# Chapter 7
# Technology, Gender, and Professional Identity

## ABSTRACT

*On its surface, technology does not appear to be a topic that is gendered. Both men and women use technology, and it must, therefore, be shaped by those who use it. However, both technology and gender are dependent on cultural, social, and historical contexts. These contexts shape how technologies are designed and used and how technologies and gender is understood. Currently, information technologies are associated with masculinity. In a similar manner, librarianship is gendered. Not only is the demographic makeup of the profession female-intensive, with approximately 80% of all LIS professionals being women, but some have argued that its core professional values, specifically access to information and service, are feminine in nature – as are its traditional activities, specifically cataloguing and children's librarianship. This chapter closely examines a feminist critique of librarianship by Harris (1992) that argues librarians are embracing technology in an effort to improve the perception of librarianship and make it more masculine. The status of male librarians is examined in light of Harris's argument, alongside an examination of Library 2.0 and how technology is used as part of its service philosophy. This chapter argues that the relationship between gender and technology is more complex than Harris argues.*

## INTRODUCTION

To call librarianship a "women's profession" is an understatement. Nearly eight in 10 librarians and nine in 10 paraprofessionals are female (Ingles, De Long, Humphrey and Sivak, 2005). Yet, the gendered nature of the profession is often ignored in its academic and professional literature. Roma Harris (1992) wrote that she felt that librarianship, as a profession, was undervalued because of its gendered nature, yet whenever she spoke to librarians about this, she was greeted "as often as not, by a stony silence," leaving her to conclude that "there seems to be a great reluctance within

this profession to acknowledge the significance of gender in its evolution" (p. xiii). Harris is not alone in her attempt to draw attention to the gendered nature of librarianship. Hildenbrand (2000), Hannigan and Crew (1993), and Radford and Radford (1997), among others, have urged Library and Information Studies (LIS) practitioners and scholars to consider the feminine nature of the profession in their work and research. The effect of information technology on the profession during the 1980s and 1990s (and beyond) has been well documented here and elsewhere, but its impact on the gendered nature of LIS work is less studied. This chapter seeks to address two main questions: Is there a connection between the feminine nature of LIS work and technology? And, if so, what impact has technology had on this aspect of professional identity? To examine these questions, this chapter will first question whether or not technology can be considered to be gendered. For example, how is technology and gender depicted in the media? And, is there a masculine information and communications technology culture? This will be followed by an examination of gendered makeup of librarians. Has the gendered makeup of librarianship changed over time? What does the gendered makeup of LIS workers tell us about the profession? Are there differences between how female and male librarians are treated? This will be followed by a fairly extensive look at Harris's *Librarianship: The Erosion of a Woman's Profession* (1992). Harris wrote the book is response to the profound changes happening to LIS that she argued were the result of technological innovations (in addition to a renewed focus on the importance of managerialism). Harris gave perhaps the earliest feminist critique of the impact of technology on the profession and set the stage for future commentaries, which will also be examined. Harris's predictions for the future of the profession will be examined in light of the technological change that has occurred. How well have her predictions weathered these changes? In addition, as part of

this section, the stereotype of male librarians will be examined. If technology is considered to be part of the male domain, how does this impact the way male librarians are viewed by society? Lastly, this chapter will examine more modern technological innovations, specifically Web 2.0, and its effects on LIS and gender. This chapter will not attempt to solve any of the problems that may be the result of the gender divide within the profession. The roots of this divide are deep and there have been many attempts to change the demographic makeup of the profession. Instead, this chapter will explore and challenge some of the gendered assumptions that exist within the profession, such as male librarians have more opportunities for career advancement than female librarians, and their relationship with technology. The answers to the questions raised in this chapter could change the face of the profession, but these answers can only be achieved after deep discussion and debate amongst those more affected–LIS professionals.

## THE GENDERED NATURE OF TECHNOLOGY

Can technology be "gendered"? Can it be masculine or feminine? Technology is, after all, an object. Objects don't have a gender – people do. The first definition for technology offered in this book was from the *Oxford English Dictionary's*: "The branch of knowledge dealing with the mechanical arts and applied sciences, ... the application of such knowledge for practical purposes, ... [and] the product of such application; technological knowledge or know-how. ... machinery, equipment, etc., developed from the practical application of scientific and technical knowledge" ("Technology," 2010). Implied in this definition is what Terry and Calvert (1997) called the machine/human interface. Technology does not have a life all its own outside of how people use and design it. How we use and design technology is, therefore, dependent on our cultural,

18 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage: www.igi-global.com/chapter/technology-gender-and-professional-identity/88775

# Related Content