

Social History of Domestic Appliances in Turkey

Notes on gender and technology

Defne Karaosmanoğlu, Bahar Emgin, Leyla Bektaş Ata

ABSTRACT

In this essay we offer a summary of our analysis of the social history of domestic technologies in Turkey with a view to micro aspects such as the way women experience and perceive modernization, changes in gender roles and everyday lives, and desires and fears triggered by technological innovations as well as macro transformations in society, economics and politics. In other words, we study the discourses and promises brought by domestic technologies, such as refrigerators, washing machines, dishwashers, ovens, cookers, vacuum cleaners, and small household appliances; analyze their place and role in the everyday lives of women; and finally understand women's experiences of using these technologies in parallel with macro processes. In doing so we consider women as active agents.

KEYWORDS

Women's agencies, Domestic technologies, Turkey, Everyday life, Women's narrations



New articles in this journal are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 United States License.



This journal is published by [Pitt Open Library Publishing](https://pittopenlibrarypublishing.com).

SOCIAL HISTORY OF DOMESTIC APPLIANCES IN TURKEY: NOTES ON GENDER AND TECHNOLOGY¹

Technology, then, can tell us something we need to know about gender identity. Gender identity can tell us something we need to know about technology. (Cockburn, 1992, p. 38)

The strong connection between technology and manhood has been evident in academic literature for many years now. However, “men’s love affair with technology” has a history of its own and “there is nothing inherently or naturally masculine about technology,” as Ruth Oldenziel (1999) claims (pp. 9-10). This is only one of the reasons that we look at domestic technologies that have been understudied in academia for a long time. This lack of attention is most definitely due to their association with femininity and domestic life. Considering that technology has always been a masculine field, our aim is to re-establish the relationship between gender and technology and open new thresholds in history with the perspective of women.

Our project, funded by TÜBİTAK (The Scientific and Technological Research Council of Türkiye), aims to write a social history of domestic technologies in Turkey. We examine the representations of housework related technologies in different media platforms and try to understand and analyze the experiences and perceptions of female users. We examine how women as users of these technologies get into a relationship with modernization in different periods in the history of Turkey. In other words, we aim to examine the social history of domestic technologies by looking at how women as agents perceive the past, present and future.

Many studies have revealed that technologies cannot be understood only by their functionality or the instrumental benefit they produce, but also by daily experiences integrated with local, cultural, political and economic dimensions. Various meanings are created with the use of technology in everyday lives. Social studies of technology state that these meanings re-create the social, re-establish distinctions such as private and public space, rich and poor, male and female, feminine and masculine, organic and mechanical, modern and traditional (Bose et al., 1984; Cockburn, 1997; Cockburn and Fürst-Dilic, 1994; Cockburn and Ormrod, 1993; Cowan, 1976; Durack, 1997; Faulkner, 2001; Nickles, 2002; Ormrod, 1994; Silverstone and Hirsch, 1992; Wajcman, 2010).

Here, it is important to ask how and in what respects the housework related technologies in Turkey change the concept of home, domestic roles, interpersonal dynamics at home, and also how distinctions such as public and private, modern and traditional are re-defined in representation and everyday practices. While investigating the social history of domestic technologies, we focus on micro aspects such as the way women experience and perceive modernization, changes in gender roles and everyday lives, and desires and fears triggered by technological innovations as well as macro transformations in society, economics and politics. In other words, we study the discourses and promises brought by domestic technologies, such as refrigerators, washing machines, dishwashers, ovens, cookers, vacuum cleaners, and small household appliances; analyze their place and role in the everyday lives of women; and finally understand women’s experiences of using these technologies

in parallel with macro processes. In doing so we consider women as active agents.

Cynthia Cockburn (1992) asserts that “the sociological understanding of technology” has improved in two ways within the past two decades. First is that technological determinism is not taken seriously today and it is discarded eventually. In other words, technology is no longer seen as the primary driving force of social change. Instead, society and people who use technology differently in various contexts, are recognized as the agents of change. Theoretical responses to technological determinism manifest themselves in various approaches such as social construction of technology, actor-network theory, and relationality. Secondly, feminists claim that there is a strong relationship between technology and gender, that is, “technology itself cannot be fully understood without reference to gender” (p. 29).

Due to the 1970’s negligence of the gendered power relations in the field of science and technology, studies began to be subjects of criticism. Feminist historians and sociologists of technology has been influential in undermining the self-evident relation between technology and masculinity. The question, whether women’s relation to technological development significantly differs from that of men, which Ruth Schwartz Cowan (1979) had rightly posed long before, turned the attention inevitably to home. Cowan (1979) cites home as one of the prominent sites that designates women’s interaction with technology. Unlike male engineers who mostly shape and produce domestic technologies, women experience these rather as consumers and users (Cowan, 1979, p. 63). This observation is what placed everyday life at the center of the study of domestic technologies.

