

## **Chapter 10 - Conclusion**

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This study has provided a "snapshot" of a unique women's organization, DigitalEve, at a particular moment in its development, focusing closely on a small population of the women who compose its membership and leadership. Through in-depth qualitative interviews which built on the themes raised in the literature, I have explored some of the links between these women's experiences and perspectives as IT users and workers, in order to argue that the structure and mandate of DigitalEve reflects, in part, the practices, needs, and concerns of this IT use and work. While drawing attention to the foundational themes in the literature and the similarities between the subjects, I have argued against the development of a typology of IT users, women workers, or women's organizations. Rather, I have suggested that DigitalEve is a dynamic entity which reflects the kinds of ideological and material tensions and contradictions which the members experience.

The development of DigitalEve, and the ongoing challenges which it experiences, parallels women's recent emergence into and current positioning in the IT field. As more women move into IT work from various points of entry, they encounter structural relations of power and privilege which shape their work experiences. Webgrlrs began as women who were semiprofessional and professional IT workers began: a small, isolated population which employed informal networks of support to survive. The organization experienced an existential and financial crisis as it became increasingly formalized and it became evident that the values and structure needed to be consciously developed. Many women IT workers were both excited and worried by the possibilities of new kinds of

work; they realized that there were some inherent difficulties for them in their field, despite the rewards and promises of a "friction free economy" where structural markers such as gender did not matter. The looming economic recession in many IT sectors combined with actual job losses and company bankruptcies meant that workers had to become more aggressive in ensuring good working conditions for themselves. They had to maintain their skills, find a supportive community, gain access to resources and information, and develop a personal and professional network. All this had to be done in a labour market and workplace culture which was stratified by gender, race, age, immigration status, ability, and other social markers.

DigitalEve sought to fill that niche for women IT workers. By 2000, there were enough women in positions of seniority and influence in various IT occupations to lend the organization legitimacy. Leaders drew on their own base of knowledge about the industry and their perceived needs for women IT workers. Situated as they were within semiprofessional and professional IT positions, their "job class" consciousness informed their values, desired organizational structure, and proposed strategies.

They produced a mandate and structure which was at times contradictory. While they were a women's organization, they shied away from discussions of feminism or systemic gender inequities. Their formal structure was clearly centralized and hierarchical, but produced autonomy and self-management at the local level. Currently an integral part of the organization's mandate is accessibility for all women; however it has begun to charge more money for its services. DigitalEve International is officially a global organization, but has yet to address some of the most pressing issues about

women's technologically facilitated work in regions beside the most affluent ones. It has yet to critically interrogate many of the structural relations of power and privilege which continue to govern the labour market, but many feel that this lack of critique is precisely what lends the organization its appeal. It has also yet to incorporate technology workers who are not professional or semi-professional, such as call centre workers, which may reflect a particular class bias, a regional bias, a lack of interest, a failure to regard such workers as part of the IT workforce, a perceived absence of shared concerns, or simply an indication of the limitations of the organization.

The interview population has, however, indicated the versatility of the current objects and practices of IT, and their adaptability to the needs of various women workers. In practice, most of the respondents said that they had derived some personal and/or professional benefit from DigitalEve. The organization's broad appeal reflects many of the diverse types of IT work which women perform, and provides both role models and concrete instruction for the ongoing development of these varied occupations. In this it is both descriptive and prescriptive of the work that women do.

DigitalEve has also raised some areas for future research in the area of women's organizing, most notably the arena of virtual organizing. First, can women organize productively around gendered issues in a forum which prevents policing of gender boundaries, and/or which promotes itself as free from the messy concerns of lived gender (or, for that matter, race/ethnicity, age, sexuality, etc.)? How does the avowed formal equality and erasure of structural relations of power and privilege obscure these as lived relations, and how does the virtual "equality" play out in actual online interaction? An

advantage of DigitalEve's virtual structure is that the informal policing of others which may occur in women's organizations (as I discussed in Chapter Four and Eight) may be more difficult. Visible markers of identity are largely eliminated, and so in a sense, the medium contains only the message with its coating of social relations stripped away. And yet it is clear from both casual observation of online interaction, as well as research into online discourse, that while visible markers of identity may be significant, they are not the only factors affecting online power and privilege. Virtual interaction remains filtered through particular channels. Thus, more research is required into the ways in which virtual organization can deal productively with issues of gender and other structural social relations.

Second, how does the image of "access for all" obscure the issue of material access to skills and technological equipment? Virtual organization may be a powerful tool for women, but if women cannot access the relatively expensive objects nor the knowledge to use them, then they are effectively prevented from lending their voices to online discourse. How can we improve women's access, so that they can more effectively participate? How can we develop virtual organizations and technologies which enable, rather than disable? DigitalEve's mandate is one of accessibility, but the organization itself, in its virtuality, prevents many women from taking part in it. However it could be argued that since DigitalEve serves IT workers, who would already have access to the technology, this is not necessarily a fair critique. DigitalEve does not pretend to serve all women, but rather a specific group of women who are already situated as technology users. Thus, should the organization direct its resources towards

getting more women involved, or towards improving the lot of women who are already involved? This is a contradiction with which the organization continues to struggle.

Third, is an online forum a democratic space for discourse? Should that be a goal? Does dividing discussions by interest and affinity result in a more productive experience for members, or does it shut down discussion that is deemed unrelated? For example, as we saw in previous chapters, the organization enforces its power to limit discussion to "on-topic" material; just what gets to count as "on-topic" is a subject of debate. The absence of certain discussions may be as relevant as the presence of others. Does discursive "delegation" result in a more orderly experience at the cost of patrolling debate boundaries?

Fourth, and perhaps most significantly, does online interaction ultimately result in organizational action? Given the evidence of DigitalEve, I suggest that it certainly can. DigitalEve uses its virtual structure to produce both informal networks of skill and resource sharing (as well as social interaction), and formal programmes of training, outreach, education, and mentorship for women. For these projects, a virtual structure has proven to be invaluable, as the organization is able to contact and allow networking between far more women than would otherwise have been possible. IT workers who may be isolated, such as home workers, especially benefit from the social and professional resources offered. Virtual interaction may be performed in a "disjunctive" time frame, unlike in-person meetings or phone calls; a woman juggling paid and unpaid labour responsibilities can participate in the organization in a fashion and at a time which is convenient for her. Virtual interaction also facilitates engagement between people who

may be separated from one another geographically (or socially). There are few other women's organizations with the scale of DigitalEve, because most organizations simply do not have the reach which a primarily virtual structure can facilitate. However, this crossover from the virtual to the "real" world must be consistently monitored to ensure that it continues to exist and develop. The ongoing hostility of many sectors of the IT industry to formal unionization may mean that such a virtual organization provides some benefits to women IT workers, but it may come at a cost of particular political gains if virtual networking is viewed as sufficient to address structural inequalities.

The success of DigitalEve in the coming years will no doubt be tied to the development of the IT field, and as women continue to grow as an online population as well as part of the IT workforce, new opportunities and challenges for activists will emerge. There is a strong need for literature which adequately reflects lived and online contradictions (if, indeed, the two can be thought to be separate), which accounts for women's current virtual organization, and which proposes new ways to use an expanding medium.