

Towards a Research Agenda on Technology Pushback

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ABSTRACT

In a technology-saturated context, technology non-use can be understood as refusal or reclamation of time and attention—‘pushback.’ Pushback is a site of negotiation with the digital, where norms surrounding its use are called into question. In this work in progress, we look at images circulated on social media sites as powerful expressions of this negotiation. Remixed, re-blogged and re-pinned images represent an opportunity to understand shared metaphors and affective states surrounding users’ relationship to technology. Using content analytic methods adapted from visual anthropology and cultural studies, we interpret 300 images found on Pinterest, Tumblr, Reddit and Google Images. We develop the resulting themes into a framework as part of a preliminary foundation for studying reflexivity in pushback—both the social and personal norms eliciting pushback and the means of achieving it.

Author Keywords

Technology non-use; pushback; content analysis; image analysis; social media; memes.

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

INTRODUCTION

In the attention economy, where digital goods vie for the time and cognitive resources of users, their ‘non-use’ might be understood as more than the absence of acting within any personal and social norms surrounding technology. Rather, this withdrawal becomes laden with a sense of backlash and struggle; a discontentment with the status quo that provokes reflexivity or a step towards its undoing.

The following work in progress understands technology non-use as different from ‘pushback,’ the latter carrying with it a sense of saturation and backlash against permanent connectivity, “in an attempt to manage, limit or

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control their exposure to ubiquitous and constantly connected communication technologies” [1]. The exploratory nature of the study makes space for multiple motivations for (and ways of enacting) pushback.

PREVIOUS WORK

Previous work points to groundswell of pushback sentiment. A meta-analysis of blogs, popular media and academic articles surfaced five primary motivations for pushback, which include “1) the desire for downtime; 2) the desire to connect more in face-to-face relationships; 3) the desire to create space for one’s kids to enjoy traditional childhood activities; 4) the desire to reduce time spent on attention-seeking online noise; and 5) the desire to retain (or restore) a sense of privacy” [1]. These are consistent with a discourse analysis by Foot [3]. The literature review reflected these to be consistent and widely-held motivations for pushback, while other working hypotheses were not supported, like fatigue from the learning and cost of technological upgrading.

METHODS

This work in progress departs from the themes surfaced by previous studies and explores whether they are also present in images collected from social media sites. The metaphors of technology use and pushback circulated on social media may corroborate or contrast with those previously discussed, which were generated by analyzing blogs, news media, and academic venues.

Image Collection

The 300 images collected for this study were found in a search-driven process, beginning with the keywords *mobile, phone, Facebook, text, texting, SMS, Twitter, technology, laptop, Internet, Tumblr* as well as *móvil, teléfono, mensajes de texto, tecnología* and *portátil*. These words were entered as search terms into Pinterest, Tumblr, Reddit and Google Images, and any resulting images were saved for the study if they exhibited any of the following conceptual definitions of pushback:

- Reflexive attention to technology use or overuse
- Using negative metaphors for technology
- Advocating or suggesting technology non-use
- Reaction to information overload

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This heuristic is convergent with Foot's approach of defining pushback "broadly, as including discourses about reducing or avoiding media use, altering media practices, and efforts to influence media policies" [3].

Descriptive characteristics

Each image in the corpus will be treated as its own artifact as in other photo, art, or archive collections. The team will record descriptive information about each image, including its source, the technology the work is commenting on, and what types of actors are in the image.

Interpretive process and meaning

In addition to aggregating the descriptive characteristics listed above, found images will be qualitatively coded by theme. This methodology resembles other analysis of visual material, like that in cultural studies.

Our analytic process is hermeneutic in that "understanding constitutes a creative, reproductive act in which the researcher appropriates the meaning of the object, rather than mechanically mirroring it. The researchers carry around their own frames of reference, and inevitably make their interpretations in accordance with these." [9].

Our hermeneutic process differs from content analysis in that it relies on more than the literal meaning of the text, (See Fig. 1 for example) [10]. We adapt methods for visual analysis that are sensitive to multiple layers of literal and figurative meaning, historical and cultural context, as well as tone and likely intentionality. Circulated images from social media present interesting challenges: they are compact, powerful signifiers to the extent they are re-blogged, re-pinned and re-mixed. At the same time, this aspect may mean they signify differently to different people. Our coding process will incorporate comments and captions attached to the found artifact to help inform its intended use.

The coding manual will be based on an iterative process of distilling themes and tropes from the corpus, focusing on notions that include shifts in relationships, health and wellbeing, or presence of humor and metaphor. Preliminary coding manual development required researchers code the artifacts as a team, as a means to credibly interpret shared signifying elements in each image. Once the coding manual was developed, two members of the team then coded each image in order to arrive at an inter-coder reliability percentage.

According to Sturken and Cartwright in their book on interpreting visual culture, "To interpret images is to examine the assumptions that we and others bring to them, and to decode the visual language that they "speak." All images contain layers of meaning that include their formal aspects, their cultural and socio-historical references, the ways they make reference to the images that precede and

surround them, and the contexts in which they are displayed." [6]

Our preliminary observations point to the stability of certain metaphors of technology use, e.g. drug addiction, or the replacement of personal and material with virtual reality ad absurdum. These findings extend previous work on pushback in that it characterizes the experience of pushback in personal and relational realms [1, 3]. Interestingly, some of the images are 'remixed'—the same tableau is dubbed in different languages or recreated in different images altogether (e.g. multiple photos of Facebook as cocaine, although all shot from the same angle and featuring a young woman). Theory of memes as a constellation of closely-related remixed content may help us understand these images together, in dialogue with one another [8].



Fig. 1. Humor adds complexity to the task of visual analysis

CONCLUSION

Towards a typology of pushback

The intended outcome of this work in progress is to create a typology for understanding reflexivity in pushback. We are interested in the way that people characterize their own experience using technology in affective terms and imagery. These emergent themes and metaphors will contribute to our understanding of the social and personal norms eliciting pushback, as well as emerging conceptions of how to achieve it.

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