

MEDIA, TECHNOLOGY AND
EVERYDAY LIFE IN EUROPE

ROGER SILVERSTONE

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Roger Silverstone

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List of Original EMTEL Project Reports

Berker, Thomas (2003) *Boundaries in a space of flows: the case of migrant researchers' use of ICTs*, NTNU, University of Trondheim.

Cammaerts, Bart and Van Audenhove, Leo (2003) *ICT usage among transnational social movements in the networked society*, ASCoR/TNO, University of Amsterdam.

Durieux, Dorothee (2003) *ICT and social inclusion in the everyday life of less abled people*, LENTIC, University of Liège and ASCoR, University of Amsterdam.

Georgiou, Myria (2003) *Mapping diasporic media across the EU; addressing cultural exclusion*, Media@lse, London School of Economics and Political Science.

Hartmann, Maren (2003) *The web generation: the (de)construction of users, morals and consumption*, SMIT-VUB, Free University of Brussels.

Punie, Yves (2003) *A social and technological view of ambient intelligence in everyday life*, IPTS (EC DG JRC), Seville.

Ward, Katie (2003) *An ethnographic study of internet consumption in Ireland: between domesticity and public participation*, COMTEC, Dublin City University.

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Preface

The research from which this book emerges was conducted over a three and a half year period, between May 2000 and October 2003, under the auspices of a grant from the EU within its 5th Framework Programme. EMTEL, *the European Media Technology and Everyday Life Network*, was funded under grant HPRN-CT-2000-00063 as a Research Training Network.

EMTEL brought together senior and – because it was a training network – junior researchers in seven laboratories within the EU to investigate what we announced as ‘the realities and dynamics of the user friendly information society in Europe’. The research was designed to explore the underbelly of that society, the everyday lives and practices of its members, as citizens and consumers, as they made their way into the supposedly revolutionary new world of technologically driven social, political and economic organisation. The questions that we posed to each other as well as to our respondents, in what for the most part was qualitative research, had been developed over a number of years. EMTEL had had an earlier incarnation, with overlapping, but not identical partners, in the mid-1990s. In the work we did then, something of the present intellectual and methodological agenda was developed, but most of all what emerged was an understanding of each other’s perspectives, despite being initially separated by culture and first language. Above all what was developed was a trust in each other as researchers, and even more importantly, as human beings.

EMTEL 2, as we called it, allowed us to bring into the network young, mostly post-doctoral, research fellows who were required under the EU regulations for the programme to work in a country other than their own. This was, for many, a considerable undertaking, one that was added to the already significant challenges of entering a new field and of developing new research projects which they would have responsibility, albeit under supervision, for conducting. It is a pleasure to report that all those who completed their projects in the network have subsequently moved on to academic posts, as researchers or teachers or both, and all are building their careers and writing their publications on the basis of resources which EMTEL encouraged them to develop and within a field which the network itself was significantly involved in developing. So, in many respects, and for the young researchers certainly, this book marks a beginning; one in which the EU in its drafting of the programme and in its fine judgement in including us in it, can well take some pride.

This book, therefore, is the product of the collective work of seventeen European scholars from diverse social science disciplines whose shared agenda over three years of collaborative work it expresses. The field is a relatively new one: the concern with the dynamics of everyday life in the confrontation with new technologies and new media, and the implications of that confrontation for a further understanding of socio-technical change and for its management. Indeed the research was always

looking over its shoulder at policy and market makers as they continued, in an otherwise untroubled way, the construction of technologically defined visions of the future. We hope that the contributions to this book, both severally and together, will at worst give pause, and at best encourage a more sensitive and informed understanding of what really does emerge at the interface of the social and the technological in the lives of ordinary people within Europe's polymorphous societies.

We leave the notion of Europe open. The research was conducted before the enlargement of the EU, and refers to the dynamics of information and communication technology use in all of its then member states. But Europe as a possibly problematic socio-political category remains on one side, as does any attempt to provide a formally comparative framework for the study as a whole. Indeed it would be fair to say that this book does not represent in any strict sense a study 'as a whole', since it is precisely the diversity of experience across and within European societies that it is designed to illuminate and explore.

