Book Review


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In an era where technology increasingly takes a central position in our daily lives, it is sometimes easy to underestimate the importance of the user. In this respect, How Users Matter represents a much-needed corrective to the more common technological determinist accounts, and will be of use to anyone interested in the human-technology interface.

The book contains twelve essays on various aspects of the technology-user relationship, preceded by a lengthy and generally excellent introduction which maps out the theoretical terrain the book traverses. While necessarily schematic in its presentation, the introduction serves as a concise overview of some of the key approaches which have been taken in investigating how users and technology interact, and as such would be extremely useful for readers not already familiar with the territory. From here, the book is divided into three mains sections, each dealing with a theme. The first of these concerns the role of users in the stabilisation and de-stabilisation of specific technologies, a topic exemplified by Christina Lindsay’s interesting essay which traces the rise, demise and then re-emergence of a specific technology: The TRS-80 personal computer.

The following chapter takes the concept one step further, with Roland Kline exploring the idea of “resistance” to technological development. In an extensive study of life in rural America between 1900 and 1960, Kline investigates how resistance by users to the proscribed use of technologies such as the telephone and electricity led to the transformation of these technologies. What is perhaps most interesting about this chapter is the way in which Kline demonstrates how traditional rural practices such as sharing work and defending property rights were superimposed upon the emerging technologies, and subsequently altered the way the technologies were developed. The third chapter in this section, by Sally Wyatt, revolves around the concept of non-use, focusing on the largely ignored group of people who either refuse to use the Internet, or have discontinued their use of it for one reason or another. While not the strongest chapter in terms of its theoretical underpinnings, Wyatt’s piece does raise some important issues, not the least of which being the implications of policy-making based on incomplete or misleading usage estimates. The section concludes with an essay by Anne Sofie Laegran’s who uses domestication theory to examine how the Internet and the automobile can be viewed as escape vehicles. Focusing on two distinct Norwegian subcultures, Laegran shows how each utilise a particular technology to build a sense of commonality, and how this practice itself can engender a sense of segregation from the wider community.

The second section of the book moves the attention away from the users themselves, and focuses on the role played by user representatives in various forums. The first essay, by Rose and Blume, looks at the role played by the state in conducting immunization campaigns, and in doing so problematises the view that users are primarily configured in their technological use at the point of development. Through a series of case studies the authors demonstrate how the often complex interaction between state control and market forces affect both the structure and delivery of immunization programs, including creating sometimes strong opposition to the programs themselves. The second essay in this section
also focuses on medical issues, with Shobita Parthasarathy looking at the political environment surrounding the introduction of genetic testing for breast cancer susceptibility. As in the previous essay, the emphasis here is not on the users themselves but those who represent them, with the role of advocacy groups in mediating access to the screening technology. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this paper is its comparative approach, which enables the author to investigate how the public versus private health systems in the United Kingdom and the United States affects the way advocacy groups represent their constituents.

The next chapter, by Jessika Van Kammen, deals with similar issues to the first, and examines the role of advocacy groups in the development of contraceptive vaccines. However, whereas the previous paper focused on the implementation phase of the technology, Van Kammen chooses to centre her discussion on the development phase. In doing so, she is able to demonstrate how advocacy groups are sometimes able to change the way developers conceptualise the user, by representing the perspectives of real users rather than a broad, ill-defined user group. Medical issues are again the focus of the third essay in the section, although this paper takes a far broader approach than in previous chapters. Drawing on case studies of the role of advocacy groups in AIDS and heart disease research, Epstein traces the impact a diverse range of interested parties can have on policy development. Whereas most studies focus on the role played by one or two groups, the strength of Epstein’s work is its acknowledgement of the heterogeneous nature of medical advocacy, and how advocacy groups must, at least initially, work within pre-established discursive frameworks.

The third and final section of the book shifts the focus on to specific technologies (as opposed to the technological practices of the preceding section), and begins with an insightful piece by Ellen van Oost that deconstructs the development of the electric shaver. Starting with the concept of “scripting”, Van Oost demonstrates how a specifically gendered user was inscribed in the development of electric shavers for men and women. Most importantly, she clearly shows how the production and marketing of the products established a masculine/feminine dichotomy based on perceived technological competence. Whereas the male version was designed to emphasise its technological sophistication, the female version did exactly the opposite, instead emphasising the device’s aesthetic qualities. The next chapter, by Nelly Oudshoorn, returns the focus again to medical issues, and focuses on the way gender identities are configured in the development of the male contraceptive pill. According to Oudshoorn, the development of the male pill creates a problem for hegemonic notions of masculinity, which traditionally have aligned contraceptive responsibility with female biology. The centrepiece of the paper is a discussion of the role of clinical trials in the development of the pill, and as the author notes, trials are an especially rich area for investigation in that they involve large groups of users directly, while still under the control of designers. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this chapter is how the trials worked to co-construct both the technology and the users, with the latter adopting the identity of the “caring, responsible man” which was inscribed as part of the selection process. This chapter is followed by an essay by Johan Schot and Adri Albert de la Bruheze in which they explore the role of mediation in technology development. Using two case studies, the authors demonstrate how mechanisms such as market experiments, user panels, conferences and workshops can all work to alter the dynamic between production and consumption. According to the authors, the key here is who is driving the mediation process, with producer-controlled mediation processes tending to produce more unpredictable results than those controlled by external bodies. The final chapter in the book is Trevor Pinch’s discussion of the development and production of a musical synthesizer, the Minimoog. Unlike most of the
other entries, Pinch’s chapter adopts an explicitly narrative approach, detailing the history of the technology from its conception through to its release and distribution. Importantly, the author also focuses on an aspect of the technological diffusion not often addressed: the role of marketers and salespeople. According to Pinch, these groups act as “boundary shifters” in the dissemination of new technology, and in some cases can help create an entirely new type of user for a given technology.

*How Users Matter* covers a tremendous amount of territory in its twelve chapters, and represents an important contribution to this growing field. The strong emphasis on medical technologies (especially in the second section) is probably reflective of current trends within user research in general, but might also limit the book’s appeal for those whose interests lie in other areas. Having said this, the excellent introduction, and general high quality of the essays make it a valuable resource, especially to those just beginning to familiarise themselves with this field of research.