FEMINIZED WORK, NEW TECHNOLOGIES, AND HOPE

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The dramatic social and economic changes of the past 30 years related to globalization are linked in important ways to the 'new technologies' of information and communications systems. Indeed, in the first rush of enthusiasm for information and communication technologies, it was proclaimed that people in communities all over the world would be connected to one another in new ways, that this was an inherently democratic medium, and that it would create work for people who lived outside the major urban centers. The new jobs related to the sunrise industries of 'telematics' would replace the jobs being lost in the older industrial centers, the 'sunset' industries. This was precisely the story that was told in New Brunswick, when the provincial government during the 1990's launched a sustained effort to utilize the dissemination of information technology as a core piece of their local economic development strategy. They did this through encouraging the location of 'call center' operations in the province by offering forgivable loans and other incentives. Call centers are sites from which firms, or independent contractors, provide consumer services over the telephone. They can be either inbound service centers, where, for example, customers call a 1-800 number to purchase a product or a service or to make a reservation for a hotel or airline, or they can be outbound centers, where telemarketing, consumer research or other types of calls are made to consumers. The New Brunswick government initially billed its efforts to attract call center jobs to the province as its 'on-ramp to the information highway'.[1] While this

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[1] F. McKenna, "Changing the Bottom Line" (1994) 59 Bus. Q. (Special Supplement "Report on Globalization") 104 at 104; New Brunswick Taskforce on the Electronic Information Highway, (1994) *Driving the Information Highway*, January; New Brunswick Department of Economic Development and

generated a great deal of attention for the call center strategy, Premier McKenna's rhetoric also revealed an element of closet technological utopianism. The "high skill, high wage, pollution free jobs"[2] that the call centers were supposed to provide were offered as the panacea for underdevelopment at the margins of the global economy. These were to be the better, cleaner, more sustainable jobs to replace those that were being lost in the fish plants, the shipyards, and the sawmills. The New Brunswick strategy dovetailed with prevailing policy wisdom at the time: high tech was considered by people like Robert Reich, President Clinton's former Minister of Labour, to be a developed country's best defense to the threat of unlimited low wage labour in the south.[3]

Although I will be calling for a reinvigoration of utopian thinking in this paper, I want to distinguish my approach from the unacknowledged utopianism of this type of technocratic discourse, which I find misleading and potentially dangerous. It is dangerous because of what it too often conceals, the narrow conceptions of both liberty and selfhood presumed by free market liberalism.[4] It also conceals a failure to attend to the ways in which new technologies often function to reproduce and reinforce older social and labour market divisions, such as the feminization of marginal labour, a process that is very pronounced in the call center industry.

The faith that new technologies can 'solve' persistent social problems, like the chronic un- and under-employment of New Brunswickers, is not uncommon among

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Tourism, (1989) *Toward 2000: An Economic Development Strategy for New Brunswick*, cited in R. Buchanan, *Making Women's Work: Global Restructuring and Local Development in the Call Center Industry* (S.J.D, Wisconsin Law School January 2000) [unpublished] at 128 [hereinafter *Buchanan, S.J.D. Thesis*].

[2] This statement was made by Premier Frank McKenna in relation to jobs in the call centers. See "Premier Challenged on Job Creation" *The [Fredericton] Daily Gleaner* (2 August 1995).

[3] "Why is this all happening? Why is it that we had an economy in the first couple of decades after the Second World War in which the rising tide lifted everybody, and now we have an economy in which there is so much dispersion? A lot of this has to do with the fact of technology and, also, globalization. And what does that mean? It means essentially that if you are well educated, if you have the right skills, if you have the right problem-solving skills, technology is your friend. But if you don't have the right problem-solving skills, technology is your enemy." R. Reich, "Investing in People 'Good for Us as a Nation,' Says Secretary of Labor," online: National Center for Research in Vocational Education, 1988-1999 <http://vocserve.berkeley.edu/CW73/Reich.html> (date accessed: 20 May 2002).

[4] "In the consumer culture of the late twentieth century, freedom has come to be equated with freedom of choice and the rights of citizenship with those of consumership." D. Schniderman "Constitutionalizing the Culture-Ideology of Consumerism" (1998) 7 Social and Legal Studies 213 at 218.

policymakers these days.[5] In a sense, it is a new kind of fundamentalism, which replaces the previous, now discredited, faith in 'regulation' that we had in the post-war era. These days, policy makers seem to understand too well that their efforts to re-orient social practices through legislative means are likely to be 'captured' or otherwise give rise to unintended consequences.[6] Yet technology and regulation are not so different from one another, as Ursula Franklin has shown us.[7] She describes both as powerful forms of social instruction.[8] I would call them regulatory practices. That is, while we are commonly in the habit of looking at both of these things in instrumental terms, as 'tools,' neither law nor technology exist in isolation from the social contexts in which they are used. The belief in their efficacy as 'tools' for social change only survives by abstracting them from their social contexts. When one understands that both law and technology are the products of the very social relations it is imagined that they will change, it is easier to understand why they so often fall short of the transformative goals set for them.[9]

Professor Franklin defines hope as our ability to imagine and work towards a better future.[10] The maintenance of social hope, it seems, is a necessary legitimating ingredient in our political and social institutions. We expect it of our governments and policymakers; we require that they imagine and work towards better futures for us, despite the fact that they seem to so often fail at this task. In recent years, we

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[5] An influential example of technological optimism is found in: M.J. Piore & C.F. Sabel, *The Second Industrial Divide: Possibilities for Prosperity* (New York: Basic Books, 1984) [hereinafter *Piore & Sabel*]. See also J.E. Krier & C. P. Gillette, "The Uneasy Case for Technological Optimism" (1985) 84 Mich. L.Rev. 405.

[6] Overviews and reconfigurings of the scholarly literature on regulatory capture, which had its heyday in the 1970s and 1980s, are contained in M. Levine & J. Forrence, "Regulatory Capture, Public Interest and the Public Agenda: Toward a Synthesis" (1990) 6 Journal of Law, Economics and Organization 167, and I. Ayres & J. Braithwaite, "Triparitism: Regulatory Capture and Empowerment" (1991) 16 Law and Social Inquiry 435.

[7] U. Franklin, "Liberty, Technology and Hope" (2002) 51 U.N.B.L.J. 35 [hereinafter, *Franklin (2000)*].

[8] *Ibid.* at 35; U. Franklin, *The Real World of Technology*, rev. ed. (Toronto: Anansi, 1999) at 6 [hereinafter, *Franklin (1999)*].

[9] A useful discussion of the socially and culturally embedded nature of law is found in the lengthy introduction by D.T.Goldberg, M. Musheno & L.C. Bower, "Shake Yo' Paradigm: Romantic Longing and Terror in Contemporary Sociolegal Studies" in their edited collection, *Between Law and Culture: Relocating Legal Studies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

[10] *Franklin (2000)*, *supra* note 7 at 35.

have seen a growing public concern and sense of powerlessness in the face of these failures. Public protests that seek to circumvent our democratic political institutions and address a differently constituted public are one symptom of this concern.[11] The crisis of left politics in this country is another. It is our current inability to construct a plausible alternative narrative of progress that has led to these losses, which all stem from the loss of social hope.

