

# CLAIMING FEMINIST SPACE IN KOREAN CYBERTERRITORY

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## Abstract

This paper analyses two Korean feminist webzines. We use the two cases to investigate the conditions under which feminist online media can survive, express alternative and feminist voices, and build a feminist community. The research is based on interviews with people involved in the zines' production, and on qualitative and quantitative analyses of the zines' contents, with particular attention to spaces provided for audience interactions. We conclude that *Dalara* and *Unninet* play a significant role in enlarging the meaningful space for women in virtual world and helping to build a women's network that is both technologically sophisticated and politicized but also comfortable and familiar. Readers apparently feel bound to one another, with mutual responsibilities and reciprocal duties.

But *Dalara* and *Unninet* did not escape the constraints imposed on traditional women's alternative media. Time, energy, and money – always limited resources – remain intractable issues even for online communities.

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## Introduction

Women have long tried to use emerging forms of media to communicate and forge ties with like-minded women, to work out new definitions and self-definitions, and form a cohesive community. The Internet is an increasingly important medium for creating and supporting a feminist public sphere, or, more properly, multiple public counter-spheres. Yet, feminists' cyberspace work is still understudied, particularly regarding activity generated outside the US and/or not in English. This paper focuses on Korean feminist webzines as venues for social-political advocacy and activity and, at the same time, as mechanisms for nurturing a sense of solidarity and sisterhood among feminists. Since Korean sites speak to the potential generally for sustaining distinct cyber-cultures, they provide the platform by which to understand the Internet's potential for feminists, particularly in places without a long history of feminist media. Duncombe (1997: 6) defines zines, like the printed fanzines that preceded them, as "non-commercial, non-professional, small circulation magazines" which their creators produce and self-distribute, in this case, through the Internet. Following Duncombe's distinction, feminist zines are political, as opposed to "perzines" (i.e. highly personal expression of an individual), although feminist zines, including the two analyzed here, typically incorporate a personal dimension. Famously understanding that "the personal is the political," feminists have created media forms that tie personal experiences to structural principles, illustrating how personal problems transcend the individual. Just as Internet interactivity blurs the distinction between producers and audiences (Atton 2002; Couldry 2003; Im 1999; Park 2001), zines like these span the divide between information-oriented sites and bulletin board systems or chatrooms. With the growing diffusion and popularity of the Internet in Korea since the mid-1990s (Kang 2000, 7), zines have rapidly become vigorous sites for alternative advocacy. As feminist scholars suggest (see Rodriguez 2001), we can and should assess feminist webzines in terms of how well they help build and sustain alternative or counter-public spheres.

The two zines analyzed here are *Dalara Talsepo*, translated here as Moon World and Cells of Daughters (<http://Dalara.jinbo.net>), and *Unninet*, translated as Sisters' Village and Network (<http://www.Unninet.co.kr>).<sup>1</sup> Inaugurated in 1998, *Dalara Talsepo* was the first feminist webzine produced in Korea. *Unninet* has developed different textual and organisational structures since its inception in 2000; this plasticity allowed it to ride out several crises. Both were established by young feminist groups that, since the mid-90s, have become increasingly critical of men's domination (and even a kind of masculinist culture) in social movements. Until then feminism was subsumed within political movements (such as the labour movement or movements for reunification that largely privileged the problems of class conflict or democratisation over those of women; but now feminists are determined to restructure relationships with other movements as "together yet separate" (Kim 2002, 33). This new wave of feminism wants to balance solidarity with and autonomy from those once exclusively privileged movements. Having a more diverse agenda, feminists focus on cultural issues and cultural explanations for gender politics and raise issues of sexuality and identity politics in ordinary life (Kim 2002). The undergraduate students who led this new wave were particularly committed to exposing the gender inequalities and patriarchal impulses of both

class-based movements and student movements. Most of these young feminists, including members of the collectives producing these two webzines, had been involved in student movements. These young feminists had no professional journalism experience or training. But they wanted to enact feminist principles, including in content, especially with articles focusing on the sexual politics of women's daily lives, as *Unninet* made clear in an article "Reflection on the Debates over Young Feminists" (#40) but also in organisation, based on horizontal alliances, rather than hierarchical structures.

The analysis is based on multiple and extensive interviews with two former editors of *Dalara* (using their online names "Strawberry" and "Chacha") and the former chief executive for *Unninet* ("Zoe"), a founding and still active member; quantitative and qualitative analyses of the content; and historical documents and news coverage of these two sites. Interviews took place (in person and through email and instant messaging) between November 2004 and February 2005.<sup>2</sup> The contents of each webzine and the audience feedback were explored to see which subjects were highlighted and how the zines' creators interpreted Korean womanhood and interacted with audiences. This triangulation enables analysis of each webzines' organisation, practices and social relations. The comparison of the two offers the basis for understanding both the conditions under which feminist media can survive and even expand their influence, and the Internet's potential for articulating otherwise silenced voices, reinforcing women's solidarity, and sustaining feminist activism.

## Feminist Alternative Media

The late 1990s saw rapid growth in feminist print media in Korea, such as *IF*, established by and for feminist scholars and professionals, and *Women's News*, which is widely regarded as the leading alternative voice for Korean women. Nonetheless, Korean (and most non-Western) women's alternative media and their importance to the women's movement have attracted little study.<sup>3</sup> The mid-1990s emergence of cyberspace inspired some interest in alternative media in general (see Kim 2002; Kang 2000; Park 2001). Two MA theses addressed a particular aspect of the same Korean webzines we study. Chae (2001) concluded that *Dalara Talsepo* only partly rejected patriarchal and macho values, and failed to prevent online sexual harassment. Song (2002) found that self-confessional writing on *Unninet* helps women recover from trauma. In Korea, it is worth noting, women active in alternative media production have shared a commitment to undoing patriarchy. Therefore, Korean women's alternative media can be defined as feminist media: They are produced specifically to articulate alternative conceptions of women's lives and to sustain and promote women's political, social and cultural goals.