Two people otherwise invisible on these pages are owed a huge acknowledgement. Wainer Lusoli, who by the time these pages are read will be Dr Lusoli, was a key individual during the life of the network in his role as Administrator. He was efficient and cordial and dedicated. These characteristics also describe Anita Howarth who has worked on the editing of the manuscript for the book with great application and patience. EMTEL as a whole is immensely grateful to both. We would also wish to thank Ralf Rahders of the European Commission for his supportive management.

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List of Abbreviations

AmI	Ambient intelligence
EARC	Experience and Application Research Centres
EMTEL	European Media Technology and Everyday Life Network
ESDIS	The Employment and Social Dimensions of the Information Society
ICT	Information and communication technology
ISTAG	Information Society Advisory Group of the EC
IT	Information technology
S&TRM	Science and Technology Road-mapping

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Roger Silverstone

If we accept the argument that developing technological capabilities does involve a complex, endogenous process of change, negotiated and mediated both within organisations and at the level of society at large, it is obvious that policies cannot and should not be limited to addressing the economic integration of technological change, but must include all aspects of its broader social integration. We thus reject the notion of technology as an external variable to which society and individuals, whether at work or in the home, must adapt (*Building the European Information Society for Us All*, Final Policy Report of the High-Level Expert Group, European Commission, 1997).

The work of the *European Media Technology and Everyday Life Network* over the last three years has addressed the *problematique* which the above quotation identifies. What is at stake is the significance of social processes for the nature, direction and speed of technological change, and the significance of the everyday as a context for the acceptance of, or resistance to, new communication and information technologies. Such a perspective has, potentially, radical implications, for it demands a different view of the so-called European Information Society than the one which commonly informs both research and policy in this field at both European and national levels. It is one that is grounded in a requirement to investigate, and in that investigation to privilege, the ways in which the user, the consumer, the citizen, the worker, incorporates or fails to incorporate the new and the technological into the familiar, ordinary and more or less secure routines of his or her life in contemporary European society.¹

For it seems to us quite clear that it is at this level, the level of social action and experience, where the decisions and risks are taken which enable or disable access to, and participation in, this society. It is here where individual and collective judgements are made which affect the realisation of individual and collective capabilities. And it is also here where the material and symbolic resources are or are not available to engage with what many still believe is the brave new world which digital technologies are capable of creating.

This book is a synthesis. It is also an argument. In its first ambition it summarises a range of empirical and conceptual work which seven young researchers have conducted within a framework of training and support provided by senior researchers in the field at seven different centres in Europe. In its second ambition, it intends to present a case for the importance of the detailed investigation of the everyday for the capacity subsequently both to understand and to direct the complexities of socio-technical change which the latest generation of information and communication technologies are currently creating. In the latter context it will suggest that what takes

place in the everyday life of all those within European society is a crucial determinant of what takes place, or will take place, in this context in Europe society as a whole. And it will suggest that all those involved in directing policy, or developing markets in this emerging digital world, will, likewise, need to take what ordinary people are doing in their everyday relationships to communication and information technologies, in cities, suburbs, provincial towns and rural areas, across Europe, entirely into account. This report will be structured in the following way.

The first part will elucidate the significance of everyday life as a frame for approaching the European Information Society and the dynamics of socio-technical innovation which may or may not be producing it. The second section will present the key findings and arguments from the individual research projects. The third and final section will identify issues, consequences and questions.

Everyday Life

It is within the sphere of everyday life that individuals and groups can be agents, able, insofar as their resources and the constraints upon them allow, to create and sustain their own life-worlds, their own cultures and values. It is within the sphere of everyday life that the ordinariness of the world is displayed, where minor and often taken-for-granted activities emerge as significant and defining characteristics. We take everyday life seriously because it is precisely in its distinctiveness and its generality that we can see and understand how meanings that sustain as well as challenge its taken-for-grantedness are generated and communicated. And it is in the conduct of everyday life that we can begin to observe and try to understand the salience of information and technologies in humanity's general project of making sense of the world, both private and public.

Perhaps the most useful way to approach the distinctiveness of the everyday as a frame for understanding the dynamics of the information society will be to indicate what kinds of questions it allows us to ask – questions, perhaps to put it too bluntly, which are asked from below, rather than from the more familiar *de haut en bas*.

