

Review Essay: Gender and Technology

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Critical Communication Theory: Power, Media, Gender and Technology. By Sue Curry Jansen. Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002. 304 pp. ISBN 074252373X (pbk.).

Technofeminism. By Judy Wajcman. Cambridge, U.K.: Polity Press, 2004. 160 pp. ISBN 074563043X.

The Making of a Cybertariat: Virtual Work in a Real World. By Ursula Huws. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2003. 208 pp. ISBN 1583670882 (pbk.).

Doing It: Women Working in Information Technology. By Krista Scott-Dixon. Toronto: Sumach Press, 2004. 244 pp. ISBN 1894549376 (pbk.).

An emancipatory politics of technology requires more than hardware and software; it needs wetware—bodies, fluid, human agency.

—Judy Wajcman, *Technofeminism*

What a pleasure to review four strong books on gender, communications, and technology. Three of these authors—Wajcman, Huws, and Jansen—have been researching, writing, and advocating in the area of women, gender, communications, and technology for several decades. Building on their legacy, Scott-Dixon is a first-generation women's studies' doctoral graduate and an emerging scholar in this field. If the pleasure of writing this review is mine, however, space does not allow for the extensive discussion that each of these fine books deserves. I have thus chosen to concentrate on what each of these authors contributes to the ongoing dialogue around these issues, rather than offer a series of clipped critiques that cannot possibly do justice to the wealth of ideas contained in these four exciting additions to our field.

While three of the texts are primarily interested in analyses of gender and technology, Jansen's *Critical Communication Theory: Power, Media, Gender and Technology* is broader in scope. As such, it is a fitting place to start: her mapping of the post-war paradigms, schools of thought, and traditions that have shaped the contemporary study of communications in the United States provides a useful backdrop against which to frame the other three books.

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Jansen's thesis is that "the mandates of media-critical theory [must] reconnect analyses of cultural forms to analyses of the institutions and political economy of communication, to form alliances with cultural workers, and to link critical scholarship to meaningful forms of social and political freedom, not just cultural freedom" (p. 18). In other words, it is imperative that we "recover and amplify definitions of human freedom that position meaningful citizen participation at their center" (p. 18). To forward this compelling thesis, as well as emphasize the pivotal role that communication studies should be playing in shaping and implementing these politics, she reviews numerous developments in the discipline, highlighting both the unexpected sidetracks and the insurmountable roadblocks. Far be it for Jansen to gloss over these so-called troubles in the field. For Jansen, "[M]edia and mediations are practices that must be understood on their own terms and in their full . . . complexity" (p. 18).

The book is divided into four parts: "Silences and Whispers"; "Impertinent Questions"; "Post-ideological Ideologies"; and "Noble Discontent." Chapter titles such as "The Future Is Not What It Used to Be," "When the Center No Longer Holds: Rupture and Repair," and "A Fly on the Neck: 'Noble Discontent' as Duty of Critical Intellectuals," give a sense of the kind of sharp-edged wit that makes this book so readable and the political commitment that drives its sparkling narrative along. Her chapter-by-chapter charting of post-World War II academic literature and those burning disciplinary questions that have emerged out of this corpus sheds important light on key debates taking place in communication studies departments throughout North America. These range from how we understand and analyze knowledge-power relations to which research methodologies we should be using when conducting our studies to the integration of cultural studies interventions into our field.

What I particularly enjoyed about Jansen's work is the importance she places on the mainstream press both as a lucrative site for scholarly study and as a powerful resource for assessing changing vocabularies, lexicons, and "keywords." With regard to the latter, she draws attention to the way the terms "freedom" and "democracy" became particularly potent post 9/11, effectively demonstrating how the press's relentless mixing of sport and war metaphors, for instance, resulted in a re-presentation of the word "freedom" (see Part 3, "Post-ideological Ideologies"). Nor does she shy away from those prickly issues such as power relations in the production process, or the labour practices of journalists, or how media content is selected. For Jansen, work that critically engages with the news media goes hand in hand with being a communication scholar who is actively committed to democracy and citizenship. This reflection bears thinking about in light of the ever-diminishing number of newspaper-based studies being conducted in the field of communication studies in Canada at this time.

In fact, there is much to reflect upon in Jansen's insightful and respectful analysis of the communication studies field in the United States, making it a *must read* for Western communication scholars. Though Robert Babe's *Canadian Communication Thought: Ten Foundational Writers* (2000) and essays by

Michael Dorland and Sheryl Hamilton in Attallah and Shade's *Mediascapes* (2002) do a good job of taking on individual theorists and providing brief overviews of how some of the issues raised by Jansen are being debated in the Canadian context, a sustained and extensive mapping of this kind has yet to be written. Jansen's *Critical Communication Theory* would serve as a good model for this much-needed addition to Canadian communication studies scholarship.

For many of us who work in the field of gender and technology, Judy Wajcman's (1991) *Feminism Confronts Technology* has, along with Anne Balsamo's (1996) *Technologies of the Gendered Body*, been regarded as a germinal text. I would even hazard a guess that these two books are the most oft-cited examples of feminist scholarship in our field. In other words, to say that I have been looking forward to updated texts from both of these authors is somewhat of an understatement. Happily, Wajcman's *Technofeminism*—an in-depth examination of digital technology in the age of one of feminist scholarship's more recent incarnations, cyberfeminism—does not disappoint.

Wajcman has always argued that technology is historically situated and shaped by the social relations that produce and use it. More specifically, and as she explains in this book, she is interested in an “emerging *technofeminist* framework [with] an emphasis on the contingency and heterogeneity of technological change . . . to locate its possibilities in wider social networks” (p. 7). Such an analysis, as she stresses, “introduces space for women's agency in transforming technologies” (p. 7).

