

Overcoming the socio-technical divide: A long-term source of hope in feminist studies of Computer Science

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Abstract

In the age of ecofeminism it took some time until feminists listened to Donna Haraway's call to enjoy the blurring of boundaries between machines and organisms, between the natural and the artificial which she articulated in her famous 'Cyborg Manifesto'. Meanwhile shifts in traditional dichotomies are very welcome and they often give rise to the hope that they will evoke changes in the existing gender order and the relationship between gender and technology.

In the field of Computer Science feminist approaches often focussed on the socio-technical divide, since the discipline is one of the main arenas in which the boundary between the technical and the social is being formed, negotiated and constantly reconfigured. The socio-technical divide – and also its bridging - pervades disciplinary discourses, software development processes and manifests itself in the artefacts of information technologies that come into use. At the same time, this dualism has been deeply gender-coded in western societies.

In my contribution I want to revisit some controversies in the history of the discipline that do not only demonstrate the uncertainty and permeability of boundaries between technology and the social, but that have also been sources of hope for change from feminist perspectives. The central questions I want to discuss are: To what extent feminist hopes were fulfilled? And, if positive changes in the relationship between gender and technology are not observable, what happened instead? Did the discipline reject approaches that aimed at integrating social aspects into technology (design)? Or was the thesis wrong that a bridging of the socio-technical divide will go along with changes in gender relations? On the basis of this analysis I want to question the current hype promoting "interaction", "interactivity" or "interactionism" in various forms as a new motor of progress or hope – in mainstream Computer Science as well as in feminist criticism.