Because various women's movements have been marginalised, if not excluded by mainstream media, women have experimented with their own media to articulate otherwise unspoken stories and to build solidarity among women (Chambers, Steiner & Fleming 2004; Steiner 2005). Feminist media often, although not always, commit themselves to non-hierarchical and democratic organisation. They have tried to open spaces to the audience as well as to promote the readers to join in their production, regardless of their levels of training or professional experiences in mainstream media (Mitchell 2000; Steiner 1992). Feminist media are typically

small-scale, non-profit, and highly undercapitalised. Especially given severe economic constraints, such experiments often survive only for short periods.

Some criticisms of alternative media – for example, its marginal position in the market and its failure to reach larger audiences – certainly also apply to feminist media. For example, critics bemoan alternative organisations' amateurish writing, lack of long-range business strategies and financial planning, and inefficiency caused by collective and horizontal organisation (cited in Atton 1999; Hamilton 2000). Feminist newspapers and magazines have been criticised for their dense writing and inattention to aesthetics and design, for their refusal to supply "mental chocolate" (Winship 1987). Conversely, Farrell's (1998) thoughtful analysis of *Ms.*, the long-running "mouthpiece" of popular feminism in the US, underscored the tensions in the complex relationship between feminist media and market forces. Farrell saw *Ms.* as a corrupt hybrid, "always firmly enmeshed in a commercial mass media matrix" (p. 9).

The critical importance of alternative media in sustaining alternative public spheres based on alternative values (Atton 1999, 2002; Couldry 2003; Downing, 2003; Downing, Ford, Gil, & Stein, 2001; Hamilton 2000; Rodriguez 2001) helps explain feminists' concern to develop their own media outlets. Notably, these researchers argue that alternative media should be understood not through their static products (and certainly not in terms of adherence to mainstream practices) but in terms of their distinctive practices, organisational cultures and social relations. Thus, definitions and assessments of feminist media, both historically and in their contemporary incarnations, should be grounded not in their profitability, audience size, or longevity, but whether they manage to operate according to the values and principles they articulate, and whether they help produce oppositional visions that empower women as individuals and, more importantly, as a productive community. Unprofitable and even short-lived feminist experiments, therefore, are not necessarily failures.

## The Potential of Feminist Internet Sites

"Virtually" anyone who can access the Internet can communicate with audiences across space, thereby allowing for diverse forms of communication that, in some instances, challenge the authority and dominance of mainstream media. Certainly feminist activists use the Internet to empower themselves and to communicate with converts as well as potential converts, since outsiders – surfers – are much more likely to find feminist sites than the traditional feminist forms. Compared to other media formats, the Internet allows for relatively low production and distribution costs, thereby helping activist web producers avoid control by market forces (Atton 2002; Curran 2003; Harcup 2003). The Internet evidently provides an efficient platform for oppositional groups to communicate with (or among) their audiences and to come together for political work, blurring the "entrenched division of labour between producers and audience" (Couldry 2003, 45). People who cannot come together in the same physical space – or even at the same time – can thus collaborate in global alliances and networking (Harcourt 2000).

Technological optimism may still be exaggerated, however. For alternative voices, the Internet has considerable barriers, all highly relevant to the zines considered here. Technical literacy and language itself are both under-appreciated

and unacknowledged barriers to “global” communication, so access remains a problem literally and figuratively. Other serious downsides include the sheer volume of utterances, a numbing quantity of content that may exceed and exhaust an audience’s energy and attention (Downing 2003); fragmentation among publics (Downey and Fenton 2003); balkanisation of personal interactions (Alstynne and Brynjolfsson 1996), and the ability of well-organised conservative groups to attack and overwhelm minority expression (Atton 2002). Research suggests that male dominance continues to plague cyberspace (Gurak 2001, Travers 2003), although women regard zines as a highly plastic forum for raising women’s issues (including sexuality) impossible to discuss elsewhere (Cresser, Gunn and Balme 2001). A larger problem is digital capitalism, privatisation, and the corporate targeting of women in particular as commercial market.<sup>4</sup> Although non-profit websites can survive, Internet sites for women, and especially teenaged girls, can be and increasingly are co-opted by corporate agendas. Shade (2004) shows how this happened to feminist online communities such as the Australia-based Geekgirl (described as the world’s first feminist zine and media portal about “women, technology and cyberlifestyles”); likewise Women.com emerged first in 1993 as Women’s WIRE (Worldwide Information Resources & Exchange) with the best of activist intentions but then merged with other corporate entities. So, cyberspace does not automatically liberate the dispossessed.

Young’s (2004) exploration of “continuity and discontinuity” between new contexts and old problems in feminism is highly relevant to women’s political cyberactivity. Having assumed neither a utopian nor a dystopian view of technology or cyberfeminism, we cannot assume that alternative Internet sites always carve out spaces for feminism and feminists or that women’s online activity constitutes agency. Rather, we must study when and under what conditions feminist media can support activist networks in telling counter-narratives and in contesting patriarchy and power structures.

## The Emergence of Feminist Webzines in Korea

Beginning in the mid-1990s, Korea experienced rapid Internet diffusion. According to 2004 statistics, 70.2% of Koreans now use the Internet; this figure quadrupled in five years (National Computerisation Agency [www.nca.or.kr](http://www.nca.or.kr)). Not surprisingly, men and women do not use it at equal rates or in precisely the same ways; women have lagged behind men by approximately ten percent (see Table 1), perhaps because of the lack of websites – whether progressive or market-oriented – for women. Moreover, while computer-mediated communication is now the primary means of communication for progressive movement groups, traditional male-oriented styles that dominate social movements in Korea generally (Moon 2002) have limited women’s political agency in cyberspace. “Chamsesang,”<sup>5</sup> the model bulletin board service of progressive Internet-based movements in Korea, carried no articles about women on its public forum until 1997. Between 1997 and 2003 only 13 articles out of 156 dealt with women; reflecting Korean activists’ tendency to privilege the labour movement as responsible for reform, over these years 76 articles dealt with labour (Kim 2003, 41).

