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# Women on the Web user case study

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## Abstract:

This case study investigates the users of the Dutch branch of the Webgrrls; Women on the Web (WOW). From the beginning the objective of this organisation has been to make computers and the Internet more accessible for women. To what extent were the inclusion initiatives, which comprised recruitment as well as socialisation instruments, considered to be effective by the female users of WOW? The Board of WOW has put a lot of energy in to facilitating the provision of information to women and socialisation activities. Mailing lists are an attractive blend of information and community forming for the respondents. From the questionnaires and the interviews, it has become clear that almost all respondents, including starters and ICT professionals, use computers and the Internet more, have more fun and use more different facilities because of WOW. Perhaps even more important than providing a platform where women exchange information, is the fact that WOW supports a women only social community. This strategy was felt as essential by the respondents, as they felt lonely in a men's world, they felt like men were degrading them and their level of self confidence and their belief in the power of women was generally low before they entered the WOW community. As a result of WOW, more than half of the respondents gained self confidence regarding computers and the Internet and felt more independent and empowered. It seems WOW was most effective in offering role-models of women that were competent and felt confident, leading both beginners and women that worked in IT to feel more empowered to work with computers.

**Keyword list:** women only, informal education, voluntary initiative, role model, community.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The main objective of WOW was to make computers and the Internet more accessible to women. The strategies that were used to reach this target were by providing information about computers and the Internet to women and to socialize women in ICTs, to enlarge their skills, knowledge and self-confidence with computers by creating a women-only social community and network where women could help each other. The designers used on- and off line courses and social gatherings, an informative website and several mailing lists with various topics such as general information lists about computers and the Internet, mailing lists directed at specialist IT topics such as multimedia, Macintosh or web-design issues and several mailing lists to support women with their professional work as entrepreneur or journalist. The target-group consisted of 'all women', including starters and professional women in IT.

This case-study has been selected because WOW is a well-known initiative in the Netherlands, which on several occasions has been mentioned as the new form that the Dutch women's and feminist movement have taken. It can be considered very successful, as 4500 women are subscribed to at least one of WOW's mailing lists and the questionnaires and interviews show that even those women that stopped using WOW, are very enthusiastic about this initiative. Moreover, this case study permits us to get more insight into the importance of mailing lists as an inclusion initiative.

A questionnaire has been distributed amongst 20 'ordinary' users of WOW and 10 so-called 'lurkers', subscribers that hardly contribute to the lists. A comparison between the backgrounds and the answers of the 'ordinary' users and the lurkers shows that lurkers are not that different from other users, except that they are somewhat more shy in writing contributions, feel less confident as they often have somewhat less experience with computers and the Internet and are in general newer to the mailing list. The background of all respondents was diverse: women from diverse ages, with various levels of educational background, occupation and experience with computers and the Internet were reached. Out of all respondents, six women were selected and extensively interviewed to get more in-depth insights into how WOW has affected the lives of female users of this initiative.

From the questionnaires and the interviews, it has become clear that mailing lists are an attractive blend of information and community forming for the female respondents. Two third of the respondents had gained access to relevant information via WOW and the information they received was considered to be clear, tailor-made to the specific questions that women face, with a fast response rate and a high level of reliability. Because of WOW, almost all respondents indicated that they use computers and the Internet more, have more fun and use more different facilities. Even though not all female IT professionals found the technical information WOW provided relevant anymore, several indicated that WOW had motivated them to start a career in IT and they still found other kinds of information and support by their colleagues to make WOW an effective inclusion strategy for this specific group as well.

Perhaps even more important than providing a platform where women exchange information, is the fact that WOW supports a women only social community. The 'women only' strategy was felt as essential by the respondents to help them 'battle the binary'. They felt lonely in a men's world, they felt like men were degrading them and their level of self confidence and their belief in the power of women was generally low before they entered the WOW community. Almost all responses indicated that WOW has helped women to feel empowered in the field of ICTs and that this was thoroughly needed, even in an equality

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oriented country as the Netherlands. As a result of WOW, more than half of the respondents gained self confidence regarding computers and the Internet and feel more independent and empowered. It seems WOW was most effective in offering role-models of women that were competent and felt confident, leading both beginners and women that worked in IT to feel more empowered to work with computers.

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## 1. Introduction

WOW started in 1996 as the Dutch Webgrrls and changed their name in 2001 to 'Women on the Web'.<sup>1</sup> WOW is a 100% voluntary organisation, which has succeeded to survive independently for over 7 years. In June 2003, almost 4500 women had subscribed to WOW and close to 700 are member of the Association.<sup>2</sup> (Slooten and Rommes 2003). Messages by subscribers on the mailing lists and the accounts by women that have been interviewed indicate that this is a very well-appreciated project that has helped many women on their way in using computers and which supported professional female IT specialists in their work. WOW is a well-known initiative in the Netherlands, as the large number of articles in newspapers and magazines shows (<http://www.womenontheweb.nl/opinie/media/index.html>). Notably, WOW has on several occasions been mentioned as the new form that the Dutch women's and feminist movement have taken (e.g. Feiter 2001: 36-39; Agerbeek 2001). This is one of the reasons that this case study was selected. Moreover, this case study allows us to gain more insight into why WOW is so successful and what users of WOW themselves perceive as successful inclusion strategies of WOW as it closely connects with the case-studies 'WOW designers' by Slooten and Rommes and with 'On the Boards' by MacKeogh. Finally, an important reason for the selection of this case study is that it permits us to get more insight into the importance of mailing lists as an inclusion initiative.

According to internal documents the objectives of WOW were to spread knowledge about the Internet among as many women as possible, to make new media like computers and the Internet more accessible to women, and to exchange knowledge and create connections between members of WOW [Beleidsplan 2002-2004: 1; [www.womenontheweb.nl/organisatie/statuten/index.html](http://www.womenontheweb.nl/organisatie/statuten/index.html) (13-9-02) article 2]. Hence, the goal of WOW is not only to introduce women to computers and the Internet, but also to socialize women in ICTs, to enlarge their skills, knowledge and self-confidence with computers. The target-group consisted of 'all women', as was written on the first website of WOW: '*every woman can become a member of Webgrrls, you don't need to be an IT specialist*' [<http://web.archive.org/webgrrls>, visited on 11-10-02]. Members of the board of WOW have tried to reach the goals of WOW by providing mailing lists, courses, and information on computers and the Internet on their website, such as job openings and places where women can network by introducing themselves or their companies. As is also clear from the quotation, female IT specialists also form an important target group of WOW. As a result, the subjects of the mailing lists provided by WOW vary from general information lists about computers and the Internet, to mailing lists directed at specialist IT topics such as multimedia, Macintosh or web-design issues. In addition, several mailing lists are set up to support women with their professional work, e.g. a mailing list in which female writers and journalist support each other in finding work, or a mailing list in which women support each other in (setting up) their own enterprise.

