

A Complex View of Technological Change in the UK

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INTRODUCTION

This article seeks to discuss women's ambivalent but potentially positive attitude to and relationship with new technologies, as exemplified by Internet and mobile technologies, using as an illustration the results of a UK-based qualitative study into women's perceptions of technological change. The research sought to investigate how individuals understand recent technological developments, analysing the data in the light of theoretical discussions of new technologies and the information society, as well as feminist analyses of gender and technology.

The spread of information and communication technologies has been rapid and significant. For instance, the number of UK households that are connected to the Internet has increased steeply from 9% in 1998 to 52% in 2004, while also in 2004, 37% of UK adults had not yet used the Internet. Meanwhile, individual ownership of cellular phones has increased swiftly to over 70% (Office for National Statistics, 2004). This implies a considerable range of experience and inexperience of new technologies amongst the general public currently. Government policy has also impacted the diffusion of ICT in the United Kingdom, as elsewhere. In particular, the development of the People's Network of Internet access points in public libraries throughout the United Kingdom has been a prominent strand in the government's information policy (Library and Information Commission [LIC], 1997), aiming to make new technologies widely available to the citizenry and requiring people working in this field to become Internet literate, with implications for library staff at all levels of employment. Indications are that the People's Network may be altering the library-user demographic, and that many people are experiencing the Internet for the first time via the public library ("Beardy-Weirdies' Rule," 2003).

These developments led to an interest in perceptions of technological change, particularly among those working in the library sector, as a site of government information policy. The focus of the research was women working in this field, but it was complemented by a further sample of women with little or no experience of new technologies. The intention behind this was to provide a rich variety of data whilst maintaining a focus on individuals who are less often the subject of research on new technologies. The study took an interpretive perspective, utilising in-depth, semistructured interviews with 50 women as described above during the period of 2001 to 2002, and using grounded theory to analyse the resulting data. This approach favours the development of concepts that are rooted in the data, useful for an exploratory project, which can be subsequently compared to and placed in the context of existing literature and theory. An overview of the central theoretical contexts of the project is presented below followed by a discussion of the results and their wider relevance.

BACKGROUND

Women have long been dominant in the library field, accounting for upwards of 70% of the employees in the UK and U.S. library sectors (Harris, 1999), and they have been the focus of some research in this respect, particularly in the field of information studies, from which this project originates. Underrepresented at the higher end of the salary scale, their dominance at the lower or nonprofessional end is marked. It has been argued that the predominance of women in a profession may negatively impact its status (Harris, 1992). In fact, gender relations are becoming increasingly important in the library sphere, as this traditionally "female-inten-

sive” profession becomes a “technologically dense site,” and as yet, insufficient attention has been paid to this issue (Dilevko & Harris, 1997, p. 719). Technological change may de-skill women or downgrade their traditional roles in the library sphere, although Harris also points out an often-positive attitude to such change in the workplace (1992, 1999). Of course, women have been using technology in libraries long before the advent of the Internet, and are understood to have been “intensive systems users” throughout the 1980s (Green, Owen, & Pain, 1993, p. 132). A more recent development, however, as noted above, is the way that government policy, in the United Kingdom at least, seeks to engage library workers at all levels with new technologies.

The broad framework for the research was the concept of the information society and discussions of social and technological change within this context. There is an ever-growing body of work on the information or network society, for example, Castells’ (2000) key study of the information age. Within the field of information studies, literature focuses on the role of the information worker or information policy in the United Kingdom, as well as wider analyses of technological change (Dearnley & Feather, 2001; Feather, 2002). Some authors take a critical perspective toward the concept of the information society itself or the hyperbole that seems to attach to it, and to the technological developments that are understood to underpin it (Garnham, 2000; Golding, 2000; Robins & Webster, 1999; Webster, 2002).

Clearly, then, there are many examples of theoretical analyses of the information society and new ICT. In recent years, there has also been a welcome increase in the number of empirical studies that investigate the role, use, and place of the new technologies such as the Internet in everyday life, helping us to ground our understanding more firmly in the context of individuals’ lived experience (Wellman & Haythornthwaite, 2002; Woolgar, 2002). It is this developing understanding to which it is hoped the current article contributes.

An important perspective also comes from feminist analyses of women and technology, particularly gender and technology studies that theorise the social construction and gendering of technologies (Adam, 1998; Cockburn, 1994; Faulkner, 2001; Grint & Gill, 1995; Kirkup, 1992; Wajcman, 2000). In

terms of empirical research, much literature attests to the differences in experience of and attitudes toward computers between men and women, although many studies also acknowledge other cultural factors involved. It has been argued that as the Internet becomes pervasive, women’s attitudes to it become increasingly important. It is less and less a matter of “take it or leave it” as it becomes harder to avoid engaging with ICT, therefore it becomes ever more vital to understand how women think about and deal with technology in their everyday lives (Li, Kirkup, & Hodgson, 2001).

EXPERIENCE AND PERCEPTIONS OF ICT

Many of the women interviewed for this project expressed very positive attitudes toward new technologies, or at least some aspect of them (the Internet, cell phones), which may be understood as an encouraging sign for women’s future relationship with ICT and the information society. This was especially evident among library staff that had some regular access to the Internet at work. However, it was by no means a universal or consistent expression, and many sceptical or critical points of view were also articulated. Most commonly evident was a sense of ambivalence toward new technologies and their apparent social implications. It is helpful to think in terms of a shifting continuum of attitudes, ranging from the dismissive and highly sceptical to the positive and enthusiastic. Most points of view existed somewhere between these points and were flexibly dependent upon the type of technology being discussed, its location, and mode of use. Ambivalence is articulated in particular ways in the women’s talk, as described below. The concept is examined here in terms of how it is apparent in the data and how seemingly contradictory attitudes are reconciled, or at least enabled to coexist, as individual women make sense of and integrate social and technological change into their everyday lives.

Many women, particularly those who regularly used new technologies such as the Internet, reported positive or empowering experiences. This ranged from simply overcoming their doubt and suspicion of a new technology, to being regular, enthusiastic

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