

ICTs and Immaterial Labor From a Feminist Perspective

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Abstract

In this article, I discuss an issue which lies at the core of today's "political economy" of the domestic sphere. The issue in question is that human beings are pushed to "outsource" their emotions, information, communication, education, organization, and entertainment, while they are left with scarce new technological support with which to cope with the fatigue, stress, boredom, and complexity of housework. My question is "Why has technology which is related to the material aspects of housework ceased to develop, whereas the technology connected to its immaterial aspects (information and communication technologies or ICTs) has grown at an increasing rate?" For answering this question, I analyze briefly how the machinization of the domestic sphere has developed the technologies connected to material labor such as means of transportation and domestic appliances and those connected to immaterial labor such as mass media, ICTs, and new media. A double strategy has always been pursued: a specific strategy is applied to immaterial labor, involving a great deal of technology, and an opposite strategy, involving much less technology, is applied to material labor. This bifurcation is necessary to maintain a high level of value production in everyday life. Nowadays immaterial labor not only creates value in the process of reproduction of the labor force but also generates capital directly. One only needs to think, for example, of Facebook, Twitter, Myspace, and so on. They are basically enterprises which extract value directly from sociability, friendship, and emotion for producing capital.

Keywords

ICTs, immaterial labor, feminism, domestic sphere, housework

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In their trilogy, Hardt and Negri centralize the importance of ICTs to the spread of Empire. However, this “newness” or “global dimension” needs to be grounded in a genealogy of ICTs as developments in, and responses to, the domestic sphere’s role in social reproduction.

An issue which lies in fact at the core of today’s “political economy” of the domestic sphere is that human beings are pushed to “outsource” their emotions, information, communication, education, organization, and entertainment, while they are left with scarce new technological support with which to cope with the fatigue, stress, boredom, and complexity of housework. I will attempt to outline the existing analysis of this issue and to provide a possible answer to the question, “Why has technology which is related to the material aspects of housework ceased to develop, while the technology connected to its immaterial aspects (information and communication technologies or ICTs) has grown at an increasing rate?”

Let me begin the analysis of this twofold strategy by stating briefly that the mechanization of the domestic sphere has included various types of technology, especially in the past century, including the following:

1. Means of transportation
2. Domestic appliances and sewing and cooking machines
3. Mass media, ICTs, and new media.

The means of transportation have aimed to guarantee more frequent and/or personalized mobility. Through cars, workers are able to cope with the new level of mobility that they are being pushed to have (Urry, 2003). The diffusion of cars has changed the way in which people deal with public space, by strengthening their need/will to move. In turn, their use in public places (streets, squares, motorways) is easily regulated and controlled by the public authorities. New opportunities to explore a larger territory, to cope with the geographical dispersion of family members and relatives and to have fun during the weekend by organizing excursions and tours were created when cars were introduced. Many people enjoyed this more intense mobility without realizing that this would result in an extremely high number of deaths, equal to or greater than those caused by some wars.

This first type of machine was clearly derived from the “core” factory tradition, but their penetration of the domestic sphere did not challenge the privacy of the home. In fact, as Jack Bratich pointed out in a private conversation, Raymond Williams (1974) has argued in his notion of “mobile privatization” that the automobile *reinforced* the domestic sphere, by facilitating the development of suburbs (aggregated domiciles) as well as being a kind of “mobile domestic sphere” of its own. This is more obvious today with large SUVs equipped with DVD players for kids, and the like. It is not surprising indeed that a special refuge was created for these machines outside of the house—the garage—when they were not parked in the street.

The second type of machines was the result of a secondary fallout of the “noble” evolution of the large, industrial sectors in the domestic sphere (Gras, 1997, p. 172). The slow penetration of this second type of machine into the household in the past two

centuries was accompanied by a series of integrated processes, such as the social construction of the figure of the housewife, a rather rigid division of labor among men and women, the development and imposition of the cultural hegemony studied by Gramsci (1982/1994) and the development of telecommunications technologies such as telephones, radio, television, and so on. The reason for this slow penetration was due to the fact that, in the house, there were already “machines” which were involved in domestic processes: these were the woman’s body (with its capacity to work almost illimitably) and then the bodies of the various family members. This functioning of individuals as “machines of everyday life” was the factor that limited both the penetration of machines understood as black boxes and the transformation of housewives into a superfluous labor force. However, the transformation of housewives into a superfluous labor force has been managed in different ways in accordance with the specific sociocultural environments which are typical of different economic systems. Whereas this transformation took place very early on and very rapidly in the United States, it occurred later and much more slowly in other countries, such as Italy. Of course, the different timing of the growth in the number of waged women correlates not only with the penetration of domestic appliances but also with the resistance of women to housework. This type of machinization of the domestic sphere invites us to reflect on the need to remediate Marx’s perspective on the inexorable increase in the number of machines, accompanied by a decrease in the number of workers. Marx’s vision, in fact, is good only for analyzing the productive sphere in which the commodities are produced and not for the domestic sphere in which billions of people own and use ICTs.

