

Institution: University of West London		
Unit of Assessment: UoA 34 - Communication, Cultural and Media Studies, Library and Information Management		
Title of case study: Gender, Technology and Work: Policy Debates and Creative Practice		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2015 - 2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s): Helen Hester	Role(s) (e.g. job title): Associate Professor of Media and Communication	Period employed by submitting HEI: Aug 2015 to date
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2016 to 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		
1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)		
<p>Gender, technology, and work are related to each other in profound and complex ways, but the connections between them are not always widely recognised or sufficiently well understood. Helen Hester's research seeks to rectify this. Its impact is demonstrable across two broad spheres – public policy debates and creative practice – within which the interaction of gender, technology, and work calls for specific forms of confrontation and response. Notable beneficiaries include UK think tanks addressing technology and the future of work, as well as cultural institutions and individual artists with an interest in feminist approaches to technoscience and gendered labour.</p>		
2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)		
<p>Dr Helen Hester's research advances a cultural studies perspective grounded in a materialist feminist tradition. Her work on labour (represented most directly in R1, R2, R3 and R4, but also thematically significant to R6) takes the form of feminist critical theory, and is influenced by social reproduction theory, feminist political economy, and post-work philosophy. In common with other post-work positions, it responds to changing labour conditions in the twenty-first century, seeking to confront rising inequality, anxieties around automation, and ever-more precarious working arrangements, while also arguing that people must seek to be collectively emancipated <i>from</i> (rather than <i>through</i>) their labour. Unlike many such positions, however, Hester also turns her attention to the home as both a waged and an unwaged workplace. She challenges the assumption that reproductive labour such as housework and care work represent the constitutive limit of contemporary post-work politics, and provides insight into the under-recognised tension between ideas about the caring economy and the "refusal of work" (understood as a political project encompassing the problematization of the work ethic, campaigns for a shorter working week, the use of technology to improve and reduce work, and so on). Hester's research addresses the mechanisms via which "women's work" has so far come to be excluded from post-work political projects, and offers concrete proposals for better integrating social reproduction into the refusal of work (via, for example, a commitment to the social and spatial redistribution of reproductive labour, and a critical rethinking of the development and application of "domestic technologies"), in a vital and timely move towards a robustly feminist post-work politics.</p> <p>Hester's research on technology and gender (most clearly represented in R1, R5 and R6) engages with and contributes to feminist technoscience studies and debates about post-cyber feminism, and significantly informs her interventions in debates about labour. This side of her work reimagines the emancipatory potential of feminism for an era of increasing complexity and perceived technological acceleration; demonstrates how gender politics have been reconfigured by a world transformed by globalization and the digital revolution; sets out what feminist technologies might look like, offering an ambitious approach to technological development that is attentive to historical inequalities in design, ownership, and access; and theorises the connections between contemporary technologies and gendered forms of labour, particularly those associated with biological and social reproduction. Spanning several disciplines (including Media Studies, Philosophy, Gender and Sexuality Studies, and Science and Technology Studies), Hester's work frequently involves collaborations with scholars from different fields. This is reflected in the co-authored outputs listed below. In the case of R3 and R4, the co-authors contributed equally to all elements of the research.</p>		

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

- R1. Hester, H. (2016) "Technically Female: Women, Machines, and Hyperemployment." *Salvage*, 3, August 8, 2016. <https://salvage.zone/in-print/technically-female-women-machines-and-hyperemployment/>
- R2. Hester, H. (2017) "Promethean Labours and Domestic Realism." *e-flux Architecture*, <http://repository.uwl.ac.uk/id/eprint/4048>
- R3. Hester, H., and N. Srnicek (2018). "The Crisis of Social Reproduction and the End of Work." In *The Age of Perplexity: Rethinking the World We Knew*. Barcelona: Random House (for Fundacion BBVA). An 800-word excerpt was included in *MIT Technology Review* (5/11/18). <http://repository.uwl.ac.uk/id/eprint/4288>
- R4. Hester, H., and Z. Stardust (2020) "Sex work in a post-work imaginary: on abolitionism, careerism and respectability". In: *New Feminist Studies: Twenty-first-century Critical Interventions*. Cambridge University Press, 2020, ed. Jennifer Cooke, ISBN 9781108471930
- R5. Hester, H. (2017) "After the Future: *n* Hypotheses of Post-Cyber Feminism." *Res*. <http://beingres.org/2017/06/30/afterthefuture-helenhester/>
- R6. Hester, H. (2018) *Xenofeminism*. Cambridge: Polity Press. ISBN 9781509520626

Quality statement: All listed outputs were published and/or reprinted in peer reviewed or peer edited publications. R4, and R6 have been submitted as outputs to REF 2021. All outputs (bar R5) have been translated into one or more foreign languages, with R6 in Italian and Spanish.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Hester's research has fostered new approaches across two spheres – policy debate and creative practice. Her research has stimulated and informed discussions regarding public policy via her contributions to a series of UK think tanks, as well as to the international organisations UNESCO and Fundación Saber Futuro. It has also produced successful collaborations with arts venues and inspired innovative artistic activities internationally.