This paper considers where we might look to recreate this sense of social hope. As information and communications technologies (what I will call 'new' technologies) seem to have most recently served as the vehicles by which our greatest ambitions for social change have been dashed yet again, they are an appropriate focus for this examination. The New Brunswick call center strategy serves as an instructive case study, as it offers both a cautionary tale about the over-ambitious embrace of technology as a panacea to social ills, as well as suggestive narratives about the creative agency of workers and the collective effects of optimism as a transformative social force. Before examining the New Brunswick case study further, however, it is necessary to consider 'the social relations of science and technology' in a bit more detail. In order to examine more closely our tarnished but persistent belief in technology as a tool of social transformation, I will rely on the work of two prominent women scientists, Ursula Franklin and Donna Haraway. Franklin and Haraway have each written a great deal on gender, technology and society, from distinct perspectives and in very different idioms. Franklin is a physicist, Haraway a biologist by training. Franklin is a modern, Haraway a distinctively post-modern, writer. Yet, their analyses of the social practices surrounding technology and their gendered implications are surprisingly similar.

The argument in this paper is organized in reverse order from its title. That is, the first section will consider the nature and significance of hope for social change. The second section will discuss the social relations of technology, primarily relying on the work of Franklin and Haraway. The third section will consider the example of feminized and flexibilized work in the call center industry as an illustration of the double-edged potential of new technologies in the workplace. While the use of information and telecommunications technology has made it possible for many new jobs to be created in places like New Brunswick, serious questions need to be asked

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[11] See J. Thomas, *The Battle in Seattle – The Story Behind and Beyond the WTO Demonstrations* (Colorado: Fulcrum Publishing, 2000); A. Cockburn, J. St. Clair, A. Sekula, *Five Days That Shook the World – Seattle and Beyond* (London: Verso, 2000); T. Jordan & A. Lent (eds) *Storming the Millennium – The New Politics of Change* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1999).

about the nature of those jobs and who is likely to be performing them. My final section will reflect on how we can best ensure that the social practices of technology reinforce, rather than undermine, our highest aspirations towards a more just, equitable and inclusive society.

A. The Necessity of Social Hope

To speak of hope, as Professor Franklin does, as Polanyi's belief in perfectibility, posits our ability to imagine and work toward a better future as the true project of social and political theory.[12] Richard Rorty has pointed this out in a recent essay entitled "Globalization, the Politics of Identity and Social Hope."[13] For Rorty, it is our current inability to construct a plausible narrative of progress that has led to the loss of social hope. Our loss of faith in both scenarios, Marxist and capitalist, that were supposed to culminate in an egalitarian utopia, drives much of the current public concern and sense of powerlessness about globalization. What we need to retrieve, according to Rorty, are historical narratives that segue into utopian scenarios about how we can get from the present to a better future. In other words, we need to make utopias fashionable again.[14]

Rorty does not stand alone in his diagnosis of our current malaise, nor in his prescribed remedy. Socially engaged scholars across a range of disciplines have reached similar conclusions. Boaventura de Sousa Santos, a legal sociologist and theorist, has also called for a re-emergence of a utopian style of thinking, which he describes as "the exploration by imagination of new modes of human possibility and style of will, and the confrontation by imagination of the necessity of whatever exists — just because it exists — on behalf of something radically better."[15] Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto" is also an example of utopian thinking, albeit one that cleverly subverts our usual expectations of the genre, while still offering an

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[12] *Franklin (2000), supra* note 7 at 35; K. Polyani, *The Great Transformation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957) at 84.

[13] R. Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (London: Penguin, 1999) at 229-42.

[14] This may not be such a stretch, as coincidentally, Steven Weinberg, another physicist, urges us to be wary of emerging utopias that abandon variously the values of equality, liberty, and quality of life and work that motivated the best utopian ideas of the past. S. Weinberg, "Five and a Half Utopias" (2000) 285(1) Atlantic Monthly 108.

[15] B. de Sousa Santos, *Toward a New Common Sense: Law, Science and Politics in the Pardigmatic Transition* (New York, Routledge, 1995) at 479.

optimistic and transformative vision of the future.[16] As well, Paulo Freire, the progressive educator and social activist, wrote in the introduction to his *Pedagogy of Hope*:

> Without a minimum of hope, we cannot so much as start the struggle. But without the struggle, hope, as an ontological need, dissipates, loses its bearings and turns into hopelessness. ...hence the need for a kind of education in hope.[17]

Freire goes on to argue that it is the task of the progressive educator to "unveil opportunities for hope, no matter what the obstacles might be." He sees individuals as constructive agents in an ongoing process by which history is made, although we are also products of this history. He goes on to observe that the 'dream of humanization,' one of the most important products of authentic social hope, is an ongoing demand or condition of this history that we make and that makes us.[18] Significantly, Freire locates the relationship between workers and technology at the heart of the questions he examines in the book. For him, the idea that education should be primarily about technological training is a threat to both freedom and democracy.[19]

I concur that it is necessary to embrace the possibility of utopia in order to be able to move forward on the project of thinking constructively about social change. The urgency of freeing up the space to imagine alternatives was brought sharply into focus a decade ago when Margaret Thatcher infamously declared their

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[16] D. Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist Feminist in the Late Twentieth Century" in D. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women. – The Reinvention of Nature* (New York:Routledge, 1991) at 149-81 [hereinafter *Haraway (1991)*].

[17] P. Freire, *Pedagogy of Hope* (New York: Continuum, 1995) at 9.

[18] *Ibid.* at 99-101.

[19] "It seems to me to be fundamental for us today, whether we be mechanics or physicists, pedagogues or stonemasons, cabinetmakers or biologists, to adopt a critical, vigilant, scrutinizing attitude toward technology, without either demonizing it or 'divinizing' it. Never perhaps, has the almost trite concept of exercising control over technology and placing it at the service of human beings been in such urgent need of concrete implementation as today—in defense of freedom itself, without which the dream of a democracy is evacuated." *Ibid.* at 132.

obsolescence.[20] The urgent question seems to be whether, as David Harvey has argued, we will somehow be able to become the "conscious architects of our fates rather than [the] 'helpless puppets' of the institutional and imaginative worlds we inhabit."[21] What unites these scholars, including Ursula Franklin, who are concerned with re-activating hope as a social force, and sets them apart from Margaret Thatcher and her compatriots, is the understanding that society is something that has been imagined and made by human beings.[22] Social change is possible, in part, because of our capacity to re-imagine and re-make the ways that we operate in the world, here and now. In this context, hope is not simply an attitude, a state of mind, or an elective way of looking about the world. More fundamentally, hope (or its absence) can play a powerful ongoing role in constructing the material conditions of our existence.

