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First published in 2022 by September Publishing

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Typeset by RefineCatch Limited, www.refinecatch.com

Printed in Poland on paper from responsibly managed, sustainable sources by
Hussar Books

ISBN 9781912836970

Ebook ISBN 9781912836987

September Publishing
www.septemberpublishing.org

INTRODUCTION

On the night between the 4th and 5th of January 2013, 14-year-old Carolina Picchio threw herself out of her bedroom window in Novara, Piedmont. She left a few messages: some for her loved ones, and some for the Internet users who had tormented her for weeks.

Two months before, Carolina had been to a party at a friend's house. They had ordered pizzas and passed round a few bottles of vodka, and Carolina had had a lot to drink. She was vomiting in the toilet and had almost passed out, when seven boys she was friendly with, more or less her age, came in and turned on their iPhone cameras. They cornered her, molested her and made sure to film every single moment. The morning after, they shared the videos on a school chat thread.

From private exchanges, the images quickly spread on social networks, where they attracted the attention of Carolina's friends and acquaintances, and of hundreds of strangers. Via Facebook and WhatsApp, she received over 2,600 insulting messages. She was called a 'slut' and was told she was 'disgusting' and that people would have liked to 'spit on her'. She had no memory of the night of

the party, but was forced to re-experience it until she ceased to find her life worth living.

Despite several requests to do so, Mark Zuckerberg's platform, Facebook, did not remove the cyberbullies' comments until after Carolina's suicide.

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On the 17th of March 2010, another teenager had jumped out of a window. Her name was Tian Yu, and the window was that of a Chinese factory where she worked over 12 hours per day assembling iPhones, such as those used by Carolina's persecutors.

That factory is part of a humongous complex owned by Foxconn, a multinational electronics supplier to which Apple and other tech giants outsource the manufacturing of their appliances. Yu's family, living in the countryside, struggled to make ends meet, so she had become a factory worker to help them pay their bills. When she signed her first contract with Foxconn, Yu was about three years older than Carolina.

Every morning, Yu woke up at 6.30 a.m., attended a compulsory unpaid meeting at 7.20 a.m. and did not leave her position in the assembly line until 7.40 p.m., usually being forced to skip dinner to work overtime. She had to ask permission to use the toilet and the walls around her were covered in posters with 'motivational' sentences such as 'Growth, thy name is suffering' and 'A harsh environment is a good thing'.

When Yu jumped out of the building, Foxconn owed her a month's salary plus overtime pay because of an administrative oversight. She had no money left and her mobile phone had broken,

INTRODUCTION

leaving her unable to ask for help. Neither could she reach out to any of her co-workers; they were all so exhausted that they had never talked to one another before.

You will be glad to know that, unlike Carolina Picchio, Tian Yu survived her fall. She remained, however, paralysed from the waist down. In 2010 alone, 17 other workers from the same Foxconn factory attempted suicide, and most of them succeeded. Apple founder Steve Jobs defended his subcontractor, arguing that suicides at Foxconn were ‘below China’s national average’.

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This book looks at what is perhaps the most important event of the last 30 years: the *digital revolution*. It looks at it through the eyes of the women who are harmed by it globally. These women come from all walks of life. Some of them, like Carolina Picchio, are victimised through digital devices. Others, like Tian Yu, are exploited while producing them. And some do not even have access to the Internet, but are brutally raped in wars funded by minerals that make our tablets work.

After years of unimpeded enthusiasm towards all things tech, our views have become more critical and nuanced. For example, we have started to pay attention to controversial practices such as data mining, online surveillance and algorithmic bias. We are also increasingly aware of the relationship between technology and gender inequalities (among other things, we speak a lot of ‘online hate’ against women and LGBTQ+ people). But we have only just started to connect the dots, and the more connections we draw, the less pleasant the picture is to look at. As I write, millions of women

across the world are violated, exploited and marginalised due to processes of technological change, and in many more ways than we may realise.