The rationale behind setting up WOW has been the assumption that the relationship between women and technology is a problematic one. According to the designers of WOW, women lack information and consequently the confidence to use technology. Moreover, according to the designers of WOW, women also lack the confidence to ask questions,

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<sup>1</sup>The name Webgrrls was changed into Women on the Web in 2001. This was done because the inventor of the name, Aliza Sherman, claimed a lot of money in exchange for the use of the name 'Webgrrls'. The Dutch Webgrrls decided that they did not want to pay that much money. Therefore they changed the name in Women on the Web.

<sup>2</sup> This means that they have subscribed to the general WOW-mailing list, the so-called 'All-list' One can only subscribe to the other mailing lists if one has subscribed to the 'All-list'.

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because they are afraid to be labelled as 'stupid'. So the designers of WOW created a place for women, where information can be found and where women feel safe enough to ask for more information if they want to. The designers of WOW have created such an area by facilitating a community of women-only mailing lists.

## 2. Methods

A questionnaire was distributed amongst 20 active users of the mailing list 'computers'. This mailing list was selected because it is a more general mailing list in which questions are asked by people with very diverse experience (see annex I for backgrounds of the respondents). These users were selected by the moderator of the mailing list, with the selection criterion to achieve a wide variety in background factors in as far as known by the moderator, such as age, ethnicity, occupation, experience with computers and the Internet, membership and number of contributions to the mailing list. Virtually all users that were asked to help with the research by the moderator of the mailing list responded positively and filled out the questionnaire. Indeed, the backgrounds of the respondents were diverse, as women with diverse ages, and levels of activity in WOW responded. Some had been long term and active members\_of WOW, whereas others had subscribed for only a couple of weeks and had unsubscribed again. Although women with various professions responded, the number of women who are active in IT was relatively high. Moreover, in general, the respondents have a very high level of education, more than half of all respondents have either university or higher professional education.

Because the researchers noticed that so-called 'lurkers', users that are subscribed to mailing lists but (almost) never contribute, seemed to be lacking from the selection made by the moderator, an extra e-mail was send around to get more respondents from that category of mailing list users.<sup>1</sup> Lurkers have been found by self-definition: an e-mail was sent around with the subject 'lurkers sought for', in which people 'who do not answer questions or pose questions to the mailing list' were asked to respond to the researchers. Of course, the problem remains that lurkers who hardly read the mailing lists they are subscribed to, will not respond to such a request. Nevertheless, fourteen self-defined lurkers responded, who indeed were less active contributors to the mailing lists than the original respondents. The backgrounds of all fourteen were studied (see annex II), but only the answers from the first ten in the tables could be analyzed.<sup>2</sup>

The questionnaires have been used to get a general impression of what parts of the inclusion strategy of WOW can be considered most successful. To safe-guard the privacy of the respondents, the respondents have been given a number: the original respondents have been given numbers, the 'lurkers' were given Greek numbers. Out of the responses to the questionnaires amongst users and lurkers of the mailing list, six women with diverse backgrounds, ages, experience with computers and the Internet and with different intensities of using WOW were selected (they have been given a name). These women have been interviewed in their homes. Quotes from these interviews have been used to give more in-depth insight into specificities of how the inclusion strategies of WOW have affected the female users of WOW.

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<sup>1</sup> This word has been used to refer to the way lurkers passively consume information, like a baby lurks on a milk bottle. Lurkers are often by far the largest group of subscribers to any mailing list and at one stage or another, most mailing list users are lurker especially when they try to get to know a mailing list. It is even considered a good habit to lurk a while to get to know the culture of the list before one starts to make contributions (Correll 1995).

<sup>2</sup> Fire has destroyed the original answers to the questionnaire and ten of the fourteen lurker-respondents re-submitted the answers to the questionnaire.

### 3. Recruitment

An inclusion strategy that is based on a website and mailing lists can only work if women find WOW and subscribe to it. How did the respondents to the questionnaire find out about WOW and why did they subscribe to it? The following answers to this question were given<sup>1</sup>:

	Links in other websites	People I know	Search engine	Magazine article	Other: Mailing list; HCC days
Number of lurkers out of 10:	5	0	3	2	2
Number of original respondents out of 20:	10	6	3	1	0

**Table 1: how did respondents find WOW?**

The strategy of the board of WOW to distribute information about WOW widely seems to have been effective. Table 1 shows that five respondents found out about WOW via a magazine article or the stand of WOW at national computer days (HCC). Fifteen of the twenty five respondents have found out about WOW via links in other websites, making this the most common way of finding WOW. Finding out about the existence of a website or mailing lists is, however, not enough to include women in such a strategy. Potential users need to be attracted to the extent that they subscribe to a mailing list, or that they regularly use a website. What did the respondents find attractive about WOW? (see table 2)

	Mailing List	Workshops/courses	Website 'who is who?'	Social drink	Home-page	Other: Contact with women	Website online course
Number of lurkers out of	6	1	1	2	2	0	0

<sup>1</sup> In each table, first the number of lurkers (out of ten) who ticked of the category is given, followed by the number of original respondents (out of twenty). The most commonly given answer is mentioned first, followed by the less often mentioned answers. Respondents could fill out more than one answer, so the total of answers given exceeds the total number of thirty respondents. The number of thirty respondents is too small to draw conclusions on the basis of a cross cutting table in which answers are compared with the backgrounds of the respondents. However, to give an impression of the relation between the backgrounds of the respondents and the answers they gave, in annex III, the numbers of the respondent who answered positively to the question is given, so the answers to the questions in the tables can be compared with the backgrounds of the respondents in annex 1 and 2.

