

Technology Non-Use as Avoiding Accountability

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that the non-use of technology by organizational members may be viewed as a refusal, rejection, or avoidance of accountability. Drawing on an ethnomethodological framework, this paper takes the position that individuals may decline use of a technology in order to protect or facilitate a desired communicative performance. The non-use of organizational social media is examined as a context in which individuals may reject or decline use of social computing technologies.

Author Keywords

Non-use, social media, ethnomethodology, accountability, visibility.

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.3. Group and Organizational Interfaces:
Evaluation/Methodology

INTRODUCTION

The choice of HCI researchers to study the active use of technologies is not only a common decision, but also a practical one. By focusing on the motivations, processes, and outcomes involved with technology use, an analyst can reference the material relationship between a technology and some aspect of human interaction. Put another way, technology use provides researchers with something that can be seen and experienced, and something active that needs to be explained.

However, the focus of researchers primarily on active technology use may encourage an associated bias that views this activity as beneficial for an individual or organization. This line of thinking has supported a research agenda often concerned with the use of technology to motivate participation in online communities [1,14] or increase contributions to communal information systems [4,15,24].

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The explicit goal of this work is to transition non-users, or non-visible users, into active individuals who use a technology [19]. Those who do not use a technology are characterized as passive, or at best represent a potential audience for the actions of others [3].

This paper calls upon researchers to consider the potentially active, performative nature of technology non-use. Specifically, technology non-use is recast as a communicative act that obscures visibility into an individual's actions in a particular context. Drawing on a framework of ethnomethodology, I argue that understanding technology non-use is critical to examining the process by which individuals make information more or less visible to others. This perspective will be explored by reflecting upon the non-use of organizational social media technologies.

AN ETHNOMETHODOLOGICAL VIEW OF TECHNOLOGY NON-USE

The application of ethnomethodology [9] to the study of technology non-use is somewhat paradoxical because ethnomethodology is fundamentally concerned with action and what is visible in everyday interactions. Ethnomethodology argues that communication is indexical, meaning it directs our attention to particular aspects of social situations, and in turn creates meaning within respective contexts. The argument advanced here is that within an organizational context where communication technology use mediates interactions among workers, the non-use of technology may have the consequence of avoiding or averting attention in specific ways.

To understand the connection between ethnomethodology and technology non-use in organizations we can draw upon Suchman's [21] concept of *technologies of accountability*. She defines technologies of accountability as:

....systems aimed at the inscription and documentation of actions to which parties are accountable not only in the ethnomethodological sense of that term (Garfinkel and Sacks 1970), but in the sense represented by the bookkeeper's ledger, the record of accounts paid and those still outstanding. (p. 188)

The alignment of this perspective with ethnomethodology is important because it directs our analytical focus to how

technology use, and associated communication, provides meaning within a social context. Ethnomethodology argues that meaning is formed through accounts – explanations, descriptions, and directions that are communicated through interactions [9]. These accounts then constitute, and inform others' judgments of, the performance of an individual's identity, knowledge, and motivations for action. Additionally, others in a social context will hold individuals accountable for previous communicative performances. Following this perspective, technologies do not merely create an account of a situation by documenting contributions, but individuals are accountable for the communication performed through technology use.

As an example of how this ethnomethodological framework can be applied to technology use in organizations, Dourish [7] described how work flow technologies can serve as *organizational accounting devices* in two different ways. First, he noted that use of the technology “does not simply describe the activity, but renders it observable-and-reportable” (p. 56). Second, because the technology exists within a specific organizational context users are aware to whom actions are observable. From an organizational perspective, these types of technologies have been attractive not merely because they often increase the efficiency of tasks, but because they also serve as way of accounting for the behavior of workers.

If technology use is associated with practices of accounting in organizations – both the material recording of actions, and the active performances of the acts – then non-use of technology may offer a way to avoid or limit accounts. Within this framework, technology non-use can be seen as a means of either avoiding, or outright rejecting a particular form of organizational accountability. This is not an argument that individuals in organizations can avoid accountability for the completion of tasks by avoiding use of communication technology. Rather, technology non-use may limit the frequency, detail, and form of accounts of everyday action offered with a particular context where communication is mediated by technology. In other words, in organizational contexts heavily dependent on communication technologies non-use of particular technologies may offer individuals ways to regulate or influence the manner in which their actions are visible to others. For instance, research on teleworkers found that individuals often disconnected from their computers for long stretches of time so that they could work undisturbed by colleagues who might try to reach them [16]. Not using the technology at all was seen as the best means of avoiding the frequent inquires from colleagues that occurred when a worker was online. In contexts where individuals rely upon technologies for insight into the work of others, technology non-use, or limited use, may create greater ambiguity around what an individual is doing, which in turn may offer a desired sense of distance from others [2].