Whether discussing feminist confrontations with technology or the “technomodification” of feminism(s) as a result of them, Wajcman once again challenges the feminist community to engage more critically and actively with the latest digital developments. Her call for feminist analyses of technology that are “contingent and open” and that, moreover, take into account “the networks of social relations in which they are embedded” (p. 108) makes Wajcman's “technofeminism” more compelling than its cyberfeminist precedents. While acknowledging cyberfeminism's enthusiasm and imagination, Wajcman is quick to point out the benefits of a broader, more materially grounded term that simultaneously addresses and incorporates the myriad ways that technologies shape our day-to-day lives.

In a sense, the term “technofeminism” could well be applied to Ursula Huws' research on economic restructuring and its relation to paid and unpaid work in those realms—like the print and call centre industries—that have been adversely affected by technology. In conceiving of her work as such, it is important to take a step back and acknowledge Huws' long-standing intellectual commitment to socialist feminist politics and praxis. Despite various scholarship trends, she has not waned from this orientation—steadfastly making gender relations central to her ongoing examination of work and technology.

This emphasis emerges clearly in *The Making of the Cybertariat: Virtual Work in a Real World*—a collection of Huws' writings from the early seventies to the present. Moreover, it is quite astounding to see just how prophetic some of her

earlier scholarship is with regard to what lies ahead, and how much of Huws' analysis from that era still holds sway. In the first three chapters—"New Technology and Domestic Labour," "Domestic Technology: Liberation or Enslavement?" and "Terminal Isolation: The Atomization of Work and Leisure in the Wired Society"—Huws focuses on the "private" and "public" relations of technology. The resonances between those headlines that grapple with the question of whether domestic technologies will liberate women from housework and those later headlines that ask whether computer technology will open the door to women working *from* the home are highly telling.

Also telling is the extent to which the relationship between the private and the public in the realms of technology is almost exclusively framed by gendered practices. For if, as research shows, domestic and computer technologies have at various times been seen as holding the promise of liberation for women, and with it the concurrent promise that they will free women to spend more "quality" time with their children, for instance, the question that begs asking here—a question that Huws doesn't hesitate to ask—is just who actually benefits from this type of liberation. In fact, it is the kind of question that Huws has been asking for more than 20 years now, concerned as she is not so much with how technologies might change relations of gender, but rather with how gendered practices of technology can be changed so as to make way for more human agency in our increasingly commodified economy (p. 186).

As suggested at the beginning of this review, Scott-Dixon's book grows out of the cumulative body of feminist scholarship on gender and technology that authors such as Huws, Wajcman, and Jansen have been instrumental in shaping. Granted, Scott-Dixon is interested in a wider readership than the other three, and this probably explains why the tone of her book is chattier. However, this chattiness should in no way be confused with lightweight. On the contrary, Scott-Dixon's book is packed with statistics, data, and theoretical considerations—and all of this grounded in an empirical study of women who have worked in the information technology (IT) industry in Toronto.

Though driven by the seemingly simple question "What are the material conditions of women's work in information technology?" (p. 23), Scott-Dixon's actual research is multi-layered and intellectually sophisticated. Drawing on feminist political economy and cultural studies scholarship to build her case, she deftly weaves this theoretically rigorous framework into empirical evidence garnered from interviews conducted with more than 60 Canadian women who either work or study in the information-technology sector. What she finds is that women who work in and study IT are more likely to come from non-traditional backgrounds. What also emerges is that many of the women in her sample have worked hard at creating their own opportunities within the industry. Her synthesis of interview data, Canadian statistics on IT education and employment, and industry analysts' commentary reveals how human capital theory pervades explanations offered by the IT sector and how the traditional characteristics associated with masculinity are better suited for this kind of paid work.

Scott-Dixon's findings are also practical in that they tell us where we have to look to find women working in the IT sector. They emphasize the importance of recognizing the complexity of socio-historical relations of technology so that we can increase women's opportunities in the IT field, and they attend to the working conditions of those currently employed within it. In her closing chapter, "Looking Ahead," Scott-Dixon directly addresses Wajcman's call for agency. She identifies specific actions and analyses that need to be pursued to acknowledge women's participation in the IT sector and ultimately "change the cultural elements of IT work that encourage long hours, fail to provide strong worker protections, sustain an imbalance between work and life and maintain hierarchies based on social and geographical location as well as assumed technical competence" (p. 188). For Scott-Dixon, the message is clear: "Making IT a more hospitable place for those people who have traditionally been marginalized in IT will result in a more positive environment for all workers" (p. 188).

As a unit, these four books make for excellent course content, and I can see them contributing greatly to courses such as "Gender and Technology," "Work, Communications, and Technology," and/or "Communications and Technology." Aside from the course content utility of their books, these feminist scholars serve to remind us of the centrality of gender, work, technology, content, and context in our field, and as such their texts not only do much to advance feminist scholarship in these areas, but also further communication studies scholarship as a whole. The discipline of communication studies in Canada has readily implicated itself in a rhetoric of equality, as many of my colleagues' assurances that gender has been well integrated into the curriculum and their research will testify to this. These texts affirm that it is only through placing gender and power on the agenda, and moving feminist scholarship away from the periphery of communication studies and toward the centre, that we will begin to see the benefits of a more engaged and democratic discipline and academic community. Ultimately, we have to push toward "a different way of understanding the nature of agency and change in a post-industrial world, as well as the means of making a difference" (Wajcman, 2004, p. 130).

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