<b>10:</b>							
<b>Number of original respondents out of 20:</b>	16	6	6	4	3	4	3

**Table 2: Answer of the respondents to the question ‘what attracted you to WOW?’**

Not surprisingly as respondents were selected amongst users of one of the mailing lists, the mailing lists were the most attractive part of WOW to two third of the respondents. From the answers, it can be concluded that both the wish to find information (e.g. workshops, homepage and the online course) and the social networking part of WOW (e.g. ‘who is who’ part of the website, social drink and ‘contact with other women’) were seen as attractive by the respondents. Mailing lists are a blend of these two, and may be very attractive for this reason. In the following parts, first the information/learning part of WOW will be discussed and then the social community part.

#### 4. Information

As has been described in the designer part of this study, the designers of WOW believe that the proper strategy to make computers and the Internet accessible for women is to provide women with information. Indeed, about two third of the respondents wrote that thanks to WOW they have gotten ‘access to relevant information about computers and the Internet’ (see table 5). Did this information influence their use of computers and the Internet? And was the form in which they received the information, specifically mailing lists, especially inclusive for women? These questions will be answered in this section.

Information is communicated to the users of Women on the Web in different ways: via the mailing lists, on the website and via workshops and courses. Again, because of the selection method of the respondents, it is not surprising that all respondents use at least one, and most respondents use several mailing lists. The website is used to provide up-to-date information on viruses, news about the things happening in the ICT branch and job openings and the ‘Frequently Asked Questions’ (FAQ). The website also contains a part in which users of WOW can introduce themselves to each other, the ‘who is who’ part of the website. Table 3 shows that these various parts of the website are used by more than a third of the users of WOW. On-line courses have also been developed, to help women to develop their skills and knowledge about computers and the Internet. This part of the website has been used by a quarter of the respondents, which is a considerable number given the amount of time and energy that such a course demands.

	<b>Mailing lists</b>	<b>Homepage</b>	<b>Website who is who</b>	<b>Social drink</b>	<b>Online courses</b>	<b>Workshops/ courses</b>
<b>Number of lurkers out of 10:</b>	All	5	2	2	1	2
<b>Number of original</b>	All	7	8	8	4	2

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respondents out of 20:						
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**Table 3: answers to the question ‘What parts of WOW do you use?’**

If this table is compared with table 2: ‘what attracted you to WOW’, it becomes clear that once the respondents started using WOW, they use more options than the options that originally attracted them to WOW. Especially the social options are used more often than the respondents had originally thought.

In the following sections, the specific way in which information is distributed with mailing lists is studied more closely, followed by a section about what professional IT women got out of the mailing lists of WOW.

#### **4.1 Mailing lists as information source**

What is attractive about mailing lists? In what way are mailing lists different than other information sources? To find out more about this question, the respondents were asked to compare the information they obtained via WOW with other information sources, such as family and friends, manuals and courses. These other sources of information are relevant for several of the respondents, and a couple even felt they were more relevant than WOW, e.g. respondent VIII wrote that

‘information from other sources is more important to me, because in lists you get an answer to a specific question, in a book or magazine you read the whole story with everything that goes with it’.

In general, however, it seems that most respondents consider the information WOW provides as their main source of information, for several reasons. Respondent IV, for example, seems to appreciate WOW exactly for the reason that VIII did not like it as much: ‘The information I get via WOW is much more tailored to what I need than other information sources’.

Several respondents compared the information WOW provided with information they could get from manuals. Respondent 18 complained that it is so hard to find good information in Dutch, and that for her WOW was a good solution: ‘I use WOW to print clear, Dutch manuals about subjects like formatting your hard disk, or I check virus definitions via the WOW site’. ‘WOW is my main source of information because things are explained in Dutch’. Apart from the language, several women (e.g. respondent VI, VII) stated that they find the information provided by other women much clearer and easier to follow than the instructions in a manual. Maartje explained that this has also to do with the fact that manuals and help functions on the computer require the user to search extensively before the information is found, they are not that accessible. As an example, she mentioned that once you have found the right subject, often several answers are given in help functions and in manuals, only one of which is correct. As a contrast, she explained, in WOW you can explain your problem and the answer will be directly geared to your specific question (interview Maartje: 16). Respondent V even stated that ‘because of WOW I now understand manuals better’. The fact that help is given in a step by step form is also much appreciated. Respondent VI compared the way WOW provides information with the information her husband provides. According to her, the way information is given in WOW is ‘totally different than at home, where very quickly the problem will be solved, often so fast

that I cannot remember it.' By following the mailing lists a while, the researchers found out that sometimes women will ask for a 'red scooter': meaning that they need 'in real life' help. Indeed, in several occasions, women will visit each others houses in order to help someone to an even larger extent.

Even though the information is given step by step, in a pace that suits the level of knowledge of the woman that asked for it, several respondents made remarks showing that they liked the fastness of the response rate the mailing lists provided. As respondent 8 wrote:

'the information is adequate and clear, the information is fast, if things do not go right, you can ask a question, and another one, and another one...'

Several respondents compared the fastness of WOW with how slow things will go when you have to wait for a friend or family-member to be ready to help you, or if you have to wait for a course to start. Some women wrote that they helped or had been helped by other women on the list via phone, if e-mail was not clear or fast enough.

The respondents in general put a lot of trust in the information they get via WOW. Ester said she found the information she got via WOW much more reliable than the information she found at other parts of the Internet, because 'that information is much more coloured and also by people that try to sell you something. With WOW, you at least know the background of the people and the level of knowledge they have, so you know how much trust to put in their answers' (interview Ester: 14; also respondent 4). Similarly, Maartje recalled how at a certain point in time, she hired a man to repair her computer. She had some bad memories about this experience:

'He had been working on it the whole evening and finally he concluded that the sound card was broken. But he had not even removed it or anything, so it should have been working (...) I thought, maybe he just dropped a screwdriver on it. And later that 'broken' sound card could be used in the computer of my children'. (...) by now, I would just open up my computer and put in a sound card myself. I feel pretty pleased with this, I just take the manual nowadays and do it myself, I now dare to do it because of WOW' (interview Maartje: 11, 12, 14).

Several respondents felt more confidence in the knowledge that women of WOW provided 'from practical experience' (respondent VII), than by people that have their own, often commercial interests in providing information. And, as respondent 7 wrote:

'WOW is a reliable source of information, a mistake will immediately be corrected by someone and what one person does not know, another person can help with'.

Correcting each other seems to be an effective way of guaranteeing a high reliability of the answers that are given on the mailing lists.