Public policy debates: Since 2015, Hester has particularly influenced the approaches of four public policy think tanks in the UK and, latterly, UNESCO and Fundación Saber Futuro. In all cases, her contributions involve foregrounding issues of gender in discussions about emerging technologies and the future of work, thereby ensuring that these three key areas are considered not as isolated phenomena, but as interdependent concepts. As one former Senior Researcher (now Director of his own think tank) puts it, 'Think tanks are strange intermediary institutions in many ways, acting to interpret, translate and transform research from academic sources among others into public policy. In that, Helen's work has been exemplary – incisive, always providing new ways of thinking through questions of work, justice and power, while communicated in a way non-specialists can digest and draw upon – and has been both hugely valuable and impactful' [S1].

In 2018, Hester joined the Board of Advisors for **Autonomy** (a progressive think tank concentrating on the current crisis of work) and has since been involved in several projects relating to her research. She directly contributed to a major report on working time reduction, 'The Shorter Working Week: A Radical and Pragmatic Proposal' (2019). The report received widespread media coverage, as well as endorsements from trade unions, economists, and major political figures such as Clive Lewis MP and Katja Kipping, co-leader of Germany's Die Linke party. Kipping declared that the report is ". a radical proposal and it is necessary. The special focus on the question of gender equality and the double burden of women is one of its key points' [S2]. The report had a significant impact on debates about working time in the UK; it was referenced in the 2019 report 'How to Achieve Shorter Working Hours' by Lord Robert Skidelsky [S3], commissioned by the Labour Party. Shortly after the publication of S3, the four-day working week became Labour party policy. The announcement of a move towards a 32-hour week over the course of a decade – included within the Labour Party Manifesto 2019 (p.62, Working Time) – followed the proposals laid out in Autonomy's report exactly. This went *against* the advice offered by Lord Skidelsky, suggesting a strong preference for Autonomy's recommendations. Indeed, the then-Shadow Chancellor, John McDonnell, called the report 'a vital contribution' to the debate. [S2]

Hester also served on the advisory board for one of Autonomy's specific projects – a 2020 report on the future of work in the Valencian community, which proposed a working time reduction strategy for the region. The regional government commissioned the research as part of its planned 'futureproofing' of the labour market, and the Regional Secretary for Employment stated that

Autonomy's suggestions would 'inspire our coming action plan' for work in the community. Eight months after the report came out, the regional government allocated €4 million to support companies seeking to implement a four-day week without loss in pay for workers. At the time of writing, the Spanish treasury is also debating subsidising a four-day week, in a move that has been attributed to the influence of developments in Valencia. [S2]

Autonomy's Valencian report also considered care infrastructure in the region, and Hester's research was central here. The Director of Autonomy said: 'We have a number of foci, including unemployment support, working time, education and work, and gender and work. Regarding the latter in particular, Helen's work has been foundational – particularly her work on gender infrastructure, the politics of time and automation'. Hester's contribution to the project included collaboration with architects on proposals for long term care centres, intended to respond to the needs of an ageing population while also improving the lives of care workers (paid and unpaid). The resulting designs were included in the report, which received coverage in both the Spanish press (including in *Levante*, the region's most widely read newspaper) and the British media (including in the *Independent* and *Daily Mail*). [S2]

The **Institute of Public Policy Research** (IPPR; a think tank with interests including public services, economic justice, and technoscience) twice commissioned Hester to write about feminist perspectives on care work for their journal *Progressive Review* and drew upon her research in the field of gender, technology, and work while developing a series of proposals around automation. IPPR's Commission on Economic Justice discussion paper 'Managing Automation: Employment, Inequality, and Ethics in the Digital Age' (2017) included an acknowledgement of Hester's contribution [S1]. The paper's lead author described her work as 'hugely helpful in informing' the paper, 'particularly relating to the politics of working time, ensuring policies sought to embed justice into social reproduction as a fundamental element of a just economy, and a more critical approach to the nature, direction and use of technologies and technical systems' [S1]. The paper generated widespread coverage from outlets such as the BBC, the *Financial Times*, and the *Telegraph*, with much of the reporting concentrating on IPPR's call for government oversight of automation to help prevent increasing inequality and a widening gender pay gap. The paper's analysis and arguments underpinned the Commission's final report, 'Prosperity and Justice: A Plan for the New Economy' (2018), which formed the basis of discussions with Labour and the Liberal Democrat's economic teams [S1]. John McDonnell compared it to the Beveridge Report, arguing it 'deserved to have the same impact' [S4].

