society hold a comparatively privileged position[12].

In terms of gender equality, all Nordic countries have a tradition of working to improve women's rights. Finland was the first European country to implement women's suffrage in 1906 (at the time a part of Russia), as well as electing female members of the parliament. The other Nordic countries soon followed suit: Norway in 1913, Denmark (including Iceland) in 1915, and finally Sweden in 1921. In 1980, Iceland was the first country to democratically elect a female president – Vigdís Finnbogadóttir – and the Icelandic Kvennalistinn was the first feminist party to gain seats in a national parliament. Sweden has the highest share in the world of female members of parliament. Norway is the country that for ten years altogether was governed by female prime minister, Gro Harlem Brundtland (first elected in 1981), and Finland elected its first female president, Tarja Halonen, in 2000.

The feminist struggles of our mothers and grandmothers have in many respects paid off, one visible result being the Nordic tradition of state feminism. State feminism means – as the name itself gives away – that work with gender equality has come to be institutionalized through laws and regulations by the state. Put simply, state feminism is a kind of feminism that has made its way into the socio-political system and that works to change society from within.

There are many visible results of state feminism. Two central examples are paid parental leave and the childcare system, both of which have had important effects on women's access to the labor market in the Nordic countries[13]. Starting

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[12] It is not always obvious what is meant by the concept gender equality. Here, it is understood along the lines of the Swedish government policy, which states that "Women and men shall have equal power to shape society and their own lives. A prerequisite to accomplish this is that women and men enjoy the same opportunities, rights and obligations in all spheres of life."
<http://www.sweden.gov.se/sb/d/4096;jsessionid=abaKafs62Wkd>
(September 22, 2006).

[13] In the work to improve women's situations in the Nordic countries, emphasis has been put on women's equal rights to paid work outside the homes, because being allowed to

around 1900, the aim of the first Nordic laws regarding parental leave was to combat infant mortality and protect the health of children and mothers. These laws simply prevented employers from allowing women to work during the first weeks after childbirth. No compensation for the loss of income was given, meaning that the law struck very hard on the households with the smallest incomes. Since then, parental leave has rather worked to improve women's opportunities for paid work outside the home (Valdimarsdóttir, 2006).

The aim of parental leave is twofold: first, it aims to safeguard parents' security of employment. Throughout history and around the world, women have frequently been fired because of getting pregnant, going on maternity leave, or staying at home to care for sick children. Sweden was the first of the Nordic countries to legislate against such termination in 1939. It took some time for the others, but by 1989, all Nordic countries had followed Sweden's example (Valdimarsdóttir, 2006). Secondly, paid parental leave compensates for loss of income. The duration of leave, as well as the level of compensation, varies between the countries. In Iceland, parents have the right to compensation for a total of nine months (i.e. 39 weeks) of parental leave. Finland's current law allows for a total of 44 weeks. In Denmark, as in Norway, compensation can be obtained for a total of 52 weeks. Finally, Sweden tops the list with compensation being paid for 480 days, or 68.5 weeks. In some of the Nordic countries, it is also possible to choose partial compensation and thus extend the time of leave, or to combine the parental leave with part time work (Valdimarsdóttir, 2006)[14].

Other countries may have similar, or other, laws for parental leave that safeguard mothers' security of employment as well as their economic situation during the years of child raising. What distinguishes the Nordic countries is perhaps the emphasis put on paternal leave. According to Valdimarsdóttir (2006), paternal leave was implemented for two reasons: first to make way for men into the home so that they can be more involved in the upbringing of the children. Secondly, it is also used as a means to create a more equal labor market. If fathers participate in childcare, it makes it easier for women to re-enter the labor market after childbirth. Furthermore, if men and women share the time of leave equally, the labor market will be more equal in terms of opportunities.

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have an income of their own and not being economically dependent on their husbands was believed to give women more liberty (Hirdman, 2001:166ff).

[14] The amount paid in the Nordic countries ranges between 70 and 100 percent of the pre-childbirth wage. Converted into time with full compensation, the countries offer between approximately 22 and 42 weeks' wage, with Denmark at the lowest and Norway and Sweden at the highest level.