All in all, the information women give each other is experienced as clear, step by step in a pace that suits the level of knowledge by the woman that asks for help, tailor-made to the specific questions that women face, with a fast response rate and reliable. As one of the results of all this information and help that women provide each other in WOW, the questionnaire showed that in general women use computers and the Internet more, have more fun and use more facilities because of WOW:

	I use it more	I have more fun	I use more	No effect
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		in using computers / the Internet	facilities	
Number of lurkers out of 10:	5	5	5	2
Number of original respondents out of 20:	6	6	6	5

**Table 5: answers to the question ‘has WOW influenced your use of computers and the Internet?’**

As respondent VI clarified:

‘I have more fun in using the computer because I use more different options, such as digital camera and picture programs.’

It seems that the information WOW provides on the website and the information women provide each other with via the mailing lists indeed helps to include women in the information society.

#### **4.2 Information for professional female IT workers**

One of the main reasons why the mailing lists of WOW are attractive to professional female IT workers is to get in contact with other women. This was not pre-given as an answer category in table 2, so the number of four women who wrote ‘getting in touch with women’ as their main reason for using WOW, can be considered large. Moreover, several women (including the founder of the Webgrrls), made a big point out of needing to get in touch with other women in a male dominated area. As Ester said:

‘I was looking for other women that are also fascinated by computers’, ‘I wanted something else than those men all the time’, ‘I had gotten tired of men’ (interview Ester: 6, 7).

Similarly, respondent 19 wrote:

‘what attracted me to WOW was to get contact with women via a medium that was and is part of my everyday life, at a moment that I lived in the middle of men’

and respondent II:

‘WOW attracted me because of the fact that there are more women out there that are interested in computers and computer technologies. At that time, mostly men ‘ruled’ the computer’.

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Creating a meeting place for women in IT seems to be a relevant strategy for several women that feel lonely in a male dominated world. Respondent VI tried to formulate why it was important for her to get in touch with women:

‘I was attracted to WOW because talking with men about computers is different than talking with your partner or other men. I could recognize myself more in WOW and I also found some recognition’.

Though it is not totally clear what was the precise difference, it is clear that there was a real need by these women to get in touch with other women about their profession (see also WITI case study).

In general, the level of knowledge of the women on the mailing lists is considered to be high. Not only starting users of the Internet seem to find relevant information, but also professional IT workers appreciate the information they are provided with by their ‘colleagues’ of WOW. As respondent 4 wrote:

‘I learn a lot by discussing with professional colleagues, (...) these are people that intensively deal with computers.’

And respondent 1:

‘WOW is my main source of information because there I meet colleagues and all kinds of specialists in the area of computers’.

Some of the professional IT women have ‘passed the phase by now’ in which the computer information of WOW is still useful (respondent 5), or ‘by now, other information sources are more important to me because in the meanwhile I know a lot about computers’ (respondent IX). Even for these respondents, ‘other information of WOW is still considered very useful (respondent 5). As respondent 19 wrote:

‘For technical/computer knowledge, other information sources are more important for me because they go further. For the small enterprises list, however, it is my main information source, this information is hardly accessible, moreover, experiences of female entrepreneurs can just not be found in booklets’.

And respondent IX still finds WOW ‘my main information source about new Internet knowledge and to me new programs’.

Moreover, the phrasing of the answers of these professional IT women shows that the information of WOW has been relevant for them in the past. Many of them testified that the information of WOW was relevant in their career, as the replies by respondent V, 5 and respondent 16 show:

‘I have more fun in using computers because I have learned so much from WOW. I use it more intensively\_on my work and I can solve problems with the computer at my work’ (V)

Respondent 5 wrote that ‘because of WOW I have gotten a lot of work and I have come in touch with colleagues.’ And respondent 16 stated that

‘WOW is my main information source, because I am not a manual-person, I give courses myself and I am the computerwizard amongst family and friends. I am totally autodidact, and I could go nowhere with that’.

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So for respondent 16, WOW was also one of the few ways to get the information she needed for her work.

Some women even started their career in IT after using WOW for a while. As respondent 2 testifies:

‘because of WOW I have started to take myself seriously in setting up my own company’.

Similarly, respondent 6, who has an illness which keeps her bound to her house, has ‘found my work in IT, despite my illness, I am gainfully employed again’, because ‘it is so easy to consult colleagues now’. Similarly, Ester explained in the interview that she got her job as a result from WOW, that she teaches courses because of it and has found companions to work with (interview Ester: 8). Tosca founded her own company motivated by WOW and Maartje now gives courses with which she earns some money (interview Maartje: 10). It seems hard to overestimate the relevance of WOW for all these professional IT women.

## **5. Creating a community**

Professional IT women are very relevant for the mailing lists of WOW. They answer a lot of questions for the women who are not as knowledgeable yet. Why do these women invest so much time and energy in answering questions? Respondent 15 wrote;

‘I answer a lot, but never ask a question because I get my information from other websites and my questions are too specific. I am part of WOW because I think it is a nice list, I know a couple of people there and I like to share my knowledge and to help people’.

So liking to help people and to share knowledge are important characteristics of the helpers on the mailing lists, as it is important to feel a connection with WOW, e.g. by knowing some women on the list. Several others also wrote how much they liked helping women, how much they were helped themselves in the past by WOW, or that they ideologically supported the goals of WOW and were happy to help other women with their knowledge. Ester explained in the interview with her that she found it very ‘stimulating’, to extensively help a woman and then see that woman answer questions on the list herself half a year later (interview Ester: 5). As the board of WOW had guessed, the fact that WOW is felt as a community has been helpful in motivating women to help each other. The importance of WOW as a social community is the topic of this section.

In table 3 we have seen that the community parts of WOW are used enthusiastically: all respondents used one or more mailing lists, a third of the respondents has been at a social drink and a third has used the ‘who is who’ part of the website, which was more than the number of women that had originally thought these parts attractive. The creation of an on- and offline community, may have been very effective as a way of socializing women in the information society. According to Sørensen, inclusion is not only about recruitment, trying to get women inside, but also about socialisation, which is about ‘remaining inside, (...) getting accepted, and (...) becoming familiar’ (Sørensen 2002: 2). From previous research, it has become clear that the main ways in which people are introduced and socialized to computers and the internet is via their job and/or their social network. Similarly, Faulkner and Kleif showed the importance of ‘local experts’ in the SIGIS case study ‘Ardmore Network’ in introducing and socializing women to the Internet (Faulkner and Kleif 2002). Research in the Netherlands has shown that in general, women are not as often part of a social network in which they can be recruited or socialized in the information society (SCP

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2000). The mailing lists of WOW may offer an alternative social network for those who do not have access to a social network in which help with computers can be gotten.

