

# Bringing users and non-users into being across methods and disciplines

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## ABSTRACT

This paper re-visits Wyatt et al's [22] categories of non-use: resistance, rejection, excluded, expelled. Subsequent work done within science and technology studies, media studies and sociology of health, is examined which suggests further refinements of the categories. The normative implications of these categories are briefly discussed, and questions raised about how different methodologies and disciplines bring types of (non) users and practices of (non) use into being.

## Author Keywords

Non-use, user practices, digital imperative, methods, interdisciplinarity

## INTRODUCTION

About fifteen years ago, together with colleagues at the University of East London, Graham Thomas and Tiziana Terranova, I started to think about non-use of the internet [22]<sup>1</sup>. At that time, the digital divide was a huge policy issue. Policy makers expressed concern about individuals, social groups, countries becoming socially, politically and economically excluded as a result of not being digitally connected. Data were already beginning to emerge in the late 1990s [12] that not using the internet was sometimes a positive choice. Thomas, Terranova and I were not content with seeing non-use simply as a deficit, as a lack, as a problem to be solved. We wanted to question the conventional wisdom that everyone is a potential user just waiting for access. We came up with two dimensions, distinguishing between voluntary and involuntary non-use and between those who had never had access and those who had once had access but had, for whatever reason, lost it. This enabled us to develop four categories of non-use: resisters, rejecters, the excluded and the expelled. Resisters are those people who have never had access and never

wanted it. Rejecters tried it but gave it up voluntarily. The expelled have had access at some point in time but have lost it, maybe through leaving formal education or changing jobs, but certainly loss of access was not of their choosing. The excluded have never had access, again not through their own choice. The excluded and expelled are the groups to whom policy makers and suppliers of technology aim their policies and sales pitches. We felt that the resisters and rejecters were being ignored but were nonetheless important in all sorts of ways. Even if one accepts the notion that digital inclusion somehow leads to social inclusion, understanding why some people choose not to use digital technologies in their current form could provide important insights for policy makers and suppliers. Maybe non-users find current applications to be neither useful nor fun, but some future, as-yet-unknown applications will bring them into the digital fold. In this way, non-users may also shape the technologies of the future. But resisters and rejecters are more important for their challenge to the technological imperative [9] in this case, to the digital imperative, to the idea that there is a single, digital logic for all individuals, organizations and countries. In other words, people who choose not to use digital technologies, remind us that things 'might have been otherwise' [2, p.3]. They remind us that digital exclusion does not always mean social exclusion, and they also remind us to think carefully about what the expansion of the online world means for the offline world. Could it be that everyone's choices will be determined by the growth of digital technologies, whether or not people actively choose to take part in digitised interactions? As information and services such as banking become increasingly available online, will the possibilities for finding information or conducting one's financial affairs be limited? Most importantly, non-use, especially when it takes the form of resistance or rejection, is a reminder that the universalist claims, both the utopian and dystopian versions, about the diffusion of digital technologies may not be realised.

## WHAT HAPPENED NEXT?

This early work on non-use was largely a thought experiment. Since then, others have taken up the empirical challenge. Two communication studies scholars did a large-scale survey of non-users in Germany [18]. The categories worked well with non-use quite evenly distributed across

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<sup>1</sup> That project was entitled, 'From the Net to the Web and Beyond: Actors and Interests in the Construction of the Internet' (grant number L132251050). It was funded under the auspices of the Virtual Society? Programme (1997-2002) of the British Economic and Social Research Council. The Programme was directed by Steve Woolgar. More information can be found at: <http://virtualsociety.sbs.ox.ac.uk> or in [21].

the four groups.<sup>2</sup> A US survey [14] found that over half of non-users are resisters or rejecters. A PhD in Flanders [6] about young people's use of technology found that a significant group of young people think the internet is no longer 'cool', and they are busy with other adolescent pursuits.

The next step for me was also an empirical one, to study the everyday, the mundane, what people do, in all its fascinating detail. Since the mid-1990s, more attention has been given to users in science and technology studies (STS), away from the traditional focus on design and development [1,15,16,18].<sup>3</sup> In part, the inclusion of users is an attempt to overcome the problems associated with those approaches in STS that emphasise the powerful actors in producing technologies such as scientists, engineers, politicians, marketers and financiers. But, focusing on use to the neglect of non-use means we are in danger of uncritically accepting the promises of technology. Defining people as either producers or users, and sometimes both, confirms the technocratic vision of the centrality of technology. Use, as I have already suggested, needs to be seen in relation to non-use. Moreover, non-use is not the only practice that needs explanation. To be symmetrical [3,4]<sup>4</sup>, use also needs to be explained, and should not be taken as the normal, taken-for-granted practices and relationships.

