

Y. Strengers and J. Kennedy

The Smart Wife Why Siri, Alexa, and Other Smart Home Devices Need a Feminist Reboot, Cambridge, MA, the MIT Press, 2020, pp. 320

Linda Paxling *Lund University*

The smart wife is here to serve. Feminized artificial intelligence in the form of digital assistants such as Amazon's Alexa, Apple's Siri, or Google Home is replacing the human wife. They can also take the shape of anthropomorphic, zoomorphic, or automated home devices or robots and even sex robots. As with many technologies, smart wives are integrating themselves into our lives, offering help that we suddenly feel we cannot live without. Industry sales figures show that men are more likely to be smart home consumers. At the same time, women, especially millennial women between the ages 18 to 35, have shown a keen interest into smart home technology. In terms of gendered interest, the smart wives are being designed in male-dominated research fields of robotics, AI, and computer programming, and then further developed and commercialized in global tech companies vastly outnumbered by men. This unbalance is visible in the digital feminized workforce reinforcing the age-old stereotype of the woman as a loving and modest caregiver whose rightful place is the home.

In the book *Smart Wife* Strengers and Kennedy give the reader a close look into the almost stealthily pervasiveness of feminized digital assistants into our homes, and what the consequences are of re-inscribing outdated stereotypes such as those of a 1950s American housewife into contemporary assistants. The authors argue that the smart wives serve a patriarchal system that position women as commodities, upholds nostalgic and sexual stereotypes and paints a picture of boys merely playing with their toys.

They present a research aim of rebooting the smart wife to become a more diversified, equal technoscientific figure in contemporary society. The authors provide a detailed framework of the discourse of smart wives by weaving in the academic fields digital media, media and communication, AI and feminist and queer theory, pop cultural representations of smart wives, the industries of digital assistants, robots and sex dolls, and their own empirical research into smart home households. Their empirical work covers ethnographic interviews, observation and home tours in Australian households, and interviews with Australian industry insiders. Additionally, they have made qualitative content analyses of international popular media and trade articles about the smart home as well as promotional videos for smart home products and digital voice assistants.

The book is structured as follows. The first chapter introduces the discourse of the smart wife. Smart in this sense means digital, internet-connected, or robotic and wife refers to the archetype of someone who takes on all domestic responsibilities within a home. The main prototype for the

smart wife is the 1950s US white, middle-class and heteronormative housewife. However, she is not the only prototype of the smart wife today as digital assistants are becoming increasingly popular worldwide and thus reflect other cultural expressions. China has surpassed the US in global market share in digital voice assistants with over half of the global market share. Although quite culturally diverse, several of the Asian countries (China, India, Japan and South Korea) have a shared technological theme where the characteristics of a young, timid and sexualized woman or girl are emphasized in the digital assistant.

In their pursuit of addressing the future of domestic life and relationships between humans and AI and feminism, Strengers and Kennedy pose several questions concerning the meaning of the smart wife: “Is [the smart wife] actually helping our progress toward gender equity? Aside from keeping us company or ordering the groceries, what else is she doing in upholding systems of power and oppression in capitalist and patriarchal societies? What kind of future is she manifesting? And how can we imagine her living with us?” (p. 4). The authors continue to provide context to the diversity and complexity of the smart wife archetype by explaining how domestic responsibilities continue to fall to women around the world and how people are looking to technology to overcome this gender inequality. At a first glance, the smart wife sounds like a fantastic solution that can help solve the ongoing nagging of division of (domestic) labor taking place in many households in gender-progressive societies. At the same time, the smart wife is represented as a nostalgic, sexualized, and submissive female figure that has serious consequences in how we treat people. The increased use of social networks and robotics is further blurring the boundaries between humans and machines, which in turn affects how we understand and interact with each other (Turkle 2016). As a result, the authors are motivated by an agenda of rebooting the smart wife so it serves a progress toward gender equity and diversity. They position themselves as feminists who seek to break up the patriarchal system in order to increase diversity and equity and are inspired by technofeminist scholars Donna Haraway, Judy Wajcman, Sherry Turkle and Sarah Pink in their pursuit to liberate the smart wife. In the following four chapters Strengers and Kennedy introduce historical and contemporary smart wives from popular culture (Rosie), social robotics (Pepper), the digital device market

In chapter two Rosie - the animated, freewheeling robot housekeeper from the 1960s tv-series *The Jetsons* is introduced as representing the core values of the ideal 1950s housewife. Rosie has influenced the smart home industry when developing for instance robotic maids and vacuum cleaners. The gendering of technology is poignant in how women are completely neglected as a resource for product design even though they are the main domestic workers. Technology has been and continues to be viewed as the “men’s domain” (Berg 1994). This is further exemplified by the authors’ research on early adopting smart households and the concept of “digital

housekeeping” (Tolmie et al. 2007) – the activity of integrating, maintaining, and monitoring digital devices and systems. It was mostly the men who did the digital housekeeping.