Moreover, from the interviews, it has become clear that a 'normal' social network, built of family members and friends, creates some uneasiness and problems of its own for some women. Some women feel hesitant in asking help from people they know. As Saskia said in her interview:

'My son said: 'mum, you have to buy a computer, that is so much fun'. And so I did, but I also told him: but then –you- are the one who I will go to for help! And very well-behaved, he did do that, a couple of times I had completely crashed the system and he reformatted everything.'

Although in this quotation Saskia seems to act very tough towards her son, it also becomes clear that she is defending why she dares to ask for help and that she thinks it is 'well-behaved' that he helps her. By now, Saskia was very happy to say that she found other sources of help, amongst others WOW, so that she does not have to feel that obliged to and dependent on her son anymore (Interview Saskia: 4). Several other respondents also felt that WOW makes them less dependent on others, e.g. respondent 8 wrote

'I want to manage and maintain my own computer without being dependent on others'.

And respondent 13 wrote:

'I do not ask that many questions, my husband also knows a lot about computers. But sometimes I want to take care of things myself, and than I ask it at the list'.

Clearly, the help women receive from their own social network, e.g. friends and family, gives them the feeling that they are dependent on others. Whereas the help women give each other feels empowering to them, makes them feel more like 'taking care of things themselves'.

It may very well be that women easily feel guilty for asking help from friends and family members. WOW offers an alternative, as women can help each other. As Ester said in her interview:

'no one is trying to just get information out of it, it is much more an exchange.' (Interview Ester: 5).

WOW offers women the option to create an exchange, so that women can give something back for the help they get. Tosca, for example, said that in order to get help, you should help someone yourself as well. Because the level of skills and knowledge is so diverse, it is even possible for women without much knowledge to help other women who have even less knowledge. And some women saw the membership of WOW as a way to give something back for the help they got, as Ans for example said (interview Ans: 8).

All in all, creating a community where women can help each other seems to be an effective inclusion strategy in making women less dependent on their own social network, if they have such a network at all. According to Correll, a 'community (...) is characterized (...) by factors such as a high degree of personal intimacy, moral commitment, and social cohesion.' [Correll, 1995 #324: 271] The board of WOW has tried to create a sense of community amongst the users of the mailing lists by introducing a netiquette, which is partly maintained by moderators, in which the women feel that 'there are no stupid questions', an atmosphere which is friendly and respectful to each other. To safeguard this atmosphere, the founders of WOW restricted access to the mailing lists to women-only. How effective

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were the netiquette and the women-only strategy in creating a safe environment in which women can feel commitment to each other and a sense of cohesion?

As many other respondents, respondent IV was very enthusiastic about the atmosphere on the list. She is a member of many lists, and according to her the WOW mailing lists 'are the only mailing lists where people behave and where it is never deadly quiet.' Similarly, Saskia told us that

'people are not offending each other, are taking each other seriously and no-one is treated in a degrading way about not knowing elementary information' (interview Saskia : 11).

Although the moderators are relevant in maintaining this atmosphere, according to Saskia, it has also been growing like this from the start:

'at first WOW was a small community, and slowly about 1000 people have joined it but because the right culture already was there, it just keep going on like that, just like with a small soccer club, for example that grows but maintains its culture' (Saskia: 15).

So the users of the WOW mailing list also have some sort of self-regulation, as Tosca said, regularly one of the contributors to the mailing list will state 'a stupid question does not exist' (Interview Tosca: 4). Several respondents contrasted the atmosphere in the mailing lists of WOW with the 'rude', 'harsh' and 'unhelpful' atmosphere in other mailing lists, in which 'Read The Fucking Manual' is a commonly given answer.<sup>1</sup>

## 5.1 Battling the binary: women only?

The Board of WOW has consciously decided to create WOW as a women-only place. By keeping men away from the lists, the board tries to create a supporting environment where everyone who asks a question is dealt with respect. But can such a 'respectful' atmosphere not be created in a mixed list? Why is it important to the subscribers that the lists are not accessible to man? Although none of the questions in the questionnaire directly addressed this question, the unsolicited answers the respondents gave to these questions, were revealing and made clear that this was a crucial point of the mailing lists of WOW.

Several women wrote that WOW was the first place where they, as a woman working with computers, received some respect. Respondent VI wrote that in the mailing lists of WOW

'every question and problem is taken seriously, and not in a way like 'and there we have her again'.

Respondent 1 wrote:

'what attracted me was that knowledge about computers was given without being degrading'.

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<sup>1</sup> Another interesting Dutch inclusion initiative, the 'genderchangers academy', mentions this 'Read The Fucking Manual' reply as follows: 'Making people expect "RTFM" as bloody advice is proven to be an effective means to keep people out.' Similar to WOW, their initiative is aimed at women only and based on providing answers instead of referring to manuals. (<http://www.genderchangers.org/>)

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Several answers made clear that such a respective environment is hard to find amongst men. As respondent 8 wrote:

‘in shops and at the telephone with helpdesks, there are always men and they seem to think that women cannot do anything with computers. I do not always feel like engaging in that battle. And at home it is also not easy.’

Similarly, respondent IX wrote:

‘I was attracted to WOW because it gave me the feeling that there are more women who are knowledgeable about computers and who are fed up with men who do not take you seriously in your hobby’.

Apparently, several respondents had been met with a lack of respect by men about their interest in and knowledge about computers.

Whether or not men are to blame for giving women the feeling that they should not be working with computers, it seems clear that women come from a position that they feel they have to defend themselves. Some struggle with their own doubts and seem to have internalized the feeling that women and computers do not go well together and express a feeling of surprise about the level of knowledge they found amongst the women of WOW. As respondent 13 wrote

‘another effect of WOW is that I now know for sure that women are allowed to be on the internet and with computers. Sometimes, people are laughing a bit about women and the computer. I do not know as much as some women of WOW, but I do think that most women on the list have a considerable amount of knowledge.’

