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Being user-driven

By Kim Christian Schrøder & Sisse Siggaard Jensen

Users are a coveted species these days, and there is no shortage of hype about the blessings to be harvested from adopting a user-driven approach to innovation. However, new and traditional media and communications phenomena are hybrids of technological, cultural and situational affordances.

Experimental labs and natural labs

In exploring the revolutionary shifts across these areas, the research teams at Roskilde University attempt to achieve a balance between acknowledging technological drivers on the one hand; and championing culturally situated users' uptake and the co-shaping of technological affordances on the other.

We achieve this balance by basing the research and development focus on the empirical study of users, exploring the continuum from 'artificial' experience labs to the 'natural' labs of everyday settings. As part of the process, we find ourselves inclined to question this very division between artificial and natural labs, which we have inherited from previous research traditions. We have to acknowledge that many naturalistic research settings have experimental components, whilst many artificial research settings resemble the natural experience.

Interdisciplinary research traditions

At the Department of Communication, Business and Information Technologies (CBIT) at Roskilde University, Denmark, we explore technological usability as well as cultural 'sense-making' through interdisciplinary research topics from the traditionally separate fields of the humanities, the social sciences, and the natural and technological sciences.

Consequently, we achieve a combined effort to transform scientific analysis into usable tools for strategic processes of change and innovation in companies, cultural institutions, media organisations, public organisations and NGOs.

The balance between technological determinism and being user-driven is ensured by exploring co-shaping practices in experimental and natural labs.

In the following, we demonstrate the range of approaches that we apply by presenting two projects that are designed to study user behaviours and processes for making sense in traditional and digital media. One project, headed by Professor Kim Christian Schrøder, sets the spotlight on understanding users' everyday life through predominantly naturalistic methods. The other project, directed by Professor Sisse Siggaard Jensen, is currently developing a new, predominantly experimental approach to users' situational engagement with embodied, mediated experiences.

Navigating the landscape of news media

If we want to understand people's motivations in developing preferences for certain news media rather than others, we need to see the landscape of news through their eyes, from the viewpoint of their everyday life. Most industry knowledge about media consumers tends to regard people as lists of demographic or lifestyle facts that are held to somehow predict their news media preferences. This knowledge bears little resemblance to the subjective motivations that determine how people make sense of news media.

In a joint project with a major newspaper publishing house, our research

Exploring technological usability...

team explored people's 'perceived worthwhileness' of different news media, combining quantitative and qualitative research methods in innovative ways. We were thus able to draw maps of the Danish news landscapes on different scales – from high altitude contours that revealed the balance of power between 16 news media formats and genres, to eyelevel sense-making reflections that revealed the 'news packages' assembled individuals on a daily basis.

The anatomy of 'worthwhileness'

The notion of 'perceived worthwhileness' can be extended beyond the area of news consumption, and may serve to conceptualise any kind of cultural behaviour: people choose – as part of either routine or a thought-through decision – the cultural experiences that provide some kind of payoff on their investment of time and energy.

Worthwhileness is a multidimensional phenomenon – a meeting point of seven factors that influence people's cultural behaviour. The most salient factors for worthwhileness are whether a mediated experience contributes to their sense of network connection, and whether the mediated experience is deemed to be appropriate to the situation. This means that people favour media experiences that serve to strengthen their relationships with significant others in their everyday networks, and that somehow fit into everyday situations, such as listening to the radio news whilst driving or reading the free newspaper when commuting to work by train.

Other worthwhileness factors include the participatory potential of an event or experience, and the normative encouragements or constraints from significant others – i.e. whether

one's network finds a given media experience or a museum visit - to be comme il faut.

User-driven innovation in journalism

The project reported here has developed our understanding of news consumers' motivations and behaviours, notably providing a snapshot of shifting patterns of consumption between traditional media (newspapers or broadcasting) and digital media (news on the internet or mobile news). The findings also delivered an innovative typology of consumers, with seven user types distinguished by the different packages they constructed for themselves from the news media marketplace on a daily basis. This knowledge enriched the strategic thinking of the newspaper publisher.

Rethinking approaches to experimental lab research

At an interdisciplinary department such as CBIT, there is a mutual interest in empirical research and the study of different forms of practices. There is a shared, common orientation towards the production of new knowledge about how citizens, entrepreneurs, learners, 'prosumers', avatars, and news consumers make decisions, act and reflect on their lives, engagement, experience and agency.

That said, there is also a broad range of different approaches to the practice-oriented study of user behaviours and sense-making processes. To frame this diversity and make it useful, a newly established Experience Lab aims to frame the study of different modes of experiencing and engaging with a diversity of practices. The aim of this is to provide some laboratory affordances for the staging of experiments and prototyping. Most importantly, however, the Experience Lab provides a frame of reference for discussions across the 'methodological divide' between researchers, who often see ethnographic field studies as being in opposition to the relevance of artificial lab environments. The overall

aim of the new laboratory, therefore, is to bridge the gap of this divide, and to consequently redefine the idea of laboratory experiments.

Networked and networking Experience Lab

The Experience Lab is not an isolated island of experiments that is detached from practice and users' 'real' sense-making. It is a networked and networking lab - on the internet and working in the field - creating connections between researchers and practitioners.

The background for this networked and networking rethinking of the traditional laboratory is the convergence in the development of digital and networked media, technology, society and culture on the one hand and research methods on the other. Moreover, oppositions - for example, nature vs. society, natural vs. artificial, real vs. virtual, fact vs. fiction, theory vs. practice, producer vs. consumer, professional vs. amateur - are challenged, creating questions such as: What is natural and what is real in social media-like virtual worlds?

A mixed reality project

The cross-boundary experience of the real vs. the virtual is emphasised by the mixed reality and multisensory project 'The Sea Stallion from Glendalough'. It is a project about experimental archaeology and adaptive cultural experiences hosted by Experience Lab.

In 2007, a replica of 'The Sea Stallion from Glendalough' sailed from Roskilde, Denmark, to Dublin, Ireland, where it was presumably built in the 11th Century. This trip was the object of huge media coverage.

During the trip, heterogeneous forms of data were gathered - wind, temperature, wave and tidal movements captured digitally; and systematic log book notes and personal accounts from the sailing crew were kept. Satellite data captured weather changes and the boat route in detail.

Vivid audio and video recordings show the everyday chores of rowing and cooking, the sleeping arrangements and seasickness of the crew. Computer scientists, communication researchers and curators are now facing the question: How can this incredible journey to and from Dublin be retold and made available for a wider European audience?

The Experience Cylinder installation

In the Experience Lab, the pilot prototype of the Experience Cylinder has been designed to answer the above question. The Experience Cylinder is a prototype of an installation that makes the data collected and produced during the Sea Stallion trip come alive in a multimodal, mixed reality and gesture tracking environment. It affords the project with the potential to involve prospective users and practitioners of the museum, decision-makers and management, and other museums and cultural institutions. An interdisciplinary team of researchers has been developed, who were part of the development process of the project and conducted research of the usage of media, design, technology, etc.

The Experience Cylinder exemplifies the ambition to combine the best from the traditions of interdisciplinary research, prototyping and field studies.



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