Just such a remaking happened in the province of New Brunswick during the past decade. My research on the call center industry revealed that the capacity of Frank McKenna's government to capture the imagination of the public and generate widespread optimism around its call center initiative played an active role in transforming the social and economic realities of the province in the 1990s.[23] My interviews with call center workers in New Brunswick compared with workers in other locations, such as Toronto and Winnipeg, suggested very significant differences between the way the work was perceived and adopted in the different sites. Despite their difficulties in coping with highly monitored and routinized workplaces, the workers in New Brunswick were more committed to and more hopeful about their jobs. The story of call centers in New Brunswick, as I will

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[20] This refers to Margaret Thatcher's famous retort to critics of her free market economic strategy. When pressed about economic injustice, Thatcher was dismissive, arguing, "There is no alternative." This defense of the *status quo* was soon translated into the phrase "TINA," meaning "There Is No Alternative" to capitalism and that a globalised economy is inevitable. The Media Channel website <http://www.mediachannel.org> cited in *Franklin (2000)*, *supra* note 7 at footnote 31.

[21] D. Harvey, "The Spaces of Utopia" in D. Goldberg, M. Musheno & L. Bower, eds., *Between Law and Culture: Relocating Legal Studies* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2001).

[22] *Ibid.* at 98, 100, 120.

[23] R. Buchanan, "Lives on the Line: Low-Wage Work in the Teleservice Economy," in F. Munger, ed. *Laboring Below the Line – The New Ethnography of Poverty, Low-Wage Work and Survival in the Global Economy* (New York: Russell Sage, 2002) 45 at 50 [hereinafter *Buchanan (2002)*]. See also *Buchanan, S.J.D. Thesis*, *supra* note 1; R. Buchanan & S. Koch-Schulte, *Gender on the Line: Technology, Restructuring and the Re-organization of Work in the Call Center Industry – Policy Research, Status of Women Canada*, (September 2000) [hereinafter *Buchanan & Koch-Schulte]*.

outline it in the third section of this paper, provides an example of the real effects of hope as a social force.

B. The Social Relations of Technology

Women who are scientists are well-positioned to understand the social relations in which technologies are embedded. Women have traditionally been outsiders to scientific practice, few in number and subject to struggles in their careers and their research that their male colleagues do not encounter.[24] A familiar feminist (but not solely feminist) observation is that a researcher's social location both structures and frames their insights.[25] As technological and technocratic discourses have become an increasingly powerful tool of governance,[26] politically engaged and committed scientists such as Franklin and Haraway have become important critics to turn to for insights into our current condition.

As feminist theorists of technology, both Franklin and Haraway have argued forcefully that technology must be understood as a social practice. Franklin explains a practice, or a form of social instruction, as "the way things are done around here."[27] Haraway makes a point of talking about "the social relations of science and technology...to indicate that we are not dealing with a technological determinism, but with a historical system depending on structured relations among people."[28] They agree that technology is not primarily comprised of tools or artifacts. Rather,

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[24] See generally, Chapter 1 - M. Eisenhart and E. Finkel, "Women (Still Need Not Apply)," Chapter 2 - S. Brainard & L. Carlin "A Six-Year Longitudinal Study of Undergraduate Women in Engineering and Science" and Chapter 4 - C. Wenneras & A. Wold, "Nepotism and Sexism in Peer Review" in M. Lederman & I. Bartsch, eds., *The Gender and Science Reader* (London: Routledge, 2001).

[25] For more on feminist standpoint theory see, S.Harding, "Feminist Standpoint Epistemology" in *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women's Lives*, (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1991) at 119; D. Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective" (1988) 14:3 Feminist Studies 575 [hereinafter *Haraway (1988)*]. A non-feminist version of reflexive sociology is provided by the work of Pierre Bourdieu. See, for example, P.Bourdieu, "Social Space and the Genesis of Groups" (1984) 14 Theory & Society 723.

[26] L. Philips, "Discursive Deficits: A Feminist Perspective on the Power of Technical Knowledge in Fiscal Law and Policy" (1996) 11(1) C.J.L.S. 141.

[27] *Franklin (1999)*, *supra* note 8 at 6.

[28] *Haraway (1991)*, *supra* note 16 at 165.

technologies are about the ordering and structuring of social relations.[29]

> Technologies and scientific discourses can be partially understood as formalizations, i.e., as frozen moments, of the fluid social interactions constituting them, but they should also be viewed as instruments for enforcing meanings.[30]

So, while I want to adopt the notion of technology as a social practice that comes from Franklin, I also want to add to it the element of discourse analysis which I find implicit in Haraway's version. That is, I would claim that all social practices are necessarily also discursive practices. Or, according to Stuart Hall, "the word is now as material as the world."[31] Haraway captures this in her notion of the cyborg, as it is a "creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction."[32] "The cyborg is a condensed image of both imagination and material reality, the two joined centers structuring any possibility of social transformation."[33] So, in my analysis, the social practices of technology are also composed of the way we talk about "the way we do things around here." This insight can help us to understand the ways in which essentialist beliefs about the power of technology themselves have a powerful social effect. We can note the ways in which much current technology-speak, particularly in policy circles, is covertly political. It imposes certain social structures and relations upon society without revealing that it is anything other than a technocratic and detached expert opinion.

Secondly, Franklin and Haraway also concur on the predominant form of social organization that has been implemented by our new technologies for information and communications. They believe these new technologies have been used as instruments for monitoring and control. Franklin refers to these kinds of technologies as 'prescriptive', in contrast to the 'holistic' technologies of the artisan or the craftsperson. In a prescriptive technology, the task is broken down and organized into a sequence of executable steps and control over the work moves from the

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[29] *Franklin (1999), supra* note 8 at 18.

[30] *Haraway (1991), supra* note 16 at 164.

[31] *Buchanan, S.J.D. Thesis, supra* note 1 at 57; D. Morley & K. Chen, eds., *Stuart Hall - Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, (London: Routledge, 1996) at 233.

[32] *Haraway (1991), supra* note 16 at 149.

[33] *Ibid.* at 150.

individual worker to the organizer, boss or manager. In the process, Franklin notes, "a workforce becomes acculturated into a milieu in which external control and internal compliance are seen as normal and necessary."[34] While artisans have control of their entire production process, from start to finish, workers who are organized in accordance with prescriptive technologies usually participate in a smaller capacity and have no control over or even access to the finished product. A classic example is the Taylorist assembly line, where each worker is assigned a small task which they repeat over and over. Haraway adds to this the suggestion that these days the Taylorist model has been intensified and exaggerated so that "modern production seems like a dream of cyborg colonization work, a dream that makes the nightmare of Taylorism seem idyllic."[35]

Michel Foucault's work on these technologies of organization, what he called 'disciplinary practices', has influenced both Haraway and Franklin.[36] These were the practices that made prisons, schools, and armies look like one another. As Franklin also points out, these technologies are not only about getting things done more easily or more quickly; they work to regulate and observe the participants, that is, they are technologies of surveillance. Foucault's powerful metaphor for these technologies was that of the Panopticon: the notion that one could be observed at any time meant that one was effectively under surveillance all the time.[37] Call center work, as I will discuss in the following section, is one contemporary example of the use of information and communications technologies to intensify the surveillance and control of workers.