Respondent 2 clearly expressed how, before WOW, she did not feel that, as a woman, she ‘belonged’ to IT:

‘WOW (...) gives me the feeling that ‘I belong to it’, because of this, I have started taking myself more seriously in the area of computers. Nowadays, I follow a masters education media design, but WOW remains a very important source of information and support’.

All in all, WOW helps women to ‘battle the binary’, to challenge the dominant image of women as not being competent with computers. A notion which can be found amongst men in the ‘outside world’, but which also seems to be deeply embedded in the women themselves.

How does WOW help women to battle the binary and their own lack of confidence in their skills? First and foremost, the role model that women give each other seems crucial. By reading the problems other women face with computers, respondent 10 writes that she has learned

‘it is good to know that you are not the only one that hits a problem now and then. And it is also good to know that a problem is not always caused by yourself.’

Moreover, as Tosca said:

‘by reading how others deal with computer problems (...) I get the sense ‘I could also learn it!’ (Interview Tosca: 4).

Similarly, Maartje said:

'I have become so stubborn, I think: if others can do it, then why should I not be able to do it? And if I then do something wrong, I can always throw out a question to the group' (interview Maartje: 6).

From this quotation, it seems clear that having help immediately available in the form of the mailing lists is also crucial in giving women enough self confidence to 'even- screw open my computer', as Tosca said (interview Tosca: 3). Last but not least, women also support and encourage each other in being bold and taking themselves seriously. As Tosca said in her interview:

'WOW was most relevant for me because of the confidence and the morale support that they have given me and that I needed in order to work independently as an entrepreneur. Sometimes women on the list will write about 'their own little enterprise' and then some of the women will reply 'come on, women, we do not have a small enterprise, we have our own company' (interview Tosca: 2).

It seems that women not only empower each other regarding computers and the Internet, but also in other areas. From observations in the past, the researchers have seen several instances where women in WOW i.e. took the initiative to protest against sexist advertisements, or where women supported each other in being more assertive to sexist behavior by people in shops.

As a result of these kinds of encouragements, role models and support, several respondents have started their own company in IT, have chosen a career in IT or are much more confident in using their computer. As Maartje said:

'I have become much more bold: in the past I would not even have thought of installing something differently than what is prescribed in the program' (interview Maartje: 13).

Similarly, respondent IX wrote:

'WOW has made me more self-confident about my knowledge about computers; I have gained knowledge and dare to use it'.

These effects can also be found in table 6:

	<b>I have gained access to relevant information</b>	<b>New connections with people</b>	<b>More self confidence regarding computers</b>	<b>More positive image about computers</b>	<b>No effect</b>
<b>Number of lurkers out of 10:</b>	6	4	8	4	0
<b>Number of original respondents out of 20:</b>	13	12	8	6	3

**Table 6: How has WOW influenced the meaning computers and the Internet have for you?**

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More than half of the respondents have gotten more self confidence regarding computers and the Internet as a result of being a user of the mailing list and only three respondents have not noticed any effect in the meaning computers and the Internet have for them<sup>1</sup>.

## **5.2 Lurkers**

Hardly anything is known about lurkers, e.g., why do they subscribe to mailing lists, what are they interested in, what messages do they read and why don't they send in their own questions or responses? From the answers we got from the questionnaires, some comparisons between the backgrounds of the original respondents to the questionnaire and the lurkers can be made. As can be seen in annex 1 and 2, the original respondents send in contributions to the mailing list considerably more often than the self-defined lurkers. The comparison of the backgrounds of the two groups shows that the original respondents have, in general, been using the Internet for a longer period of time than the lurkers: three quarters of the original respondents had started to use the Internet before 1998, whereas only half of the lurkers started after 1998. More than half of the original respondents work in IT or even has their own company in IT, which is considerably less than the number of lurkers with a comparable profession. This offers part of the explanation of why lurkers do not respond as often as the other respondents to questions on the mailing lists: they feel they are less knowledgeable than other respondents.

A comparison of the way the original respondents and the lurkers have found out about WOW, shows that none of the lurkers had found out about WOW via 'people I know', whereas several of the original respondents were introduced to WOW by a friend or someone they know. This may partly be explained by the fact that they have been on-line for a longer period of time: when they started to use the Internet and joined WOW, information about it was not as widespread and people who did use the Internet were in the habit of 'sharing the secret' amongst each other. Moreover, search engines, the other common way of finding WOW, were not as good or commonly used as presently. A comparison of the answers to the questions in the other tables shows that in general, getting more self confidence regarding computers was one of the main effects of WOW for the lurkers and in general, WOW had a more radical impact in the use of computers and the Internet by lurkers than for the longer term users. The answer to this question may, however, be influenced by the fact that the original respondents had used WOW considerably longer before answering the questionnaire, so they may have incorporated their use of WOW to such an extent that they cannot recall as easily how WOW has effected their use of the Internet.

One of the main differences between lurkers and the original respondents is the importance of getting connections with other women. The original respondents answered more often that the 'who is who' part of the website was of importance to them, that they had been to

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<sup>1</sup> Several other advantages of using WOW were mentioned. WOW seems to be particularly helpful for women who work independently at home: respondent 17 and 9 both wrote that 'as a worker at home, the mailing list give me the feeling that I do not work on my own. It strengthens me if I can help someone now and then' (respondent 9) and respondent 17 wrote: 'as a homemaker, in the first place I find it cozy. Plus the In Real Life contacts that I have gained, people that I would never have met otherwise, so it is very enriching'. Respondent 11 and VI also mentioned that they found the connections they got with women 'that they would not normally get in touch with' (respondent VI) very valuable. Getting support with other than computer problems (respondent 11) and 'feeling connected with the Netherlands' (respondent II, who lives in another country) were also mentioned as valuable results of WOW.

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social drinks and found that attractive about WOW, and four respondents wrote that they were attracted to WOW because it offered the option to get in touch with other women, whereas this was not a pre-given selection option in the questionnaire. In table five, twelve of the twenty original respondents said that 'getting to know new people' had been an important effect of WOW. All in all, getting new connections with people seem to have been of more relevance to longer term users than to lurkers. This is reasonable, seeing that people who respond more to others on the list, also get more connections with people than people that only read contributions. This relation works also the other way around, users of WOW who are looking for connections with people can be expected to respond more often to questions on the list than others.