The **New Economics Foundation** (NEF). This think tank promoting social, economic and environmental justice, whose activities include campaigns for universal basic services and a shorter working week, consulted Hester while developing proposals for new forms of public control of cultural and social resources. She commented on a draft working paper and then participated in a closed roundtable in December 2016. Her contributions were among those integrated into the resulting 2017 report, 'Building a New Social Commons: The People, the Commons, and the Public Realm'. The Head of Work and Pay at NEF has confirmed that Hester's 'work has been a source of inspiration for NEF's thinking over a number of years. In particular, we have sought Helen's input into our treatment of themes of care work and reproductive labour. NEF's developing "universal basic services" policy agenda has put social care and childcare work at its core and as such we've found Helen's careful thinking about the role of technology in relation to the care economy particularly useful' [S5].

Hester's work has also had an influence upon the activities of **Doteveryone** (a think tank which seeks to explore how technology is changing society). The interim CEO – commenting on Hester's participation in the discovery project 'Inclusive Futures', which addressed how imaginative approaches to the future might offer a starting point for rethinking technologies today – noted that her contribution (which drew upon the research underpinning R1, R2 and R3) was 'very valuable, and led to the development of a significant programme of work'. The project resulted in the 2017 white paper 'Space invaders: Reclaiming the future through rebellious stories and diverse voices', commissioned by the innovation fund Nesta. This paper draws directly upon Hester's words (attributed to 'roundtable participant') and includes her in its thanks and acknowledgements [S6]. Its publication resulted in funding for a follow-up project, which sought to foster the participation of women and girls in the STEM industries. In 2018, Doteveryone sought Hester's views on the topic of care, AI, and automation as part of its 'Better Care Systems' project. This project resulted in a

report entitled 'Better Care in the Age of Automation' (2019), which generated considerable interest from specialist trade publications for the home care industry. [S6]

More recently, Hester's research (including R1) has been cited in the **UNESCO** report 'Steering AI and Advanced ICTs for Knowledge Societies' (2019), which advocates for a human rights centred, open, accessible, multi-stakeholder approach to the development of artificial intelligence. The report identifies gender as a cross-cutting issue in relation to AI, and it is in this context that Hester's research on technology and reproductive labour is repeatedly cited. Her work is used in discussions about the gendering of workplace technologies and the automation of secretarial and emotional labour, as well as in support of claims about the exploitation and perpetuation of cultural ideas about gender and work in the design of digital voice assistants. In August 2019, Hester was invited to sit on the report's review board. One of the report's authors commented that her feedback 'helped us to understand diverse feminist perspectives on technology, especially tech-positive cyberfeminism', and noted that her 'contribution to our chapter on Gender was invaluable and we made major changes to [a key section] as a result'. [S7]

Hester's work has also recently proved influential for the newly formed Chilean think tank **Fundación Saber Futuro**, which aims to explore technology and the governance of knowledge from a Global South perspective. In extending an invitation to collaborate with the Foundation, the Executive Director wrote '...your work, in general, was significant [...] for the ideas that encourage the creation of the Foundation. Here your book *Xenofeminism*, that was translated and published by the Argentinian publishing house Caja Negra, had a great impact, which is very important for us because it includes thoughts and ideas that, at least in Chile, are still far from the public discussion'. [S8]

Creative practice: Hester's research on technology and gender politics has had a substantial impact upon programmes organised by arts and cultural institutions – most notably, the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) and Science Gallery London (SGL). Hester has been invited to collaborate with the ICA on the programming of public events related to her research on an ongoing basis since 2015. The Curator of ICA's Talks and Live performance programme stated that 'Hester's work has built around it a community of committed artists, writers and activists, and not only has our continued collaboration born fruitful discussions and new conversations, but it has developed a new community of thinkers here at the ICA' [S9].

In 2017, Hester worked directly alongside the **ICA's** in-house team to programme the 'Post-Cyber Feminist International' – a 5-day series of workshops, performances, and discussions, building from ideas first outlined in R5 (the text in which the term 'post-cyber feminism' was coined). This event, in which participants explored the ways in which feminist and queer practices might shape the future of technologies, reached a total audience of 1,349, and generated substantial media coverage, including positive review articles in *The Guardian* and *Frieze* (which praised the series for 'raising urgent questions') [S9]. In the wake of the event, the art market website *artnet* called post-cyber feminism that 'latest big idea to storm contemporary art' [S9]. The curator from the ICA noted that the idea of post-cyber feminism has had a continued impact upon the agenda of arts institutions internationally, including inspiring a 2019 exhibition in Zurich [S9].

