

To what extent can we talk about the design and use of ICTs as gendered?

In contemporary society, media and communication technologies, as are all other technologies, are gendered: in the way they are designed, produced and marketed as well as in the way that they are used. In the course of history, a more or less stable relationship between masculinity and technology has taken shape. Masculinity and technology are assumed to be intimately related to one another. It is argued that there is a definite “cultural association between masculinity and technology” (Grint and Gill: 3). Following on from this is the other popular assumption that all technology is created, designed by and there for masculine users. However, today’s generations and the future may hold some changes in the gendering of technologies.

To what extent have new Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) such as computers, computer-games, mobile phones and Internet sites come to signify masculinity? What may have begun as a “sexist humour about women’s technical incompetence” (Grint and Gill: 3) has now developed into something much more serious. Feminists have claimed that “social relations of technologies are gendered” (Cockburn: 32), and it is true that we cannot fully understand technology today without a “reference to gender” (Cockburn: 32).

Throughout history men have dominated technology.

“Masculinity and technology are conceived of as being symbolically intertwined, such that technical competence has come to constitute an integral part of masculine gender identity, and, conversely, a particular idea of masculinity has become central to our very definition of technology” (Grint and Gill: 8). Women “were distant from the laboratories, drawing offices and board rooms from which decisions about new technologies were emerging” (Cockburn: 36). The designing of Information Communication Technologies were gendered male to a huge extent. Even today, technologies are increasingly being designed by men, and therefore it is men’s interests that are shaping the outcome of technologies. Women are being excluded not only in the production process but also when it comes to what is suitable for these ICTs. Men produce the majority of products designed mainly for the use of women housewives such as washing machines and microwaves. Therefore, how can they be suitable for women to use? Men observe women in their family homes and try to interpret what they will find useful to aid them with their housework.

“Men are depicted as designing technologies, which are ‘inappropriate’ or even ‘pernicious for women’s use and male interests’ are said to shape their eventual form” (Grint and Gill: 13). The continuing design and development of technologies by men is leading to gendered technologies which are not suitable for women. Therefore it would be much more practical and cost effective for women to design the technologies that they are more likely to use.

However, “to talk about women and technology in the same breath seems strange, even incongruous. Technology is powerful, remote, incomprehensible, inhuman, scientific, expensive and- above all- male. What does it have to do with women?” (Faulkner and Arnold in Grint and Gill: 3). They suggest here that it is the common belief that women have nothing to do with technology. This to an extent this is completely true. The technology may be designed for women but it is certainly not by women. Any technological products that women will use are more than likely to come

from a male dominated design and production team. Therefore, these technologies are completely male gendered.

They continue to argue that any women designers or inventors of the past have been “hidden from history” (Grint and Gill: 3) and any past association with inventing technologies has now been replaced with woman’s fears and alienations of technology. To an extent I feel that this is true but I do not believe that women have a fear of technology, just that older female generations may have been excluded from the learning processes about technologies. Nowadays, both male and female children are taught the same things and I feel that they have the same technological competence. Therefore, in the future, there may be equal technologies designed by men and women and we will not have to address the ideas that ICTs are gendered and inherently masculine.

Although it is a popular belief that ICTs are mainly for male use, many feminists claim that this defines technologies in a way that excludes “both technologies which women invented and those which are primarily used by women” (Grint and Gill: 4). Although the design of ICTs may be completely male gendered, the use of them is not gendered masculine to the same extent. A perfect example of this is the telephone which may have been invented by a man and is mostly designed by men, but it is women who use it for their own purposes. The telephone could even be said to be gendered as a feminine technology. Women use the telephone for maintaining household activities and maintaining family relationships. “Gossip and chatter” (Rakow: 1988) are also activities that the telephone is used for. So we have to realise that the presumed link between masculinity and technology is just an “ideological link” (Grint and Gill: 4), when it comes to the use of certain technologies and the more women overcome this ideology, the less certain ICTs will be gendered as masculine.

There are many different types of feminist ideas on the subject of gendered technologies. The first is that of Eco-Feminists who see technology as a way “in which men try to dominate and control both nature and women” (Grint and Gill: 4). In some cases this statement may be true and many peoples ideologies have adapted to believe that it is men who are in control of technologies. In their view “society is presumed to be made up of two discrete cultures - a male (patriarchal) one and an undervalued female one” (Grint and Gill: 6). However, with changing times, these ideologies will also be forced to change and people will begin to realise that women are just as capable as men at designing and implementing technologies. Past experiences have limited women’s opportunities in this field but today and in the future this will change.

