

Non-use as ambivalence: Conceptualizing smartphone resistance

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ABSTRACT

In contemporary society media ubiquity and convergence have transformed the act of turning "off" from a routine unmarked moment into a conscious effort and a personal statement. Use and non-use of specific media are increasingly self-reflective and symbolically significant acts. In an ongoing research project we seek to gain insight into this cultural and technological moment by examining individuals and communities who make the effort to remain – to some extent and in relation to some media – "unplugged." We propose that media avoidance is specific to medium, time and place, is constantly negotiated, and needs therefore to be conceived in terms of media ambivalence; and that instead of an identity marker of exclusive ideological groups, media ambivalence is implicated in media ubiquity, technological convergence, and new-liberal ideas about choice. Analytically, we inverse Silverstone at al.'s notion of domestication and outline how de-domestication can highlight practices of resistance to smartphone adoption.

Author Keywords

Media ambivalence; resistance; avoidance; smartphones; media accounts.

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INTRODUCTION

In contemporary society avoiding media consumption has become a challenge. If exposure to media was once confined to a number of well-defined spheres and moments in the day, today the media is omnipresent and continuous, requiring no disengagement or resumption [20]. The ubiquity and convergence of the media has transformed the act of turning it "off" from a routine unmarked moment into a conscious effort and a personal statement. Use and non-use of specific media are increasingly self-reflective and symbolically significant acts – "not watching" now signifies the adoption of a "media avoidance" lifestyle, a lifestyle which is flexibly defined and interpreted depending upon community and class context [see19, 27, 3233]. If carrying a Blackberry or iPhone has certain cultural connotations, then not owning one is equally meaningful.

In an ongoing project, entitled "Unplugged: Media ambivalence in everyday life" [24], we seek to gain insight into this cultural and technological period of transition through an examination of individuals and communities who make the effort to remain – to some extent and in relation to some media – "unplugged." Approaching contemporary media saturation by studying not those who partake in it, but rather those who negotiate media in a critical fashion by for example setting limits (no cable) or through complete avoidance (no cell phone), we are tracing commonalities and differences in the practices of young modern orthodox couples, "green" new-age communities, as well as self-defined secular middle class individuals and families.

What we are finding, beyond group differences, is that whether they construct themselves as members of a community of non-users or see themselves as lone resisters, media in some combination or another are very much present in their informants' lives [6, 2125]. Thus, many of those individuals who have chosen to unplug the television or cut off cable or get rid of the radio or the answering machine, are avid users of the internet and the mobile phone; indeed, some may ironically use the latter to articulate their extensive critique of the former [26]. Far from total, then, *avoidance is specific to medium, time and place, is constantly negotiated, and needs therefore to be conceived in terms of media ambivalence.*

At the same time, with the transition from a dedicated television set to a generic screen, in particular, and with media convergence, mobility and ubiquity more generally, media ambivalence – negotiation on which medium (not) to use, and when and how to disengage and be unavailable – is no longer limited to marginal communities. For example, more and more self-designated non-viewers in our project watch television series on their cell phones, laptops or LCD screens, and construct themselves not as ideologically motivated but rather as technologically savvy or economically sensible. This suggests that instead of an identity marker of exclusive ideological groups, *media ambivalence is implicated in media ubiquity, technological convergence, and new-liberal ideas about choice.*

In what follows, then, we outline the theoretical underpinnings of our project, and then focus on resistance to smartphone adoption in order to reflect upon some

conceptual and methodological issues that this example helps to highlight.

"NOT VIEWING" AS A LIFE STYLE

While there is a plethora of studies that examine the speed of diffusion of new technologies [22], far less research has explored user resistance or ambivalence toward new technologies. Partly this lacuna in the research can be attributed to, what Everett M. Rogers called, "the pro-innovation bias" of diffusion research, which suggests "that an innovation should be diffused and adopted by all members of a social system, that it should be diffused more rapidly, and that the innovation should be neither re-invented nor rejected" [22, p. 16]. This bias, claims Rogers, has produced a field of knowledge that focuses upon quick diffusion and adoption, rather than on slow diffusion, rejection or discontinuance [22, p. 111]. By concentrating upon the measurement of penetration rates, that is, the period when a technology is first introduced and adopted by users, diffusion research focuses on relatively short time frames, and avoids analyses of longer processes. While the adopter or potential user has a certain amount of agency within this model, the technology is perceived as a stable object unaffected by the interaction with the user.

