

# A Cultural Studies Approach to Gender and ICT

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## INTRODUCTION

This article introduces a cultural studies approach to the field of gender and ICT. This implies an emphasis on the symbolic aspects of technology. Technologies are approached as cultural phenomena to which meaning is attached, but in the sense that they are open to various interpretations. Technology holds a position as a key symbol in Western societies. A key symbol is, in Sherry B. Ortner's terms, a symbol that helps us to sort out experiences and put them into place within cultural categories, and even help us think about "how it all hangs together" (Ortner, 1973, p. 1341). This key symbol has gone through a radical transformation from mechanical machines to ICTs as the leading technologies. An important question is how changing technologies are linked to another key symbol, namely that of gender. Moreover, following from that question, how can you study the relationship of gender and ICTs when both are continually changing?

## THEORETICAL KNOTS

My own background is from a Norwegian network of researchers who have been studying gender and technology for the last 25 years. The differences between two Norwegian collected volumes may indicate a changing direction in the understanding of gender and ICT from the 1980s until today. The volume from the 1980s depicts technology as a tool of power in the hands of men (Lie et al., 1988). This provided a clear line of analysis as well as a direction for action to change the imbalance between men and women's access to technology. A volume from the 2000s, however, depicts a cybernetic pattern with threads and knots and loose ends—and may serve as an illustration of a seamless web with neither one distinct pattern nor one direction for change (Lie, 2003).

In our research during the 1980s, we analyzed technology as a means of power within a gendered division of labor. Technology was analyzed as the result of social constructions with in-built gender divisions, or in David Noble's terms, "frozen culture" (Noble, 1985). At the same time, however, technologies are also messengers, telling us who and what belongs where. During the 1990s, my focus shifted towards the symbolic dimensions of technology and the strong connections between technology and masculinity. As a symbol of masculinity, technology strengthens bonds between men and offers a way of "doing" or "performing" gender. To prove one's competence with technology is to prove one's place as a man among men. This perspective tends however, to be too static and has therefore spurred a search for new perspectives that include changing technologies as well as varying and constantly changing understandings of femininities and masculinities.

Within the field of gender and ICT, most attention has been accorded to women and how one might change their attitudes to technology. Feminists have tried to move away from this one-sided perspective towards regarding it in relational terms, thus drawing attention to technology as the other side of the gender-technology relationship. Instead of changing women, it was argued, one should change technology and the culture of technical institutions. In this way, however, both the concept of gender and that of technology may appear to be given and stable, thus in need of conscious strategies if they were to change. However, what we actually observe is that both are constantly changing. Suffice to mention how computers as calculating machines have been transformed into information and communication devices (Turkle, 1995) and continuing debates about what gender means and proper gender conducts. The challenge is that when we try to find out why gender still matters in relation to ICT, the themes we are dealing with tend to change their shape: gender relations are re-negotiated and new technologies

appear. Thus, once we have identified a strategy to include women into the field of ICTs, the whole field is re-configured. Change is therefore obviously, what theories of gender and technology have to include.

Moreover, ICT is no longer an exotic item with the prefix cyber-, alluding to something that is virtual, out of the real world, and exclusively for a minority with access to a cyber society. Today, ICT indicates rather familiar items that are included in the everyday routines of many people, at work, for entertainment, and for social activities. ICT is part of a variety of activities related to different aspects of people's lives. However, we still tend to talk about ICT as if it were one thing.

As mentioned, the studies of gender and ICT have mainly directed the attention at women, and they are often focused on education (cf., Gansmo, 2004; Lagesen 2004). Women's attitudes and relationships to ICT have been studied empirically. It has been said that women's performances are measured against a norm that is set by men, and consequently women are considered to do computing in an inferior way and not up to standards (Corneliussen, 2003; Rasmussen & Håpnes, 1991). The difference is conceptualized in terms of men's more technical approach vs. women's more communicative approach; that is, men are deemed to be interested in and competent at technical matters whereas women are deemed to be interested in chatting and e-mail (Stuedahl, 1998). We may ask, however, whether this feature of "men as norm" does not actually refer to "real men," with varying user patterns, but rather to an abstract "ghost feature" of masculine gender symbolism.

Studies from working life have shown that when masculinity is symbolically linked to different technologies and to technical competence, it is the result of cultural practices (Cockburn, 1983, 1985; Faulkner, 2000; Lie, 1998; Mellström, 2003; Wajcman, 1991). The symbolic association of technology and masculinity is, in other words, not self-evident but must be produced and confirmed continually. This also tells us that gender symbolism is open to change, holding that matters do not "have" meaning but are accorded meaning by actors and within particular contexts (Geertz, 1973). My concern is how gender functions as a cultural distinction that literally "gives" meaning to technical artefacts and practices.

## TECHNOLOGY AS CULTURE

A cultural studies approach to the knot of gender and ICT implies that not only gender but also technology is analyzed as a cultural phenomenon. Technology and culture are conceptualized as interwoven in mutual shaping processes. This mutual shaping can be studied in design and also during the cultural consumption of a new technology. In Norway, a user perspective and focus on cultural appropriation of technology have been prominent in gender and technology research (Berg, 1996; Lie & Sørensen, 1996). This is an approach following the traditions of social shaping or social construction of technology (Bijker & Law, 1992; MacKenzie & Wajcman, 1985;), the point being that a technical device could always have been otherwise. There is no technical necessity that leads to a certain end product, and culture is integrated, literally in-built, in the technical products. Moreover, the concepts of gender and ICT cannot be explored separately because they are intricately interwoven. This implies leaning on the metaphor of a seamless web of technology, culture, and society (Hughes, 1988) and on cyborgian and hybrid conceptualizations that blur the otherwise clear boundaries between nature-culture, both in the sense of sex-gender and human-technical (Haraway, 1991, 1997).

The connection of technology to masculinity has implied that tools are more easily identified as technologies when they belong to the masculine realm, whereas tools associated with women are more ambiguous and may be categorized otherwise, as with kitchenware or sewing-kits for instance. In this way, preconceptions regarding gender are constitutive for what is recognized as technology. Likewise, with technical competence as a characteristic of masculinity, technology has functioned as a device for sorting out gender. Although we recognize a variety of masculinities, meaning that there are many ways to be identified as "masculine", a close relationship to technology still remains one of them. However, whereas steel, cogs, and mechanical machinery produced masculine connotations related to muscles and strength, computers are more ambiguous. This ambiguity refers not only to the design of machinery but also to the varied social contexts of ICT use. Thus, the new ICTs could have meant a re- or de-gendering of technology, but the social pro-

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