Table 1: Percentage of Men and Women's Use of the Internet in Korea

	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
Male	3.5	3.7	10.6	17.2	21.6	45.1	63.2	66.2	71.7	74.4
Female	0.5	1.4	4.8	7.7	8.7	28.8	50	53.6	59.2	62

Source: National Computerization Agency ([www.nca.or.kr](http://www.nca.or.kr))

With the dramatic surge in Internet use starting in late 1999, the number of female users has grown rapidly, as has the number of commercial websites targeting Korean women (Yoo 2001). However, this refers to sites dedicated to fashion, beauty, food and child rearing, namely, the sphere(s) traditionally assigned to women; these sites address women as consumers (Kim & Joe 2000, 2001; Chae 2001). Notably, research in 2002 found that Korean women tend to use Internet for shopping/reservations and entertainment, recreation, chatting and socialising, and studying; men tend to use Internet for information (Korea Network Information Centre [www.nic.or.kr](http://www.nic.or.kr)). Such survey data, however, fail to acknowledge how these patterns are constructed and enforced. In any case, whether sites were meant to be progressive or commercial, Internet websites initially offered little space for feminism. Young feminist groups in particular therefore sought spaces where they could speak out and be heard. *Dalara* was a trigger, simultaneously providing and calling for spaces in which women, again, especially young women, could speak in their own voices.

### *Dalara Talsepo* (Moon World and Cells of Daughters)

*Dalara Talsepo* (Moon World and Cells of Daughters) was active 1998 to 2002. *Dalara* was produced monthly by a feminist collective that emerged out of the organised women's student movement in the mid-1990s that, as suggested above, critiqued the gender politics of the student movement of everyday practices. The volunteers in the webzine collective attended different universities, but came to know one another through various feminist political activities and underground media. They wanted to continue their feminist activity, that is, even while they were beginning careers or graduate school. Nine women and, for a while, one male feminist took initial responsibility for producing *Dalara*.

Consistent with findings by Curran (2003) and Harcup (2003), the low costs of entry and production were important advantages of the web. (Similarly, some feminists at Seoul National University started publishing a bimonthly zine *Jouissance* in 2002 but by the third issue switched to a web ([www.jouissance,cafe24.com](http://www.jouissance,cafe24.com)) format to save money.) *Dalara's* members initially planned a printed magazine but then realised this would cost eight times as much. One former editor said: "With the economic crisis in Korea in 1997-8, we couldn't tackle the cost of production. Given other changes during the preparation period, such as the departure of members, we decided to launch a webzine instead."

Web-hosting cost \$140 a year. Other expenses included buying small gifts (usually a coupon for a book) for people who agreed to be interviewed for a feature story, and expenses for reporting and meetings. To meet its financial needs, *Dalara* primarily depended on membership dues of \$10 a month. (This amount would not

be unusual in Korea, where activists often pay equivalent dues to non-governmental and social movement organisations.) Other occasional revenues included donations, payments from news media for articles, and lecture fees (typically, on topics such as women and cyberspace, or webzine production). After 1999 the collective had no physical office or newsroom (and no rent). Instead, members essentially operated in a virtual newsroom on their personal computers, their CUG (Closed User Group).<sup>6</sup> They met once a week in a public place, such as a café, to plan forthcoming issues and to critique previous issues. They also discussed various articles and other problems more or less continuously on the CUG. Thus, *Dalara's* small-scale organisation and minimal spending enabled it to survive for four years.

The *Dalara* collective was entirely self-managed. Members did most of the writing. They designed, uploaded and promoted each issue. They expected to be stymied by technical problems – given that typically women have less exposure and familiarity with technology than men (see Travers 2003) – but they managed to take on nearly all production activities. Strawberry and another member, who had studied web programming, normally took responsibility for the zine's feminist design. After learning web-design and HTML on their own, other members also played part on posting on the webzine. According to Strawberry some technological problems arose but the zine was not launched until everything was set. Nonetheless, she added, "everybody felt responsible for zine's production so determined to share the burden."

*Dalara* continuously experimented in terms of texts, design, and production practices. *Dalara* was well-known for giving each issue a unique design. According to former editors, members thought seriously about every layout in order to display the cover story, the issue's core story, in feminist ways.<sup>7</sup> Initially, one person with expertise in web-editing was responsible for the lay-out. Once trained, other members shared the responsibility. During its planning stage, the dummy edition of *Dalara* looked much like a print-based magazine; its application of Internet technology (interactivity) did not go beyond hyperlinks. Over time, however, *Dalara* introduced innovations exploiting the Internet. For example, for a story about the importance and lasting effects of being socially typecast, readers could click on options like Tarot Cards; each selection generated a different explanation. The collective also worked to enlarge spaces for audience participation. With its sixth issue, *Dalara* ran a bulletin board at the end of each cover story as a prominent site for audience responses. Strawberry said: "Sometimes, people post persuasive and terrific stories, expressing their own experiences. The collective wanted to accept and integrate them into the cover story."

