

Wired to the World, Chained to the Home: Telework in Daily Life. By Penny Gurstein. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2001. 256 pp. ISBN 0774808470.

Futuristic predictions that large segments of the North American population would soon be working from home—such as those related to Alvin Toffler’s electronic cottage—have not been borne out. However, although home-based information work is a phenomenon that involves a relatively small (but noteworthy) portion of the labour force, it is one that is tied to a wide range of issues related to information technologies and social change. Penny Gurstein’s work on the subject addresses a number of important issues and brings together some very interesting primary research completed over the period of a decade. She set out to analyze what she refers to as the “experiences and practices” of teleworkers within the context of contemporary labour force and economic restructuring.

One of the key difficulties with accounting for the actual number of individuals carrying out information-related work from home has to do with the issue of definitions. Terms such as telework, telecommuting, tele-cottaging, home-working, and others are used in different ways by different authors and researchers. Gurstein starts out by acknowledging this fact and then providing her own definition of telework as including work that uses information and communication technologies (ICTs) to perform work remotely from the main site of operations. She includes in this very broad definition employees working either at home or some other remote site, self-employed consultants, home-based business operators, independent contractors and self-employed subcontractors, as well as workers in remote call centres and telecentres. This is a very wide range of categories of workers to address, but Gurstein manages to present her data and analysis in a way that for the most part is clear about whom she is writing at any given time and keeps her descriptions and assessments in groupings that make sense to the reader.

Working primarily from the perspectives of Sociology and Urban Planning, Gurstein sets out her main questions for the entire work as revolving around: “how. . . people accommodate telework. . . in their use of time and space?” and “what is the role of home, work, and community life in this context?” (p. 9). Gurstein’s work is based on three pieces of research. In 1990, she performed a study of fifty-four California residents that included interviews and time/space diaries. In 1995, she carried out the Canadian Telework and Home-Based Employment Survey. This was a Canada-wide mail out survey with a response of 453. Finally, in 2000 she carried out a case study in Vancouver, BC, involving an analysis of Canadian census data, an examination of municipal practices, and interviews with eight teleworkers. Gurstein does not present the three pieces of research as comparative, and it would indeed be objectionable to do so. However, she weaves together an analysis of the experiences of telework within the context of various policy frameworks that contributes to our understanding of this set of work arrangements.

One of Gurstein’s stated goals from the outset is to take on her research questions with a particular attention to gender. She mentions issues related to dual responsibilities of domestic labour and paid work as well as those related to child care early on in the text. Some of the more interesting findings presented with respect to gender are the daily and weekly time/space patterns of participants in her California study: the women tend to get less sleep, have less time for recreation, do more chores and errands, and spend more time on child care. And, these patterns tend to be exacerbated when individuals telework. Her Canada-wide survey also includes data on gender differences related to household maintenance and child care. Both sets of findings complement those presented in the time-use studies included in the Canadian Census beginning in 1996. While this type of finding

Reviews

should certainly not be news to us, these types of detailed and/or quantitative findings lend support to feminist analysis of both paid and unpaid labour.

Where I would have like to see her analysis go further is in the area of the politics of the home. Using many interesting descriptions of individuals' situations as well as comments from the participants, the work discusses the differences between the experiences of men and women when they work from home and acknowledges the tensions and contradictions women, in particular, encounter in this arrangement. However, Gurstein does not squarely address the need for domestic relationships to become more egalitarian regardless of whether individuals work from home or not, nor does she fully analyze the role telework *may* be playing in reinforcing existing inequalities. The absence of such a political analysis comes through once again in the conclusion, where she refers to the meaning of home as involving a set of opposites—"public versus private realms, other versus self" (p. 195). While Gurstein positions this statement within a brief discussion of the historical significance of the home, the lack of acknowledgement of the artificiality of the distinction between the so-called public and the so-called private and all of the gendered implications of such terminology seems problematic.

Gurstein's disciplinary home in "Planning" comes through in her analysis of the use of space within the home as well as in her consideration of the role of telework within neighbourhood use and planning. She presents a set of live/work typologies, complete with diagrams, to argue that the role of the home may be changing, not only in terms of the allocation of physical space but also with respect to the role the home plays in our lives. She argues that, for teleworkers, the home as a buffer from the outside world is being lost as the patterns and priorities of the corporate world seep in. Her focus on the outcomes for community turns out to be very much related to neighbourhood planning and use—and primarily with respect to services. A broader definition of community, such as that related to activism and collective action, would have been a great addition to the work, particularly for those of us reading the work from a communication studies perspective; in other words, are teleworkers who spend more time in their so-called physical communities in any way more involved with or active in them?

Wired to the World, Chained to the Home presents important research on the subject of home-based information workers. From a communication studies standpoint, even more could be said with respect to the role of the technological and globalization discourses surrounding telework, as well as regarding the gender analysis and social activism questions mentioned above. Nonetheless, the work spans an important decade in terms of developments in this work arrangement, uses a variety of qualitative and quantitative methods in a compelling manner, presents interesting findings on the uses of both time and space and makes contributions to the analysis of gendered labour. Anyone interested in the implications of new technologies for paid and unpaid labour will find this an informative and interesting read.

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