Historians and sociologists have long recognized the importance of the user in the actual development and production of new technologies, as well as the importance of viewing these processes over time. In this spirit, Kline [1213] and Marvin [17] write not only about early adopters, but about user ambivalence and resistance to new technologies. Likewise, research by Umble [3031] about the Amish and the telephone in the early 20th century illustrates how negotiations by users take place over time, and not just at the initial stage of diffusion and/or adoption [2]. Indeed, discursive and practical forms of user resistance continue to change after the initial encounter with the technology, and in the wake of new technologies that follow [13, 19, 33]. Further, when adopting new media, users do not only adopt new practices (i.e., watching television series on the internet) but they modify or discontinue older practices (i.e., stop watching the evening news) and situate their newer practices within older discourses. As Marvin wrote about the time *When Old Technologies Were New*:

Experts and publics greeted a new world of electricity by elaborating an old one. New electrical inventions and ways of thinking about electricity were given shape and meaning by being grafted onto existing rules and expectations about the structure of social relations... Electrically transformed communication thus offers a keenly focused view of the process of social adjustment around new technology, which is an occasion for introducing new rules and procedures around unaccustomed artifacts to

bring them within the matrix of social knowledge and disposition [17, p. 232-3].

In contrast to the relative wealth of historical studies of so-called "old media" and user resistance [1, 12, 17, 31], there is little sociological research on non-users of classical mass media [but see 3, 89, 14]. Jackson-Beeck's statistical study of television in 1977, that concluded: "nonviewers appear to be not only rare in [the] United States today; from the macro perspective, they seem to be socially insignificant" [8, p. 71], seems to have set the tone. With the exception of Krcmar's *Living without the Screen* [14], there has been little systematic follow-up research. This relative lack of interest is particularly surprising in light of the introduction of cable, satellite and internet, technologies that have changed the map of media. Faced with more and more media outlets and platforms, individuals appear to have more choice, whether it is to purchase cable programming or broad-band internet access, or to view a specific program, or not to.

Two issues are noteworthy at this point. First, the conceptual transition from the study of non-use, of non-viewers who live without the screen, to the study of media ambivalence: of individuals and communities who, faced with a growing number of convergent media technologies, make choices based on the ways in which they construct these media in relation to one another, and to the culture at large. Consequently, we depart from the use/non-use or viewer/non-viewer binary, and propose to view individuals' on-going engagements and disengagements from various media over time on a continuum of possible media practices. This allows us to move away from labels such as technophobia and Luddism (or Neo-Luddism) [11] and to account for the multiplicity and variety of media practices that individuals engage in, in different moments and in different contexts [see also 33].

This brings us to the second point – what consists of a medium, in particular, and media technology more generally, in the contemporary media environment [see 10, 16]. For decades, "watching television" consisted of a known set of practices, all related to a dedicated television set [5]. In Eliot Friedson's [4] terms, the "situation of contact" had clear spatial and temporal parameters. In recent years, however, television has transformed into a screen; instead of a single function device, this screen can show broadcast or cable "television" – as well as movies, family photos, power point presentations and other contents [16, 18]. How do people make sense of this technological transformation? We wish to suggest that rather than defined technological objects such as television or telephone, media have become discursive categories. Informants may say that they do not have television, when in fact they own a screen, or when they watch considerable amounts of television content on their computer. We are interested, therefore, in the discourses that prioritize one medium or platform – e.g., the computer screen – over

another – that of television, in this case [26]: why is one medium valued as active and the other decried as passive; why is choice on television constructed as an excess (i.e., too many channels) while choice and access to a wide variety of contents on the computer is construed as a virtue (i.e., the importance of accessing the information highway); and why is using the mouse considered to be a form of user activity and engagement while zapping the remote control is considered to be an expression of passivity (i.e., the couch potato) or at best an illustration of active patriarchy in the household?

These two conceptual moves – from non- to ambivalent users, and from single-function technological objects to discourses that construct their convergent uses – shift the discussion about non-viewers of television from the margins identified by Edgar [3], Jackson-Beeck [8] and even Krmar [14], to the center. In a sense, where Livingstone commented "on the mediation of everything" [15], we seek to reflect upon the media ambivalence of everyone; taking into account, however, that ambivalence is more prevalent among some cultural groups than others. In order to gain insight into "the ambivalence of everyone," however, we begin with the more conscious, intentional rejection of some media (at least some of the time) as an expression of media avoidance.

MEDIA AMBIVALENCE AS A MEDIA ACCOUNT

In *Consuming Technologies* [29], Silverstone, Hirsch and Morley conceived of the human-machine encounter as dialectic, on-going processes which they termed "domestication." From this perspective, technology continually defines, but is at the same time defined by, the communities that adopt or resist it, the cultures that practice it, and the relationships in which it is intertwined. Focusing on television, Silverstone et al. explain that family members decide to buy a television set, to locate it in the living room, to watch particular programs in particular times, and to discuss the programs with their friends; they define the medium—they domesticate it – as it defines, or domesticates, them. Silverstone and his colleagues distinguished four phases or elements in the process of domestication, namely, appropriation, relating to practices of ownership and possession; objectification, focusing on the object and its display in the geography of the home; incorporation, highlighting uses and functions of the object in and over time, thereby foregrounding issues of power; and conversion, referring to the ways in which the object is employed as currency for indicating memberships in relations with the outside. Together, the phases express "the moral economy of the household," the deliberations, decisions and practices of family members as they shape and are shaped by communication technologies.