Most of the distinctive characteristics of *Dalara's* organisation and practices explicitly derived from feminist principles. They sought to establish a non-hierarchical, participatory organisation based on democratic production processes. Strawberry said: "Everything was based on collective decision-making. Although an editor functionally existed, she only presided over meetings and coordinated matters such as interviews. This responsibility shifted annually, taking into consideration each member's ordinary life." The collective objected to and dropped honorifics as a way of opposing all hierarchies, including those based on age, gender, and military service. More importantly, all members used pen-names as a way "to express newly created identities in cyberspace and to experiment with a feminist writing

style,” as their book chapter explained (*Dalara Talsepo* 2001). They asserted that these writing styles indicated that they regarded readers as equals and in dialogical relationship with them. But they also recognised that these unconventional styles might exclude many male readers and even a few female readers (*Dalara Talsepo* 2001). Because members welcomed participation and material from readers, they granted access to anyone who wanted to meet with them (although, as one editor said, new people joining in their editorial meetings may have regarded their communication style as “strange”). Anyone could attend editorial meetings or use the mailing list. Meanwhile, *Dalara* discarded several traditional journalistic routines. Its virtual newsroom essentially nullified journalism’s temporal/spatial conventions. Having quickly abandoned the concept of deadlines, the collective decided to upload cover stories whenever they were completed.

Table 2: Subjects in *Dalara* and *Unninet* (in percent of all articles)

Content Category	<i>Dalara</i>	<i>Unninet</i> 2000-2001	<i>Unninet</i> 2002-2005
Body/Appearance/ Health	3.9	11.1	7.3
Cyberfeminism	9.2	3.7	6.7
Everyday life	39.9	29.6	20.7
Family/Marriage	6.6	6.8	7.3
Feminism theory	15.3	1.0	3.3
Feminist identity	15.1	3.1	6.1
Friendship	0	2.6	5.0
Hobby/Leisure	0	15.3	3.3
Housekeeping	3.0	0	3.9
Media/Culture	15.7	5.8	7.3
Mind/ Mental state	1.7	2.6	5.0
Money	0	2.6	0.5
Politics/ Policy /Law	41.7	7.4	7.9
Pregnancy/Abortion	3.0	8.9	0
Prostitution/Pornography	1.7	0.5	7.8
Sexual violence/Sexual harassment	5.7	3.7	7.9
Sexuality/Love	15.7	17.4	14.0
Education/Work Prospects	3.0	8.9	2.2
Women’s Labour	3.5	11.1	7.9
Women’s movement	9.6	7.4	15.7
Other	4.8	8.9	7.9
Total (articles)	N = 228	N = 189	N = 178

## Securing Women’s Space on the Internet

The title “*Dalara Talsepo*” hints at the collective’s intentions: “*Dalara* (Moon World)” signifies women’s world and “*Talsepo* (Cells of Daughters)” symbolises the horizontal relationship between mothers and daughters, as opposed to the hierarchical and patriarchal relationship that members assumed typifies father-son relationships. The goal was to build a strong foundation for an egalitarian community among women in both the real and virtual worlds, to create a feminist space on the Internet that would be comfortable and would sustain real world feminist activities. In order to knit together diverse strands of the women’s movement, it offered virtual space to nascent organisations, again joining new waves of the move-



ment grounded in the everyday lives of daughters. Its emphasis on first-person, “ordinary,” and dialogical modes of writing was intended to encourage informal, participatory chat.

Given their initial assumption regarding who enjoyed easy access to the Internet, *Dalara's* founders expected female university students and younger office workers to be their main audience. According to an audience survey carried out in 2000 (and published in issue no. 12, 2000) by the collective, undergraduates and workers 20-30 years old were indeed *Dalara's* main readers. But while women readers outnumbered men, many more men were readers than expected. The survey found that the majority of women found their way to the webzine on the recommendation of acquaintances or other feminist websites. In contrast, men arrived after using portal sites or because they had read articles by members published in other media.

*Dalara's* feminism clearly emerged in its choice of topics. As Table 2 shows, most content grew out of concerns that gender inequality is embedded in women's everyday lives.<sup>8</sup> For example, one article complained that women in Korea experience rampant sexism and discrimination at alumni meetings, otherwise regarded as important venues for building social networks. These efforts were also evident in consistent attention to contemporary popular culture: Reviews of romantic television dramas underscored how mainstream popular culture reproduces gender stereotypes. Meanwhile, slightly over 15% of *Dalara* was devoted to sophisticated feminist theory, and about the same for feminist identity; sometimes it offered academic papers or commentaries. As noted below, far more than *Unminet*, the *Dalara* collective intended to introduce and popularise feminist theory.

The collective's efforts to secure and expand women's place in cyberspace also entailed trying to make women feel at ease on its site and to feel comfortable communicating with one another. This became problematic after abolition of the controversial governmental system that had awarded extra points to military veterans in competitive examinations for government jobs; *Dalara's* coverage of this issue provoked a rash of abusive flaming from supporters of the Veterans' Extra Point System.<sup>9</sup> The collective – in vigorous debate with readers-- considered various ways to protect women readers from “macho” attacks. Chacha, another former editor, recalled considering a login-system: “But it requires too much personal information to meet the purpose; it violates the Internet's free spirit and may hinder women readers from communicating with each other. So we decided to judge anti-feminist or androcentric attitudes instead based on their writings.” Nevertheless, to protect women from sexist attacks, the collective established a bulletin board exclusively for women. Regardless of content, editors deleted from this board any articles that they thought showed “male-dominant” tendencies or in which the writer manifested male biological identity; deleted articles were moved to a “toilet board.”

Meanwhile, users of the women-only bulletin board were required to be respectful and civil. Again, the aim was to preserve a comfortable and safe space for women. Some readers criticised these measures as exclusive. Cynics questioned the authority and competence of the collective in presuming an ability to recognise which articles were written by men.<sup>10</sup> One resistant reader decried *Dalara* as “a swamp.” But, most women apparently welcomed these measures and saw the women-only bulletin board as an emancipating space enacting a kind of feminist ethics. As the editors acknowledged, some visitors were unwilling to express their opinions on bulletin

boards. Still, one delighted reader said, “I visit this place now and then, like resting in an oasis” (women-only bulletin board #248). Another reader contrasted this space to the oppression of the open space: “I felt heavy in my chest at the hostile atmosphere in bulletin board for everybody” (Bulletin board for everybody # 410). As Table 3 shows, the women-only bulletin board appeared to be a place where women could openly (but responsibly) chat with friends about agony, grief and joy without being threatened by the macho variant of cyberspace.