Given that carework has been based on the *under*-development of the division and cooperation of labor, the development of the domestic sphere seemed to work only in the direction of a limited augmentation of technologies and of a parallel increase in the number of workers. After the first wave of household appliances which in the United States is post World War I, in the 1920s, in fact, technological innovation in the field of material domestic labor has come to a halt. Some tasks have been outsourced outside of the house, whereas other tasks have been reorganized, simplified, and compressed. The house, however, has continued to present itself as the backward sphere in industrialized countries. It has remained a broad substratum of preindustrialization in daily life with regard to the material aspects of care and housework. There is a *doppelkarakter* to carework and housework, in which the domestic sphere seems as if it belongs to the “natural” world, although in reality it conceals the true process of valorization which takes place within the sphere (Fortunati, 1981/1995). At the same time, the parallel increase in the number of workers has to be read in the influx of caregivers (in large majority women, often migrants) and in the involvement of men and other family members in the division of housework within the domestic sphere.

However, the political management of this reproductive sphere, organized in such a way, was imperfect, because all of these processes suffered from closed-door syndrome. The impassability of the door to the house and the construction of privacy have had negative implications on how the reproduction of the labor force has been

controlled. The most immediate difficulty was that the control of the reproduction of individuals and of the functioning of the domestic sphere could only be done *ex-ante* and outside of the domestic process itself, when the labor force arrived at the gates of factories or schools. For a long time, the social services were able to anticipate the control during the process itself only in limited cases. This control mainly involved the areas of social exclusion, marginalization, and severe poverty. Only these types of houses were susceptible to the social workers crossing their threshold.

The third type of machines analyzed here—ICTs (from old electronic media such as radio, telephone, television, to the new media such as mobiles and the Internet)—came from the most advanced world of innovation. Their advent in our houses has represented a great technical, social, and political resource, which has been used in order to overcome the difficulties of exerting control over the domestic environment (Meyrowitz, 1985). These technologies are, in fact, able to put people in contact with the external world through almost invisible means: through electricity, electromagnetic waves, and so on. However, they too had to overcome the problem of the closed door. The only way to resolve this problem was to submit ICTs to the same process of commodification to which both means of transportation and domestic appliances were submitted. They became goods, which entered into the market and were available to purchase. Of course, this solution was not painless because it meant that the new technologies were then subject to the purchasing power of consumers and then the will of the ICT owners. For the first time, all these types of technology were available to and owned by the masses.

A feminist approach can be derived from our understanding of the meaning assumed by ICTs once they have entered into the domestic sphere at the level of the political economy. Going beyond the work of Marx (1857-58/1970, 1867/1964), it can be argued that ICTs function as instruments of housework and that they are able to standardize the process of immaterial reproduction, making it uniform and homogeneous. As they are invisible, they do not come to a stop in front of the closed door but penetrate and intrude upon all the folds of daily life. If Tronti's (1966) analysis of class composition is applied to the contemporary multitude (Hardt & Negri, 2000), one discovers that, in front of a great fragility of class awareness, people reveal instead the great homogeneity of a particular technical collocation which is that of being an audience in which almost all of the members of a family are included. ICTs and the various work processes that they support in the household represent the various parts of a big assembly line. The technical collocation of multitudes in this invisible assembly line is increasingly important place in this invisible assembly line.

ICTs are power-centered, authoritarian technologies, sometimes even of military derivation, such as in the case of the Internet. These characteristics are very important because they allow us to recognize their attempt to shape the domestic field with a military logic: we have only to think of the immobility which they caused among audiences and users before the broad diffusion of new media in the second half of the 1990s. The unidirectional message which arrived from the mass media conveyed the

same hierarchical discipline that had characterized factory work. Before new media, women basically had to endure, according to Rosalind Williams (1998), the capitalist (and masculine) initiative of life-denying technological systems. This is in spite of the fact that, historically speaking, women have been crucial in shaping democratic techniques, especially in agriculture and horticulture, or *biotechnics*, to use Mumford's (1996) term.

