Cultural Appropriation of the Internet

Internet has changed our Everyday Life

In the past ten or fifteen years, the Internet has become a commonplace technology in many countries and a widespread social scene of activities. In Finland, for example, only 10 percent of Finns used the Internet in 1997 and 83 percent in 2008.

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How has this happened? How and why has Internet usage increased so exponentially? How have different uses of the Internet evolved and changed during the past 15 years? Which factors have taken part in the alteration of the Internet usage practices, and in what ways have uses remained invariable throughout the years? If one needed to promote a change in the usage of the Internet, how could this be done? The Department of Digital Culture, University of Turku, Finland have had a book project, which tries to answer the previous questions. My research group (myself, Dr. Petri Saarikoski, MA Riikka Turtiainen, and MA Sari Östman) has used various sources, such as popular newspaper and magazine articles, digital material, guide books as well as user and expert interviews for making an overview of contemporary history of the Internet particularly in Finland. The book on cultural history of Internet will be published in Finland by the Gaudeamus publication company in September 2009, and it will be internationally one of the first books on the Internet that puts emphasis on everyday experience as well as phase of popularisation of the Internet. Quite many studies before has focused only on Internet's American predecessor the Arpanet network and pioneering inventors of the Internet technologies. We argue that there is an urgent need for such research, as policy-makers, practitioners, specialists and scholars alike may sometimes present rather superficial conceptions on how information networks have become a part of everyday life in the Western countries. It seems that the discourses, oriented towards the speed of technological developments, may easily become self-evident: People fail to recognize and remember what has happened, when, and why, and what it is, as a matter of fact, that has changed in reality. The French theorist of the Information Society, Armand Mattelart, has even polemically claimed that the current technical and market-oriented determinism produces a kind of amnesiac modernity and absolves it from social contemplation. This amnesia is prone to lead us away from historically conscious and proactive research paradigms. Therefore, all future-oriented research should be based on the recognition of the importance of knowing the historical processes that have guided us to where we stand now.

Mikael Hård and Andrew Jamison have in their book Hubris and Hybrids. A Cultural History of Technology and Science (2005) analyzed the histories of technology and science in terms of processes of cultural appropriation, by which new things and new ideas are made to fit into the established ways of life. In their approach, technological change becomes a story of how ideas and visions about technology become deeply embedded in different cultures, cultural identities, personal needs and the practices of everyday life. The aim of the book project of ours has been to ponder Internet-related issues within this kind of an analytic framework, by also paying attention to the influence of gender and age in the varied processes of appropriation. Different generations do not appropriate the same facts and artefacts, systems and structures in the same way. Similarly, gendered appropriations of technology tend to be culturally constructed within the power hierarchies and privileged positions that are naturalized to appear as automatic accompaniments to each sex. The feminine interest of knowledge seems continuously downplayed. We have asked, how the model of cultural appropriation of technology can be adapted to the research of such multi-layered phenomena as those related to the Internet.

Popular introduction of the Internet – some results

One key issue of success story of the Internet is in its flexibility. Even though at the first place the mobilization of the network wasn't that effortless and the use was considered expensive in households, Internet's various applications and possibilities made it attractive for the masses.

One of the key notions of the project was that role of so called "old media", such as television and newspapers, has been essential when introducing and popularising of the Internet. Other media forms were forced to integrate their practises to the Internet, but they have introduced the Internet itself during the mid-1990s and after that Internet's various services like search engines, games, video sites (particularly YouTube) and social networking services (MySpace, Facebook, Twitter etc.). For getting mass interest, the Internet has needed help of other media forms.

A French media historian, Patrice Flichy, has pointed out in his book "Internet Imaginaire", that also certain cyberelite, group of key people introducing the new technology in the USA, has affected to popularization of the Internet. Our studies show that there has been similar cyberelite, consisted of certain journalists, researchers, novelists and artist, in Finland. Even though learning of Internet application has occurred with the mouth-to-mouth technique and within personal user networks, this cyberelite has been active in discussing and introducing the new technology publicly.

Although many things are constantly changing with the Internet, there is something more stable. On the basis of our stud-ies, it seems that media technological discourses go round in circles. The way of talk and write about potentiality of the Internet as a multimodal communication sphere or a technology for saving time resembles discourse of its predecessor "new media" such as telegraph, telephone, radio or television. Also fears can be similar: suspicion about media affects, particularly amongst children or about reliability of information. Discourses about websites in the mid 1990s and use of Wikipedia in the 2000s provide fine example of the information reliability distrust. In both cases, there has been lots of arguments why not to rely on digital information due to lack of the formal structures and practises of knowledge construction and evaluation. In some years these doubts have diminish because of two reasons, at least. On one hand, people has used to web sites and digital information services and found out their feasibility. On the other hand, some new practises of regulate digital knowledge have emerged. For example the user community of Wikipedia has many ways of control Wikipedias' content and react quickly to potential vandalism. At the same time, however, the community uses interestingly power to regulate and define character of this "Free encyclopedia".

The net as a memory machine

We can also discover some repetitive phases in the Internet discourses: introduction, popularization and transformation. In the first phase, the new technology (e. g. Internet application, service, site) is not only introduced but its possibilities are widely put under question. After the introduction, the most controversial discussion can be ceased and technology can be accepted and popularised in common use, but at the same time some new controversies can emerge. During the transformation, the technology could receive more national and local variations and imitations, which can mean some sort of technological metamorphosis in the end.

One could say that the future of the Internet is in history. Already now we can realize that great amount of digital content is related to our personal and collective past. Many people log their personal life by writing weblogs, Facebook status updates or uploading digital photos and videos to YouTube, Flickr and so on. Also broadcasting companies and newspapers use their archival material for making re-releases and gaining profits. YouTube video clips of old movies or tv-shows can increase sales of dvd's of the product. Also Finnish Broadcasting Company Yle has opened its "Live Archive", which provides quite a lot of their old radio and tv-material for every Internet users. This material can be used, for example, in academic teaching and research. Like television before, Internet is then, some sort of memory machine, which makes possible to collect, archive, distribute and revise elements of past. The Internet is an extension of memory from personal and collective levels.

At the same time this historical content consists of history of digital culture itself, old computer and video games, memoirs of using personal computers and the Internet. Digital media is not "the new media" anymore, and researchers should also pay attention to its maturation process, where the digital technology is able to transform to digital cultural heritage.

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