The effort to enlarge women’s territory extended to off-line feminist activities and community support. The collective of members provided technological assistance for people or organisations wanting to express their voices on the Internet; in solidarity with other women’s organisations, *Dalara* members produced banners and homepages for feminist events and organisations. Women’s organisations frequently invited *Dalara* members to teach them how to design homepages.

## The Experiments End

In late 2000, the periods between updating grew longer; only three new issues were posted in 2001. Strawberry partly attributed these delays on members’ engagement in other activities. Even some of the stalwarts of the collective were busy with other responsibilities; both Strawberry and Chacha were in graduate school. Some members quit in order to study abroad or start new jobs. Strawberry’s explanation echoes other constraints feminist media have historically faced:

*[Since] the number of people who manage to write for the zine decreased, it was harder to cover one specific topic in distinctive ways and in a style different from other women’s websites that had emerged since 2000. Not only feminist websites such as Unninet but also commercial women’s sites contributed to enlarging the space for women to express their voices in cyberspace. We did not have to treat popular issues, we thought, because other sites did the job. In the process of finding our own colour and tone, the articles became more serious. We no longer found the pleasure, now that we were no longer the solitary warrior on the Internet.*

These difficulties not only hindered consistent publication but also caused a stylistic shift. The subject matter did not significantly change. Yet, most of the newly-posted articles were highly (some readers said “overly”) self-confessional and based on personal experiences. A certain kind of didactic tone evoked particular dissatisfaction, uneasiness, and reader criticisms. One unhappy “layperson” said she hoped the site would not become “a ghetto” (“Passing by,” no. 1305, women-only board, posted 9/11/2001). Another said the writing was “as rude as leaflets by student movements association with too-long sentences and unfamiliar words” (“It becomes difficult to read,” no. 1246, women-only board, posted 8/14/2001).

Delays and decreases in postings of new articles resulted in a gradual decrease in the number of people visiting and posting on *Dalara*. As Table 3 shows, in the early period talk about everyday lives dominated the interactions; in a dramatic transformation, the bulletin board became more of a notice board, merely a publicity device for social movement organisations. Bulletin boards lost their significance as mechanisms for sharing experiences and strengthening connections among readers. To cope with these challenges, some members suggested linking the personal or individual homepages of anyone who wanted to contribute to the zine. This at-

tempt tentatively showed up in the last issue, “Diary,” which was entirely devoted to personal accounts. But, members’ energies were already sapped. In September 2003 members announced a temporary halt to postings. As of this writing, it has not resumed, although old issues are archived.

Table 3: Subjects in the Women-only Bulletin Board in *Dalara*

	02/2000 to 02/2001	02/2001 to 02/2005	Total
Notices*	115	201	316
Consultation	61	54	115
Advice for consultation	116	52	168
Opinion	241	102	343
Talk about every life	867	270	1137
Comments on the webzine	25	16	41
Others	85	35	120
Total	1510	730	2240

\* Information about upcoming feminist events, meetings, employment in women’s organizations.

### *Unninet* (Sisters’ Village and Network)

In April 2000, another one of the so-called “young feminist groups” launched *Unninet* (Sisters’ Village and Network). *Unninet* shares many characteristics with *Dalara*, including the self-conscious intention to create a comfortable platform for women to talk freely in cyberspace and to experiment with alternative definitions of womanhood. Technological benefits of the web, lower costs than conventional media as well as other advantages (especially interactivity) encouraged these feminists to launch a webzine, although like *Dalara*, *Unninet* staff members had to work intensively to learn to solve technical matters.

Although it had a nominal functional hierarchy and division of labour, *Unninet* began with a commitment to egalitarian and collective decision-making. All the staff members defined themselves as feminists, including one man who had worked on several other feminist projects and was one of the first to suggest establishing *Unninet*. One major structural difference relative to its forerunner was that *Unninet* was established within a larger corporation, Chora. Its founder explained that the group adopted this corporate structure because members, having all recently graduated from college, hoped to combine making a living with feminist activity. In 1999, during the webzine’s planning stages, few feminist websites existed; commercial sites for women began to emerge only as *Unninet* was getting off the ground. Zoe, its CEO, said: “If we told different things about women and the issues which commercial sites dealt with, in a feminist, vigorous and friendly way, we thought, we could be successful.”

From the start, *Unninet* intended to conquer a market, albeit a niche market; in this sense, it seemed to harbour mainstream ambitions. The staff members publicised the inauguration of *Unninet* by releasing news to mainstream newspapers as well as to feminist media. It abided by copyright laws. It used a login-system to count its subscribers. Not surprisingly, such enterprise required paid full-time employees who worked together in a physical place. In order to generate revenue

to meet its staff and management expenses, *Unninet* staff members frequently designed homepages for other women's organisations. Very minor sources of funding included donations from acquaintances and readers, and payments from news media for articles. Most of the advertising they ran was free, functioning primarily to cement alliances with other women's organisations, so advertising generated little revenue. Zoe, the former CEO of Chora, stated: "It was like running after two hares. We always discussed an appropriate profit model but it was unrealistic." Yet, *Unninet* rejected most mainstream journalistic values and conventions. The concept of deadline was diluted. Most writers used pseudonyms. In order to represent women's voices and to communicate with the audience as equals, they adopted a friendly conversational style. As the name of the webzine demonstrates, staff members aimed to create a cosy space for women. Zoe said, "From the start, we had a concept of village for the structure of the webzine." Indeed, all the sections of *Unninet* were named for ordinary places encountered in everyday life. For instance, to signify the idea of cleansing misogynist thoughts, the section on men's issues (including for male feminists) was called the "laundry room for brothers." The "video rental shop" carried movie reviews. The forum for discussing sexual harassment was the "scorching sauna"; the name refers to popular public saunas in Korea that are notorious sites of sexual violence. Each space had a bulletin board for readers.