With new media, which are increasingly being designed and vivified by users, immaterial labor in the reproductive sphere has become mediated, self-reproductive, self-exploiting and self-disciplinary. Intellectual machines have spread in great numbers and variety, by deeply modifying the organization of space and work in houses and also the possibility of cooperation among the members of a family. If we compare the technologies which are associated with the material aspects of care and housework—the domestic appliances—with those which are associated with the immaterial aspects of care and housework—ICTs—the following points need to be stressed:

1. Technology, which should be designed to perform many of the material tasks of housework, is both very difficult to realize and furthermore is aimed at a section of the population with limited purchasing power inside the family. In contrast, the technology which is related to immaterial labor is much easier to produce and is also less expensive than that which is related to material labor;
2. Domestic appliances succeed in reducing the time, which is required to carry out a series of material tasks and the resulting fatigue, but this “liberated” time is immediately swallowed up by other tasks and functions of carework which, in the meantime, have become increasingly complex. In contrast, ICTs have increased the time which is dedicated to communication itself by intensifying the associated workload. Although it is very difficult to demonstrate that ICTs have ameliorated the quality of life, it is easy to show that following their introduction into society, people began working more;
3. At the moment of their diffusion, classical domestic appliances represented a symbolic operation, through which industrial developers put forward a positive and fruitful image of progress after the disasters of the Second World War and Hiroshima (Gras, 1997). The United States starts this in 1920s, soon after women need to be installed as “domestic managers,” as Roland Marchand's (1985) excellent book *Advertising the American Dream* shows. In contrast, ICTs represent the point of convergence of two different leading industrial traditions: informatics and media technologies (Manovich, 2001);
4. Whereas the use of domestic appliances was promoted mainly to women, who were pushed to act as gatekeepers and to be responsible for the entire process of housework, as they were believed to be the most able to use them for everyone's benefit, ICTs tend (after initially being aimed at White, young, rich men) to be more ecumenical, and to directly address all of their users, involving all of the members of the family;

5. Increasing the number and types of ICTs was the only way to sustain the expansion of immaterial labor in the reproductive sphere. This expansion was required by the need to produce a labor force which was capable of coping both with the complexity of globalization and with the growing portion of material and immaterial reproduction unaddressed because of women's resistance to housework and carework.
6. However, this increase was also the result of a grassroots initiative which promoted self-determination in the areas of feelings, affections, sex, education, and so forth. In this respect, ICTs represented a good resource also for managing and establishing control over the most "precious" part of people: their affectivity and imagination;
7. Although the opposite may seem to be true, immaterial labor is the fulcrum of the entire domestic process. In fact, material production is usually carried out after the first exchange of immaterial use-values (communication, affect, love) has occurred. "However, once immaterial domestic labor has put in motion the material part, the former becomes less important than the latter" (Fortunati, 2007, p. 141).

In conclusion, the political economy of the domestic sphere continues to pursue a double strategy: a specific strategy is applied to immaterial labor—involving a great deal of technology—and an opposite strategy—involving much less technology—is applied to material labor. This bifurcation is necessary to maintain a high level of value production in everyday life. However, there is a final point that deserves a particular attention and it is the fact that immaterial labour not only creates value in the process of reproduction of the labor force but also generates directly capital. One only needs think for example of Facebook, Twitter, Myspace, and so on. They are basically enterprises which extract value directly from sociability, friendship, and emotion for producing capital (Fisher, 2011).

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Bio

Leopoldina Fortunati teaches sociology of communication and culture at the University of Udine, Udine, Italy, and is the director of the PhD programme in multimedia communication. She has conducted several research in the field of gender studies, cultural processes, and communication and information technologies. She is the author of many books and is the editor with J. Katz and R. Riccini of *Mediating the Human Body: Technology, Communication and Fashion* (2003), with P-L. Law and S. Yang of *New Technologies in Global Societies* (2006) and with Jane Vincent of *Electronic Emotion: The Mediation of Emotion via Information and Communication Technologies* (2009). She is very active at European level, especially in COST networks, and is the Italian representative in the COST Domain Committee (ISCH, Individuals, Societies, Cultures and Health). She is associate editor of the journal *The Information Society* and serves as referee for many outstanding journals. Her works have been published in 11 languages: Bulgarian, Chinese, English, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Russian, Slovenian, Spanish.