The Case for Responsibility of the IT Industry to Promote Equality for Women in Computing*

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ABSTRACT: This paper investigates the relationship between the role that information technology (IT) has played in the development of women’s employment, the possibility of women having a significant influence on the technology’s development, and the way that the IT industry perceives women as computer scientists, users and consumers. The industry’s perception of women and men is investigated through the portrayal of them in computing advertisements. While women are increasingly updating their technological skills and know-how, and through this process are entering some positions in the workplace traditionally occupied by men, these achievements are not mirrored in their social and occupational status. The computer industry and higher education have worryingly low numbers of women, while the possibility of women influencing the development of computer technology is just emerging in feminist research. This paper argues that, though the IT industry, through their self-regulatory codes, subscribes to equal treatment of sexes, races and persons with disabilities, the industry nevertheless paints a stereotyped picture of inequality when portraying men and women in computer advertisements. As long as such a perception of women prevails within the industry, it will stand as a barrier to women having equal access to computer technology. If advertisements influence the way society perceives major social constructs and issues, then the computing industry has a social responsibility to portray men and women in an equal and non-stereotypical fashion.

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INTRODUCTION

For a relatively long time the effects of information technology and computing on the lives of women have been studied by feminist and non-feminist researchers. The reasons for low numbers of women present in the computing industry and in computer education have been investigated. However, it is only in recent years that research on whether and how women can influence the creation and development of computer technology has been undertaken. I shall briefly examine this two-way process and then present a case that the IT industry should take responsibility for presenting a positive view of women as computer users and creators.

The issues to be examined by this paper are:

1. The effects of computerization on women as users of IT
2. Women as creators of IT
3. The ways in which the IT industry portrays women in its advertisements
4. Codes of conduct and advertising standards
5. Issues of responsibility

WOMEN AS USERS OF IT

If we are to understand how computerization has affected women, we need to understand gender inequalities in the workplace. Increasing numbers of women all over the world have taken up paid employment. Women now comprise 43% of the labor force in Britain. However, the majority of working women have a limited range of occupations, expressly health, education, retailing, banking and finance, unskilled manufacturing, service industries and occupations which rely on part-time work. Men tend to dominate the upper levels of most sectors, but, notably, all sectors of technology. Few women enter what is seen as male dominated areas. The wages of women are on average less then three quarters that of men. In the 1970s feminists began to study traditional female occupations as well as the labor process in general from the gender point of view (e.g. Cockburn) and began to look at the relationship between women and technology. These studies have for the first time revealed the relationship between the division of labor and the widely held mistaken assumptions about women’s lack of aptitude for handling technology. Research has now established that women are as able as men to handle technology, including IT. What has not been conclusively established, though researched in detail, are the reasons for which women are not taking up careers in computing.

Information and communication technologies have almost always been included in the analysis of women’s employment and have been seen and documented in the past 20 years as having a significant impact on the employment of both women and men. Little of the research analyzes the changing position of women in the process of technological change. What seems clear, however, is that new technology replaces human (especially women’s) labor at the point when manual skill possessed by a