

ACTIVITY 3

**WHO'S VISIBLE ON THE WEB:
THE POLITICS OF SEARCH
ENGINES**

TEACHER'S NOTES

Although the World Wide Web is often characterized as a democratic, equalizing space, access to the Web—particularly to Web-authoring tools—remains unequal, drawn along rather predictable lines of race, gender, and wealth. In addition, the Web itself—for a variety of important reasons—represents itself as predominantly monocultural.

The “Who’s Visible” assignment asks students to look hard at how different demographic (social, gender, racial, etc.) are constructed visibly on the World Wide Web. The goal of the assignment is not to place blame for constructing certain subjectivities, but to understand the complexity of the topic. In addition, as students themselves begin authoring Web sites they will need to make conscious decisions about who is represented in their own work, and how they represent others.

Note: This exercise requires students to enter racial and gendered terms into search engines. It is likely that some of these terms will be linked to sexually explicit and/or offensive sites. This is entirely part of the goal of the exercise, which is to link racial and gender terms to their presentation on the Internet. However, students will need to be given the option to opt out of that portion of the assignment for personal reasons. In addition, we would discourage against demonstrating this activity in a public computer lab in order to avoid subjecting participants to potentially harassing sites.

TIMEFRAME

One day to one week (depending on complexity of report)

VARIATIONS

To minimize potentially explicit or offensive search results, instructors can assign specific search terms and/or engines (after testing them to vet results). Could concentrate on subset of possible terms—who is represented, graphically or textually in searches on specific occupational titles, for example?

ACTIVITY

OVERVIEW FOR STUDENTS

Although the Web was originally created as a relatively specialized network for publishing scientific work, it is rapidly becoming a major cultural force. As the Web becomes more common, the presence or absence of different types of people within the Web becomes a political issue. If the Web is represented as the domain of a particular group or subgroup of people based on their race, color, sex—or whatever—then, in a recursive way, users outside of that group are implicitly discouraged from using the Web.

The majority/minority distinction is, in some ways, a culturally relative construction: consider the majority/minority faces you would see at a meeting of the Boy Scouts of America versus the local National Organization of Women chapter versus the playground at your local elementary school. In each of those contexts, majority/minority divisions differ dramatically.

ASSIGNMENT

In order to help you think about who is present and who is absent on the Web, choose a search engine and enter your own name into the query. Do you find many hits? Are there other people with your name?

Next, come up with a set of demographic terms that describe yourself—race, ethnicity, gender, age, etc. Enter those terms into a search engine: what types of entries come up? How many?

Finally, come up with a set of “Other” terms—for each of your own demographic terms, list a common term used to describe people unlike you. Try to avoid relying on derogatory terms.

For more information about Web demographics, see the following sites:

- Basic, long-term WWW user demographic surveys:
<http://www.cc.gatech.edu/gvu/user_surveys/>
- Domain name registration demographics:
<<http://www.domainstats.com/>>
- Early MIT article on measuring the growth of the Web:
<<http://www.mit.edu/people/mkgray/growth/>>
- Nua’s massive database of Internet surveys and reports:
<<http://www.nua.ie/surveys/index.cgi>>.