RAZÓN Y PALABRA
Primera Revista Electrónica en América Latina
Especializada en tópicos de Comunicación.

género y comunicación

Número 9, Año 2, Noviembre - Enero 1997-98

New Technologies, Old Issues

by: Angharad N. Valdivia
valdivia@ux1.cso.uiuc.edu

New technologies is a historically relative term. We are not the first generation to wonder at the rapid and extraordinary shifts in the dimension of the world and the human relationships it contains as a result of new forms of communication, or to be surprised by the changes those shifts occasion in the regular pattern of our lives. If our own experience is unique in detail, its structure is characteristically modern... In a historical sense, the computer is no more than an instantaneous telegraph with prodigious memory, and all the communications inventions in between have simply been elaborations on the telegraph's original work (Marvin, p. 3)

The future of cyberspace, therefore, will be determined not only through the invention of new hardware and software but also through the names we employ to describe it. What cyberspace becomes will, to a great extent, depend upon whatwe call it. (Gunkel¿ and Gunkel, p.133)

Technologies of gender. Technologies of the nation.

Modern technologies. These are all ways in which the themes to this special issue are taken up either by contemporary theorists or by those who have influenced contemporary theorists. However, unlike Gunkel and Gunkel suggest, this is much more than a matter of name choice though as Marvin asserts the terminology might be new but the issues and debates are not. It is a matter of keeping our historical wits (1) about us. As Marvin reminds us, all old technologies were once new. Dating as far back as the printing press, to pick an arbitrary time and technology, society and culture have reacted to new technologies with both a fear of its dystopian ramification as well as a celebration of its utopic¿ potential. Would telegraph lines decrease children's growth? Would radio finally bring together the rural and urban parts of the United States? Would television erase geopolitical difference? Will the net and cyberspace bring democratic access to vast storages of archived and newly developed intelligence? These are all questions which we encounter if we conduct a cursory overview of the reaction and reception to what we now call modern new technologies, which in contemporary media studies we date back as far as the turn of the century and the coming of the telegraph.

Of course, all of the above questions and concerns do not include, or at least, do not foreground, gender. As Rakow (1986) admonished us, as feminist communications scholars we need to consider gender in theory– that is, how theoretical traditions include or deploy gender as a system— and in practice—that is, how gendered subjects, both women and men, function within any theoretical formation in terms of both theorizing and being theorized. I particular when speaking of issues of technologies and gender, we threaten to disturb some cherished notions about progress, utopias, and life in general. However, in the absence of gender, we face a very partial picture of the relationship between technology and society. Thus we can ask another set of gendered questions. Would telegraph lines interfere with women's fertility ? Could we

broadcast birth control information on the radio? Could we educate home ridden housewives with television? Can women remain both mothers and workers through the use of telecommuting ?

In order to move beyond the repetition of the oft said and into the realm of careful scholarship, the issue of women and new technologies has to be discussed from both a theoretical and a historical perspective which enables the study of gender in theory and in fact. Too often current and previous discussions take on a nearly hallucinatory tone which ignores social, political, and historical facts and trends which would temper dystopic and utopic discussions if taken into consideration. As such all of us, especially women in general, and women at the geopolitical margins in particular, need to carefully examine and consider new technologies issues from an integrated framework of analysis which extends beyond the purely technological potential of so–called new technologies. We cannot forget that technologies have to be used and deployed within concrete settings, more often than not less than the ideal situation for the machinery itself let alone for the system of social relations which is assumed to accompany it.

To proceed with such a project, this essay, much like Felski's work(1995) will attempt to unravel the complexities of technology's relationship to women and the extent of popular culture's theorizing about the gender of technology. For if modernity is composed of both masculine and feminine tensions, so is the development and deployment of technology, a key factor in the historical and temporal construction of modernity. In theoretical terms, the very theories of modernity and modernization assumed gendered uses and deployment of technology (Valdivia, 1996). I am, of course, particularly interested in communications technologies, as these are both the focus of this special issue and the area of my training and expertise, but these general issues can be applied to the study of technology in general, at least in its deployment if not its content components.