Despite these differences, in general it seems that the fourteen self-defined lurkers that responded were not that different from the respondents that the mailing list moderator had originally selected. Although they send contributions to the mailing list considerably less often, almost all of them had occasionally asked a question or replied to a question on the list (see annex II). Some have been active in the past but have stopped for a while ('I'm on a mail-diet', as one of the respondents wrote), others think they might become more active if, for example, they had a faster connection to the Internet, or if they felt that they had important information to add. Others seem not to respond for reasons of modesty, or because they have problems formulating questions and answers. As Ans said:

'others sometimes ask a question that I had wanted to ask and then I think 'o, yeah, that is what I wanted to know!'

It might very well be that mailing list discussions are not that different than ordinary group discussion, in which newer group members often are more silent until they feel more confident about the group habits and in which in general some people are more quite and prefer to listen more, whereas others are more outspoken and talkative.

## 6. Conclusions

From the questionnaires and the interviews, it has become clear that mailing lists are an attractive blend of information and community forming for the female respondents. Two third of the respondents had gained access to relevant information via WOW and the information they received was considered to be clear, tailor-made to the specific questions that women face, with a fast response rate and a high level of reliability. Because of WOW, almost all respondents indicated that they use computers and the Internet more, have more fun and use more different facilities. Even though not all female IT professionals found the technical information WOW provided relevant anymore, several indicated that WOW had motivated them to start a career in IT and they still found other kinds of information and support by their colleagues to make WOW an effective inclusion strategy for this specific group as well.

A comparison with more formal education initiatives may cast some doubts about the value of the information provided by WOW. The information that is provided is attractive to women because it often is very practical and geared to the specific problem one of the women confronts. Hence, the information is not always given in a pedagogical correct framework and more general and abstract information, that helps women to 'see the bigger picture', may not be provided to the extent that it could be useful.

Perhaps even more important than providing a platform where women exchange information, is the fact that WOW supports a women only social community. The 'women only' strategy was felt as essential by the respondents to help them 'battle the binary'. They

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felt lonely in a men's world, they felt like men were degrading them and their level of self confidence and their belief in the power of women was generally low before they entered the WOW community. Almost all responses indicated that WOW has helped women to feel empowered in the field of ICTs and that this was thoroughly needed, even in an equality oriented country as the Netherlands. As a result of WOW, more than half of the respondents gained self confidence regarding computers and the Internet and feel more independent and empowered. This may also explain why the women of WOW were enthusiastic about the relations they got with other women. In several other case studies, e.g. by Rommes on 'Internet Courses' and by Mackeogh 'Ivenos', female users were hesitant in meeting each other 'in real life', as they were afraid of being stigmatized as 'lonely women behind a computer that could not get any 'normal' relations with people'. In WOW, women seem to be very supportive to each other, encouraging each other to fight sexism and inequality. Women seem to be very proud of themselves and of WOW, for offering support to each other in the male-dominated world of ICTs. All in all, it seems WOW was most effective in offering role-models of women that were competent and felt confident, leading both beginners and women that worked in IT to feel more empowered to work with computers.

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## Annex I: Backgrounds of the original respondents to the questionnaire

<b>Respondent (number or name):</b>	1	Tosca	3	4	5
<b>(country of origin)</b>	NL	Brasil	NL	NL	NL
<b>Age respondent</b>	41	43	41	34	42
<b>Age child(ren)</b>	1	10	19; 8	-	-
<b>Educational background</b>	HIGHER PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION	University	SENIOR VOCATIONAL EDUCATION	University	University
<b>Profession</b>	Entrepreneur/journalist	Webdesigner/student	Housewife	Web director	Entrepreneur
<b>First experience computer/Internet</b>	1982/1995	1994/1997	2000/2000	1987/1995	1986/1990
<b>How often used per day/ how long per time logged in</b>	Couple of times a day/ all the time	always	Couple times a day/dag, 30 min.	Couple times a day/20 mins.	Couple times a day/15 mins
<b>Active for WOW</b>	Answers, has posed more than 100 questions	Answers questions/asked many questions	Answered a couple of times/asks questions	Answers/has asked couple of questions	Answers/has asked questions

<b>Respondent (number or name):</b>	6	7	8	9	10
<b>(country of origin)</b>	NL	NL	(Brasil)	NL	NL
<b>Age respondent</b>	50	49	50	45	56
<b>Age child(ren)</b>	25;27	18	16; 20	4	35
<b>Educational background</b>	HIGHER PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION	HIGHER PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION	HIGHER PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION	HIGHER PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION	HIGHER PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION
<b>Profession</b>	Webdesign	Secretary/housewife	Manager elementary school	Website building	Teacher IT/IT employee
<b>First experience computer/Internet</b>	1990/1999	1995/1997	1985/1996	1987/1996	1987/1995
<b>How often used per day/ how long per time logged in</b>	Half day	Couple times a day/60mins	Many times a day/	Couple times a day/20mins	Couple times a day/5mins
<b>Active for WOW</b>	Has been member of the board, daily answers, asked many questions	Answers/asks questions	Couple of questions asked/answered	New member, asks some questions. Especially active on webdesign lijst	Asks/answers couple of questions

<b>Respondent (number or name):</b>	11	12	13	14	15
<b>(country of origin)</b>	NL	NL	NL	NL	NL
<b>Age respondent</b>	32	45	43	40	30
<b>Age child(ren)</b>	-	11; 19;22	-	9;10	-
<b>Educational background</b>	SENIOR VOCATIONAL EDUCATION	SENIOR VOCATIONAL EDUCATION	Vocational education	Higher education	SENIOR VOCATIONAL EDUCATION
<b>Profession</b>	Administrative/financial employee; webmaster volunteer	Study secretary housewife	Course in literature Housewife	Supervisor KLM, volunteer telephone, housewife	System manager at Internet provider
<b>First experience computer/ Internet</b>	1988/1999	1995/1997	1996/1996	1988/1999	1992/1994
<b>How often used per day/ how long per time logged in</b>	Couple times a day/60mins	Many hours a day	Couple times a day/15mins		A lot
<b>Active for WOW</b>	Asks/answers questions (20)	Answers/asks questions (8)	Asks questions	Answers/asks couple of questions	Answers often/content for website/network building for courses

