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The Information Highway:
Its Implications for Women and Work

Jean Edmonds Lecture Series

I am happy to be part of this event in honour of Jean Edmonds. She was a great person and a fine public servant.

My contribution will be to speak about some of the social and economic impacts technology upon women and on the society in which we live. I want to talk about the polarising effects of technology, the paradox of technology, some of the social repercussions, and then policy consequences.

The Polarization Story

In 1991, the Economic Council of Canada issued a report called *Good Jobs, Bad Jobs.* The title became code for describing the disappearance of the middle wage earner – both blue and white collar. About half of the jobs created in the 1980s were non standard or Bad Jobs – with low pay, limited job security and few if any benefits. Non-standard jobs now account for about 30 % of total employment.

While I will talk about the effects on women in a moment, it is important to note that the polarization into good and bad jobs was pervasive. It affected men as well as women, manufacturing as well as services, and it was evident in all regions of Canada.

In January, CPRN published a study of the employment impact of technology, authored by Kathryn McMullen. It is based on a small sample, but it shows that the good jobs require more skill than ever. It also shows that the low-skill jobs are being eliminated by technology. So we may end up characterizing the 1990s as *Good Jobs, No Jobs*.

Kathy's work shows that low skill workers face fewer and fewer choices, and are at risk of being excluded from the workplace. Her study also tells us that:

- More women than men actually use computers in the work place. This is partly because women are concentrated in office and administrative work where computers are dominant.
- Training to help people acquire the higher skill demanded by work today is concentrated in the largest firms and it is focused on the most educated workers. So workplace training actually accentuates the polarization effects of technology.

Surveys by Statistics Canada show that home use of computers adds to polarization – 57 percent of high income households own computers versus 14 percent for the lowest income group. The rate is even higher in high income households with children: 65% reported having a computer. So the rich kids get to practice at home, while few poor kids do.

Computer access at schools is also an issue. School Net is a program to connect every school to the Internet. But we suspect that well funded schools do better at acquiring computers and ensuring all students have easy access.

All this means that we are becoming a society of winners and losers. People who are well educated have the best chance of being winners. People who are adept at using the new technologies also have a good chance of being winners.

Women may be further along the road to being comfortable with the technologies, but we do not know much about how this affects their ability to climb the ladder of success. With all their skill with technology, for example, women accounted for about 55% of non-standard jobs in 1994. As such, they may be skillful with technology but still badly placed to become winners in the workplace.

Of course, technology is not just a bad news story. It can generate extraordinary gains in productivity and incomes, at least for some. And in its social effects, it can be both liberating and oppressive.

The Social Paradox of Technology

I see liberation and oppression as two sides of the same coin.

If technology is liberating, we see it as permitting us to work anywhere, any time.

If technology is oppressive, we see it as forcing as to work everywhere, all the time.

Let's look at the liberating effect first.

- Telecommuting can help with the work-family balance, and thereby reduce stress.
- Technology is reconnecting people. We are entering a new era of letter writing because families and friends can communicate easily over long distances. Elizabeth in For Better or Worse has just discovered how to communicate with her older brother!
- Research and writing have been transformed. "Anytime I have two hours, I can work," says a friend of mine.
- And technology breaks down hierarchy – assistants can talk to the boss directly; layers of management are no longer needed. This can be liberating for the assistants, if not for the managers.

- Finally, there is new scope for economic development – look at the province of New Brunswick.

Now, let's look at the other side of the coin, the oppressive effect of working everywhere, all the time.

- With no boundaries between work and family life, the quality of family life can diminish rapidly. In our house, my husband and I could easily spend our evenings at two different computers at two opposite ends of the house.
- Workers at home are isolated, disconnected from the buddy system at the workplace – out of sight, out of mind at promotion time.
- Speeding up the pace of work can create stress for everyone.

This paradox of liberation and oppression illustrates the two faces of computer technologies. With winners and losers and insiders and outsiders, it is hard to know which way to turn.

Certainly, the polling data suggest that Canadians are not comfortable with the prospect of a polarized society. We do not see ourselves as a class society. Yet, we have been relatively slow to try to mitigate the polarizing effects of technology.

- For example, we do not know much about the career paths of nonstandard workers.
- Can they eventually climb the ladder to be insiders, or are they stuck in bad jobs for a lifetime?
- Do career ladders actually exist any more?
- If they do, is it possible to climb the ladder from clerical to professional work?
- Or is it necessary to drop out, upgrade, and then try for re-entry at the professional level?
- If people do upgrade, will there be entry-level jobs?

(One of the ways to end run the corporate ladder of course is to start your own business. 10 percent of women were self-employed in 1994, up dramatically from the 1980s, but still lower than the average of 17 percent for men.)

The Policy Consequences

Women seem to react to polarization and the new stresses in the workplace differently from men. Perhaps they hold different social values. Or perhaps they feel more vulnerable. After all, 20 percent of all women and 21 percent of children live in poverty, compared to only 16 percent of men.

And it appears that men still tend to dominate the political process. Only 37 percent of women are very likely to vote on election day, compared to 43 percent of men. (1993 National Election Survey)

Galbraith has argued that politics have increasingly moved to the right because the segment of society which has traditionally supported liberal social and economic policies have gradually withdrawn from the political process. (Ekos, Rethinking Government) check

The recent Maclean's-CBC poll showed that, compared to men, women feel that the safety net is more threatened and "heartily disapprove of those changes". Also, women were much less accepting of the prospect of working longer hours for less (34 vs 39 percent), of being unable to retire at 65 (27 vs 33 percent), of never being able to find full-time work (24 vs 36 percent).

In short, if more women voted, we might end up with different policies!

If we wanted a different kind of outcome from the use of the new technologies, what would we do?

Well, I do not think we can roll back the tide of technology or the other market forces that go with technology. But, collectively, we do have a lot more control over the future of work than we realize.

- Governments have an important influence through the decisions that they make with respect to investments in training and education, the way income is redistributed, and the way in which labour markets are regulated.
- Employers, unions, and workers have a major impact on the future of work through the way in which they reinvent the rules of the workplace. Will work be shared among the insiders and outsiders, or will strict distinctions be maintained?
- Will education leaders begin to rethink the way they organize to deal with the challenges of technology? One of the poorest school boards in Ontario has dealt with the cost problem by creating one super classroom with the best technologies which is used by all the schools in the system. Kids travel by bus 5 or 6 times a year to spend a full day doing highly relevant games and exercises on the computer.
- Are there ways to reduce the insecurity of the people in nonstandard jobs. For example, could they establish basic rights, that is, opportunities to create solidarity with their fellow workers – in dealings with employers as well as with suppliers. Can they form mutual aid societies to buy insurance? Or will temporary agencies begin to establish employment benefits for the workers they deploy?
- Will political parties and governments begin to use technology as a means of democratization, fostering political participation, educating citizens, giving them voice, connecting people to the collectivity in which they live?

At the moment, we all tend to deal with employment and technology issues in an ad hoc fashion, often trying to minimize change rather than reach out for new answers that fit the new world of work.

It would help if we could all begin with a sense of the big picture, and then acknowledged that we all have a hand with the paint brush. Every collective agreement, every community development project, every government decision on employment standards and social programs adds another brush stroke which will determine whether the future of work will be positive or negative for women and for men.

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