BOOK REVIEW

Gender, sex and tech! An intersectional feminist guide

EDITED BY: JENNIFER JILL FELLOWS AND LISA SMITH

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This book is a collection of 14 essays and one introductory and one conclusions chapter, written by scholars cutting across different institutions in Canada, and engages with diverse dimensions of gender, sex and technology. Exploring interdisciplinary, feminist, intersectional and decolonising methods and approaches, the chapters in the 300-plus page book are divided into five themes of "Disrupt", "Connect", "Surveillance", "Bodies" and "Reclaim". The book emanated from working on developing a course on the same theme and was written primarily as a resource for teachers, students and research scholars and, therefore, refers to itself as a guide. What allows it to be a real guide is the fact that each chapter is accompanied by sections on "Questions for Discussion", "Invitations to go Deeper", "Read More" and "Listen More, Watch More", in addition to References. These sections also follow the same theoretical backdrop as the essays, and encourage readers to explore questions about their experiences vis-à-vis their identities and interactions with technologies both in their personal and professional lives, and also both as individuals and members of a community.

The book is indeed a resource for teachers, researchers and students, especially in North America and perhaps also the rest of the Western world. In addition, it is also an important read for others interested in exploring and understanding the relationships between technologies, identities and commerce, especially in the context of growing corporate control of technologies, on one hand, and deepening technological penetration in our daily lives, on the other. The book does not reject technology, in fact, it is very aware of the fact that intellectual exploration of this kind is also dependent on technology. Rather, it attempts to raise questions around the use and application of technology by connecting it with the issues of intersectionality and gender, and, therefore, with the issues of power, control, hierarchies and identities while attempting to go beyond binaries of various kinds.

The first section, "Disrupt", has three essays, centering around the use of technological devices as a solution to women's problems and questioning the 'myth' that these necessarily improve their lives and give them greater control over their own lives. Lisa Smith, in her essay, analyses the use of birth control pills, baby bottles and bikes, especially in view of how these are advertised as saviours of women's freedom, and argues that "technologies serve and feed into power relations, which reproduce inequity in often violent and oppressive ways". While arriving at this conclusion, the essay recognises the complexity of discussing technology using the intersectional feminist concepts and the next essay, by Lauren Friesen and Ana Brito, takes this argument forward as they analyse menstruation technologies using the same lens. The essay explores the dimensions of shame and taboo that are deeply associated with menstruation in different cultures, and how menstruation technology solidifies menstruation as a distinctly feminine issue, and, therefore, disregards the experiences of trans and non-binary individuals. It also recognises that some signs of change are visible in terms of making these technologies more inclusive to reflect gender diversity but claims that these are not enough.

The last essay in this section, by Shaina Mchardy, explores "Technology Facilitated Sexual Violence (TFSL)" in the context of educational institutions in Canada. It includes cyberbullying and cyberharassment, since it has become important to confront these issues from various standpoints, including legal and institutional positions in view of the increasing use of social media both as formal and informal modes of communication. The chapter highlights the need for examining the experiences from an intersectional lens and for a more active engagement from institutions with these issues.

The second section, "Connect", also has three essays that explore the aspect of technology and relationships, exploring various dimensions of ageism, intimacy, sexuality and gender identities, and the associated experiences of inclusion, exclusion and discrimination. These pieces are important also from the perspective of exploring new methodologies, such as autoethnography, where authors analyse the social implications of their personal lived experiences. Treena Orchard, in her piece, traces her own experiences of using Bumble, which is marketed as a feminist dating app. Christopher Dietzel discusses the experiences of using specialised apps meant for men who have sex with men (MSM), examining the issues of sexual racism, racial fetishisation and exploitation in that context, following the qualitative method of semi-structured interviews with adult men who agreed to be part of the study. Noorin Manji examines the role of smartphones in committed relationships by analysing the experiences of 23 heterosexual couples (56 individuals) of different ethnicities living in Canada. All three essays, in diverse ways, recognise that while the risks of exploitation and surveillance definitely mark the experiences of using technology in intimate relationships, it can also be empowering for many in ways that would perhaps not have been possible in the absence of technology.