What does it mean to be part of the information society? What does it offer, what does it refuse, its citizens? How might participation in its direction and access to its claimed benefits be achieved? What are the constraints on, and what individual or socially provided resources might be needed for, that participation? What new skills or competencies will be needed, what literacies? Will new communication and information technologies improve or undermine the quality of daily life? Can we use these technologies meaningfully to change the relationship between work and leisure, work and play? What scope might there be for the marginalised or the excluded to claim a place in the mainstream, and will the new media reinforce or undermine the existing barriers to membership and citizenship? How far will the primary institutions of modern society, the family, or the community be affected by new technologies; and how far will they be able to mould them to their own cultures? Will the new information and communication technologies increase or reduce anxiety, dependence, and the capacity to manage the ups and downs of life in the twenty-first century?

These are questions – and there are others – which emerge with some clarity once a perspective on the everyday is taken. But to ask these questions from below in turn

requires that their answers also must be premised on the requirement to take into account the quality and the character of the everyday.

First of all the answers must understand, as we have already intimated, that it is within everyday life that individuals and groups are agents, active, insofar as resources allow, in their ability to create and sustain their own life-worlds, their own cultures and values. Our answers must take into account everyday life's uncertainties and its contradictions. They must recognise the significance of cultural differences and the inequalities of access to the symbolic and material resources necessary for participation in European society. They must acknowledge that for many Europeans, both in the new and the old Europe, as well as the young and the old, life in the emerging Information Society is hard, and there is scepticism as well as enthusiasm, fear as well as hope, opportunities denied as well as offered, in their engagement with it. Our answers must take into account the specificity of the individual and the local as well as the generality of the national and the global. They must understand, finally, the particularity of information and communication technologies, which are central to the conduct of everyday life, not just as material objects, as technologies, but as objects of desire or dismay, and through whose use individual identities, as well as social networks and communities, are defined and defended.

We therefore presume the importance of information and communication technologies to the conduct of everyday life in contemporary Europe. But we remain sceptical as to their precise significance. Such scepticism leads to, and informs, our particular social scientific approaches to their investigation. We argue, and aim to demonstrate, how an approach grounded in studies of the ordinariness of the everyday, and in the experiences and practices of ordinary people, the included as well as the excluded, will illuminate the otherwise easily ignored realities of the information society.

Illumination, however, is not the only possible consequence of this interrogation. For it is in the investigation of the ordinariness of the everyday that one can also begin to offer a critique of the everyday and, in this context, dissect the limits and misunderstandings embedded in the rhetoric of the information society. Above all, our inquiries aim to challenge the presumptions of rationality and efficiency (operationalised as they so often are in a discourse of consumer need) which impose themselves on the way we are encouraged to think about the relationship between information and communication technologies and social change, and which are grounded, always, in an equally pervasive, but equally ill-founded, assumption that technological change rules. The ordinariness of everyday life is not therefore to be found only in the mundane but also in our not infrequent capacities for transcendence, evidenced in the kinds of creativity that emerge both with, but also against, the grain of technological innovation, and which never fail to surprise innovators and policy makers alike.²

This is a challenge which we would regard as important and long overdue. There are four dimensions of this approach which require brief comment: the empirical; the epistemological; the methodological; the political.

The Empirical

The world of everyday life is a specific domain. It is where groups and individuals act together and separately, in harmony and in conflict. It is where decisions are or are not taken: to work or to play; to participate or not to participate; to move or to stay put; to be sociable or to remain solitary; to communicate or not communicate. It is where the structures of the social: institutional power, the presence or absence of material and symbolic resources, are most keenly felt. It is in our everyday lives where we confront the most profound and challenging ambiguities, contradictions and insecurities. The tools we have to help us manage these challenges have become increasingly technologically enhanced. Indeed we have become increasingly dependent, over the last century or so, on a range of technologies, predominantly our information, communication and media technologies, which have come to provide us with a framework for making sense of the world in which we live. And for those of us without those resources, without basic access, but more significantly without the reasons, skills and literacies to take advantage of what that access enables, the consequences are profound. These frameworks, the frameworks for personal security as well as social and cultural participation, the frameworks of meaning and practice which are a precondition for full participation in contemporary society, are potentially and often actually disabled.

