

## Internet Technology Has Its Limits

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New Internet technology – or at least the advertising and marketing of it – promises that people's lives will dramatically change if they embrace the latest electronic products. But Michele White, associate professor of communication at Tulane, says that Internet sites and technologies do not equally empower people. Sometimes, they are constraining.



With ubiquitous access to the Internet through computers, iPads and smart phones, just how empowering is technology? Michele White, associate professor of communication, says it also can be constraining. (Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano)

Apple and other technology producers, according to [White](#), tend to claim that new products are better and inherently more empowering and encourage a culture of upgrading. A recent iPad advertisement on Apple's website promises individuals a “magical and revolutionary product.” By using the term “magic,” Apple displaces the workings of the iPad and the more banal and repetitive labor of individuals producing and using it, she says.

Individuals using the Internet are configured and directed to follow rules, says White. The Internet is not as freeing a place as is portrayed in some computer ads. For

example, on the Yahoo! portal and many other sites, one of the questions asked when registering is, what is your gender? The choices are male and female, and immediately a registrant is categorized.

In a related manner, eBay offers help for “finding the perfect gift,” encouraging people to “Wish for It,” using the gender-neutral pronoun “to acknowledge everyone and everything,” says White. But the gifts are divided into “For Him” □ with categories such as the “Brainiac” and “Mr. Fix It” □ and “For Her” □ with a division for “Domestic Goddess” and other stereotypical female labels.

White says, “It is important for individuals, including academics and students, to recognize how they extend traditional identities and beliefs when using these technologies.”

There are ways that we can “rethink these products, positions and engagements,” she adds.

White recently published “What a Mess: eBay's Narratives About Personalization, Heterosexuality and Disordered Homes” in the *Journal of Consumer Culture*. She's also the author of *The Body and the Screen* (MIT Press, 2006).