The second view is that of Liberal Feminists. They see technology as neutral and see men and women as being positioned differently in relation to it. These ideas support my views that it is the positioning and ideologies that need to change not the technologies. They follow on this argument stating that gender stereotyping has led to the assumption that women ‘lag’ behind men in the understanding of technologies. This is because they have, due to these continuous assumptions, adopted this role. Although this ideology sees women as the problem who need to adopt masculine ways of relating to technology, to an extent this is true. Women have constantly assumed that they are not able to work technologies. It is not uncommon in my household for the woman of the house to seek assistance with the VCR or her mobile phone because she assumes that she cannot work it. If they gain a little more confidence they would be just as able as men. As mentioned before, I feel that it is just the case of being able to overcome the ideologies that surround the gendering of

technologies. Nowadays, younger generations have similar roles when it comes to technology and the future will see technologies, which are not listed under any gender but are neutral.

Technologies are gendered due to history and culture. “Women’s alienation from technology is a product of the historical and cultural construction of technology as masculine” (Grint and Gill: 8). Women became alienated during the industrial revolution and development of Capitalism in the West. In factories, there was a “gendered division of labour” (Grint and Gill: 9). This began the divide and male dominance of technology. Machinery was designed for and by men as women were forced to enter into unskilled jobs. “Men were the technologists and technicians of the industrial revolution” (Cockburn: 34).

“The effect of male control of technologies- and women’s exclusion and alienation from it- is that the technologies produced for use by women may be highly inappropriate to women’s needs, and even pernicious as well as embodying male ideologies of how women should live” (Karpf in Grint and Gill: 10). Since the development of Capitalism, technology could be said to have become a masculine culture. Women have been seen as inferior because they have been unable to identify with technologies. “Men... resented and resisted women seeking to learn their skills and use their tools” (Cockburn: 1983). Our past history shows how ICTs are gendered. Fascist Italy could be seen as a prime example of this. Here, Mussolini saw “an incompatibility between women and machines and banned women from the operation of machinery in production” (Macciocchi in Cockburn: 41).

A typical feminist view is that women are disadvantaged due to being distanced from men’s technologies. The design of ICTs is “based on a masculine experience of domesticity” (Cockburn: 40). There are set roles for men and women in the making of a new technology. “The relations of this technology are relations of masculinity” (Cockburn: 41). In the design of technologies, women do not have any influence due to an ideology that has excluded them because “what we think of as ‘technology’ is the doings of men” (Cockburn: 41). However, on entering households, technologies can adopt a different gendering as they are viewed very differently by the different sexes. So although the designing of technology is gendered masculine to a huge extent, the use of some technologies is not. Many ICTs could even be said to be gendered the opposite way and that, to a large extent, they are feminine.

“Men are silent about the sewing machine, and often about the washing machine; women have nothing to say about the drill or, often the hi-fi” (Livingstone: 121). Ann Gray (1987, 1992: 336) studied how women relate to television and popular culture in the home. Women consume ‘feminine’ media genres using the VCR to tape their favourite soap operas in order to watch them at a later date free from the derogatory comments that their husbands might pass on them. In these nuclear families that were studied, domestic technologies are used differently by men and women. Women state how important domestic technologies are to their lives whereas men see them as luxuries that they could live without. This could have a lot to do with the roles adopted by men and women at home but it also shows how the different technologies adopt different genders. Technology provides women with convenience when it comes to their responsibility of the housework. The ‘white’ goods such as the washing machine and tumble dryer are seen as necessities but the other coloured goods are there for the husband’s luxury.

Women use these technologies in order to keep their domestic activities under control. Men use the technologies in order to exercise some power over some thing. They see

ICTs as “purely functional” (Livingstone: 119) and even as a “substitute for social contact” (Livingstone: 121). Women on the other hand assess the “utility of objects” (Livingstone: 120) and see technologies as a way to “facilitate social contact” (Livingstone: 121), for example the telephone.

The design and use of technologies is gendered to a huge extent, but in different ways. On the production line technologies are produced by men and could therefore be gendered as masculine. There has been a continuous ideology that women should not be included in the design of technologies so therefore, the design of technologies is a masculine activity. However, at the moment, there remain clear gender differences when referring to a technology, particularly accounting for the use of a particular technology within the home. Many have become largely gendered feminine within the home and their uses. It seems that throughout history, technologies have become gendered, firstly in their manufacturing and then in their uses and this still remains today. There are definitely different gender relations when it comes to technology and ICTs are gendered both in their use and their design. Ultimately, ICTs are gendered to a large extent in both areas. Male in their design and feminine in their uses in the home as necessities.

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