Technology comes up over and over in popular culture theory (e.g. Strinati, 1995). Mass culture theorists seemed to fear new communications technologies for it threatened to be a component of what would eventually unseat the established and powerful social institutions, including the intellectuals' position as arbiters of taste and knowledge. Although technology is not necessarily a major focus of mass culture critique, it lurks in the immediate background. Thus both radio and film are seen to contribute to the unwashed and uncultured tastes of the increasingly alienated and atomized masses. As many have noted (Huyssen, 1986; Strinati, 1995), within this theoretical school, the masses and mass culture are often referred to in derogatory and feminine terms.

Frankfurt School theorists also envisioned technology as a nefarious force which in tandem with rationalist and capitalist modes of production and reproduction would provide the working class with false needs. For example Adorno (1941) both feminized and infantilized the duped audiences who, he claimed, were seduced by false needs in pseudo individualistic pursuits and desires. Technology, in his vision, was harnessed to the project of ideologically dominating an implicitly female gendered audience. m For rationality, even in his anti–Enlightenment critique, Adorno reserved only largely for men. Mattelart's (1986) work on women's magazines exemplifies the application of the Frankfurt School approach to issues of gender, technology, and modernity. The easily and widely available magazines further circumscribe women through standardization masked by a pseudo-individual set of messages which carry the coercive and repressive character of a class system (Ibid.). As a dissonant voice within the Frankfurt School, Benjamin (1970) defended art in the age of mechanical reproduction for its democratic potential of bringing art and art criticism to the masses. However, a critique of this latter theoretical move takes us back to gender in that Benjamin did not pause to consider power differentials within the masses and between the masses and the elites or the producers of mass media.

While it's quite fashionable within academic circles to dismiss both mass society and Frankfurt School analyses, popular press discussions about new technologies continue to implicitly draw on these two theories. Much less often we encounter structuralism and semiotics though neither of these were particularly attentive to issues of gender until feminists took them up as a corrective and sometimes foundationally¿ challenging move. We can safely conclude that early theories of popular culture ignored gender both in theory and in practice. At some very surface level, women were not even part of the body of intellectuals, let alone the focus of theorizing.

However, even women–centered projects such as the Women in Development (WID) sub–discipline, took up the artifact component and not the theoretical analysis. From within the development project otherwise known as modernization, both scholars and practitioners could not help but notice that women existed in the

so–called third world yet were not only not the focus, but nearly ignored by agencies and governments. Technology and gender figure prominently here as both access to technology and the ability to invest in technology were not open to women. In most settings women were simply not allowed to apply for credit. Similarly in most settings women had no access to technological training. When you take a geographical area such as sub–Saharan Africa where women accounted for 90% of the agricultural production, the displacement occurring from limiting women's access to technology and credit could be great indeed. Obviously, one corrective move was to make technology, training, and credit available to women. However, on a theoretical level issues of reliance on externally developed technologies and modes of development were not as easily nor obviously forthcoming.

I take the time to mention the WID example because it is very instructive in terms of current debates and discourses about new technologies. They are everywhere yet they are not. Yes, we all have access to new technologies. We must, otherwise we would not be publishing in nor reading this electronic journal whose special issue focused on women and technology. But the question we need to ask ourselves is ÀÒ -Àwho are we? We are women. We are academics. We are literate and have more or less uninterrupted flows of electricity. As such we are also all computer literate. We could probably all think of obstacles or fears that we've encounted when facing new technologies, whatever these may have been. Remember what the title of Marvin's book: When old technologies were knew. A recent meeting of the Colloquium (see endnote 1) revealed that depending on our age and background, we all had a very diverse variety of first encounters with the technology we call computers. For some of us this technology was newer than for some others. In particular a nine–year–old participant was born into a computer rich household whereas several others could recount a number of attempts to break into the world of computers. The fact is there were about 20 of us there who currently use computers in more or less dedicated ways. Yet we also knew, as our research has documented (Taylor et al, 1993; Spender, 1995; Kramer and Kramarae, 1997) that not everyone on the university, let alone on a global scale, has access to new technologies. Anything from access to electricity, ability to read, or affordability¿ and a climate of learning oriented toward males tend to keep large numbers of women from exploring the liberatory potential of cyberspace and computers as the new technologies. This does not even include institutional issues of ownership and control of the net and the seemingly inexorable drive to turn the net into a profitable—read, commodified, venture so that more and more of what we once did for free on the net is being incorporated into the pay–per area of usage. This development will make issues of affordability and access even more intense as a dividing factor between the new technologies haves and have nots.