Everyday life is an empirical domain in which our relationships to information and communication technologies are worked out and worked on. Both meaningful access to information resources and the equally meaningful capacity to engage in communication are preconditions for its conduct. The ability to make sense of the world, both within and beyond the range of individual experience, has become dependent on the mediations that flow through the various electronic channels – of broadcast radio and television, the internet, the cellular phone – which are ever present in the daily lives of most citizens of European society. Everyday life is lived both in face-to-face and in the often contradictorily technologically mediated spheres, where battles for control – over privacy or surveillance, for example – are central. Much of our everyday life is involved in the management of that interface and, as we have already suggested, in both its transgression and transcendence.

The Epistemological

Framing everyday life as an empirical domain of this kind involves an equally distinctive approach to its investigation. The research reported here for the most part draws on an epistemology which is derived from two substantively converging approaches to an understanding of communication and information technologies. Both media and communication studies and the social studies of science and technology have, over the last decades, developed epistemologies which depend on seeing both media and other technologies as being socially constructed. This process of dematerialization, and the reconfiguring of technologies as symbolic objects and products has directed attention to information and communication technologies as being constituted in and through the everyday practices of both production and consumption. Without underestimating the institutionalised power of such technologies as they are introduced and sustained as significant means of information

dissemination and communication, this approach challenges any simple or linear account of technologies as being determined either in their design and development or in their consumption and use. The particular complexity of information and communication technologies, that is their double articulation as both objects of consumption and as media of consumption, and their distinctive status – precisely – as key technologies for the conduct of everyday life, requires a way of seeing and understanding them as subject to the daily exigencies of social and individual action.³

One major consequence of such an epistemology is the requirement to acknowledge the open-ended nature of technological innovation, its provisionality, its unintended directions and consequences. Since such innovation is subject to the actions of all those involved, albeit with different power and resources, then it is essential that the trajectory of social change is not just read off from the trajectory of technological change (as if that itself was easily readable). It is equally essential that one accounts for the specificity of these technologies, that they are produced and consumed both as machines and as media, and as such that they are particularly vulnerable to their definition and redefinition through the human capacity to make meaning and order in the world. It is of course equally essential to recognise and understand technology's capacity to mould that world in its own image, or the image at least of those who design, market and regulate it.

Methodology

The methodologies developed and mobilised by researchers within the network, again for the most part, derive from these sets of theoretical assumptions and perceptions, as well as the continuous tensions between them. In practice this means a focus on qualitative approaches to the study of everyday life. If everyday life in the information society is constituted through the actions and meanings that individuals and groups produce in their interaction both with each other and with the technologies that, at least in principle, enable that interaction, then an understanding of that process requires the researcher's focused attention on meaning and significance. While this does not preclude quantitative approaches, it nevertheless privileges those methodologies which seek to get beneath the surface of everyday life and practice, to explore the dynamics, the ambiguities and the contradictions as well as the certainties, of the relationships we create and sustain with our information and communication technologies, both old and new. For without this sensitised investigation of the dynamics of the everyday and of innovation as a contested process of social as well as technological change, we will misread and misunderstand the realities of innovation and the implications of those realities for policy.⁴

Inevitably the kinds of findings produced by close attention to process and meaning are not easily amenable to mechanical generalisation. The case studies that comprise much of the research of the network are designed both to complement, and to be complemented by, quantitative investigation. It is important to point out however that such latter kind of investigation is likewise limited insofar as it does not address the dynamics and complexities of the realities it purports to be describing. It is our contention that methodologies need to be implemented in social research that engage with meaning and agency as constitutive of both technology (as technological practices) and everyday life, and that such methodologies are defensible in their

attention to detail, in their capacity to generate theory and in their ability to challenge the taken for granted assumptions, perhaps in policy and technological discourses above all, that the world is as it is, and can be legislated into existence from on high.

Two dimensions of our methodology need further comment. The first is the scepticism built into the approach. The social dynamics of everyday life (society as it is experienced and constructed) get in the way of technological change, just as technological change poses both particular and general challenges for the conduct of everyday life. The mutuality of this disruption, and the uncertainties as well as the strains that it generates for all participants in the process, needs to be inscribed into the way in which research into the information society is conducted.

