Sex Discrimination and Law Firm Culture on the Internet: Lawyers at the Information Age
Watercooler by Amanda K. Baumle Making Virtual Worlds: Linden Lab and Second Life by
Thomas M. Malaby

Sex Discrimination and Law Firm Culture on the Internet: Lawyers at the Information Age Watercooler. By Amanda K. Baumle. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. Pp. x+197.

Making Virtual Worlds: Linden Lab and Second Life. By Thomas M. Malaby. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2009. Pp. x+165. $24.95.

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In the early years of the Internet it was commonplace for commentators to propound its dangers and virtues in sweeping fashion, announcing the implications of the Internet for whole swaths of society. Extreme utopian and dystopian visions sought to extrapolate social consequences from qualities of the technology. As the Internet became mainstream, however, and as our experience of it as an embedded aspect of everyday life has deepened, it has become harder to sustain such sweeping generalizations. In particular, much sociological work has been done to disaggregate the Internet phenomenon, exploring its diverse nuances and manifestations and its situated interpretations. It has gradually become clear that the Internet *is* society, thoroughly diverse and connected with the other manifestations of society in complex ways. Coming to grips with that diversity needs a rich repertoire of methodological strategies, some fresh for the Internet and others from disciplinary canon that are more recognizable. Amanda K. Baumle's *Sex Discrimination and Law Firm Culture on the Internet* and Thomas M. Malaby's *Making Virtual Worlds* explore very different aspects of the Internet. While both are ethnographically inspired, their approach to notions of field differs dramatically, and this difference has serious implications for their ability to situate observations of Internet activity as sociological contributions.

Baumle begins her book with a description of her own encounter with gender stereotyping as a practicing lawyer and sets out the paradox that while gender inequality, discrimination, and harassment are often encountered within legal practice, lawyers appear to be reluctant to take the perpetrators to court. She wonders why this should be so, and whether there is any prospect for improving the lot of women lawyers. In order to explore these questions she turns to a body of data provided by an anonymous discussion forum hosted on a web site. This data provides a rich perspective on the understanding that practicing lawyers have of the environment that they work in and the demeanors that they consider are required to achieve success. While Baumle suggests that some participants are helped by the discussions to name incidents that they have experienced as injurious, to allocate blame for the injury, and to consider making a claim for the situation to be remedied, in practice using legal means to challenge discrimination is often discouraged by other participants. Baumle considers, however, that the online discussions could in them-

selves help to ameliorate inequalities in the long run, by encouraging lawyers to frame unacceptable experiences in terms of rights of even where legal means of recourse are not actually followed through. She considers it positive that the online discussions show lawyers learning to speak of their own experiences of gender inequality in legal terms, under the protection of anonymity that the online discussion provides.

Web sites such as the discussion forum used by Baumle are an irresistible resource for sociologists, seeming as they do to provide ready access to naturally occurring data on almost any social phenomenon that might interest us. There are of course ethical issues to consider before treating such data as automatically available for analysis as a public record. There are also, however, significant methodological issues if we seek to take this data as a transparent mirror of an offline domain. Taking web site discussions, as Baumle does, as representative of how people think about an issue is methodologically problematic for a number of reasons: the participants in a discussion are a self-selecting and often very unrepresentative sample of the population as a whole; when a thread of discussion ends the analyst may be left with the misleading impression that everyone agrees with the final point; we have no access to the interpretation of messages on screen, both by participants and silent lurkers, nor how they might use what they read. While studying online discussions is an effective methodological strategy if we simply want to know how an online community enacts professional practice, it is inherently limiting if we want to explore the extent to which online discussions mirror and transform other social arenas. Further compounding this problem, Baumle confines herself to observing online interactions without participating in discussion or interacting with members. An important component of any ethnography is the challenge to the ethnographer's interpretations that comes from testing them out in dialogue with participants.

Baumle's book speaks to a sphere of contemporary professional practice that enacts strong hierarchies and rigid structures. In contrast, Thomas Malaby studies a domain of work that strives to enact a libertarian, hierarchy-free culture. Both books, to some extent, explore the reflection of an offline practice in the online domain, but while Baumle sees online discussions as fairly straightforwardly reflective of offline professional practice, Malaby explores the way that particular forms of professional practice bring an online domain into being. Malaby conducted an ethnographic study within Linden Labs, the company responsible for the popular online graphical virtual environment, Second Life. His ethnography involved spending time hanging out at the offices of Linden Labs in San Francisco as well as in the virtual environment itself, and exploring the ways in which the two are linked in practice and through sets of deeply held beliefs. The developers believe that the virtual world has to be built in such a way that users will find it enjoyable, and that part of this enjoyment depends on users experiencing themselves as having agency within the virtual world. The team of developers needs to be

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motivated and managed, but again its core belief is that creativity depends on expression of agency and avoidance of direct control. Malaby explores the dilemmas experienced by the producers of this virtual world as he observes them trying to manage both themselves and their product in a way that leaves sufficient space for creativity to be expressed.

