Foreword

It is commonly assumed that we are now living in a new knowledge economy, a post-industrial society. Groundbreaking developments in digitalisation and biotechnologies have led cyber gurus to assert that everything in the digital future will be different. Industrial technology may have had a patriarchal character, but digital technologies, based on brain rather than brawn, on networks rather than hierarchy, herald a new relationship between women and machines. Perhaps the link between technology and male privilege is finally being severed.

The realities of women’s lives belie these simple generalisations. Certainly we are living in a very different world than that of even 30 years ago, and digital technologies increasingly mediate every area of our lives. This makes it even more imperative that we examine the extent to which existing societal patterns of gender inequality are transformed or reproduced in a new technological guise.

So, I am delighted that Eileen Trauth has taken on the mammoth task of bringing what is now a vast literature on gender and information technology together in these two volumes. In recent years, there has been a great deal of feminist writing on information and communication technologies. Studies on the Internet, cyberspace, and computer science, for example, have strengthened our analysis of how technology as a culture is implicated in the construction of masculinity. It demonstrates that the symbolic representation of technology remains sharply gendered. At the same time, feminist theory increasingly works from the basis that neither masculinity nor femininity are fixed, unitary categories but rather they are constructed in relation to each other. As a result, we now have a much more complex understanding of gender, of technology, and of the mutually-shaping relationship between them.

Cutting through the hype, this encyclopedia examines the relationship between gender and technology in all the major spheres of our lives. The theoretical approach that it adopts is much needed in an age when deep-seated technological determinism underpins much of the current debate on subjects as diverse as the ecological crisis, food safety, and genetic engineering. This determinist view represents technology as a separate sphere, developing independently of society, and can lead to pessimism about the possibilities for change. The rich collection of articles collected here certainly points in the opposite direction, providing a multiplicity of examples of activities, campaigns, and programs that are reshaping the landscape of women’s relationships with machines.

The encyclopedia has many strengths, but there are two in particular that I would like to mention. The first is its interdisciplinary nature. The strength of gender theory over the last three decades has been its ability to cut across traditional disciplinary divides that not only made women invisible, but produced narrow, limited forms of knowledge. The most exciting developments in social science have been in areas that crosscut these old boundaries, and this encyclopedia exemplifies the fruitfulness of this approach. The authors cover a huge range of disciplines and approaches, and we are the richer for it.

The other notable feature of the book is that it uniquely contains contributions by authors from all over the world. Contemporary feminist studies of technology are characterised by more sensitivity to “the politics of difference” than some of the earlier literature. There is a much clearer realisation that gender, that what it is to be a woman, is experienced everywhere through such mediations as race, age, class, sexual orientation, history, and colonialism. Information technologies clearly have very different implications for Third World
and First World women, within and between regions and countries. To date, this literature has been dispersed and hard to find. Now, given the comprehensive scope of this encyclopedia, we will be able to compare women’s situation in different contexts, and our analysis will be enriched as a result.

I highly recommend these two volumes. They will be invaluable not only for academics and students, but for policy makers, educators, and the interested general reader. The authors represent a wealth of expertise and are at the leading edge of research in this area. If we are to transform gender power relations in the 21st century, we need a fully-rounded understanding of the relationship between gender and information technology. Eileen Trauth can be congratulated for providing us with just that.

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*January 2006*