TECHNOLOGY NON-USE OF ORGANIZATIONAL SOCIAL MEDIA

The introduction of social media technologies within organizations offers an opportunity to explore whether a framework of accountability can be applied to non-use of technology. To date, most studies of organizational social media have focused on ways to motivate greater participation, content contributions, and information sharing among workers [6,8,12]. Active use of social media by workers is desired by organizations in large part because of its potential to increase visibility of the actions and knowledge of organizational members [23].

Yet despite the potential for the organization to benefit from the increased visibility afforded by social media use, studies of the implementation of technologies indicate many workers may be resistant to the technology, and opt for zero or limited use. Furthermore, there is evidence that non-use of the technology is largely motivated by concerns over the ways individuals may be held accountable for participation. For instance, studies of wiki use in organizations have found that individuals may reject the technology because they do not wish to share unfinished work with others [5,13]. Workers expressed concerns that other users might misinterpret contributions or form undesirable impressions based on the content shared. Similarly, in a study of use of a social networking platform in a financial services firm, younger employees chose not to use the platform in part because they were unsure who else in the organization would be viewing their activity [22]. The workers felt that visible participation on the social media platform might signal to others outside of their group that they were not focused on more task-oriented assignments. Additionally, in a survey of workers asked to discuss the likelihood of using a microblogging tool within their respective organizations, researchers found that individuals were concerned about the volume of information they might have to confront [20]. In all of these instances the resistance to social media was associated with a desire to limit or regulate the ways that individuals would be accountable to actions – whether through their own active contributions or even paying attention to contributions of others. Opting not to use social media reduced the volume and breadth of accountability they faced within these organizational contexts.

AN AGENDA FOR STUDYING TECHNOLOGY NON-USE IN ORGANIZATIONS

The relationship between technology non-use, visibility, and accountability is heavily dependent upon the context in which interaction occurs. Organizational contexts are particularly fruitful environments to explore issues associated with the non-use of a technology for several reasons. First, individuals in contemporary organizations use a variety of communication technologies in the practice of work. This increases the likelihood of variation in terms of use and non-use of technologies. As a result organizational contexts offer the opportunity to explore

how choices to use and not use technologies form a repertoire of communication use for individuals [25]. Second, when communicating with technologies such as social media within organizations, individuals have a more distinct sense of the potential audience for participation (i.e., colleagues, supervisors, subordinates) relative to more public technology use. In both settings the broad visibility of communication means performances are directed not to a known audience, but rather to an *imagined audience* [17]. However, knowledge of who that imagined audience might be for workplace communication may increase or decrease the uncertainty of accountability for technology use within an organization. Third, technology use in organizations may be voluntary, or mandated by management. Therefore, non-use of technology in organizations may be accompanied with tangible consequences that differ from non-use outside of work. Last, because organizations often provide individuals with specific goals and tasks, it may be possible to explore the performance outcomes of technology non-use. In particular, it will be interesting to test whether strategic decisions to avoid particular forms of technology use have the desired benefits for individuals in terms of accountability and visibility.

CONCLUSION

As communication technologies become more ubiquitous in organizations, workers face situations in which they feel constantly connected to others, and may desire greater distance or invisibility from colleagues [2]. Given this trend it is increasingly important to investigate ways that individuals make choices to avoid, or disengage from, technologies. Adopting an ethnomethodological framework that focuses on the ways that technologies make an account of individual behaviors, and make individuals accountable for respective behaviors offers a lens to understand the relevance of technology non-use in organizational contexts. Though knowledge sharing and greater visibility is positioned as an organizational benefit, it may raise issues for individuals who seek greater control of the communicative performances they express in the workplace. Particularly, individuals may resist the *ideology of openness* that is often advocated for effective organizational communication [11]. Instead, individuals may seek greater invisibility and associated ambiguity around their work and actions. More focused study is needed regarding how, why, and to what end workers opt to not use various technologies in organizations.

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