Book Review


Reviewed by Karen Farquharson, Lecturer in Sociology at Swinburne University of Technology

TechnoFeminism is Judy Wajcman’s slim new volume on the relationship(s) between technology and gender. Building on her previous work in this area, Wajcman critically reviews mainstream social science and feminist approaches to understanding technology. The book is primarily concerned with the relationship between gender and technology, and its review of the mainstream technoscience literature is focused on the lack of attention these scholars have paid to gender. In particular, Wajcman critiques the underlying assumption present in much of the mainstream literature that technologies are not gendered when, as she convincingly argues, gender and gender hierarchies are inherent in all aspects of technology.

A real strength of this book is its careful reviews and critiques of feminist approaches to technology. Feminist research on new technologies is placed in its historical and disciplinary contexts, demonstrating how it has developed over time. Wajcman shows that much feminist scholarship in this field is characterized by either extreme optimism about the liberating potential of technology for women, or extreme pessimism about the inherently gendered nature of technology and its role in maintaining gender hierarchies. She argues that both utopian and dystopian approaches often have at their core the technologically determinist assumption that technologies themselves determine how they are used.

The main point of the book is that an alternative approach to theorising gender and technology is needed. Wajcman proposes that the concept of technofeminism provides a useful alternative. Technofeminism is a social constructivist approach to understanding gender and technology. Citing studies she categorises as technofeminist on microwave ovens and the contraceptive Pill, Wajcman shows how technofeminism uncovers the ways in which technology and social practices mutually construct each other, to critically examine the role of gender in particular. As Wajcman writes, ‘New technologies are malleable, they also reveal continuities of power and exclusion, albeit in new forms’ (p. 54). Central to technofeminism is a recognition that gender relations are power relations, and if gender is to be renegotiated society’s power hierarchies need to change.

This is a short book, only 130 pages long. It also does not introduce any new data. Its contribution lies in its concise overviews of the literature on technology and feminism, its critical discussion of this literature, and its proposed new theoretical framework.

I found TechnoFeminism to be a welcome addition to the social science literature on technology. TechnoFeminism reintroduces basic sociological categories such as gender and race into technology studies, but in a more nuanced way than they have often been employed previously. I found the argument that many of the previous approaches to understanding technology have technological determinism at their core to be well-documented and compelling. I also found the assertion of the need to keep focused on the feminist project a timely reminder that gender hierarchies remain central to western societies.

This is a well-written, engaging book. Unlike many theoretical monographs, it is written in a very accessible manner, and will be of interest to both academic and lay audiences. The book provides a clear overview of feminist and other approaches to understanding the
relationship(s) between technology and gender. I particularly recommend it for upper level undergraduate students who will find its well-organised discussion of the literature engaging and provocative.