Cockburn (1997) offers a comprehensive critique of the widespread exclusion of the home as a non-technological sphere from the prevalent perception of technology. To undermine the idea that equates technology with the great machines of the masculine engineering culture, Cockburn (1997, p. 361) marks “the household and housework [as] a sphere of technology” pointing at the fact that the basic activities of household, which are “doing, making and producing” are actually inherent to the definitions of technology. The knowledge and know-how required to operate household technologies which are all artifactual also mandates the identification of home as a technological sphere (Cockburn, 1997, p. 362).

Cockburn (1997, p. 362) refers to a study that she conducted along with a group of researchers in eight European countries for four years to analyze the relation between development of household technologies and gender relations. The study revealed for the researchers that the engineers and designers of domestic technologies – all of whom were males – create the machines with only the motive of profit and progress, disconnected from the life in the house where the devices will be used. Obviously, the result is not pleasing for women as the users of these technologies. Cockburn (1997, p. 362) simply concludes that the “[e]veryday life is the starting place from which the design of technological futures should begin” to cover the gap between the engineer and the user.

Everyday life brings together “small things” from which it builds larger things. But, considering that it includes ordinary events, habits, and routines, one should not confuse it with a “big thing” (Highmore, 2011). Exploring everyday life reveals social relations, motivations of people and their ways of living. In our project, we examine everyday life mostly within the confines of the home and analyze the role of

¹ This text is prepared as part of a research project numbered 120K822, entitled “Social History of Household Technologies in Turkey (1930-2020): Modernization in the Everyday Lives of Women” and funded by TÜBİTAK (The Scientific and Technological Research Council of Türkiye).

domestic technologies on mundane practices of women in relation to domestic roles, division of labor and interpersonal relations. We also ask a similar question with Henri Lefebvre: "How can men [women] live as they are living, and how can they accept it?" (2002, p. 30).

While dealing with everyday life, gender and technology, we believe that concepts and categories should not be taken as fixed, but instead they should be conceived as contextual, relational and always in movement. Elizabeth B. Silva (2010) addresses three aspects that characterize feminist literature on technology: "(1) both gender and technology are processes; (2) they are shaped, or acted out, in interaction; and (3) they are both culturally and historically contingent categories" (Silva, 2010, p. 77). We believe that contextuality is the core of this perspective and it is crucial to be contextual while dealing with different periods, people, homes, technologies, and geographies.

In various contexts we question the relationship established between technology and modernization and believe that progress and development are not inherent features of new technologies, but that this bond is built discursively by different actors and representations. For example, David E. Nye (1991) in his book, in which he comprehensively covers the history of household electrification in the United States, discusses the reasons behind the rapid adoption of electricity in households and public spaces. Electricity is considered and promoted as modern and progressive by various actors in the society such as bureaucrats, technocrats, business people, advertisers, artists and opinion leaders. The newly established Republic of Turkey also attributed a key role to electricity in the modernization project. As Sibel Bozdoğan (2001) stated, electricity was considered by the newly established state "as an element of civilization, with both plain and metaphorical meanings of the term 'Enlightenment'."

Our project has two phases. The first phase, which we nearly completed, is the media archive work covering a 90-year history between 1930-2020. As part of the media archive work, we have analyzed six most circulated newspapers of their times, eleven magazines, twenty films (1950-2020), four hundred eighty television commercials (1972-2020) and social media posts of most well-known brands through discourse analysis. Then we wrote a report consisting of both visual and written materials on the history and discourse of domestic technologies in Turkey. We specifically focused on the discourses of femininity, modernization and everyday life. This report has given us a broad historical perspective as a result of the articulation of different sentiments and feelings about domestic technologies in Turkey. The second phase, which we have started recently, is the oral history study where in-depth interviews are held with 100 female users residing in five largest cities by population: İstanbul, Ankara, İzmir, Bursa and Adana. This will provide narratives on the uses of technology and experiences of women from various classes and identities. By combining media archive and oral history phases we plan to write a second report on experiences of modernization in Turkey by focusing on the female users of domestic technologies. We believe that these two reports contribute both to academic production and to the user-oriented development of technology by providing outputs to engineers, designers and advertisers who manufacture and market these technologies.

