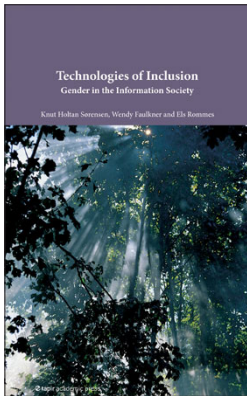


Technologies of Inclusion. Gender in the Information Society

Knut Holtan Sørensen, Wendy Faulkner & Els Rommes. Tapir Academic Press, 2011.

by Siri Øyslebø Sørensen



Does gender still matter? This is the initial question raised in the book *Technologies of Inclusion: Gender in the Information Society*. By the end of the book, there is little doubt that gender matters in Information and communication technologies (ICT) practices. Along the way new insights into how gender matters are presented. In this book, the authors Knut Holtan Sørensen, Wendy Faulkner and Els Rommes explore practices surrounding ICT. The authors pursue both

a policy interest in reducing the digital gender gap and a scholarly interest in understanding how gender and ICT is intertwined and changes over time. In doing so they manage to develop a novel theoretical approach to inclusion as well as gaining new insights into how gender and ICT is co-produced.

The empirical foundation of the book builds on a large European study entitled "Strategies of Inclusion: Gender in the Information Society" (SIGIS), involving a large group of researchers. Like many studies of gender and technologies, the analysis presented in this book takes a co-production approach. However, the effort to balance the mutual influence of gender and technology leads to new ideas about how inclusion can be understood and achieved. Unlike many other studies, this book does not focus on the gender divide as such. The book departs from the standard approach of investigating digital inclusion by taking a more explorative approach to the question of what digital inclusion is and how it takes shape. The emphasis is on exploring practices with ICT bridging the gap (or even transformations of the very idea of there being a gap).

Based on a review of the existing literature on gender and ICT, the authors argue that research on gender and ICT tends to focus on how hegemonic masculinity is symbolically reinforced through technology. In examining the stream of co-construction studies of gender and technology, Sørensen, Faulkner and Rommes argue that this research tends to focus more on changes in technology than changes in gender; thus gender is stabilized while technology is understood as continually changing. In order to capture potential changes in gender through the use of ICT or in meaning ascribed to ICT, the focus is on positive experiences, i.e., inclusion strategies with success in terms of reaching the digitally excluded. However, we are still far from a 'success story'. In the words of the authors (p 242): "...the picture we want to paint on the basis of our studies is not an epic image of progress but rather a

struggle – struggle with the meaning of gender, of ICT and of the resulting socio-technical assemblages."

Gender and ICT is in the book understood as a socio-technical assemblage. In gender studies there are many efforts to overcome the reproduction of the gender binary in research and writing. Thinking of gender as an assemblage, or gender and ICT as hybrid assemblages, provides an analytical strategy which avoids the reduction to the gender binary. It becomes possible to talk about gender and technology without getting trapped in classifications of technology being either feminine or masculine. Hence, the book provides insights and ideas relevant to a broader field of gender studies.

Following the idea of a symmetrical, co-produced assemblage of gender and ICT, the gender divide is not portrayed as a binary of included/excluded, but rather as a continuum. Furthermore, inclusion is not understood as simply adaptation to existing practices. Instead, the analytical approach is sensitive to the ongoing changes of both gender and ICT taking place. This analytical sensitivity, across several empirical studies of different sites, is one of the main strengths of the book.

In the book, digital inclusion is not understood as a goal in itself, but rather as an emergence of new socio-technical, ICT related practices and meanings attracting diverse groups of citizens. Hence, it challenges both the dominant narrative of inclusion based on the instrumental importance of ICT, and the mainstream idea of digital inclusion being something that can be measured by accounts of access, use, skills, formalized knowledge or work. Computers and the Internet constitute the main sites of study, covering a broad range of inclusion strategies. Both strategies aimed at women only, such as the use of gender quotas to educational programmes or initiatives to empower women in ICT use, and strategies aimed at including "everybody", for instance in practices of ICT design, are studied.

Gender stereotypes, and the gender binary as such, are challenged throughout the book. One study of 'self inclusion' through online interactivity and socially embedded learning shows how a symbolic reconstruction of women as competent users of ICT is produced. Another example is the analysis of efforts to motivate children and youngsters to use ICT through strategies of entertainment and glamour. This strategy transcends the gender stereotyped toy-tool binary, catering an idea of girls using computers for necessities, whereas boys use them for fun.

The findings of the empirical studies lead the authors to claim that an analytical emphasis on gender in the traditional ways (e.g.

technology as symbolically masculine) tends to portray gender as a more stable and dualistic system than it might actually be if emphasis was instead put on practices. In the final chapters of the book, the initial question of whether gender matters is developed into a question about whether gender changes with ICT, i.e., does digital inclusion change gender?

According to the empirical studies presented throughout the book, the gendered stereotypes seem sturdy and hard to change, whereas practices change more rapidly. Strong numerical dominance of one gender enforces the symbolic link between the gender and ICT, while inclusion of the previously excluded might in turn change the symbolic meaning of ICT. The authors conclude that ICT did work as a technology of inclusion, but mainly with respect to ICT use. In uses of ICT, both practices catered to by stereotypical images of men and women and in inclusion aiming at a general audience, new ways of doing gender became possible. Thus, domestication became an act of inclusion.

An important insight extracted from the broad range of empirical studies is the fact that normalization seems to be at the core of any form of digital inclusion; hence technologies of inclusion include generic and potentially standardized tools. The book also begins developing a theory of inclusion processes: The authors describe what they coin as 'the anatomy of inclusion' through three interconnected elements: initiation (including motivation), underlying understanding of gender and inclusion problems, and choice of instruments and actions. Hence, the book provides a theoretical basis for further studies of inclusion practices, not only limited to the field of ICT.

Sørensen, Faulkner and Rommes synthesize the empirical findings, suggesting that a strategy of representation and an emphasis on diversity and complexity when trying to understand gender and ICT will produce less gendered ICT-centered assemblages. Hence, the policy implications of the main findings encourage a focus on both quantity and quality, e.g., changing numeric balance in order to change gender symbolism. Furthermore, the authors suggest that strategies transcending gender is the most effective inclusion measure in the long run, as it is destabilizing the gender symbolism of ICT.

In other words: this book is particularly relevant to scholars and students interested in gender and ICT, but in fact any scholar working with gender and technology in general, and in a co-production perspective in particular, should read the book. Technologies of inclusion. Gender in the Information Society represents an unavoidable contribution to the academic debate. The book is well edited and written in a clear and accessible language, thus making it suitable for a broader audience with an interest in ICT practices as well as to policymakers interested in using ICT as an instrument for equality. Furthermore, the clear line of argument and the well-reasoned analysis makes the book a useful text for teaching.

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