<b>Respondent:</b> <b>(country of origin)</b>	16 NL	17 NL	18 NL	Evelien NL	20 NL
<b>Age respondent</b>	41	62	26	26	51
<b>Age child(ren)</b>	6; 8	Married children	-	-	-
<b>Educational background</b>	HIGHER PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION (couple of years art academy)	University (not completed)	HIGHER PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION	University	SENIOR VOCATIONAL EDUCATION
<b>Profession</b>	Housewife	Graphical/webdesign	Journalist	Own company on webdesign/ Computer education	Volunteer board women's garage and fishing club, disability pension
<b>First experience computer/Internet</b>	1983/1996	1979/1997	1995/1996	1984/1994	1983/2000
<b>How often used per day/ how long per time logged in</b>	Couple times a day/15-120mins	All the time on-line	Couple times a day/30 mins	Often, e-mail couple times a day	Couple of times a day 30 mins.
<b>Active for WOW</b>	Couple of questions answered/asked	Answers questions/design folder	One question asked, member of other WOW lists	Moderator/ answer questions/ delivers content/asks questions	Answers now and then (couple of times a year)

## Annex II: backgrounds of the lurkers

<b>Respondent:</b> (country of origin)	I	II (Indonesian)	III Saskia	IV (Belgium)	V
<b>Age respondent</b>	42	49	56	58	38
<b>Age child(ren)</b>	-	30, 28	32, 26	-	7, 7
<b>Educational background</b>	Higher professional education	Senior vocational education	Higher education	University	Higher prof. educ. /university
<b>Profession</b>	Housewife, unemployed	Lay out small paper	Housewife	Maintains website for dutch literature	Speech therapist/ student health science
<b>First experience computer/ Internet</b>	1988/1998	1980/1996	1999/1999	1985/1997	1987/1998
<b>How often used per day/ how long per time logged in</b>	Couple of times a day/120 mins.	Couple of times a week/60 mins	Couple of times a day/30mins	14 hours per day	Couple of times a day/30mins
<b>Active for WOW</b>	Answers occasionally	Rarely answers because slow modem	Rarely answers a question	No, don't want to bother others with questions	Has occasionally posed a question, does not know answers

<b>Respondent:</b>	Marleen	VII	Marga	IX	Ans
<b>Age respondent</b>	43	42	33	39	51
<b>Age child(ren)</b>	15, 17	7, 8, 9	3, 6, 9, 12	3, 5	-
<b>Educational background</b>	Higher prof. educ.	University	Higher education	Higher prof. educ	Senior vocational education
<b>Profession</b>	Day care centre leader/housewife	Communication adviser	Owns company	Manager non-profit sector	Programmer /housewife
<b>First experience computer/Internet</b>	1996/1999	1987/1995	1984/1998	1987/1997	1982/1992
<b>How often used per day/how long per time logged in</b>	Couple of times a day/30mins	Couple of times a week/30mins	Couple of times a day/80mins	Couple of times a day/60mins	Once a day/7mins
<b>Active for WOW</b>	Occasionally answers questions	Occasionally answers questions	Gives courses, occasionally answers	Has asked a question/answered a question	Rarely answers, has set up a database for WOW

<b>Respondent:</b>	XI	XII	XIII	XIV
<b>Age respondent</b>	43	69	36	36
<b>Age child(ren)</b>	15	45, 42, 38	-	14
<b>Educational background</b>	Senior vocational education	Higher professional education	University	Senior vocational education
<b>Profession</b>	Disability pensino	Volunteer pc courses for elderly people /pensionate	Owns technical theatre company	Educational assistant/ housewife
<b>First experience computer/ Internet</b>	1989/2000	1992/1992	1984/1997	1997/1997
<b>How often used per day/ how long per time logged in</b>	Couple of times a day/always on line	Couple of times a day/10mins	Many hours per day	Couple of times a day/30mins
<b>Active for WOW</b>	Has asked a question	Used to give answers, does not feel like it anymore	Helps with several things, used to answer a lot of questions	Gives website advise, answers question now and then

## Annex III: tables of answers to the questionnaire with respondent

Links in other websites	People I know	Search engine	Magazine article	Other: Mailing list; HCC days
I; II; III; VI; VIII  1; 2; 6; 7; 10; 12; 13; 14; 18; 20	3; 4; 5; 9; 11; 15; 17	II; III; IV  2; 15; 19	I; VII  8	V; IX

Table 1: how did respondents find WOW?

Mailing list	Workshops/courses	Website who is who	Social drink	Home-page	Other: Contact with women	Website online course
I; IV; V; VI; VII; VIII  1; 2; 3; 4; 5; 7; 8; 9; 10; 12; 14; 15; 16; 17; 18; 20	I  1; 2; 5; 11; 14; 20	III  3; 5; 10; 11; 14; 17	I; VI  3; 5; 14; 20	III; VI  3; 5; 10	6; 11; 18; 19	2; 5; 11

Table 2: Answer of the respondents to the question 'what attracted you to WOW?'

Mailing lists	Homepage	Website who is who	Social drink	Online courses	Workshops/courses
All	I; III; VI; VIII; IX  1; 3; 5; 10; 11; 13; 19	VI; VIII  1; 3; 5; 6; 11; 13; 14; 19	VI; VII  3; 6; 9; 11; 12; 14; 19; 20	III  2; 5; 12; 20	VII; VIII  2; 11

Table 3: answers to the question 'What parts of WOW do you use?'

<b>I use it more</b>	<b>I have more fun in using computers / the Internet</b>	<b>I use more facilities</b>	<b>No effect</b>
I; V; VI; VII; VIII 3; 5; 7; 10; 11; 20	I; IV; V; VI; VIII 5; 7; 11; 13; 14; 20	I; III; V; VI; VII 1; 5; 9; 11; 12; 20	I; II 5; 13; 15; 17; 19

Table 5: answers to the question 'has WOW influenced your use of computers and the Internet?'

<b>I have gained access to relevant information</b>	<b>New connections with people</b>	<b>More self confidence regarding computers</b>	<b>More positive image about computers</b>	<b>No effect</b>
II; IV; V; VI; VIII; IX 1; 2; 4; 5; 6; 7; 8; 9; 10; 13; 17; 18; 20	I; IV; VI; VIII 1; 2; 3; 5; 6; 7; 11; 12; 13; 17; 19; 20	I; III; IV; V; VI; VII; VIII; IX 1; 2; 6; 7; 8; 11; 12; 13; 14	I; V; VI; VIII 6; 7; 11; 12; 13; 14	3; 15; 16

Table 5: How has WOW influenced the meaning computers and the Internet have for you?