Our analysis starts with a periodization of usually twenty years (1930-1950; 1950-1970; 1970-1990; 1990-2000; 2000-2020), which we settle by taking into consideration the national macro economics and politics; changing gender roles; diversification of home technologies and their entry into the country; and globalization. We try to evaluate these periods considering their similarities and differences. As for that we try to address and discuss certain themes in each period: family structures, uses and arrangements of the space, responsibilities and duties attributed to the ideal woman, definitions and scope of housework, roles of household appliances, emotions evoked and triggered by domestic technologies, women's dreams for the future in relation to home and technology, and robotization/ smartness of technology. In relation to these, we wish to talk about how gender is redefined and reconstructed in relation to technology, and how technology is experienced, used and represented in relation to gender. In that regard, we are attentive to the complexities in the modernization processes in the country as well as everyday lives and experiences of women throughout history. We hope to re-read and re-define Turkey's modernization through domestic technologies and women's experiences, desires, concerns, and imaginations.

Finally, bringing together different fields of study such as communication studies, science and technology studies, cultural studies, history, everyday life and woman studies, our project writes the social history of discourses and experiences of domestic technologies in Turkey. This research which investigates the social history of technologies related to housework, and which reveals the relationship of women with domestic technologies and modernization, their daily lives, dreams, desires, concerns and future imaginations is first among its likes. By examining discursive differences between periods in the media and women's experiences and everyday lives, this study presents a theoretical framework on the ways in which discourses and narratives are articulated. We hope that the workshop, which we plan to bring together theorists and practitioners at the end of the research, our forthcoming book on media discourse analysis and other outputs we produce within the scope of the project will enable us to realize the relationship between use of technology and gender in the household. We are optimistic that the research will contribute to the development of products that take into account user demands, needs and imaginations, and the process in which gender inequalities are eliminated in domestic work.

REFERENCES

- Bose, C. E., Bereano, P. L. and Malloy, M. (1984). Household technology and the social construction of housework, *Technology and Culture*, 25(1), 53-82.
- Bozdoğan, S. (2001). *Modernism and nation building: Turkish architectural culture in the early Republic*. Singapore: The University of Washington Press.
- Cockburn, C. (1992). The circuit of technology: Gender, identity and power. R. Silverstone and E. Hirsch (Eds), In *Consuming technologies: Media and information in domestic spaces* (pp. 29-43). London: Routledge.
- Cockburn, C. (1997). Domestic technologies: Cinderella and the engineers, *Women's Studies International Forum*, 20(3), 361-371.
- Cockburn, C. and Fürst-Dilic, R. (1994). Introduction: Looking for the gender/technology relation. C. Cockburn and R. Fürst-Dilic (Eds). In *Bringing technology home: Gender and technology in a changing Europe* (pp. 1-21). Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Cockburn, C. and Ormrod, S. (1993). *Gender and technology in the making*. London: Sage.
- Cowan, R. S. (1976). The industrial revolution in the home: Household technology and social change in the 20th century, *Technology and Culture*, 17(1), 1-23.
- Cowan, R. S. (1979). From Virginia dare to Virginia slims: Women and technology in American life. *Technology and Culture*, 20(1), 51-63. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3103111>
- Durack, K. T. (1997). Gender, technology, and the history of technical communication, *Technical Communication Quarterly*, 6(3), 249-260.
- Faulkner, W. (2001). The technology question in feminism: A view from feminist technology studies, *Women's Studies International Forum*, 24(1), 79-95.
- Highmore, B. (2011). *Ordinary Lives: Studies in the Everyday*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Lefebvre, H. (2002). *Critique of everyday life (Volume II): Foundations for sociology of the everyday life* (J. Moore, Trans.). London and New York: Verso.
- Nickles, S. (2002). "Preserving women": Refrigerator design as social process in the 1930s, *Technology and Culture*, 43(4), 693-727.
- Nye, D. E. (1991). *Electrifying America: Social meanings of a new technology, 1880-1940*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Oldenziel, R. (1999). *Making technology masculine: Men, women, and modern machines in America, 1870-1945*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Ormrod, S. (1994). "Let's nuke the dinner": Discursive practices of gender in the creation of a new cooking process. C. Cockburn and R. Fürst-Dilic (Eds), In *Bringing technology home: Gender and technology in a changing Europe* (pp. 42-58). Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Silva, E. B. (2010). *Technology, culture, family: Influences on home life*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Silverstone, R. and Hirsch, E. (1992). Introduction. R. Silverstone and E. Hirsch (Eds), In *Consuming technologies: Media and information in domestic spaces* (pp. 1-10). London: Routledge.
- Wajcman, J. (2010). Feminist Theories of Technology, *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 34, 143-152.

Defne Karaosmanoğlu

Assoc. Prof., Kadir Has University, Faculty of Communication

Bahar Emgin

Assist. Prof., İzmir Institute of Technology, Faculty of Architecture

Leyla Bektaş Ata

Post-Doctoral Researcher, Kadir Has University, Faculty of Communication