Sweden was the first country in the world to grant fathers the right to parental leave in 1974. In 1990, all Nordic countries had passed legislation allowing parental leave to be shared between the parents. However, there are different rules and limitations. In Denmark, all 52 weeks can be divided freely between the parents. Of the 44 weeks allowed in Finland, four are earmarked for the father and 12 for the mother. In Sweden, parents can divide the 480 days freely between them, except for 60 days that are earmarked for each parent, and thus non-transferable. Iceland has intervened the most by dividing a nine months leave so that the mother and father are entitled to three months each that cannot be transferred. The remaining three months can be freely divided between the parents (Valdimarsdóttir, 2006).

Opponents of government regulation of the division of parental leave argue that it is the right of each couple to decide for themselves how to handle their childcare. On the other hand, the support given by laws and regulations is sometimes needed for women and men to defy traditions and unwilling employers. It is needed to demand equal rights to engage in paid work, as well as to participate in the upbringing of the children. As a matter of fact, the percentage of men claiming their right to paternity leave did not really increase until the state regulated the distribution of parental leave, and it is higher in the countries in which the state has intervened more. In Iceland, for example, as many as 87 percent of all fathers go on paternal leave (Valdimarsdóttir, 2006). However, even if fathers choose to claim their right to paternal leave, most of the time it is still being used by the mothers. Despite the fact that the first law on shared parental leave was written in Sweden 30 years ago, Swedish women still continue to use 83.4 percent of the total paid leave time (Valdimarsdóttir, 2006).

Another political initiative that has strongly augmented Nordic women's labor market opportunities was the implementation of the childcare system during the 1960s, a system that was greatly expanded in the 1970s and 1980s. The childcare system is well developed and strongly subsidized in the Nordic countries. Consequently, there is also a high percentage of children in childcare: between 73 percent (Finland) and 97 percent (Sweden) of all 5 year olds. The objective of this development was to facilitate women's continuing their employment and careers, which they do, especially compared to women in other countries (Bergqvist, 2002). However, it is important to note that the development of childcare also had a class dimension. The childcare system was created to allow also for women working in low-income professions to continue to work outside their homes.

State feminism has resulted in significant improvements in gender equality. Gender equality is steadily on the political agenda, and openly arguing against it would probably damage the image of the speaker, as well as the organization s/he represents. For example in Sweden, feminism has even come to carry

enough positive connotations to be used in the most shifting contexts – from glossy women's magazines to political parties, with a striking example in the previous male prime minister's claim of being a feminist (Gemzöe, 2002). Hence there is a clear connection between state feminism and the political agenda (cf. Scott Sorensen's closing essay). As a consequence, (state) feminism simultaneously carries the risk of being ideologically drained. As the *word* feminism becomes inflated, so does its meaning. State feminism may also collide with more radical feminisms working on the margins (or on the outside) of the political system.

People of the Nordic countries have often embraced the ideals of gender equality. It is probably safe to say that Nordic people in general are proud of living in welfare states that grant people from different backgrounds and with different means similar opportunities for education, health care and other public services. It has even become an intimate part of a Nordic self-image of sorts. However, feminist scholars have pointed out that this self-image may largely be a myth, which stands in the way for work with injustices that may not be immediately visible (Knudsen & Meyer Some 2002, Holli, Magnusson & Rönnblom 2005). Norway and Sweden may have the largest share of women holding seats in parliament, as well as of men taking part in household work and childcare, but equality is a tricky question. Despite laws and regulations for equal pay, the difference between men's and women's wages in the Nordic countries ranges between 12.2 and 29.3 percent. This is more than in, for example, Italy or Portugal, where the difference between men's and women's wages is merely 4.8 and 9.7 percent respectively (Mósesdóttir, 2005). This fact can be explained by more women in these countries being occupied in unpaid work at home, caring for their families. In the Nordic countries, the caring is still performed mostly by women, but as paid work outside the home. However, these professions are mostly low-paid, and thus the women who enter the labor market in, for example, Italy and Portugal have comparatively better wages than their sisters in the Nordic countries (ibid.). Furthermore, even though the Nordic countries have a high representation of women in parliament, these women work above all with so-called women's questions, such as care, education, social politics and equality, whereas men occupy the most prestigious positions. Moreover, there are other influential arenas in which women are severely under-represented, for example the economic spheres (Gemzöe, 2002), whereas other countries, such as France, have considerably more female business executives.

Up to this point, we have primarily focused on inequalities that can be seen at a manifest level. However, inequalities do not always, or even often, show; rather they are to be found in deeper structures much harder to get at. Even in what on the surface may seem as gender equality paradise on earth, there are surprisingly tenacious structures guiding male and female behavior. It seems as

if some dimensions of quite traditional masculinity and femininity can be abandoned, whereas others stubbornly appear to resist change (cf. Sveningsson Elm, this volume).