A further important insight that Foucault made about disciplinary technologies was that as much as controlling what one did, they regulated and reordered the body itself. To quote Franklin quoting Foucault:

> The human body was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down, and rearranges it. A political anatomy was being born...it defined how one may have a hold over others' bodies, not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so that they may operate as one wishes, with the techniques, the speed and the efficiency

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[34] *Franklin (1999), supra* note 8 at 16.

[35] *Haraway (1991), supra* note 16 at 150.

[36] M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish – The Birth of the Prison,* trans. A. Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1979) [hereinafter *Foucault*].

[37] *Ibid.* See also, S. Zuboff, *In the Age of the Smart Machine: The Future of Work and Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1988) [hereinafter *Zuboff*].

> that one determines. Thus, discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, docile bodies.[38]

So the question of how we do things these days, the question of technology, is emphatically not a question about how we use a tool, but a question of the mutual insertion or the intersection of human bodies and technologies. Building on that insight, Haraway's cyborg metaphor encapsulates the ways in which we are all already captured and transformed by technologies, while also re-imagining that condition as a paradoxical platform for progressive political change.[39] The image of the cyborg, which some argue is no longer merely metaphorical, if it ever was, has become a powerful and enduring vehicle for scholarly discussions of the social relations of technologies.[40]

Finally, Franklin and Haraway both consider the ways in which technologies, and particularly their deployment in the workplace, are gendered.[41] Haraway speaks of the process of feminization of labour whereby certain kinds of work are "being redefined as both literally female and feminized, whether performed by men or women."[42]

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[38] *Franklin (1999), supra* note 8 at 54.

[39] "I am making an argument for the cyborg as a fiction mapping our social and bodily reality and as an imaginative resource suggesting some very fruitful couplings. Micheal Foucault's biopolitics is a flaccid premonition of cyborg politics, a very open field." *Haraway (1988), supra* note 25 at 150. One of the questioners at the initial presentation of this talk in Fredericton made the important point that Haraway's cyborg is a self-consciously utopian version, which needs to be distinguished from the dystopic cyborgs found in popular science fiction literature and film, such as the 'Borg' of Star Trek.

[40] The scholarly consideration of Haraway's cyborg metaphor are too voluminous to detail. Recent monographs that reveal the cyborg alive and well in feminist, cultural and science studies include: A. Balsamo, *Technologies of the Gendered Body: Reading Cyborg Women* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995); G. Kirkup, L. Janes, K. Woodward, & F. Hovenden, eds., *The Gendered Cyborg: A Reader,* eds. (London and New York: Routledge, 2000) [hereinafter *The Gendered Cyborg*]; C.H. Gray, *A Cyborg Handbook* (New York & London: Routledge 1996) and *Cyborg Citizen: Politics in the Posthuman Age* (Routledge: New York & London, 2001). A slightly different approach which may be more congruent with the prosaic nature of the call center cyborg comes from philosopher I. Hacking, "Canguilhem amid the cyborgs" (1998) 27 *Economy and Society* 202.

[41] This argument is made about telephones in particular by L. Rakow, *Gender on the Line: Women, the Telephone, and Community Life* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992).

[42] *Haraway (1991), supra* note 16 at 166. The past decade has seen an emerging body of feminist scholarship that examines the processes by which labour is 'feminized'; a useful overview is found in L. Vosko, *Temporary Work: The Gendered Rise of a Precarious Employment Relationship* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000). See also R. Buchanan. "Not Just Women's Work: Relocating

> To be feminized means to be made extremely vulnerable, able to be disassembled, reassembled, exploited as a reserve labour force, seen less as workers than as servers subjected to time arrangements on and off the paid job that make a mockery of the limited workday.[43]

Both Haraway and Franklin observe that women are not only dis-empowered by technology in the workplace. That is, the effects of technology are not uniform or unidirectional. Franklin points out that women workers have historically been important innovators in the process of developing and using new technologies. She gives as one relevant example the early role of telephone operators.[44] In early days, telephone operators were instrumental in finding ways to make the new technology of the telephone useful for people; they were arranging conference calls back in 1890, as well as 'broadcasting' live public events such as football matches or operas. Eventually, switchboards became automated and many of these functions were lost for many years, only to be reinvented with newer technologies in the past few decades.

The point of the story is that it reveals the extent to which our use of telephones was shaped by the inventiveness of the primarily female operators who worked with them in the early stages. And yet, the way we understand technology, that is, how we fetishize it, has had the effect of concealing the importance of this work of adaptation, these social skills of innovation and application, so that the work that women did in 'inventing' the telephone is largely unrecognized. My call center case study revealed yet another context in which women's work, in that case, adapting to the application of telematics in customer service, is unrecognized and consequently undervalued.[45] Female telephone operators from the turn of the 19th century and call center customer service representatives at the turn of the last are both examples of Haraway's cyborg; that is, productive interfaces between women and technologies that she identifies as important sites or vehicles for resistance to dominant narratives. Since the point of this paper is to find a way to think about better alternatives to current arrangements, the cyborg is a useful mechanism to use, as it highlights the

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Gender in Studies of Labour Regulation (Review Essay)" (forthcoming) Osgoode Hall L.J.

[43] *Ibid.*

[44] *Franklin (1999), supra* note 8 at 105-07.

[45] *Buchanan & Koch-Schulte, supra* note 23 at 42; see also J. Jensen, "The Talents of Women, the Skills of Men: Flexible Specialization and Women" in S. Wood, ed., *The Transformation of Work? Skill, Flexibility and the Labour Process*, (London; Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989) at 141.

agency of individual women workers and their capacity to transform the social spaces and arrangements around them. It also links to the substantial literature on the 'resistance' of workers to technology,[46] which I think is too readily dismissed as inconsequential by those who still hold onto a deterministic view of technology.

> The real world of technology is full of ingenious and individual attempts to sabotage externally imposed plans. As a social phenomena, such avoidance techniques are well worth studying.[47]

The call centers provide an opportunity to study the ways in which dominant technological narratives and practices inscribe particular workplace identities onto the female cyborgs who work in the call centers, as well as how those narratives and practices are interrupted and transformed by those same workers.