The notion of "domestication" that captures this dialectical process invites two comments. First, the then (1992) obviousness of television as an object for study underlies

the emphasis on the domestic – the actual room and the physical objects that are placed in it – as a focal site for interaction with the media. With media convergence and mobility, however, this presumption no longer holds. Instead, the traditional meaning of the household itself evolves as its walls become potentially permeable. The household, then, is a cultural starting point that we need to acknowledge and transcend:

biographies of information and communication technologies are not exhausted at the point at which objects or meanings cross the various material and symbolic households of the domestic sphere. Pursuing those biographies also provides, in another register, the basis for an historical and anthropological account of social and technological change on the one hand, and of both large- and small-scale cultural variations on the other [29, p. 27].

Second, whereas Silverstone and his colleagues theorize the incorporation of media in domestic spaces, we are interested in the ways in which objects are removed and eliminated from them. We therefore adapt their account by inverting its focus from the adoption of a new technology to the discontinuance of use – namely, *de-domestication*. Specifically, where Silverstone et al. highlight appropriation (issues related to ownership), we study the decision not to own a technology; whereas they emphasize objectification (issues relating to the place of the technology), we study how the medium is removed, relocated, or disguised; whereas they underline incorporation (issues relating to allocation of power and time), we study how people find new uses of time, as well as who decides how to use this time; and whereas they underscore conversion (the symbolic value outside of the home), we study how non-use becomes converted into a social asset or deficit depending upon the social context. In this way, the notion of domestication provides a framework for learning about media resistance as well as their adoption. Silverstone et al.'s [29] interpretation of "adoption" of media as negotiation with media opens a continuum that spans from willing to resistant negotiations. More specifically, it proposes, first, to explore these negotiations as on-going practices that evolve over time, rather than as a binary distinction between the haves and the have-nots and even the wants and the want-nots [see 28, 33]; and second, it embeds these negotiations within defined cultural contexts: the household, the community, and the material and textual environments that people draw upon in their daily lives.

In order to learn about the de-domestication of communication technologies, we follow Seiter's [27] analysis of media lay-theories and Hoover, Clark and Alters' [7] analysis of media accounts and public scripts. These works suggest the importance of looking at the discursive practices of non-users of media and explicitly

link media use and non-use to class positioning and religious affiliation – e.g. the kindergarten teacher that makes a point of refusing to have not only a television set, but all references to commercial media in the kindergarten, including the children's clothing; and the mother of the Payton family, that does not own a television, and whose account is grounded in the eco-feminist tropes. Both studies highlight the link between practices of media non-use and discursive identity construction.

ANALYSIS

Analysis of ten in-depth interviews conducted with smart-phone non-users will allow us to explore these themes. The analysis highlights issues of de-appropriation (why not own); de-objectification (issues of spatiality: where the mobile phone is used, where smartphone use is missed or resisted); de-incorporation (issues of time: when the mobile phone is used and how smartphone resistance is implicated in social hierarchies); and de-conversion (how mobile phone use and smartphone resistance inform social interaction).

CONCLUSION

Our research project seeks to gain insight into media resistance and ambivalence in an age of cultural and technological convergence. By analyzing interviews with smartphone non-users, we hope to shed light on three general questions:

First, how do individuals and communities identify themselves as non-, resistant or ambivalent users? How do they position themselves along the continuum that spans from "normal" mainstream consumption and accessibility through ambivalence to committed avoidance and resistance? How do they incorporate their ambivalence into their constructions of self and community? Answering this set of questions will allow us to conceptually develop the notion of media ambivalence as key for understanding the experience of media ubiquity and convergence.

Second, how is media ambivalence practiced in daily life? How are media "de-domesticated" – how are they taken out of homes, how spaces and schedules are (re-)shaped in their absence, and how is this absence used as currency in social interactions? And, what may be broader social ramifications of (partial) disconnecting? Answering these questions will shed light on practices of media ambivalence, and possibly on the shifts from family to individual consumption, from pre-scheduled to flexible viewing, and from one to multiple, larger and smaller, screens.

Finally, how do individuals and communities explain to themselves, to people around them, and to researchers interested in them, their media ambivalence? What may be authoritative texts they rely on (for example, to explain the shift from one screen to another), and what may be similarities and differences in the accounts produced by different people in different cultures? Answering this

question will offer insight as to the cultural construction of technologies, as it changes over time and place.

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