The struggle is far from over. Despite the apparent gender equality, tenacious structures that uphold the power gap between men and women still persist. Sometimes it even seems as if things are actually moving backwards. The editors Gunilla Edemo and Ulrika Westerlund (2004) of *Femkamp* (wittingly alluding to the Swedish words for feminism and struggle, as well as being the word for pentathlon), a book on Nordic feminism, ponder questions such as: why does the big dairy company Arla Foods have an advertisement with naked girls that is only being showed in Denmark? Why did it take almost ten years of increasing trafficking and prostitution in Finland before Finnish politicians reacted? Why is it that beauty pageants are so important in Iceland? How come women in such a rich country as Norway earn the least money in relation to men of all the Nordic countries? Why is feminism such an infected issue in Denmark? And why do Swedish feminists have such a hard time getting along? This is not the place to address these questions, but it might still be valuable to use them as illustrations of problems lurking beneath the surface of countries that routinely are claimed to be the most advanced in terms of gender equality.

The Nordic countries' early adoption and diffusion of information technology

Another aspect that unites the Nordic countries is the belief in being well ahead in terms of technological development. Similar to the question of gender equality, this picture has some accuracy. All Nordic countries were early adopters of information technology, understood as personal computers, the Internet and mobile technology. Today, when these technologies have spread to more or less all parts of the world, the Nordic countries still have a more widespread distribution among the citizens than most other countries.

According to statistics from the Nordic Council of Ministers (Nordic Information Society Statistics, 2005), between 64 percent (Finland) and 89 percent (Iceland) of all Nordic households have at least one computer at home. Citizens of the Nordic countries also rate quite high in terms of computer use[15] – between 78 percent (Finland) and 89 percent (Iceland). This can be compared to the average of the 25 EU countries with merely 61 percent (Eurostat, 2006).

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[15] Here defined as percentage of individuals who used a computer during the last year.

The number of households with Internet access is quite high as well, ranging between 54 percent (Finland) and 84 percent (Iceland). But it is not necessary to have a wired computer at home to get Internet access. According to a survey of the share of individuals who had accessed the Internet during the last 3 months, the Nordic countries ranged between 73 percent (Finland) and 81 percent (Sweden). In a comparison of all 25 EU countries, the Nordic countries filled the 5 first places, where between 63 percent (Finland) and 77 percent (Iceland) of the individuals claimed to be regular users of the Internet. In an international comparison of the use of broadband in the home of EU countries, Iceland ranks as number one with 45 percent of all households, Denmark as number two with 36 percent, Norway as number four with 30 percent and Finland as number five with 21 percent (*Nordic Information Society Statistics* 2005).[16]

When it comes to mobile technology, Finland very early had a widespread diffusion of mobile phones: already in 1997, they had 40 subscriptions per 100 inhabitants. From 2000 and onwards, the other Nordic countries surpassed Finland. In Norway and Sweden, the number of mobile phone subscriptions in 2004 exceeded 100 per 100 inhabitants, and all the other Nordic countries have above 95 subscriptions per 100 inhabitants. As a comparison, the corresponding number for the OECD average was 64 subscriptions per 100 inhabitants (*Nordic Information Society Statistics*, 2005).[17]

The early adoption and widespread diffusion of information technology in the Nordic countries may have several possible reasons. First, the Nordic countries have a history of strong interest in technology. These are countries with a high level of education as well as a pronounced engineering culture. Technological knowledge is highly valued, and it is not uncommon for corporate managers to have a background in engineering rather than in business. There is a well-developed information technology industry, with for instance Ericsson in Sweden and Nokia in Finland. The ICT companies' share of the total number of enterprises may not seem very high – between 3 percent (Iceland) and 6 percent (Sweden). Most of the enterprises are small with less than 10 employees, and the industry employs between 6 and 9 percent of the total number of employees in the private sector. However, this is a lot in comparison with other countries. An OECD estimate of the employment rate in 2001 placed four of the Nordic countries among the 9 highest ranked countries (*Nordic Information Society Statistics*, 2005)[18].