C. Cyborgs at Work in the Service Factory: Call Centers in New Brunswick

> Rosa: *To think of it as anything but a factory is wrong. It is a factory. I think in that way you can be duped by the technology, and the moment you see a computer you think this is an advanced office and this is on the cutting edge of technology or whatever...It is not that at all. It is a factory.*

> Benoit: *I know that companies love call centers. They think it is so efficient. It is great. They can set up in no time. Very streamlined operation. It really does run well even though there are problems. Sure, there are problems, but I can see why companies love call centers. It's just a really great way to organize things. On the phone now, it is so high tech. It is a great way to do business.*

Call centers provide an excellent case study through which to illuminate and contrast Franklin's and Haraway's approaches to gender and technology, and my earlier discussion of the social effects of hope. The story of the call centers in New Brunswick is a good example, precisely because it is not easy to narrate. Have the

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[46] A. Ong, *Spirits of Resistance and Capitalist Discipline: Factory Women in Malaysia*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987) [hereinafter *Ong*]; J.Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990) [hereinafter *Scott*]. "These real-life cyborgs (for example, the Southeast Asian village women workers in Japanese and U.S. electronics firms described by A. Ong) are actively rewriting the texts of their bodies and societies." *Haraway (1988)*, *supra* note 25 at 177.

[47] *Franklin (1999)*, *supra* note 8 at 79.

call centers been a good thing for the province? For the people of New Brunswick? For their employees? The most common way to evaluate the success of a job creation strategy is to find out how many jobs were created. Or you can be more quantitative, and calculate how many jobs were created for how much government investment, and what the return is to the province in other kinds of revenue, both personal and business taxes and so on. We know that by the end of the year 2000, over 13,500 people were working in customer contact centers in the province.[48] The provincial liberals who governed for most of the 1990's would tell you that those jobs represented an excellent return on their investment in firms through 'training grants' and other recruitment efforts. But there is a lot that purely economic assessments do not help us to find out about what these jobs and the effort to get them has done for people's lives.

Between 1995 and 1997, I undertook a qualitative study of the call center industry in Canada in which I interviewed a number of call center workers first in New Brunswick, and later in Toronto and Winnipeg.[49] I attempted to come to a better understanding of how new ways of using technologies were both bringing about a geographic reorganization of customer service work in Canada, as well as how the nature of that work and the identity of the workers were being affected by these changes. While the results were somewhat ambivalent, as I will detail below, the study did offer some insights into the double edged nature of these new workplace technologies and the ways in which they can function either to further empower or enslave those working within them.

i. 'Make It So': The Necessity of Hope in Economic Development Policy[50]

I have suggested above that New Brunswick's experience with call centers can be interpreted as an illustration of the important role of hope in the process of social

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[48] This figure had risen to over 15,000 by December 2001, (Correspondence from V. Adams, Government of New Brunswick, 9 January 2002). See generally, the New Brunswick Customer Contact Center Industry Association online: at <http://www.nbcccia.org> and the New Brunswick Government site online: at <http://www.gnb.ca/nbfirst/e/10000/10006e.asp>.

[49] *Buchanan & Koch-Schulte*, *supra* note 23; also *Buchanan, S.J.D. Thesis*, *supra* note 1.

[50] This section summarizes the findings of my study of New Brunswick's call centered economic development strategy. See *Buchanan S.J.D. Thesis, supra* note 1 at ch. 3. A more detailed published account can be found in R. Buchanan, "1-800 New Brunswick: Economic Development Strategies, Firm Restructuring and the Local Production of 'Global' Services" in J. Jensen and B. De Sousa Santos, eds., *Globalizing Institutions: Case Studies in Regulation and Innovation* (Ashgate: Aldershot, 2000) particularly at 62-67 [hereinafter *Buchanan (2000)*].

change. Located in relation to the lengthy history of unsuccessful economic development initiatives on the part of both federal and provincial governments in the Atlantic provinces over the past fifty years, the achievement of the provincial government in New Brunswick during the 1990's takes on even greater significance.[51] Any discussion of the call center initiative as economic development policy needs to begin with a consideration of the charismatic leadership of former Premier Frank McKenna. McKenna was elected in 1987 on a platform of job creation. Information technology became the discursive centerpiece of his government's approach to development, and the attraction of call centers to the province its primary engine of job creation throughout his 10 year tenure. Premier McKenna was closely involved in the development and implementation of the policy, making personal calls to CEO's to 'sell' the province as a prime 'site' for call center relocation.[52] The sales pitch also involved full page advertisements in the *Globe and Mail* newspaper, proclaiming *If You have the Work; We Have the Force* and a glossy government brochure and video, "Call Center Solutions" which highlighted New Brunswick's high unemployment (10.7%) and low labour market participation rates as indicators of the availability of an eager and captive workforce.[53] The government also offered incentives in the form of 'forgiveable loans' for training of new staff, which amounted to as much as $11,000 per full time job for some 'blue chip' firms in the early years, and later, dipped to about $5,000-$6,000 per job.[54] Apart from a break on provincial sales taxes for 1-800 telephone calls and telephone equipment sales, the government pursued this initiative without making any significant regulatory changes. Rather, existing cost advantages, largely the product of the province's history of underdevelopment, were identified and 'marketed' to prospective firms. By conventional indicators, the policies adopted by the McKenna government were soon being hailed a great success. Between 1991-1997, approximately 40 customer service or 'call' centers opened up in the province,

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[51] *Buchanan, SJD Thesis, supra* note 1 at 111-26; also B. Fairley et al., eds., *Restructuring and Resistance from Atlantic Canada* (Toronto: Garamond Press, 1990); J. Brodie, *The Political Economy of Canadian Regionalism* (Toronto: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990).

[52] "The key aspect of the strategy became the strategy. The very fact that a Premier was calling on them to sell the attributes became probably a fairly central part of their final decision." Personal interview with Frank McKenna, December 29, 1997.

[53] New Brunswick Department of Economic Development and Tourism, *Call Center Solutions* (1995) at 2.

[54] D. Meagher, "$28 Million Aid to Call Centers," *The (Fredericton) Daily Gleaner*, 1 May 1996.

creating about 6,000 new jobs for New Brunswickers. During the first part of the 1990's, it was not uncommon to speak of something called the McKenna Miracle.[55]

While its clear that success of the government strategy turns in large part on how well it 'marketed' New Brunswick to firms that operated call centers, the making of a call center labour force, another crucial piece of the strategy, is often overlooked. Throughout its marketing campaign to firms, the province held out the existence of a large, willing, well-educated, bilingual workforce as one of its key selling points. The success of the strategy turned in large measure on the truth of claims made about the workforce in New Brunswick. Without a motivated and committed labour force, the call center strategy could have quickly failed, as footloose firms relocated once again to greener pastures in search of cheaper labour. The provincial government realized that it also had to market its strategy to its own citizens, promoting the call centers to New Brunswickers as good places to work. This was done in a number of ways, including events such as 'job fairs' at which potential call center employees attended information sessions put on by firms and local economic development agencies.[56] Call center jobs were represented to potential employees as 'career' jobs, which held out opportunities for promotion and advancement within the firms that had located call centers in the province, some of which were large U.S-based multinationals. Community colleges and private companies developed call center training courses, which were also marketed to potential employees to help them obtain the 'call center career' of their choice. The effect of these representations of call center work was to attach an aura of 'professionalization' to call center work in New Brunswick which it lacked elsewhere.[57]

While I cannot say that Premier McKenna accomplished the economic miracles that were attributed to him, I did conclude that he did something almost as or equally miraculous: he convinced the people of New Brunswick to have faith in their own abilities, and the possibility that those abilities could be valued and sought after by companies. I concluded that the most significant aspect of the call center strategy was the strategy itself. Premier McKenna and his government sold New Brunswick as a locality to multinational companies opening up call centers; at the same time they were selling those call center jobs to the people of New Brunswick, so that at

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[55] See for example W. Milne, *The McKenna Miracle: Myth or Reality* (Toronto: University of Toronto, Center for Public Management, 1996).