To add to the dystopian picture I've begun to outline, the modern dynamic within the computer industry to develop new and improved ways to deliver hardware and software to consumers, means that nobody but the wealthiest individuals and institutions can keep up with the cutting edge aspects of cyberspace. I need not tell you, that the "cutting edge" of yesterday is today's doorstop and tomorrow's trash. Remember 8–tracks? Indeed, a sobering thought! Finally, another scary proposition— Internet Addiction Disorder (IAD). While still in its infancy, there is a process whereby this particular affliction might get categorized as a medical condition. As women we should have learned to fear such disorders for more often than not they tend to be used against women. Current cases in the courts include one attempt to deny custody to a single mother because her exhusband claims IAD makes her neglect her children. Throw in together telecommuting and IAD and you have a potential timebomb for single mothers with a career! (2)

However not all visions are dystopian. As Felski (1995) writes out modernity so can be said of the current batch of new technology. Dystopia co–exists with utopia in a complicated manner. Thus we have the creation of such groups as WITS which provide interdisciplinary support and collaboration between women using computer technologies. Or as Spender (1995) writes, girls and women can hardly ignore the possibilities which cyberspace opens up for us. We cannot let fear of technology prevent us from exploring these possibilities. However, we should remember that the possibilities were there since the telegraph.

The telegraph, by sending nearly instantaneous intelligence over wire, ushered in the obsolescence of semaphoric systems of communications and enabled both increased safety for railroads and the development of the modern press. Radio technology which was originally envisioned as ship to shore communication and later as the entertainment form of a.m. radio through the use of the electromagnetic spectrum increased maritime safety and the development of broadcasting networks, whose reach would incorporate later technologies of f.m. radio, vhf and uhf, black and white and color television, cable broadcasting, and satellite. All of these new technologies promised greater access, diversity in content, and democratic potential. In that

sense computers and cyberspace as deployments of electronic technology promise some similar benefits in a faster and more expensive form.

At this point as feminist scholars I urge us to revisit something I learned in my "Introduction to Women's Studies" course eons ago. Feminism is a double pronged project, including scholarship and activism. We have plenty of scholarship to suggest that new technologies though great in potential by and large do not end up being used for the benefit of women or the human race for that reason. We need to break out of that "post–socialist" framework of analysis and activism which pre–empts a vision of possible alternatives (Fraser, 1997). To do so we need to embrace activism. We have to educate ourselves on the development and deployment of technologies. How available are these in our own communities? Not just in academia but in the larger communities in which we live? Do girls have as much access to computers as boys do in the local school system? You might be surprised at the answer. Can we somehow use this technology to incorporate home ridden senior citizens, differently abled¿, and any others into the larger life of the community? Can community centers have new technology rooms so people can do anything from surfing the net to running collaboratories¿ on any number of topics? Once we begin addressing some of the local issues, we need to think globally as well. How can we communicate with other communities nationally and internationally? What can be gained from such an experience? Could we facilitate access for less resource rich communities? Can we make training available? Are we open to the possibility of being trained ourselves? These are but some of the many questions we ought to be asking and trying to intervene in ourselves as individuals and members of advocacy groups. If we just sit back, use our computers, surf the net, and let it go at that, we'll be partly responsible for the impeded potential of yet another great new technology.

Endnotes :

(1) I use this term "wits" tongue in cheek, for it is the acronym for a very wonderful colloquium to which I have the honor of belonging, the Women in Technology Scholarship [WITS] colloquium here at the University of Illinois where a broadly inter–disciplinary group of women has been meeting for the past seven years to discuss issues of technology from a range of perspectives.
Back

(2) I owe my knowledge of this particular subject to Lori Reed who is conducting research on IAD.
Back

About the author:

Angharad N. Valdivia researches and teaches at the Institute of Communications Research at the University of Illinois. Her main areas of interest are gender, popular culture, and Latin America or US Latina/Latino Studies. She is the editor of Feminism, Multiculturalism and the Media: Global Diversities [Sage, 1995] and of the forthcoming Culture and Communication section of the Global Women's Encyclopedia. She has just finished a book entitled Gendered Identities and Media Culture: Essays in Multiculturalism and has published in numerous journals including the Journal of Communication, the Journal of International Communication, Camera Obscura, the review of education/pedagogy/cultural studies, the Journal of Inclusive Education, and Cultural Studies Review.
Back

Regreso al índice de esta edición