To a far greater degree than Dalara, *Unninet* experimented with structures and services that would enhance audience involvement. In 2000 and 2001, *Unninet* introduced reforms to enlarge and diversify the space for readers to post their stories. The second round of modifications created special interest communities of subscribers, one of the most popular Internet services in Korea.<sup>11</sup> The favourite service was and is "Room of my own," a structure that enabled personal columns well before blogs were popular in Korea. Referring to Virginia Woolf's 1929 book, with its well-known assertion that "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction," "Room of my own" invites readers to share personal stories of political and social alienation with like-minded individuals. People express opinions on controversial issues – ranging from men's unpleasant habits to abortion – that they cannot easily discuss in the "real" world. Women say they feel free to express their opinions in this space because they can safely assume that their "half sisters"<sup>12</sup> and other sympathisers will listen and consider in earnest. In this semi-private, semi-public environment, "Room of my own" writers apparently feel a sense of mutual support and connection with other women, as well as respect for individual differences. Moreover, *Unninet* tried to encourage readers to come together and take part in constructing the village space. Such efforts to encourage networking extended to the real world: *Unninet* made its office available to feminist groups needing a convenient place to work.<sup>13</sup>

At the end of 2001, *Unninet* confronted several crises. Although *Unninet* was neither profit-driven nor in debt, it could not generate enough revenue to pay wages and office expenses. The collective's members were frustrated by low salaries, which required them to take on additional part-time jobs. Meanwhile, *Unninet's* corporate structure ultimately limited its ability to realise its feminist intent. Ironically, self-evaluation by staff members published in the 29th edition indicated *Unninet* had drawn criticism for being similar to commercial women's sites. Whether or not this

criticism was fair, *Unninet* had felt some pressure to satisfy audience tastes and expectations. As Table 2 indicates, in contrast to *Dalara*, *Unninet* had essentially ignored issues of feminist theory, cyberfeminism and feminist identity during its early period. *Unninet* was more interested in “softer” themes like hobbies, leisure, friendship, and health. Moreover, *Unninet* adopted a lighter and more popularised approach to subjects and a more intimate writing style. This apparent similarity to commercial women’s magazines may indicate an ambiguous identity. So, *Unninet* embarked on a campaign to incorporate feminist perspectives more consistently into the analysis of women’s lives, including the impact of hidden power relations.

## Overcoming the Crisis through Reinforcing Community

In December 2001, *Unninet* members decided to shut down the company, Chora, and transform *Unninet* into a non-profit volunteer-based organisation. This freed members from financial pressure and changed their self-definition. According to Zoe, after the company folded, members “felt free to take on feminist issues more directly, because now we didn’t need to consider audience taste to for the sake of profit.” She added: “When we began as a corporation... the members were reluctant to define themselves as activists. After turning into the non-profit organisation in 2002, we defined ourselves as activists and we defined *Unninet* as feminist organisation.”

This did not solve all problems, however. Some staff members quit. Because all members now either had full-time jobs or were graduate students, fewer meetings were held. Members tried to “outsource” the writing assignments to non-members to reduce the burdens and to recruit new members, including subscribers, to join in producing *Unninet*. These efforts had some success, but, predictably, the appearance of the new issues was often delayed; only five issues were uploaded in 2002. Perhaps oddly, *Unninet*’s curtailed activity as a webzine did not significantly weaken *Unninet* as a website, which remains dynamic. With the summer of 2001 modifications, it has been largely operated by the subscribers’ activities in approximately 100 communities; by early 2003, 1000 subscribers had a “Room of my own.” Organisational transformation resulted in corollary changes in the roles (and relationships) of subscribers and staff members. Zoe described “the power of community” as what primarily sustained *Unninet*.

In late 2002, in order to stabilise the webzine’s production and the management of the website, staff members undertook more radical and fundamental changes. Zoe said, “We could not cope with ordinary tasks using volunteer labour. With the delay of the zine’s production and other work, we felt stagnant and talked about the need for full-time staff.” They successfully applied for a grant from the Korean Women’s Foundation, a private foundation established in 1999 that works to improve women’s status, and in March 2003, registered as a full-scale women’s movement NGO. As such, *Unninet* launched a number of vigorous offline activities. *Unninet* has organised several feminist events, with an emphasis on exposing women’s alienation in everyday lives. Notably, to assert women’s right to walk at night without threat of violence *Unninet* and eight other women’s organisations sponsored Protest in Moonlight (similar to “Take Back the Night” in the US) in Seoul. The women not only protested directives from Korean police bureaus, but also the sexism embodied in restraints on women’s daily activities. They also

challenged news coverage minimising the impact and extent of sexual violence. This 2004 event became a major festival and then was expanded into an annual nationwide project; the 2005 event was organised by 19 women's organisations, including *Unninet*. Another project is "Sistour," which encourages women's travel, especially in Korea, where arguably women do not enjoy complete freedom of travel. In addition, after a 16 day online convention in February 2003 among all *Unninet* subscribers, subscribers accepted a two-tier system. Those in the *Didim* (the word refers to the basement) category pay nothing to use *Unninet* services but they cannot create their own "Room of my own" or communities nor can they can upload their personal stories. The *Dotum* category pay \$30 a year to be guaranteed full privileges to all these services. Of this partial payment system, Zoe recalls: "It was very huge risk. But subscribers know *Unninet* is not profit-oriented and they want to share the financial burden. Moreover, they want to be protected in their personal places."