[56] See my account of one such job fair in Moncton, N.B: *Buchanan (2000), supra* note 50 at 65.

[57] *Ibid.* at 67.

the outset anyway, many people were very enthusiastic about the call center job creation initiative. Many of the workers with whom I spoke in New Brunswick were optimistic about their jobs and their prospects, despite the difficult working conditions that will be detailed in the next section. In this context, the hope that opportunities could be created and the province's economic fortunes transformed through the confluence of telephone and computer technologies in the workplace had a significant influence on people's perception of and performance in the jobs, despite the fact that those jobs, in many cases, did not meet the high expectations that were placed upon them.

ii. Technologies of Power at Work

Call center work is both made possible and regulated by a combination of information and communication technologies that deliver calls to a worker's headset and account information to the computer screen at her station. These technologies control the pace of a call center worker's day. In busy call centers, the next call will be delivered immediately upon disengagement from the previous one, with workers dealing with up to several hundred calls a day.

There is a considerable amount of scholarly writing that suggested that the advent of the computer in the workplace was to be liberating for workers. Charles Sable and Michale Piore in their book, The Second Industrial Divide, likened the computer to an artisan's tool.[58] They argued that the introduction of computers into the workplace would provide the opportunity for greater worker empowerment, workers would have more control over their work, and would be more fully engaged in the ongoing design and redesign of the work process (i.e. reintegration of conception and execution).[59] But, it doesn't seem to have happened this way, at least not in the call center industry, and the fact that it has not has nothing to do with the computer itself, which is just an artifact. It has to do with workplace organization, or the way we use computers, which has been influenced by the dominance of what Professor Franklin calls 'prescriptive technologies' over holistic technologies.[60]

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[58] *Piore & Sabel, supra* note 5.

[59] See also C.F Sabel, "Moebius Strip Organizations and Open Labor Markets: Some Consequences of the Reintegration of Conception and Execution in a Volatile Economy" in P. Bourdieu & J. Coleman, eds., *Social Theory for a Changing Society* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1999) at 23.

[60] *Franklin (1999), supra* note 8 at 12.

It was the computerized aspect of the work that led informants to describe their jobs as: "exhausting," "robotic," "controlled," and "machine-like." In this respect, the work process in call centers is similar to the picture of the de-skilled and speeded up Taylorist factory critiqued in Braverman's *Labour and Monopoly Capital*.[61] The same techniques of 'scientific management' that Braverman described in relation to the production of goods appear to have now, with the aid of information technologies, been replicated in relation to the production of services:

> A necessary consequence of the separation of conception and execution is that the labour process is now divided between separate sites and separate bodies of workers. In one location, the physical processes of production are executed. In another are concentrated the design, planning, calculation and record-keeping. ...The production units operate like a hand, watched, corrected, and controlled by a distant brain.[62]

Braverman was concerned with the effect that this separation of skill and knowledge had on workers. His observation that "the worker is no longer a craftsman in any sense, but is an animated tool of the management"[63] resonates powerfully with the observations of several participants in my study. In trying to describe the dehumanizing effect of the technologies in her workplace, one of my interview subjects referred to Heidegger's essay "On Technology"[64] which discusses his concept of the worker as "the standing reserve":

> Rosa: *You are standing waiting to be used by the technology, and it's a physical embodiment of that. You are standing, waiting until that call comes in to use you to make money. And you are simply another part of that machine.*

The technologies not only regulate, but also monitor employees. Through the workplace descriptions detailed in many interviews, one can visualize a virtual 'cyber-guard' pacing the rows of teleworkers. One is reminded of Foucault's well-known description of Bentham's Panopticon in which prisoners are subjected to the

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[61] H. Braverman, *Labour and Monopoly Capital* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974) [hereinafter *Braverman*].

[62] *Ibid.* at 125.

[63] *Ibid.* at 136.

[64] M. Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. W. Lovitt (New York: Harper and Row, 1977).

constant possibility of surveillance.[65] Shoshana Zuboff has used Foucault's analysis of disciplinary power illustrated by the Panopticon image to explain the ways in which technologies are deployed in the contemporary workplace.

> Techniques of control in the workplace became increasingly important as the body became the central problem for production. The early industrial employers needed to regulate, direct, constrain, anchor, and channel bodily energies for the purposes of sustained, often repetitive, productive activity.[66]

The high-tech version of the Panopticon outlined by Zuboff no longer requires an observer:

> Information systems can automatically and continuously record almost anything their designers want to capture, regardless of the specific intentions brought to the design process or the motives that guide data interpretation and utilization.[67]

Through their recording capacity, information technologies can induce compliance with stringent productivity standards by workers without the need for costly intervention or surveillance by managers. Call centers are excellent examples of this exercise of disciplinary power through automated surveillance in the workplace, as the tasks that they are designed to perform can be quantified in a number of different ways.

Although the degree of management control over the work process that they facilitate may be familiar to students of the sociology of work, the dissemination of information technologies over the past decade has dramatically altered the working lives of those who do sales and provide services over the telephone. Technologies allowing for the automation of calls and the monitoring of workers have resulted in a fundamental transformation of call center work, making it more profitable for

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[65] Foucault adopts the metaphor of the Panopticon to describe the way in which society is pervaded by disciplinary power. "Each individual, in his place, is securely confined to a cell from which he is seen from the front by the supervisor; but the side walls prevent him from coming into contact with his companions. He is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication." *Supra* note 36 at 200.

[66] *Zuboff, supra* note 37 at 319.

[67] *Ibid.* at 322.

firms but also more difficult for workers.

The computers at many call centers pace the calls and have resulted in a significant amount of "speed up" in telephone work. One technology that most outbound call centers now use is a predictive dialer. The predictive dialer keeps dialing numbers automatically, and routing the connected calls to available agents. Similarly, for an in-house center, automatic call routing or switching ensures that agents are kept supplied with calls. One outcome of both of these technologies is that workers are usually unable to take short breaks in-between calls; if they do so, they can be penalized. Yet, the ability to take short breaks when needed was identified by our informants as one of the most effective ways for them to manage the stress of their work.

