

# **Women Speak**

## **Gendering the Mobile Phone**

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## Foreword

The take on Carrie Bradshaw and Co., the celebrated *Sex and the City* ensemble, that opens Carla Ganito's important book on (en)gendering the mobile phone is not a celebrity stunt. In fact, it speaks into the seismic role of popular culture in shaping behavior. And this is a book about technology and its role in the both adapting to and transforming gendered behavior. Clearly, what the *Sex and the City* stunt shows is that women and technology, particularly the mobile phone, have changed together, that they have mutually influenced each other and that there is plenty more to come.

It was indeed a pleasure and a privilege to supervise Carla Ganito's dissertation, now turned into a superb book. She has produced a very relevant study that deepens the understanding of women's relation to technology and her situated findings of the Portuguese case have been a springboard for a revision of well-intended but quite simple readings of this theme, that have truly changed the landscape of Portuguese studies on mobility. The study brought complexity into an otherwise gender neutral discussion of the mobile phone. And wherever complexity comes into play, tensions occur, opening up the space for other questions beyond those sketched out in the initial research design. That is, the research not only denounced the hoax of gender neutrality in tech affordances, as it opened up the field to other identity based discussions on the use, the shaping and impact of technology in daily Portuguese life.

The book draws both from historical-cultural approaches to technology (SST theory) and gender studies to argue against the stereotypical denigration of women in their relation to technology. The culturally held views, constructed by conservative blood and soil ideologies in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, criticizing the impact of technology as a strategy of feminization, changed along the century to a radical dislocation of all things female from tech euphoria. Arguably, both *techphobia* and *techeuphoria* worked to denigrate women as tech users. What

is more, the suspicious look at technology as a form of imprisonment instead of empowerment – specifically in the critique of the wired kitchen as a hallmark of submission and repression – also marked certain feminist strands of the second wave. In a certain way, even technofeminism is heir to this critical appraisal of technology, as it clearly draws on stereotypes that these research findings obviously disrupt, namely the notion that technology is a patriarchal instrument for the submission of women. It is against this backbone that this study brings novelty to the world by questioning traditionally held views, both conservative, progressive and radical, on women's usage of technology.

The conceptual architecture of the research and its critical drive seem to clash head on with a pervasive euphoria over the mobile phone and its civilizational possibilities. It is 'A huge opportunity' (p.196) indeed, but one that cannot do away with the complexity of appropriation. The findings resulting from life stories show that the mobile phone is used by women in complex ways. The role they take on both mimicks male professional usages, and reflects the managing of household tasks, maintaining traditional roles within the family, such as that of the housewife as manager or as caretaker. Instead of underlining Manuel Castell's assertion that gender differences tend to disappear as technological access is widened, what Carla Ganito's research shows is that, as far as the mobile phone is concerned, there continues to be a very complex, contradictory even, appropriation of technology. This gendered use both promotes parity and stresses traditional gender roles. In a way, these findings clash with the rather warring, *guerroyant*, and even instrumental approach to technology as a subversion of patriarchy defended by technofeminists.

Another relevant finding is the phatic use of the mobile phone, that is, how this mobile technology is a source of security in the public arena, how it allows women to move freely in the public space and provides a reassuring presence. Remarkably, this trait is indeed a consequential follow-up, a resolution even, of one of the feminist first wave's agenda's: the ability to move freely in the public space. A Russian aristocrat and painter, living in Paris in the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Marie Bashkirtseff, wrote in her journals that "her deepest longing was the possibility of walking alone, to stroll along the Tuilleries gardens, in Paris, and sit on its benches freely'. The desire to be mobile, in fact, to be able to appropriate the social space without being disturbed seems simple, but it is nonetheless a major conquest along the path of the empowerment of women in western societies. Still, the freedom for women to move freely, to

walk alone, cannot be sadly taken for granted in many locations across the globe today.

The book has as yet another remarkable affordance, as its methodological backbone proves that quantitative data do not tell the whole picture, precisely because they do not filter the complexity of female life stages and use women as a homogeneous category. If the intent of research is to show that gender differences are erased with wider access, categories need to be limited not widened. In fact, it invites the reader, the researcher, into questioning the research frame and to do so not by specifically considering that the category women is a marginal or disruptive stance in the work of technology, but simply that gender is one of the many and complex ways which structures the cultural construction of the technological world we live in.

More than an introduction, I see these remarks as an invitation to reading. To reading a well argued, finely written and eye opening book.

Isabel Capeloa Gil

## Abstract

This book seeks to provide a better understanding of the relationship between women and technology through an inquiry into the significance of mobile phones in the lives of Portuguese women. Recent theoretical developments suggest too little emphasis has been placed on differences between women themselves. The initial impetus for carrying out this research stemmed from contributing towards meeting this gap by investigating the scope of mobile phones as the basis for the increased technological intimacy of women whilst without reinstating the old binary oppositions between men and women.

The study focuses on the mobile phone as a site where the nuances of women's experiences with technology become visible and on adult women as a meaningful yet underrepresented group. In choosing to conduct a case study of Portugal, I wished to contribute to the development of future cross-cultural analysis on the gendering of the mobile phone.

This work is theoretically grounded in the more recent feminist debates that identify cultural representation and discourse as important carriers of the gender system. In turn, this is rooted in the understanding that the relationship with technology proves a gendered relationship and that gender is socially constructed.

The study is located at the crossroads of feminist studies, cultural studies and new media studies and correspondingly proposing new insights and approaches to the phenomena interconnected with the gendering of mobile phones – drawn from feminist cultural studies of mobile communications. The research methodology therefore aligns with the assumption of a cultural perspective on mobile communications and clearly opting for a qualitative method designed to ascertain the actual meanings of the mobile phone to different groups of Portuguese women across different stages in their life trajectories. This then argues that the role women play proves determinant to their usage of



mobile phones. Moreover, this role is determined by their positioning in the life course and not by their positioning in the cohort.

The key findings resulting detail how, contrary to a theory of some dominant usage for a technology, an Apparatchik as proposed by James Katz, the mobile phone instead takes on different roles and affordances depending on the women's respective life stages. As embodied objects, mobile phones constitute part of very complex power relationships and, while women truly have conquered mobility in many ways, they still remained constrained in their achievements by an unbalanced gendering of time, space and the expectations about their roles in society.

The book concludes by putting forward several insights for the industry and urging it's actors to move on from a functional perspective to a broader socio-cultural perspective and correspondingly developing products and services capable of resonating with women's lifestyles. The book also proposes a new agenda for future work, namely that of post-convergence, and opening up new paradigms such as the life stage and life course approaches.