In chapter three Pepper, a gender ambiguous humanoid, and social robotics is introduced. The authors discuss characteristics such as cute, friendly and human-like in relation to gender fluidity and obstacles in designing robots that are too human and as a result become fearful and a threat. Some roboticists have thus focused on developing social robots that are similar to children in order to develop care-giving relationships. In chapter four the authors take an unexpected but well sought-after turn towards the ecofeminist movement. Amazon, the largest e-commerce company in the world, is introduced through the ever-popular digital voice assistant Alexa. Strengers and Kennedy take a critical stance inwards towards their own ambition of rebooting the smart wife to support gender equity and diversity. More technology for more people is incompatible with an ecofeminist perspective that questions the capitalist labour market as it exploits the planet’s resources and marginalizes women. Strengers and Kennedy argue that it is possible to change the smart wife from within the capitalist market system and challenge the system itself through an ecofeminist perspective.

Another, very lucrative aspect of the smart wife industry is that of sex robots. In chapter five Harmony is introduced as the smart wife with benefits. Harmony shares several characteristics like those of the other digital assistants and its creators share similar backgrounds as white, heterosexual, US men. Harmful acts such as robotic rape and violence towards sexbots can further play a detrimental impact on women. Strengers and Kennedy go on to argue that the robot-sexual services market is not supporting gender equality and diversity. At the same time, if for instance affirmative consent can be integrated in the design of sexbots, there are advantages to be had. Referring back to the social robots as relational, how we treat robots reflects our actions in other relationships. In chapters six and seven common stereotypes among men and women are discussed in detail. In chapter six the historical framing of women’s bodies and minds as imperfect is reflected in today’s digital assistant. In the text, smart wives are described as “bitches with glitches”, a derogatory name entangled with everyday sexism and passive femininity. In chapter seven the authors deal with the gendered concept of boys and their toys. The gendering of technology as a male domain has had serious implications for not only women but also to a certain extent for men as well in terms of what is implied and expected in masculinity.

In the final chapter the authors return to their two-fold aim of providing a critique of the stereotypical cultural phenomena of the smart wife and creating an intervention of the very same phenomena so as to expand possible scenarios for the smart wife to progress toward gender equity and diversity. Strengers and Kennedy have developed a manifest as a conscious

act of “staying with the trouble” (Haraway 2016). The manifest includes elements of queering the gender of the smart wife, changing the premises of who codes the smart wife, increasing female representation in technology, and embedding affirmative consent and ethical guidelines. The authors argue that the reboot of the smart wife will benefit women all over by improving the role of women intellectually and publicly, by creating a safer environment and furthering the sexual liberation on women’s terms. Additionally, they emphasize that the renewal of smart wives will benefit all other genders as well.

This book is a thought-provoking and enjoyable read. The reader is taken on a journey to learn how the socio-cultural representations such as those of a 1950s US housewife are re-inscribed in many of the digital assistants we use today, and what implications this has on the smart wife industry and to a greater extent on gender equity and diversity (and the planet) in contemporary society. Even though the text is quite theory-driven the authors manage to mix it up with plenty of witty pop cultural references and market-relevant know-how which opens up for a broader audience.

Having read this book I would argue that we need to stop thinking of smart wives as merely innovative “technofixes” that will solve the division of (domestic) labor and begin thinking and caring for them as beloved, relational artefacts in order to increase equity and diversity between humans and machines alike. Similar to Haraway’s cyborg figuration the smart wife is a provocative and complex entity challenging the false dichotomy of the social and the technical entangled with opportunities of changing human-machine relations and with complicated ethical issues of unsustainability and power relations. This book would furthermore be of interest for the posthuman discourse on care. The smart wife opens up for an interesting discussion on the division between things to be concerned about and matters we care for. When we reframe humans as inseparably entwined with the non-human what implications can this have on the relation between humans and our future digital workforce?

References

- Berg, A.-J. (1994) *A gendered socio-technical construction: The smart house*, in C. Cockburn and R. Furst Dilic (eds.), *Bringing Technology Home: Gender and Technology in Changing Europe*. Buckingham, Open University Press, pp. 165-180.
- Haraway, D. (2016) *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Durham and London, Duke University Press.
- Tolmie, P., Crabtree, A., Rodden, T., Greenhalgh, C. and Benford, S. (2007) *Making the home network at home: Digital housekeeping*, in L. J. Bannon, I. Wagner, C. Gutwin, R. H. R. Harper and K. Schmidt (eds.), *ECSCW 2007: Proceedings of the 10th European Conference on Computer-Supported Cooperative Work*, Cham, Springer, pp. 331-350.

Turkle, S. (2016) *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*, London and New York, Penguin Books.

* * *