Malaby argues quite compellingly that we need to pay serious attention to the practices and the values of those who are shaping the digital environments that are becoming available to us and that are becoming embedded in so many domains of social experience. He identifies the particular complex of beliefs about technology and governance that prevails at Linden Labs as "technoliberalism:" a set of beliefs that deploys technological contrivance as an alternative to conventional top-down governance, and have an inbuilt faith in emergence and contingency. Malaby situates his observations within an argument about the gamelike qualities of contingency and emergence that make virtual worlds compelling for their users even where, as in Second Life, there is no formal game structure. At the same time, he tells a fascinating story of the emergence of Linden Labs and its various forms of governance (and restraint from governance) during the period from December 2004 to January 2006, during which the number of employees doubled and the product moved from 13,000 users to hundreds of thousands of active users.

Each of these books addresses one fragment of the contemporary Internet. Both are ethnographic in their orientation, which leads them to take seriously the circumstances under which particular forms of discourse and practice become normalized. While Malaby's is the more sophisticated in its treatment of the conditions under which particular Internet social forms come into being and are experienced, both demonstrate the importance of paying detailed sociological attention to Internet phenomena as situated manifestations of contemporary existence. Once it was commonplace to treat the Internet as an esoteric domain separated from everyday life and hence, to a large extent, apart from everyday sociological concern as well. These two books in very different ways illustrate the highly consequential nature of the Internet for quite diverse forms of sociological interest. It will continue to be a serious matter to explore how virtual worlds arise in and become embedded aspects of society itself.

Sex Discrimination and Law Firm Culture on the Internet: Lawyers at the Information Age Watercooler 2009th Edition. by A. Baumle (Author). See all formats and editions Hide other formats and editions. Her examination of posts dealing with sex discrimination and sexual harassment in an online community for law firm associates challenges some of the assumptions of the legal mobilization literature...Highly recommended." - J. Aliotta, CHOICE. About the Author. AMANDA K. BAUMLE is Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of Houston, USA. She specializes in sociology of law, demography, and social inequality. Sex Discrimination and Law Firm Culture on the Internet: Lawyers at the Information Age Watercooler. By Amanda K. Baumle. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. Pp. x+197. Making Virtual Worlds: Linden Lab and Second Life. Christine Hine, "Sex Discrimination and Law Firm Culture on the Internet: Lawyers at the Information Age Watercooler by Amanda K. Baumle. Making Virtual Worlds: Linden Lab and Second Life by Thomas M. Malaby," American Journal of Sociology 116, no. 2 (September 2010): 719-721. https://doi.org/10.1086/658068. MOST READ. Racial Profiling and Use of Force in Police Stops: How Local Events Trigger Periods of Increased Discrimination. Legewie. Do the Poor Pay More for Housing? Exploitation, Profit, and Risk in Rental Markets. Sex Discrimination and Law Firm Culture on the Internet. Lawyers at the Information Age Watercooler. Amanda K. Baumle. Sex discrimination and law firm culture on the internet. Copyright © Amanda K. Baumle, 2009. Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2009 978-0-230-61325-6. All rights reserved. Baumle, Amanda K. Sex discrimination and law firm culture on the internet : lawyers at. the information age watercooler / by Amanda K. Baumle. p. cm. Includes bibliographical references and index. 1. Women lawyers—United States. 2. Sex discrimination against women—United States. 3. Law firms—Social aspects—United States. 4. Sex role in the work environment—United States. 5. Internet—Social aspects. I. Title. Sex Discrimination and Law Firm Culture on the Internet: Lawyers at the Information Age Watercooler by Amanda K. Baumle; Making Virtual Worlds: Linden Lab and Second Life by Thomas M. Malaby. Sex Discrimination and Law Firm Culture on the Internet: Lawyers at the Information Age Watercooler by Amanda K. Baumle; Making Virtual Worlds: Linden Lab and Second Life by Thomas M. Malaby (pp. 719-721). Review by: Christine Hine. DOI: 10.1086/658068. Reading 3: Law firm culture. Pre-reading task. A) Look through the following words to make sure that you know them, learn those you don't. solo [ ]. boutique firm [buːˈtiːk]. tremendous [trɪˈmendəs]. A small law firm, which typically engages from two to ten lawyers, is sometimes known as a boutique firm, as it often specialises in a specific area of the law. A mid-size law firm generally has ten to 50 lawyers, while a large law firm is considered to be one employing 50 or more attorneys. 2. Read about Richard, a law student, talking to a group of first-year law students at an orientation event at law school. He tells them about his experience as a clerk in different law firms.