> Donald: *Unlike other retail sales jobs, there is never any break except when your scheduled breaks are, because except for the 15 minutes and then the half and hour and then the 15 minutes that you're on break, the calls come in continuously when you come in there because the computer is doing the dialing, and as soon as you are off one call, you have got another one coming in.*

> Ellen: *It's almost like the army. It's very regimented. You punch in with a time clock. You come in and you sit down, and the numbers are all computerized. As soon as you finish a call, the minute you hang up another call comes up. It is just this constant, all day, repetitious ... constant sort of like beating on a drum, but day after day.*

Workers identified the automated nature of call center work as a major source of workplace stress. Automation is stressful for workers both because it creates greater pressures for productivity, but also because workers experience a profound lack of control over their workday activities

> Sylvia: *And then I always had so much freedom in my [past] jobs. I could take my coffee when I wanted. I could take and hour and a half lunch if I wanted and make it up somewhere else. This, you're totally tied to the phone. You're logged into a computer, you know, so you have no control over eight hours of your life.*

Another implication of the widespread utilization of telematics in call centers is the extent to which it facilitates the close monitoring of employee performance and the enforcement of increased standards for productivity. Statistical outputs of an

individual worker's performance are done daily. Among these are measures of talk time, 'in-line' time, and conversion rates. Talk time is the average length of a call, which must neither be too short, implying the worker is not trying hard enough, or too long, indicating inefficiency. 'In-line' is a measure of the proportion of time during a shift that an in-house agent is available to take calls or deal with customers, while conversion rates are the proportion of calls that result in a completed sale or reservation. Frequently, workers receive performance evaluations based on these statistics and others like them. These quantitative measures would often determine future work hours or future employment.

> Melissa: *My talk time was down to just over a minute. Well, no, well, no that is a lie. 80 seconds was my lowest. That is too low. Because there you are, then they figure you are not offering to sell, you are not pushing the sale enough, you are not being as assertive as you should be. It is kind of stupid.*
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> Helen: *Once they got the computers, they got really obsessed with statistics and started cattle prodding us all the time and all this stuff. They always wanted you to get so many completes per hour, so many completes per hour.*
>
> Cynthia: *They really pressured their employees to make a quota... In the last two call centers I've been at - I'm actually working for a call center right now - there's pressure to get the quotas. They say that they're not really interested in numbers. They say that they are more into quality. Well that's a lie. They're usually more into numbers than anything.*

In contrast with their concerns about the arbitrariness of performance pressures embedded in these quantitative measures, the common practice of surveillance through random monitoring of telephone calls did not typically worry call center workers. This was because most people I spoke with appreciated the qualitative performance feedback that they obtained from monitors and supervisors. Workers generally perceived this aspect of their work evaluation as helping to enhance their skills and professionalism. The primary concern of workers in this area, as noted above, is that qualitative monitoring is increasingly being replaced by statistical surveillance. It should be noted that this tendency is generally thought to work to the detriment of workers and customers, as pressures to process more calls supercede concerns about the quality of the service that each customer is receiving. This undermines the worker's own sense of professional satisfaction that is derived from being able to provide a high quality service to the customer.

iii. From Dystopia to Utopia

> Melissa: *I'm burnt out on phones. The thought of tethering myself to another desk, to be stuck there for eight hours, only being able to move within a ten foot radius, for eight hours, doing the same thing every 90 seconds...I don't think I could do it anymore. I just don't have the patience to handle it.*

Many of the observations and images that I obtained from the teleservice work of those engaged in it seem to reflect a highly dystopic image of the cyborg. This technological dystopia is perhaps best encapsulated in popular culture by the people of the Borg, from the Star Trek film and television series. While call center workers spoke of being tethered to their terminals through the headset cord, they talked about "going on to the next call without dealing with the fact that someone just screamed at you...like a robot,"[68] Star Trek Borg, which are part human, part non-human, are literally all connected in a vast network through their non-human parts. At first glance the Borg are pretty amazing individuals; their access to the vast data stores and memory of the whole makes them powerful. But, they have no free will, no ability to make individual choices, and no separate identity. The Borg represent a despotic image of community in which the issue of liberty has become vestigial; the way they are organized has subsumed the need for individual thriving to the survival of the collective.

The dystopic cyborg image of the Borg, and the call center workers imagined in this light, show us one direction that a mode of social instruction encompassed by our habit of using 'prescriptive technology', in Franklin's words, leads. It is clearly in the opposite direction from the liberatory model of social instruction invoked by Franklin in her essay; a tradition that leads us from J.S. Mill to C.B. McPherson. It is also quite distinct from the emancipatory cyborg imagined by Haraway that transgresses and subverts fixed dichotomies including male/female, white/nonwhite, natural/artifactual, human/nonhuman. Since these categorizations, including importantly gender, have historically enabled the creation and re-enforcement of social hierarchies and exclusions, their confounding by the cyborg is a cause for celebration for Haraway.

Call center workers do not match the popular cultural images of cyborgs drawn from science fiction films and literature that have been the subject of much of the

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[68] Personal interview with call center worker.

scholarly speculation that has followed Haraway's embrace of the term. Yet the prosaic nature of the human/technology link they exemplify provides a potentially more fecund example of human/technological interconnections than more exotic science-fiction incarnations.[69] In the interviews, a small but significant proportion identified one of the most salient aspects of the job as the way in which they were 'tethered' or 'connected' to the technology, and many more commented on the ongoing surveillance that was also a feature of the work. It is tempting to theorize the teleservice workers in terms of the analogy presented by the fictional Borg. They are linked into a powerful network of information which robs them of the most essential feature of humanity: agency. Call center workers are clearly enmeshed in information technologies, connected to a vast web of information almost constantly throughout their working day. Through their linked computers and telephone headsets, their activity also can be monitored, so that they become part of the web of information which they navigate. However, there is another side to the 'cyborg' existence of call center workers, and that is their capacity to use the technologies in which they are enmeshed for their own purposes. Writers such as Aihwa Ong[70] and James Scott[71] have helped us to see that not all forms of worker resistance are explicit or collective. Call center workers resist the 'prescriptions' of their jobs in a myriad of ways, from missing work, grumbling and complaining, finding ways to 'trick' the computer, changing scripts, forming alliances with supervisors, and simply 'not caring'.[72]

While these types of resistance may not take the form of organized or public opposition to the prevailing working conditions or forms of work organization found in the call centers, they are nonetheless significant in that they effect the ways in which the work is being done. Two forms of resistance that are most significant in the call center setting are 'beating the system' and giving bad service. A number of

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[69] See *The Gendered Cyborg, supra* note 40. See generally note 40.

[70] *Ong, supra* note 46.

[71] *Scott, supra* note 46.

[72] This section of the paper relies significantly on work done by Sarah Koch-Schulte based on the interview data we obtained for *Buchanan & Koch-Schulte (2000), supra* note 23. See S. Koch-Schulte, "Cheeky Operators: Resistance Tactics in Canada's Call Centers" in G. Desfor, D. Barndt, & B. Rahder, eds., *Just Doing It: Popular Collective Action In The Americas* (Montreal: Black Rose Books) [forthcoming] [hereinafter *Koch-Schulte (forthcoming)*], and S. Koch-Schulte, *Resistance of Teleservice Workers: Implications for Qualitative Policy Research* (M.A. Thesis, University of British Columbia, 2000) [unpublished].

call center workers with whom I spoke talked about how they had figured out ways to maximize their control over the pace of their work, notwithstanding the technological systems that appeared to regulate every moment of their working lives. Tactics employed by workers included barely meeting the minimal requirements for the workday, whether that was measured in terms of a proportion of time spent receiving calls, or in percentage of calls that result in sales. Workers developed technical 'tricks' for fooling their electronic supervisors, so that they could take a bathroom or a cigarette break without it 'showing' on the record of their day.