Surveillance is the next theme with three essays therein. How digital space is being feminised, and how this feminisation of digital spaces is driving women and marginalised groups out of digital space is the main subject of Jennifer Jill Fellow's essay, the first in this theme. She studies virtual assistants (VAs) such as Siri by Apple and Alexa by Amazon, which have feminine names, or Google's VA, which does not have a feminine name but is conceptualised as one (as cited in the essay). The essay argues that these are sexist constructions, despite having no body or biology, by citing how they respond to users' sexist and abusive comments and requests. The fact that tech companies could have prevented it by programming VAs differently but have not done so, is reflective of the recreation of feminised space — females working as assistants and reinforcing the model of selfless womanhood, and signifying subordination and submission, which, in turn, also get reflected in the kinds of jobs that women and men largely represent in the digital world.

Tech companies feature again in the next essay, this time in the form of menstrual and fertility self-tracking apps (MFTAs), and their promotion and marketing as liberating and empowering tools for women. Jessica Polzer, Anna Sui, Kelly Ge and Laura Cayen have analysed 15 websites that promote MFTAs using primarily the feminist theory lens and examining deeply the politics and economics of such tech tools. In addition to highlighting that some such companies are funded by anti-choice lobbies and how the information collected through self-monitoring is used to create large data sets that help tech and insurance companies, the essay concludes that "MFTAs educate not by responding to the needs to people who menstruate but rather by framing the problem in ways that commodify the body, emphasize individual responsibility for sexual and reproductive health, and elide social and political factors that shape access to inclusive sexual and health education and services."

Sahar Raza, in her essay, which is the last in this section, discusses Artificial Intelligence (AI). She argues that while AI has inherent potential for elevating everyone's quality of life, if developed with an approach that is socially just and inclusive of human rights, in reality what we see is AI embedded in its environment reflecting the same biases and vested interests that keep those on the margins exploited in this space as well. She traces how high dependence on various forms of social media, search engines, and smartphones determines the way one thinks and acts, and is being determined by algorithms, logic and data manipulation, leading to a surveillance society where both corporate and state actors collude most of the time. This essay also discusses how surveillance is not a neutral process — all markers of difference that exist in societies are reproduced in technology-based surveillance as well — and hopes for a better tech conceptualisation "premised on relationship, community, interconnectedness, equity and accountability".

The next section, "Bodies", has two essays, and the final one, "Reclaim", has three. Jennifer Hites-Thomas compares authenticity discourse across the two contexts of trans and cis patients through the analysis of 20 medical practitioners in Canada, who, she argues, frame patient authenticity differently, which then shapes their access to genital technology differently. The medical practitioners treat cis men's gender as unquestionably authentic while being doubtful about the authenticity of trans people. The next essay, by Tamara Banbury and Kelly Fritsch, critically analyses representations of disability, gender and technological enhancement in the video game Cyberpunk 2077. Body augmentation is a central tool in the game and the way in which it is designed, the authors argue, allows existing normative social relations of disability to go unchallenged.

The three essays in this last section of "Reclaim", while critiquing the limitations of digital spaces, also analyse the potential and possibilities that these offer for engagement and widen the scope in diverse forms. Amber Brown and Angela Knowles discuss how social media and digital platforms have provided space to indigenous communities and others who support such causes to register their resistance. Kira Tomsons reflects on her own experience of online teaching and argues for developing an ethics of care that can inform and guide the process. Jaime Yard examines feminist use of zines as do-it-yourself (DIY) technology and how this technology can be brought into the digital realm. These three essays, in some manner, recognise the inevitability of technological penetration and intend discussing their potentials by enriching the ethical bases and applications.

The introductory chapter by the two editors provides the context, relevance, approach and conceptual frame, definitions of terminology, and an overview of the book. It sets the tone of what to expect by its very style as well as the content. Highlighting the issues of intersectionality and inequity, the chapter clearly states that it is set largely in the Canadian and North American contexts but indicates the larger relevance in a globalised world. While it is true that some of the issues have wider applicability, many issues discussed in this book would not easily find resonance in all geographical and cultural contexts, especially in the Global South.

In their concluding chapter, the editors share how they put together the book largely during the pandemic by using all kinds of digital tools. The book nowhere claims to be an exhaustive collection of all that could be said but modestly urges readers to reflect on and think about what has been said by a wide range of scholars. It examines the presence and continuously changing form of technologies around us, from the perspective of an intersectional gender lens, and urges readers to add their own stories by using the questions and resources provided after

each chapter. In that, it tries to follow the feminist tradition of co-creating knowledge and has potential for succeeding in that attempt!

Reviewer Notes

https://orcid.org/0009-0002-5346-6755

Jyotsna Jha works as Director: Skills, Commonwealth of Learning. Email: jjha@col.org