

Chapter 3

Globalization, Information and Communication Technologies, and Women's Lives

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ABSTRACT

In considering women's relationship to information and communication technologies (ICTs), it is important to look at the historically embedded gender inequalities that exist in the areas of science and technology as well as examining the creative and entrepreneurial uses of ICTs in which women around the world are engaged. The picture of globalization and ICTs and women's lives is highly complex, reflecting structural problems but also new dynamics that have contributed to empowering women and global women's movements.

INTRODUCTION

The stories of globalization and information and communication technologies (ICTs) are heavily intertwined, with the latter facilitating many of the boundary-crossing possibilities of the former whether we are thinking of the iconic nature of the global financial industry, the boom in software outsourcing contributing to the growth of the Indian digital economy (Sudan et al., 2010), or the boost to the global women's movement launched by the emphasis on ICTs and networking at the UN fourth world conference on women in Beijing in 1995 (Harcourt, 1999). As we move into the

second decade of the 21st century the history of ICT developments is becoming as much a concern as their future prospects. In other words, while the technological developments continue at break-neck speed, there is also a series of progressive stages and their uneven impacts to look back on. This is notably the case with the relationship of ICTs to women and their lives and opportunities. ICTs have brought many changes and possibilities for women, which they have harnessed individually and collectively in cultural, political and economic arenas. But the historically embedded gendered characteristics of science and technology and their dominant masculinist character

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and power structures continue to impact on the uneven access and influence of women in virtual transformations.

This short contribution will begin by reflecting a little on the recent gendered history of ICTs and globalization. It will then discuss two areas that are key to the diverse roles of ICTs in the daily lives of women and girls and their future potential as citizens and economic actors. These are: creativity and innovation, and autonomy and freedom. The picture presented is one that argues for looking back as well as looking forward, for recognizing that we still have much to learn about the past in relation to gender and technology and that this will be essential for harnessing the full potential of ICTs in women's lives in the future. This is not an easy argument to make in the context of the multitudinous and rapid technological changes of contemporary times, but it is one that from many perspectives, has much to offer as I will seek to illustrate here. There is a tendency as one new technical possibility leads quickly into another to assume that we are rushing towards some kind of brave new future where all barriers will be overcome. While this may ultimately well be the case, or at least to a significant extent, we need to be aware that historical influences and the gendered inequalities related to them cannot be instantly wished away, and that they have impacted on and continue to differentially impact on the parts that women and men play and, equally importantly, envision themselves playing in the new virtual world.

So the picture I want to present here is a complex one that seeks to unpack some of the nuance involved in thinking about gender and ICTs in ways that take into account two main areas. First, the innovative forms of agency, which have been shown from the outset of the Internet era by women and organizations pursuing and aiming to develop their digital interests, engagement and awareness. Second, the many structural technical, economic and political factors shaping and inhibiting these processes, and, equally importantly, the potential

for digital identities and creativity associated with them. This discussion will therefore be distant from a strictly utilitarian (tools-based) view of ICTs. In common with most gender analysis, it adopts instead a socially and historically grounded approach that pays as much attention to context as to the specific applications of certain technologies.

The chapter also includes some consideration of the history of ICTs and changes that have occurred within that history and their importance to thinking about the present and future possibilities for these technologies in relation to women's identities, social prospects and roles. The speed and ubiquity of changes in hardware and software of the ICT era give it quite naturally a forward-looking thrust and that is unlikely to change or to slow down. But now that we have some years of this new virtual world behind us there are increasingly opportunities for looking back and seeing what has happened so far to help us move forward perhaps in more insightful and useful ways. We might chart three major stages of the Internet in this regard: before and after the arrival of the world wide web in the early 1990s and the social networking (web 2.0) innovations which followed on 15 years later. While there is much to say about these stages (see, for example: Berners-Lee, 1999 and Gauntlett, 2010) there is only space here to touch on a few aspects.

Over the history of the Internet it has increasingly become a more public and mass space. Nevertheless foundational applications like email have had enduring 'killer' characteristics in their ongoing core uses in work and private life as direct and flexible one to one, one to many and many to many means of communication. The general online trends have also included increasing interactivity and multimedia use (note the immense success of social networking phenomena like Facebook and the video site YouTube). So not only has the number and nature of users expanded but also the number and nature of uses, and the technical developments of the latter have been highly influential in the former and to some extent vice versa. In

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