The primary method of resistance among call center workers, however, seemed to be simply refusing to give good service. As Koch-Schulte observes, "new technologies do not remove the opportunity to provide bad service."[73] I have argued elsewhere that a key element of call center work is 'emotional labour', the invisible and uncompensated work that (primarily female) employees do in 'smoothing over' the often difficult interactions between a company and its customers.[74] Disgruntled call center workers can give bad service simply by refusing to inject the required level of sincerity or friendliness into a call. Since 'friendliness' is a subjective quality, it is often difficult for management, even if they are monitoring the calls in question, to identify the missing ingredient. 'Passing the buck' is another more visible enactment of bad service:

> Everybody would just know that this was a problem call, a lot of work involved. If there is any way I can get rid of it, I would do it. You can pass it on to not necessarily anybody on your call center staff, but you can pass it on to another department. That was something that everybody learned to do...Just pick up the extension list and say, 'Can you hold please?' And just dial up and get rid of it.[75]

As well, call center employees regularly joke, grumble, and complain among themselves about their workplace, its motivational schemes, the managers and the customers. At work, while taking calls, they also knit, read novels, do crosswords, play solitaire and surf the net. Call center employees also tend to frequently skip work, come late or quit altogether, although it should be noted that firms tended to report that their turnover rates in New Brunswick call centers were significantly

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[73] *Koch-Schulte (forthcoming), ibid.*

[74] *Buchanan, SJD Thesis, supra* note 1 at ch. 3; also *Buchanan (2002), supra* note 23.

[75] Interview with call center worker Benoit, quoted in *Koch-Schulte (forthcoming), supra* note 72.

lower than in other locations. All of these activities are significant features of 'the social relations of technology' as they apply to the call centers. The largely female call center workforce participates in 'making' and 'remaking' the technologies that they are using/being used by. Attending to workers' enactments of accommodation and resistance within call center workplaces allows us to see these important differences between the gendered and creative 'cyborgs' in the call centers and their dystopic science fiction cousins.

D. Towards a Real World Utopia

This paper has been an effort to re-examine my own research on call centers in New Brunswick in light of an interrelated pair of issues that are central to the work of both Ursula Franklin and Donna Haraway. I have sought to reflect on what the call centers can reveal both about the perils and potential of information technology in the workplace and the social effects of the act of imagining a better world. The New Brunswick call center experience, I've argued, can teach us a great deal about how our powerful technological fantasies can work both to our advantage and to our detriment. New Brunswick was changed through the ability of the premier to re-imagine it as a site for call centers, and to convey that vision to both workers and firms. However, that vision has proved to be wildly optimistic about the skills and autonomy that call center employment would offer to workers. Lacking an understanding of the fundamentally *social* nature of technology, it failed to grasp how easily existing social hierarchies of class, gender, and geography become re-inscribed in and through the new uses of technology.

Similarly, the reflections of the call center cyborgs in my study are both frightening and hopeful. They show us the ways in which firms have sought to organize call center workplaces like factories, seeking to compartmentalize the interpersonal work of 'giving good service' into measurable units of 'talk time'. However, they also reveal the important role of the workers themselves in inventing, adapting and subverting these technologies through their everyday practices. While only some of these innovations were of direct benefit to the employer, collectively they reveal the potentially productive effects of this intersection of workers and technologies.

One final question remains to be considered. If the effect of the call centers for the province of New Brunswick as a whole is so mixed, and the call center workplace can be potentially damaging and empowering for workers, what can we do to ensure that the benefits outweigh the downsides? As I am a lawyer, writing to

a legal audience, it would be appropriate at this stage for me to suggest some regulatory or legislative 'solutions' to the problem. The argument in this paper, however, suggests that an easy legal fix is not likely to be found. That is because I have argued that we must understand technologies as 'regulatory practices' whose effects are as powerful as those of statutes and regulations, yet much more insidious because we do not ordinarily understand them in this way. Efforts to use formal legal channels to provide further protections for call center workers through health and safety regulation, for example, are likely to fail unless they are well informed by an understanding of the ways that workplaces are *already* regulated informally through the social practices of technologies.

While I think that formal *regulatory* responses to working conditions in the call centers might form part of an approach that could maximize their benefit for workers, firms and governments, they are only one piece of a larger approach that I, along with Profesor Franklin, will call *governance*.[76] In other words, I do think that there is a role for government in *governing* this industry that they have as yet failed to embrace.[77] It needs to be grounded in a solid foundation of knowledge about how an industry operates, which includes detailed attention to the social relations of technology. When I began working on call centers, there was very little such research available. Moreover, much of the best information about the social relations of technology in call centers is the workers themselves, who are rarely consulted about these sorts of matters. Many of the workers with whom I spoke had profoundly simple suggestions for transforming the organization of their work that would both make it more tolerable for employees and improve the quality of the service they were able to provide. Many of these suggestions involved moving away from quantitative measures of productivity facilitated by telematics and return to more meaningful qualitative measures like customer satisfaction. They also suggested that workers be given more autonomy to respond to customer concerns, either by issuing credit or correcting a mistake without needing to seek approval. In terms of the physical space of the workplace, employees suggested that they needed a quiet place away from the din of the main room, where workers could take a break after an irate customer has yelled at them, to collect themselves and wind down a little. While a *regulatory* response to call center workplaces is likely to imagine them

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[76] *Franklin (1999), supra* note 8 at 174-5.

[77] It should be noted that my study of the regulation of this industry concluded in 1999. I make no comment here on regulatory initiatives that may have been launched by subsequent governments since that time.

at their worst, and to proscribe those practices, it is unlikely in this context that it alone will produce best practices. A *governance* response, as I am envisioning it, would have as its explicit goal aiding employers and employees to re-imagine their practices in ways, such as the few small suggestions above, that will constructively improve their workplaces.

Although limited and incremental, these examples are utopian in that they represent small steps towards how to get to a better future from a real (not covertly utopian version) of the present. They come from the workers themselves — speaking about the way their own labour process should work — which represents a movement away from Franklin's prescriptive technologies and toward a more holistic approach. In our return to utopian thinking we need to reject the common assumption that it requires grand narratives and posits unattainable goals. A utopia built on the thinking of feminist scholars like Franklin and Haraway is more likely to be grounded, provisional and incremental, like these suggestions. This is the kind of a utopia that we can all aspire towards: to concretely imagine in a small but achievable way how we might get to a better future from wherever we are at the present moment.