The problem for those who do research about the everyday is that everyone is an expert. If social science research confirms people's own experiences, it was trivial and a waste of taxpayers' money. If it challenges people's personal experiences, the public may simply assume it is wrong. Aware of this danger, I nonetheless took the plunge

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<sup>2</sup> Riehm and Krings (2006) refer to a survey conducted in Germany in 2004, at which time 45% of the population were non-users, of whom 35% were resisters; 25% rejecters; and 20% each excluded and expelled.

<sup>3</sup> This work on users within STS draws, often implicitly, on De Certeau [8] and Bourdieu [5] who introduced important ideas about tactics, practices, appropriation, domestication, resistance. For explicit use of De Certeau in understanding how people incorporate the internet into everyday politics, see [10].

<sup>4</sup> Symmetry is one of the four principles of the Strong Programme in the Sociology of Scientific Knowledge. It is called 'strong' because of its commitment that all types of knowledge should be treated symmetrically. Bloor [3,4] claims that truth and falsity need to be explained in the same terms. This is the principle that has had most attention within other theoretical developments within STS, such as Pinch and Bijker [17] on working and non-working artefacts; Callon [7] and Latour [13] on human and non-human actors. The other three principles relate to impartiality, causality and reflexivity.

together with Flis Henwood and other colleagues at Brighton University, to look at the ways in which middle-aged and older people found health information, and whether or not the internet made any difference to their health information seeking practices.<sup>5</sup> We focused on how people found and interpreted health information [11], but we also gathered data about how people experienced the internet in their daily lives [22]. This study allowed us to develop further ideas about use and non-use, namely that people's patterns of use and non-use change over time and life circumstances; that some people experience a digital imperative and may feel guilty for not using digital technologies; that some people really do not like computers and express this strongly; and that just because people live in a house with one or more computers, they do not necessarily use them.

## CONCLUSION

What is next for the theoretical and empirical analysis of non-use? First, it is clear that non-use is still an issue globally, nationally and locally. The Netherlands may have a penetration rate of 92.9%, but the global average is 34.3% and for many of the poorest countries it is still less than 2%.<sup>6</sup> The digital divide remains, even if it has slipped down the policy agenda, especially in rich countries and regions like the Netherlands and Europe. Second, a sensibility for non-use reminds us to be sceptical, for example, to be wary of the hype currently being manifested around Web 2.0, or social media. Third, we need to develop a more dynamic and nuanced conceptual framework. Rather than seeing use and non-use as an either/or choice, users of digital technologies need to be conceptualised along a continuum with degrees and types of involvement that may change, depending on education, jobs, children and moving house. We need to pay attention, as already indicated above, not only to users and non-users, but also to practices of use and non-use. The categories also need to be refined, to include not only rejection and resistance but also forced use, reluctant use, partial use, selective use. A list of adjectives describing use and users can be found in Table 1, together with a list of nouns for which user can be used as an adjective. We also need to consider the alternatives to 'user'

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<sup>5</sup> This project was entitled 'Presenting and Interpreting Health Risks and Benefits' (grant number L218252039) and was funded jointly by the British Economic and Social Research Council and Medical Research Council under their 'Innovative Health Technologies' Programme (2000-5), directed by Andrew Webster. For more information, see: [www.york.ac.uk/res/iht](http://www.york.ac.uk/res/iht) or [20].

<sup>6</sup> Data from <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm> (accessed 16 January 2014). Of course, the usual caveats apply about interpreting such data: says nothing about frequency, intensity or nature of use; not clear if all household members have similar levels of access, etc.

that are sometimes deployed to describe technology practices in different domains and disciplines in order to clarify interdisciplinary collaboration. Some of these are listed in Table 2. We also need to consider again the normative implications of non-users and non-use as a practice, in light of intensified concerns about privacy and security. The questions I would like to address during the workshop are the following: What are the different methodological tools for studying users, including interviews, surveys, (auto)ethnographies, web analysis; and what do they each mean for the visibility of different kinds of non-users and practices of non-use? How do different disciplinary traditions conceptualise non-use, and what do the different concepts obscure and make visible?

Adjectives to describe users	User as adjective
Early/late	-driven
Ideal	-generated
Imagined	-centered
Configured	-innovation
Potential/future	-friendly
Partial	

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Adjectives to describe users	User as adjective
Skeptical	
Reluctant	
Super	
NON	

Table 1. Adjectives for users/user as adjective

General	Science	Health	Games
Consumer	Nerd	Patient	Fan
Prosumer	Geek	Pre-patient	Player
Produser	Biopunk	Patient-in-waiting	Audience
Participant	Hacker		
(free) labour	Amateur		

Table 2: Alternatives to 'user'

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