

Field: Social Sciences

***Session Topic:
Acceptance of New Technologies***

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Title: The Lower -Tech, The Better?: Technology Adoption and the Case of Mobile Internet Services in Japan

1. Introduction

While I was studying the distribution of Internet access and use in Japan, I came across interesting facts: There are a number of people who have access to a computer but do not want to use their computer to access the Internet. They prefer mobile Internet services, instead. Those who do not have a computer are often content with their mobile phone Internet services. These puzzling facts taught me to be wary of the idea of accepting technologies. My presentation thus seeks to problematize the session title, “Acceptance of New Technologies.” Who does this phrase imply does the accepting? Certain groups of people or society in general? Society does not “accept” technology. *Rather, society and technology co-create each other’s meanings.* This is the take-home message of this presentation.

2. Do Not Accept “Acceptance”.

Technologies, whether old or new, have far-reaching and complex effects (Eisenstein 1979). As Francis Bacon famously observed: “Printing, gunpowder, and the mariner’s needle...these three have changed the whole face and state of things throughout the world.” A useful definition of technology is given by Beniger: “any intentional extension of a natural process, that is, of the processing of matter, energy, and information that characterizes all living systems” (Beniger.1989:9). Modern society might be enthralled by new technologies such as computer and other communication technologies and biological innovations, but it is crucial to have a historical perspective on technology if we wish to explore its social, political, and cultural implications and potential and Beniger’s definition is helpful in that regard.

With the advent of industrialization, assessment of the social consequence of technology has been a fundamental issue for the social sciences. In the earliest years of technology studies, that is, during the first few decades of the twentieth century, research efforts were concerned with the process of acceptance of new technologies. How social and cultural institutions catch up with ever-changing technologies was the key question. It has become increasingly clear, however, that it is one thing to acknowledge the profound influence of technology and it is quite another to believe that a given technology comes with clear-cut purposes and objectives, which society accepts gladly or reluctantly. Thus, students of social aspects of technology deal not so much with “acceptance” as with

“social shaping” or “social construction” of technology (MacKenzie and Wajcman 1985, Grint and Woolgar 1997, Pinch 2004).

3. Exploration and Experiment with New Technologies

In other words, the focus of research on social aspects of technology has moved away from the model of acceptance toward that of exploration and experiment (Grint and Woolgar 1997). The exploration model recognizes the active and selective character of technology adoption. People have to come to terms with new technologies. For example, many people of my generation had to learn how to use the Internet at some time in their adult lives. The process of mastering a new technology involves a number of activities: A novice computer user reads the manual, or more likely, she throws it away; she has to find a room to place her computer; and so on. Users’ practices and preferences are often fed back into the development process and ultimately define how a technology evolves. Just as a user has to figure out how a technology works, engineers, designers, and marketers have to be amateur social scientists and address users’ needs and concerns for their products to take root in society (Callon 1984). “What a better technology is” is a social as well as technological question. In the case of mobile Internet in Japan, for example, it turned out that the lower startup costs and the easier overall accessibility of mobile phones relative to personal computers accounted for the popularity of mobile Internet access.

4.. Conclusion

By way of conclusion, this presentation ends with a paradox: If we are interested in the issues of acceptance of new technologies, let’s not study them. Instead, let’s focus on how people identify, interpret, negotiate, and modify the possibilities and potentialities offered by new technologies. See how society and technology get entangled with each other.

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