This new-found financial stability allows for two full-time paid production coordinators. *Unninet* continues to experiment, especially with new menus that promote subscribers' political participation. For example, it posts petitions on women's issues, such as punishment for sexual assaults. It inaugurated the "Park for Knowledge Exchange" to stimulate exchange of practical information and advice. The Park's external architecture looks similar to that of other Korean portals.<sup>14</sup> But its approach is distinctive: it enables women to consult with one another about critical issues they confront in their daily lives. The questions posted there range from the private sphere (from sexual relationships to recipes) to academic and political ones (e.g. effective strategies for resisting androcentrism, universities offering feminist study). Many women respond with answers explicitly based on their experiences and knowledge. Others, unable to suggest concrete solutions, express sympathy or recount similar experiences.

These structural changes enabled *Unninet* to return to publishing a new cover story each month. Moreover, other sections, such as feminist (and anti-feminist) news, are frequently updated. A new item "Action Now" --devoted to concrete and useful suggestions for enacting feminist practices in everyday lives--encourages readers to engage in feminist activity. Thus, without losing its intimate writing style and familiar approach to subjects, the zine's political sensibility is more explicit. As Table 2 shows, since 2002, the percentage of cover stories devoted to feminist theory has increased slightly. Although the webzine is now a relatively minor part of the NGO's larger enterprise, as Zoe says, the transformed zine is important forum, "mapping" diverse positions and perspectives on controversial subjects. It sets out an agenda that provokes subscribers/staff debates in the interactive spaces such as bulletin boards and "communities." In short, given subscribers' vigorous participation in its reconstruction, *Unninet* not only survived but also embarked on new challenges.

## Discussion

These feminist webzines turn out to be remarkably similar to other feminist media. They articulate and experiment with alternative versions of womanhood and promote ties among women, quilting together the otherwise under-represented voices of ordinary women and enhancing a sense of connectivity and interaction. Given their commitment to horizontal and collective production, they promote

audience participation and learning, including of media skills. These efforts were especially significant in the early, relatively androcentric (if not misogynist) period of the Internet, which ignored women's ordinary lives and silenced feminist critique. Feminist webzines help to build a virtual space that is both technologically sophisticated and politicised but also comfortable and familiar. This suggests the potential of cyberspace for enthusiastic women who cannot afford to produce conventional media (such as print), even on a non-profit basis. The Internet, therefore, apparently sustain feminist activities, regardless of individuals' social/physical location. They hope "everybody can join in women's movements," as Zoze (using her penname) put it in *Unninet's* March, 2005 issue. In particular, *Unninet's* structural reorganisation stabilised its activities, and enabled greater involvement in the women's movement. By providing an enlarged sphere – a public sphere – for sharing experiences and connecting, *Unninet* became a feminist village simultaneously expansive and intimate.

These examples powerfully contradict Streck's (1998, 46; see also Garnham 1992) claim that "the crucial flaw of cyberspace is that it elevates the right to speak above all others, and all but eliminates the responsibility to listen." These zines powerfully promote a sense of community, such that members feel part of a collective that listens and learns from the whole, feel bound to one another, with mutual responsibilities and reciprocal duties. The zines give participants the chance to share their experiences with empathetic others, to master and apply technical skills, and promote feminist knowledge. These interactions are potentially all deeply satisfying at both the personal and group level, although they are not all equally political in some lasting way. Moreover, the zines show that feminist Internet sites can avoid commodification. Shade (2004) showed how cutting-edge feminist Internet communities can become diluted, packaged and "transmogrified into female-oriented spaces where empowerment is often equated with consumer sovereignty." But, as *Dalara* and *Unninet* show, feminisation can be resisted. Online feminist sites can survive – but not to generate profit. It's not that feminists are afraid of profit, as some critics have suggested. Rather, it seems, resisting commodification or commodifying practices is inherently at odds with profit.<sup>15</sup>

On the other hand, *Dalara* and *Unninet* did not escape completely the longstanding limitations imposed on women's alternative media. Their difficulties show that new technology does not solve the problems inherent in volunteer-run activist organisations – and face some new problems, including dealing with the technology itself. As the cessation of *Dalara* demonstrates, the advantage of the Internet in bringing together people who share neither temporal nor spatial co-presence also means that their bonds may be attenuated to the point of fracture. Time and energy remain crucially limited resources, even for online feminists. *Unninet's* frequent reconstruction required the dedication of a full-time staff. Money remains even more intractable. Despite the Internet's relatively low production costs, even simple websites cost money; innovations in structure and design are especially costly. Even more problematically, to secure financial resources for minimal management, *Unninet's* pricing structures now further divides haves and have-nots.<sup>16</sup>

*Unninet's* solutions to its various crises suggest one crucial condition for survival of feminist online media: integrating feminist community empowerment into the websites' architecture. *Dalara's* content was generated mainly by the collective, and its readers could only publicly express their voices in bulletin boards, which

perhaps made them reluctant to tell their stories. In contrast, *Unninet* has provided its subscribers with near-private spaces, an important asset for women's achievement, as Woolf famously argued. These personal as well as public spaces mean that users feel freer to build spaces of caring and connection. In turn, *Unninet's* subscribers provided the technical competence and resources crucial to sustaining the webzine, even during its period of crisis. On the other hand, a healthy sense of community and the communitarian impulse, while necessary, are not sufficient to maintain feminist webzines. To expand and to continue experimenting, feminist zines require institutionalisation. This in turn requires stable workers and financial resources. That is, effective zines require sufficient financial resources to support a technically sophisticated staff able to work with a changing roster of volunteers.

