Julian E. Orr *Talking About Machines: An Ethnography of a Modern Job*
(Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press 1996)

Julian Orr's book *Talking About Machines* breathes life into what one would
have suspected to be the tedious and mundane world of technicians who repair
photocopiers (or "machines"). Orr's animation of the technicians' subspecialty
is largely successful due to its envelopment of the reader into the dialogue of
technicians' talk about photocopiers. This, in itself, is quite a feat given the lack
of technical background of this reader. However, the technicians' dialogue is
central to Orr's thesis. Technicians talk with other technicians about their
machines to diagnose and fix what has gone wrong. Technicians converse with
other technicians to crystallize a difficult problem or hear other technicians'
suggestions on how to fix the problem. Technicians speak with the customer
(albeit rarely) to pinpoint which area of the machine may be malfunctioning.
Finally, technicians commune with the machine itself (through observation, the
use of error logs and by listening to the sounds made by the machine), a "discus-
sion" which provides the technician with varied sources of information about
the machine's troubles.

The culture of technicians' talk occurs in the context of a dialogue in the
triangular relationship between technician, customer and machine. Such
dialogue occurs in an established vocabulary of "exchanging apertures,"
"machine stress," "big input" and "dicotrons." (53, 94, 116, 129) Indeed, the
technicians' use of vocabulary and dialogue situates the culture of the techni-
cians' occupational community. (151)

Orr's description of the technicians' drive to diagnose and fix machines is
reminiscent of a detective scavenging for clues to solve a mystery. There is no
doubt that this is how he romantically perceives the diagnostic process in which
technicians are engaged (perhaps as a result of Orr having formerly been a tech-
nician himself). Technicians gather "clues" from a wide array of sources, prior-
itize and digest the information found and then, finally, solve the riddle of why
the machine won't work. Orr's depiction of the worker flies in the face of Harry
Braverman's views that the modern workplace necessitates a progressive de-
skilling of the worker. In Orr's characterization, the technician has a great deal
of subjective autonomy and skill in his or her work. The technician decodes
which pieces of information are important to fix a machine, which service calls
must be answered and when and which fellow technicians need genuine assis-
tance and which do not.

The dialogue between technicians, machines and customers not only
addresses the communication between the technician, machine and customer
but also explores the gaps in that communication chain. There are often major
discrepancies between the documentation and instructions on fixing machines
provided by the technicians' employer and what actually works to correct the
difficulty. (56, 106) The customer frequently provides incomplete information

about what went wrong. A machine's defect may not be repeatable on a test run. A technician may find that although there is nothing physically wrong with the machine, it will still not run. (120) Orr suggests that it is this lack of understanding that drives technicians to constantly talk about their work given that this tenuous understanding of the machine's problems poses a serious threat to the technicians' control over their work. (160)

In his description of technicians' talk, Orr does not consider the potential culture of gender bias that runs through his account of technicians' work. He makes no reference to any difference in perception, treatment or attitudes of, or towards, the women technicians. Take the example of Alice (39-45) who is the technician who had attempted many potential solutions to the problem her machine was experiencing. Nowhere else in Orr's tales about technicians is one technician's request for help so constantly belittled or ignored. Alice asks her fellow technicians to come and help her fix the machine eight times over lunch but no one will agree to assist. Alice clearly knows the routine "fixes" for this machine and has thoroughly checked the documentation, and yet the other technicians react by laughing and patronizing her with information she evidently already knows by heart. Although Orr implicitly suggests that the technicians' conduct is gender neutral, this example demonstrates the marginalization of Alice's (and perhaps also women's) concerns. Gender may indeed be an important factor in technicians' talk about machines and the relationships between woman technician and customer. In particular, are women technicians as likely as men to recount "war stories" as part of their problem solving efforts? What reaction do women technicians elicit from male technicians when a war story is told? Does women's dialogue about machines differ from that of men? In short, *Talking About Machines* would have been enriched had Orr picked up on the gender clues evident in his ethnography and addressed the interplay between women technicians and their inherently masculine work.

Also missing from Orr's enchanted view of a photocopy technician's job, is the tension between the employer (in this case, the Xerox corporation) and the technician. Clearly by Orr's calculation, Xerox figures peripherally in the lives of the technicians. Certainly, Xerox is not part of the crucial triad between technician, machine and customer. (66) Despite this omission, tantalizing tidbits are dangled in front of the reader concerning the employer/technician relationship only to be yanked away without further exploration. For example, Orr acknowledges that there is a struggle for control between employer and technician on issues such as the employer's view of technicians' work, the employer's attempt to control the technician's work through directive documentation, the clash between the employer and the technician over the basis for performance evaluations and the employer's attempts at control through regulation of the technician's parts inventory. (82, 99, 105-6) It should be noted, however, that the absence of a role for the employer may in fact accord with Orr's thesis on the nature of technicians' work. The occupational community of technicians

provides a serious challenge to the control of management. Ties to the corporation are few and ties to the community of technicians are many. Indeed, the way technicians define their identity is premised on their work community. Consequently, Orr's point is that the employer does not exert much influence over the work of technicians contrary to what has been suggested by other work theorists such as Harry Braverman or Richard Edwards.

Despite the above-noted concerns, Orr's account of technicians' work is a refreshing and in-depth look at how technicians perceive the work they are engaged in. Orr does not seek to slot the worker into any theoretical pigeonhole. Instead, he has given much weight to the workers' own notion about the way their day-to-day lives are organized and controlled. In the future, it would be beneficial for others to follow Orr's lead in resuscitating other occupational communities, such as the worlds of accountants, judges, lawyers or architects.

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