Articulating ICT Use Narratives in Everyday Life

Deirdre Hynes
Manchester Metropolitan University, UK

Tarja Tiainen
University of Tampere, Finland

Emma-Reetta Koivunen
University of Helsinki, Finland

Minna-Kristiina Paakki
University of Tampere, Finland

INTRODUCTION

The most common definition of the information society lays emphasis upon spectacular technological innovation and the transformative effects of new information and communication technologies. The key idea is that breakthroughs in information processing, storage, and transmission have led to the application of information technology in virtually all, public and private, sectors of society (Webster, 1995). By the 1990s, to admire and indeed enthuse over new ICTs had become highly fashionable and popular. Such technological enthusiasm has become so pervasive that it has seeped not only into political and policy discourses, but also into the whole spectrum of the media and fora of public communication (Preston, 2001). In addition, discourses of the information society are often dominated and shaped by male commentators (e.g., Castells, 2000; Gates, 1995; Kelly, 1999; Negroponte, 1995). For example, when compiling a collection of the dominant players of international information-society discourse, Cawley and Trench (2004) were hard-pressed to find female commentators, succeeding only in finding 3 out of a total of 18 critics.[1]

We argue that the focus on the artefact, and thus technological celebration, takes precedence over the largely ignored field of technological uses and consumption issues. Hence, we present a study that analyses the individual user experiences to challenge the stereotypical user traditions represented by the information-society discourse. We wish to present a counternarrative that shifts the emphasis from technical expertise, and technological and transformative benefits of artefacts to more individual-user-focused narratives.

As a result, this brought about a dual-narrative process through which the respondents described their experiences. We found that when people described their uses, consumption patterns, and domestication[2] experiences of ICTs, they tended to do so by employing contrasting frames of reference. These frames of reference we have termed the objective lens (or narratives) and subjective lens (or narratives). Through what we term objective narratives, we found that some respondents would describe their use through official and technical frames of reference. For example, they employed primarily dominant information-society jargon to frame how they made sense of technologies and their use experiences. Through subjective narratives, we found that respondents would describe their use and experiences from primarily a personal perspective to explain how the technology fitted their lives, the role it played in their everyday routines and habits, and the associated meaning and significance of the artefact.

While these contrasting narratives are not mutually exclusive or contradictory, it became clear from the interviews that a pattern of use narratives was emerging. We found that such narratives slightly reinforced traditional gender roles in which men tend to talk about technologies in highly technical terms of reference, while women portray themselves as tech-

nologically helpless or ignorant (Gill & Grint, 1995; Gray, 1992; Lie, 1995). Although we did not look for or find stable gender categories, the emergent gender narratives seem to renew the existing gender roles that link masculinity and technology (Vehviläinen, 2002).

With the development of computer technologies, we have witnessed a shift from IT to ICTs. This has resulted in a redefinition of the computer as an artefact: from a mere computational device to the newly emergent multimedia-enhanced computers, or what Paul Mayer (1999, p. 1) calls a "meta-medium." Today, the conceptualisation of the computer is more problematic. It may be thought of as the Web or Internet, computer games, CD-ROMs (compact disc read-only memory), reference works, e-mail, and a diverse range of applications for displaying and manipulating text, images, graphics, music, databases, and the like. Spilker and Sørenson (2000, p. 270) argue that computers are no longer "primarily about programming, systems, control and calculation," but instead "a gateway to communication and cultural activities." The shift in identity has opened up or unlocked the conceptualisation of the computer. Therefore, it is possible for wider audiences and previously excluded groups (such as the elderly and women) to translate the computer into something meaningful in their everyday lives. As a result, we were not solely focused on the computer as a separate technology, but instead on the wide range of information and communication technologies that are available in the domestic setting.

BACKGROUND

While the concepts of objectivity and subjectivity are not novel terms to describe contrasting positions, we have used the concepts to facilitate the understanding of how our respondents talk about their experiences and uses of ICTs. Orlikowski and Robey (1991) have employed this approach to address the relationship between information technology and the structuring of organisations. The authors argue that the essence of both social reality and ITs can be described by using objective and subjective perspectives. In Orlikowski and Robey's approach, the objectivist relationship to technology underlines the

importance of the material characteristics of the artefact, while the subjectivist approach focuses on the importance of the subjective human experience in the interpretation, creation, and modification of the social world.

Although Giddens' (1976) theory of structuration bridged the gap between the objective and subjective social reality in academic circles, and in particular technology studies, the emphasis lies firmly in the objective approach (Orlikowski, 2000). We argue that one must consider both subjective and objective approaches to ICT discourse. The division is maintained in this article as it is constructive and valuable in the ways it enables us to discuss how and why the objective approach to articulating ICT use is publicised, overvalued, and hyperbolised. On the other hand, the subjective approach is often neglected and confined to private, domestic, and unofficial realms. The aim of this article is not to merely point to the existence of both discourses of ICT use, but instead to argue that it is important to locate the common ground between the discourses in order to provide a grounded and holistic picture of the ways people talk about their ICT use.

NARRATIVES OF ICT USE

The data for this article are drawn from a larger study of Finnish families looking at ICTs in everyday life and the use of electronic services.[3] The objective-subjective theme discussed here emerged while analysing the ways family members talked about their ICT use. For the purpose of this article, we draw on selective excerpts from the interviews to illustrate the contrasting narratives.

Pure Objective Lens

The dominant narrative of information-society discourse presents ICT use in a normative way, for example, by urging universal access and consumption, which is mirrored through official discourse in the ways everyday users express their personal experiences. This way of describing ICT use was also reproduced by several respondents, as can be observed in the following quote.

5 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage: www.igi-global.com/chapter/articulating-ict-use-narratives-everyday/12712

Related Content

Women in Computer Science in Afghanistan
Eva Maria Hoffmann (2010). *Gender Issues in Learning and Working with Information Technology: Social Constructs and Cultural Contexts (pp. 48-63).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/women-computer-science-afghanistan/42488

Would Elizabeth Cady Stanton Blog?: Women Bloggers, Politics, and Political Participation
Antoinette Pole (2012). *Gender and Social Computing: Interactions, Differences and Relationships (pp. 183-199).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/would-elizabeth-cady-stanton-blog/55350

Techno-Femenist View on the Open Source Software Development
Yuwei Lin (2006). *Encyclopedia of Gender and Information Technology (pp. 1148-1153).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/techno-femenist-view-open-source/12886

The Old Approach
 (2014). *Women in IT in the New Social Era: A Critical Evidence-Based Review of Gender Inequality and the Potential for Change (pp. 42-69).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/the-old-approach/105215

Outsourcing to the Post-Soviet Region and Gender
Elena Gapova (2006). *Encyclopedia of Gender and Information Technology (pp. 952-956).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/outsourcing-post-soviet-region-gender/12855