More to the point, the Internet's flexibility and easy access predict that many sites will inevitably come and go. Feminist zines are here to stay, but no particular site is likely to enjoy longevity. The ocean of ever-proliferating voices on the Internet, many of which co-opt feminist voices, suggests that if feminists are to work together to form a mutually supportive activist community on and offline, this short-lived nature of webzines will be problematic. That is, sustaining and expanding online feminist media and bringing activists "into communication" are vital to the movement's social and political impact. Co-presence continues to be important for strengthening community bonds among feminists, especially (but not uniquely) in Korea, with its shorter history of an organised feminist movement and a long history of subordinating women's interests to other political agendas. *Unninet's* recent offline activities suggest the advantage of at least occasionally bringing together activists in the real world.

#### Acknowledgements:

Research was financially supported by Institute of Communication Research at Seoul National University.

#### Notes:

1. These are translations and transliterations from Korean; various alternative spellings are arguably possible. "Unninet" may also be translated as "Unnine," (literally means older sister's home) so the zine's name is essentially "Sisters' Village." Dalara Talsepo refers to itself, for short, as "Daltal," meaning Daughters of the Moon.
2. Interviews were conducted in Korean; quotations from interviews and webzine articles represent the authors' translations, as do citations to scholarship published in Korea.
3. One exception is Yoo's (2002) comparison of mainstream coverage of a campaign for tax-exemption of sanitary napkins to that in *Women's News*. The paucity of academic work on Korean feminist or alternative media compels reliance on US and European research; but we argue that this body of scholarship is highly relevant in explaining the role of feminist media.
4. As Shade (2002) notes, strategies for this commodification include playing on, and evacuating, the notion that women deserve their own space. For example, Microsoft promoted its chatroom for women in a *Vanity Fair* ad (April 1997) asserting, "The Microsoft Network thinks Virginia Woolf was right: WOMEN need a room of their own."
5. Chamsesang Plaza, which now operates on Jinbonet, is a board for discussing a range of issues. Jinbonet, which hosted *Dalara*, began in late 1998 as an activist independent organization as well as a center providing computer communication services for Korean activist and non-governmental organizations. In 1997 several labour and trade union activists held the first international labor-media conference in Seoul (Korean Progressive Network Jinbonet). After meetings with



international network activists, a Korean independent progressive bulletin board service proposed creating a Korean Progressive Network Center – later named Jinbonet – and donated its system and lines. Text-based BBSs (bulletin board systems that operate through computer systems equipped with modems or other means of network access that serve as an information and message-passing centre for remote users) were most popular in Korea before the spread of the Internet services like the World Wide Web. Many Korean social movement groups run closed user groups (CUGs) but some activists use commercial BBS memberships.

6. Members (if permitted by the system operator) can have their own forum, similar to intranet. The Closed User Group (usually run on a commercial BBS or Internet website) has been the main tool of progressive groups. The KCTU has utilized the network for organizing activity by exchanging e-mail and conducting online discussions. Korean Progressive Network Centre allows activist groups to use not only BBSs but also Internet services at a far lower cost than that charged by commercial systems.

7. The preview issue featured second wave feminism. Other cover stories were, in order of appearance: Fears of feminism; Veterans' benefits / movement against sexual violence; Unemployment and women's employment; Women's bodies; Women in Cyberspace; Gender differences in CMC; Weapons and self-defence; Young women; Motherhood; Numbers and quantitative logic; Images of woman; Dalara's audience survey; Dreams; Life in Korea; Sex and sexual harassment; Housekeeping; The diaries.

8. To offer equivalent data, two people coded all articles in Dalara and the main articles in Unninet. The initial relevance between coders achieved a Scott pi of 0.728. The reviewers then reviewed the coding until there was agreement.

9. In 1999, the Veterans' Extra Point System was outlawed as an unconstitutional violation of the equal rights of women and the disabled. This ruling aroused considerable backlash against feminism. "Cyber-machos" attacked many feminist websites by disabling their servers and filling their free boards with anti-woman invective and abusive language. For example, Walzang (<http://home.pusan.ac.kr/~walzang>), meaning "Beyond the (patriarchal) barriers," was another famous feminist webzine, launched in 2001 by students from Pusan University. But its first cover story "Talking about Veterans" directly criticized the military culture and provoked nationwide debate. Walzang experienced severe flaming and cyber-terror for two months. Walzang posted 10 editions but stopped uploading new edition after Oct. 2003.

10. Indeed, print and Internet readers are famously unable to determine whether writers are male or female; but arguably editors can decide whether a woman "seems" to have written something.

11. In Korea alumni and family meetings are highly significant. These community services are the main means for attracting subscribers to websites and are major profit centres.

12. Each subscriber can decide at which level her stories will be open to others; they can limit access to some stories except to their "half-sister," a person committed to reading and commenting on all one's articles. Users can forge these "half-sister" relationships with whomever they wished, as long as they trust each other.

13. Since Unninet shares space with other teams, it no longer offers meeting space to "outsiders."

14. For example, among many such sites, the portal Naver (in Korean, meaning an intellectual) operates a section "Knowledge In." Here, people pose questions and other users volunteer their answers.

15. This is also true of other online feminist journals. Ilda (<http://www.ildaro.com>), published since 2003, confronts women's issues very directly. Ilda, which means "Becoming," has adopted the standards of professional journalism much more than Dalara and Unninet; most of its content is written by "journalists" and it provides little space to readers. L zine ([www.lzine.net](http://www.lzine.net)) was launched to help lesbians exchange information, and also construct and sustain community and solidarity. The irregularly-posted zine is produced by both a group of writers and subscribers.

16. Just as John Locke said the invention of money transformed "the original state of nature," so Resnick (1998) notes that that cyberspace no longer is host to egalitarian, individualistic, free-flowing political debate, but (inevitably) has been normalized, with the division of labour, economy, and complicated structures of civil society.

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