Likewise the relationship between action and communication in online and offline spheres. It has been a recent commonplace of research into, especially, the character and significance of the internet to presume that it can be investigated on its own terms, without reference to the social context in which access and engagement takes place. Notions of cyberspace signify such otherwise arbitrary attention to life online as if it were understandable *sui generis*. As so much in everyday life, this is not sustainable. Recent research has pointed to the ways in which everyday life online and everyday life offline are mutually constituting. There is a complex social dynamics within and between the 'real world' and its cyber equivalent, which needs to be addressed. Such mutuality, and the need to recognise its significance for an understanding of both life online as well as off it, is a precondition for effective research in this area.

Politics and Policy

The quotation from the High-Level Expert Group on the Information Society which acts as the epigraph to this report begins with a statement about policy, and ends with a statement about epistemology. So far, we have moved in the reverse direction. But the point to be made is the same. Both the politics of, and the policies for, the European Information Society need to recognise what it is that makes the society, in its lived reality; that is, what the information society is, and what it is not. The everyday is the ground upon which both through individual and collective action, and through individual and collective action that in its frequency and generality (as well as its uniqueness and originality) becomes significantly social in its consequences, the much dreamed information society will or will not be built.

Indeed there is a politics as well as a policy discourse to be addressed. In relation to the first, politics, there are recognisable struggles over access to, and increasingly, and properly, participation in the so-called information society. Further, if the information society is coming to be, as many argue and believe, the expression of a new kind of social formation in which access to immediate and accurate information and advanced communications are the *sine qua non*, then the capacity to participate, the struggle to be included, but also the struggle over its control, are becoming, and will remain, a crucial component of European political life, both at union and national levels. And if such politics is to be advanced and those who wish to participate in its advancement, but even more significantly in its direction, are to be heard and given the opportunities that are required, then national and European policies will need to be developed which go beyond the narrow confines of existing information or communication policy (Burgelman and Calabrese, 1999). They will need to treat

information and communication as social goods, and ones that can only meaningfully be mobilised in the context of Europe's diversity of cultures and the persistence of inequalities of access to both material and symbolic resources. They will need to address the dynamics of the appropriation and rejection of new information and communication technologies as well as the consistencies of economic and cultural inclusion and exclusion. We will return to these issues in the final section of the report.

Media, Technology and Everyday Life

We have suggested, in a framework paper, that the European Information Society can be seen as under construction (Silverstone, 2001). By this we meant that it was still in formation and that its emergence was neither consistent, nor confidently predictable. We also argued that no established single social theory would be adequate to encompass the full range of its variations and complexities; above all there was no single theory (either that privileging social or privileging technological determinism) which could provide an explanation for the relations between social and technological change that might otherwise seem quite straightforward.

Our research has addressed these relationships from a number of different perspectives. In its original formulation it was framed through two primary concerns. The first was with inclusion and exclusion. Here the concern was with the particular implications of information and communication technologies for enabling participation in European society. It has commonly been presumed that they have that potential, and that access to technologies, networks and services is on its own sufficient to compensate for the otherwise disabling and excluding consequences of social and economic disadvantage. The second focus was on flexibility and the quality of life. Here again the innate characteristics of new information and communication technologies in particular are often seen to be able to provide for new possibilities for choices in the conduct of everyday life, and the presumption is that those choices, freely made and enhanced by such access, will lead, individually and collectively, to a more satisfying and productive existence.

During the course of the research a third, albeit subsidiary, theme emerged which cuts across these first two. It is that of mobility and belonging. Here the issue is the particular role information and communication technologies have in the context of a significantly mobile Europe, one in which mobility is expressed through the migration of groups and populations as well as through the individual's capacity to breach the hitherto clearly bounded dimensions of public and private space.

Inclusion and Exclusion

This theme emerged as a primary focus in three studies, though it should be restated that questions of participation, citizenship, and exclusion are ubiquitous in our research as indeed they should be in all research on the relationship between technological and social change.

We explored this theme through specific projects on work, political activism and the culture of ethnic minorities.⁵