Hester's impact upon cultural institutions has been extended through her recent work with **SGL**, which hosted the season 'GENDEERS: Shaping and Breaking the Binary' in the spring of 2020. The season consisted of an exhibition and a public programme, which brought together scientific researchers, students, local communities, artists and theorists. When inviting Hester to act as Researcher in Residence for the programme, the season's curator wrote that '*Xenofeminism* (2018) has been influential upon the development of my curatorial research for the gender season. This text and the conversations we have had thus far represent an impactful discourse for the overall direction of the season' [S10]. R6 was central to the original conceptualization of the exhibition, with key passages of the book being referenced in the curator's initial proposal to SGL. Hester actively contributed to the season via participation in a collective project exploring issues of gender, technology, and work in inclusive approaches to reproductive healthcare. She led a series of workshops addressing labour in relation to hormonal 'transition periods' such as menopause, puberty, pregnancy, and gender transition, and worked with an interdisciplinary team to design a prototype "cultural probe kit". This kit was a collection of creative tasks, made available for visitors to interact with, which encouraged new kinds of reflection on and engagement with the

theme of gender and reproductive transition. A free drop-in session took place on March 8 and formed a 'cornerstone of the International Women's Day programme' at the gallery [S10]. The curator described the workshop as doing 'a fantastic job of communicating incredibly complex and personal talking points in a manner that was accessible and interesting to our audiences' [S10], and reported seeing members of the public participating in the drop-in session for up to an hour at a time.

In addition to influencing the work of cultural industries professionals within institutions, Hester's research has also had a demonstrable impact upon individual creative practitioners. Her research has inspired and supported the work of artists across various media, several of whom explicitly reference Hester's work in paratextual materials. These artists include:

- Laura Yuile, a multidisciplinary, installation-based, and performance artist who has exhibited internationally. Yuile's 2019 durational performance piece 'Once You Care, You're Future' (performed in New Hunt's House, London, in March 2019) is directly inspired by the theories of reproductive labour advanced in R6. In her initial proposal for the work, Yuile cites the book directly and has said that Hester's work has been 'very informative in my thinking towards this performance' [S11].
- The duo Alla Poppersoni and Alexander Sahn (who collaborate together under the name BBB_) titled their May 2017 performance piece 'I'd rather be an iPhone than a woman' – a direct quote from R1. This was also the title of BBB's recent album. The pair reference Hester in statements, interviews, and paratextual materials [S12].
- R1 also provides the title of a work by the Swedish artist, Arvida Byström. Byström has claimed that her 2018 piece 'You'd rather be an iPhone than a woman' is 'very specifically named after a quote from [Hester's] text "Technically Female: Women, Machines and Hyperemployment"'. The caption to a reproduction of the image on her Instagram outlines some of the article's ideas about gender, technology, and work [S11].
- Hester's research has also informed the practice of pioneering new media artist Shu Lea Cheang who is currently engaged in a long-term residency at Hôtel-Dieu Hospital in Paris. The resulting project, 'UNBORN 0X9', is a performance questioning the cyborg future of parenting. The co-producer of the project, Ewen Chardronnet, said that Hester's work in R6 was particularly 'influential in terms of the development of the project and was one of several key conceptual and theoretical reference points' [S11].
- The artist Benjamin Efrati views his work 'Xenoxenism' as – to quote the project's website – 'an extrapolation of xenofeminism'. The project began in 2015, and has resulted in performances, illustrations, a digital album, and a multimedia installation which premiered as part of the 2017 Nuit Blanche festival in Paris. The installation included an animated short, featuring a fictionalized version of Hester alongside various influential feminists from history, with dialogue voiced by an actor [S12].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

- S1. Report by IPPR and letter from former IPPR senior research fellow, 16/9/20
- S2. Two reports by Autonomy, including endorsements and links to press coverage; letter from Co-Director, 8/2/19; articles about support for 4-day week in Spain, including in Valencia.
- S3. 'How to Achieve Shorter Working Hours', by Lord Robert Skidelsky (2019)
- S4. <https://inews.co.uk/opinion/comment/john-mcdonnell-economy-investment-corporation-tax-194358>, 5/9/18
- S5. Report by NEF; letter from the Head of Work and Pay, 12/4/20
- S6. White paper, report, and article by Doteveryone: letter from Interim CEO, undated
- S7. Report by UNESCO; letter from a Programme Specialist, 3/12/19
- S8. Email from Executive Director, Fundación Saber Futuro, 7/9/20, and from a Chilean congressman involved in its work, 29/7/20
- S9. Round up of press coverage of the 'Post-Cyber Feminist International' at the ICA; letter from the Talks and Live Curator, including audience figures, 28/1/19
- S10. Letters from the Curator-Producer of the gender season at SGL, 8/2/19 and 26/8/20
- S11. Correspondence from three artists and creative practitioners, individually dated.
- S12. Interview with BBB_ in *Missy* magazine, 2/2/2017. The website for Benjamin Efrati's 'Xenoxenism' project is <http://xenoxenism.net/>