I will attempt to shed light on how all this might have happened, proposing an explanation based on the tight intersections between technology, patriarchy and capitalism. Because the heart of the matter, in my opinion, is precisely that the digital revolution has taken place in a capitalistic and patriarchal society. This has profoundly shaped the way digital devices are designed and built, how we utilise them and who does or does not have access to them, which can cause considerable repercussions for women's civil and social rights.

Just to clarify, I *won't* be trying to convince you that the advent of digital technologies has had no benefits for women, or for the rest of humankind. Like all of you, I am grateful for the tools that allow me to access information, connect with my friends and family, and simplify my daily tasks. After all, I am writing on a laptop with a Wi-Fi connection, making massive use of online archives and search engines. As a feminist, I also appreciate the role that digital innovations have played in campaigns such as #MeToo and #InternationalWomensStrike, and in helping entire generations of women (including my own) organise and support one another. Of this, however, we know much already. I believe it is the dark side of digital capitalism that should once and for all come to light, together with the strategies to resist.

It also seems to me that we should look at the problem systemically, rather than simply focusing on the aspects that feel closest to home, or in which we can recognise ourselves. I must confess that when I started researching this book I, too, had mostly in mind stories that resonated with me on a personal level, like that of Carolina

INTRODUCTION

Picchio: a girl who came from the same country as me, and whom it was natural for me to picture as a little sister, or a younger version of myself. But one story leads to another, and the more I explored the ecosystem where tragedies such as Carolina's developed, the more I encountered experiences like Tian Yu's. In the end, I was convinced that it was urgent and necessary to try to explain the links between these different stories, which are equally unacceptable and underpinned by the same power relations.

And now just a couple of necessary clarifications. When I say that I'd like to offer a *global* and *systemic* examination of the digital revolution and of its gendered effects, I do not mean that my own perspective is all-encompassing or universal. Any viewpoint on a given subject is unavoidably influenced by the position from which we observe it. And, of course, it is from a specific point within the *global system* that I am writing these pages and that you are reading them. Plus, my evaluations are also filtered through my own personal circumstances: those of a Southern Italian woman who makes a living as a university researcher in the UK, who can access information in some languages but not others, and who has experienced several of the forms of violence and marginalisation described in this book, but most certainly not all of them. (I, too, for instance, have suffered online harassment, but I've never worked in a factory.) So, in my writing I have done my very best to distinguish my reflections from the accounts I have collected, which I believe can speak for themselves.

Finally, I want to make it plain that I do not consider gender the only relevant lens through which to examine what is happening to us. It is, clearly, not only women who pay a price for the latest technological changes, and some women undoubtedly have it

tougher than others. I have strived as much as possible to adopt in my analysis an intersectional approach: i.e. one sensitive to how women's lives are influenced by factors such as their class, race, sexuality, physical ability and geography.

At the same time, like many feminists before me, I am also convinced that we should reclaim the notion of *woman* as a political category and put it at the centre of both our examination of social phenomena and our fights for a freer, more equal and fairer world. Let's put it like that. Still today, our societies treat women as *the other* – a subaltern subject whose voice and needs are ignored every time we try to develop an accurate view of what's going on in the world. And the digital revolution is certainly no exception. This is why, if we want to judge it more honestly, I think it is from women's voices and women's needs that we should start, however heterogenous they may be.

Not to mention that *placing women at the centre* is helpful not only when diagnosing a social problem, but also when searching for solutions. This is something I'll talk about in Part 3 of the book, where you'll find a few ideas and proposals aimed at *taking back the tech*: that is to say, turning technology into a truly emancipatory force and a leverage to create a better and more just future for women and for all. These inputs are grounded in my years of research and activism at the intersection between digital rights and social and gender justice. But you should know that, most of all, they are inspired by the testimonies of the women you'll read about. My primary goal is to do them justice, and I am certain that, much more than me, they will persuade you that the time has come to face reality and start fighting for better technology and a better world.