Secondly, the Nordic countries appear to have a strong belief in technological development and tend to be more optimistic than pessimistic

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[16] No figures were available for Sweden.
[17] However, the OECD average refers to 2003.
[18] Iceland was not included in this estimate.

concerning technology (Ess, 2005: 112). Even if the heated rhetoric surrounding computer technologies of the mid-90s fluctuated between promises and threats, the discourses in the Nordic countries were largely centered on the potential positive effects of the use of new communication technologies (and, consequently, also on the negative effects resulting from "non-use"). For example, in Sweden, the general opinion among politicians and business executives alike can be summarized by the oft-cited phrase "We have to jump on the train before it's too late" – a perspective which was also mirrored by the media.[19]

Thirdly, in the 1990s, the Nordic governments made several egalitarian initiatives to make computer technologies available to as many citizens as possible. This was done in the shape of major investments in computers for public libraries, schools, and even nursery schools. Employers sent their employees to computer training courses, and, in Sweden, the government offered tax incentives to make it easier for citizens and businesses to purchase or lease computers for home use (also known as Government Assisted PC Programs – GAPPs). It was seen as important that all citizens were given the opportunity to acquire computer skills and access the Internet.[20]

The matter of gender in a Nordic context is a complex issue full of contradictions, which gets even more complicated when paired up with technological development, computer industries and computer use. As this introduction shows, the Nordic countries share several traits that make them interesting for studies of gender and computer technologies. On one hand, these are the countries often used as prime examples of places where the work with gender equality is a success story. On the other hand, the very same places have been the home of early adoption and wide distribution of information technology, which allow for empirically grounded studies in a field that has, in a sense, matured and settled.

The intersection of gender and computer technologies has been the subject of research before. Researchers of multiple backgrounds, methods, and theoretical frameworks have investigated how gender influences, and is influenced by, the production and consumption of digital media. The cyberfeminist movement has explored how computer technologies can be used

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[19] This optimism may sometimes lead to a certain blindness regarding the drawbacks that the technology really implied. For example, as Rafnsdóttir and Sigurvinsdóttir (this volume) write, information technology has sometimes changed working conditions for the worse.

[20] However, in the rear-view mirror, critical voices have claimed that the increase in number of users was not a result of the subsidies, but that the proportion of computer users of other countries increased just as much as in Sweden (Karlberg, 2003).

as tools of empowerment for women and other people on the cultural margins. In this respect, *Cyberfeminism in Northern Lights* is not unusual. But instead of aligning itself with the culturally unmarked version of cyberfeminism, the explicit project of this book is to penetrate the surface of Nordic cultures of gender and computing. Against the backdrop of their historical, social and cultural particularities, *Cyberfeminism in Northern Lights* sets out to investigate how gender is done and undone in the interstices of gender, technology, and culture. No matter how advanced the Nordic countries might be in terms of technological development and gender equality, knowledge about how technology and gender are related and mapped onto each other in a Nordic context is still limited.

About the book

The book is organized according to at least two principles of "Nordicness". First, we could hardly claim a Nordic perspective without covering all five Nordic countries. The book therefore gathers a group of researchers who all come from the Nordic countries: Charlotte Kroløkke and Anne Scott Sørensen from Denmark; Susanna Paasonen from Finland; Guðbjörg Linda Rafnsdóttir and Lára Run Sigurvinsdóttir from Iceland; Janne Bromseth and Hilde Corneliussen from Norway, and finally, Bodil Axelsson, AnnBritt Enochsson, Fatima Jonsson, Jenny Sundén, Malin Sveningsson Elm and Cecilia Åsberg from Sweden. Secondly, the chapters all center on research carried out in the Nordic countries, using culturally specific examples. The chapters are organized around three themes: "Sexualities, Bodies, and Desire", "Gender Identities, Performance, and Presentations of Self", and "Gendered Computing and Computer Use". The book ends with an essay written by Anne Scott Sørensen.

The first part, "Sexualities, Bodies, and Desire" opens with the chapter "On Cyberfeminism Intersectionality" by Jenny Sundén. This chapter addresses the relative absence of technology in what she calls the "trans-Swedish" intersectionality debate ("intersectionality" being the systematic study of the ways in which multiple differences, such as gender, sexuality, race, and class, intersect with and co-constitute each other), arguing for an inclusion of *technology* as one important principal of differentiation. Technology is perhaps not a "traditional" socio-cultural category, but a techno-logic that is becoming all the more entwined with our bodies and experiences. Departing from examples of multiple-sexed Swedish performance robots, and one Miami-based female birth machine, Sundén works through questions such as: how is techno-corporeality made and marked by bodily differences? Which differences make a difference (so to speak)? Do some differences make more of a difference than others in the (inter)face of the machine? Cyberfeminism and intersectionality