Report on work package 10
ICTs and everyday mobility: learning from "informal experts"
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Ideas in Transit

Introduction

This 'observatory' work package sought to understand the social context of the intersection of ICTs and everyday travel and the potential to innovate using qualitative research methods.

The report outlines the research objectives and methodology, and summarises the key research findings. In conclusion, the report considers the relevance of the findings to the research project as a whole, as well as more general comments about ICTS, travel and the organization of everyday life.

Objectives

The objectives of this work package were to:

i)   explore how everyday ICTs become embedded in 'the practice of everyday life'
ii) examine the relationship between ICTs and travel
iii) explore how ICTs augment lifestyle or identity aspirations (e.g. being 'green', popular, professional, etc)
iv) understand individual perceptions of ICTs as an opening for creativity or 'user innovation'
v)   provide a 'social' context for other parallel and future work packages exploring 'user innovations'

Methodology

Thirty two 'informal experts' (i.e. people with a grasp and 'enjoyment' of technology) were selected from three target groups:

-   Mums who work part-time – time constrained, 'busy' activity schedules
-   Mobile business professionals – technologically equipped in transit
-   University students – curiosity about ICTs, managing life transition

Participants completed an account of travel, phone and email communications, websites visited and activities undertaken (e.g. work, collecting kids from school) in a one day diary. The diary formed an interview prompt to explore the participants' broader use of ICTs, travel and everyday activities. The interview schedule was tailored around the diary content but reflected the research objectives and questions.

Key Findings

The research findings are divided into four sections. The first two focus on the participants' everyday use of technology and their identity relationship with ICTs and travel, and provide a social context for the research project. The third section summarises the limited creative (or 'innovative') practices identified by participants, and the fourth, the challenges (or problem spaces) identified by the participants in their day that could act as a motivation for creativity or innovation.

1.   Mediating the Mundane, Facilitating the Everyday

Technologies are used for everyday communication – to contact friends and family, contact colleagues, for trivia and entertainment – nothing special. However, so embedded is this use of technology in the practice of everyday life that people describe feeling 'lost' without their mobile phone or that they cannot function at work without the internet.

Technological applications such as social networking sites and email play a key role in time management and schedule co-ordination, but it appears the mobile phone is the most useful tool in this context - allowing communication on the move, at a distance and at the last minute. This appears especially important where participants attempt to manage a varied and highly time-pressured schedule (the part time working mums in particular). However, this 'last minute' communication is viewed negatively when it allows people to become lazy in making plans, or to cancel them altogether.

The participants pointed to the mobile as a storage device (particularly for photos) and for sourcing travel information (via traffic watch hotlines for example), but it is the internet that has revolutionised the volume of information available to people and the speed at which it can be accessed.

Participants referred to the internet for information regarding (work and leisure) travel and holidays, as well as and detailed specialised information (related to specific purchases or hobbies). They looked at user generated information (such as Wikipedia), but there was a tendency to take this "with a pinch of salt". Forums are often used but rarely contributed to.

The internet plays a key role in people's consumption activities – for shopping, e-banking and price comparison in particular. A number of participants also referred to gaming on the internet, often through Facebook.

Technologies have led to the establishment of new work practices, particularly around the use of email. Communication is faster and can be documented more easily, although participants also referred to the high volume of 'unnecessary' emails and the degree to which the 'speed' associated with ICTs at work leaves them feeling "hassled" and "under pressure". The laptop and mobile were identified as key work tools when travelling – allowing a number of the mobile professionals to work on the move. For the student group Facebook played a greater role than email for communicating and making arrangements with friends as many are continuously logged into the site, thus giving a faster response than by email. Email for students was considered a more formal and slower means of communication.

2. Identity, technologies and travel

Role identity appears to be a particularly important influence on the acceptance/uptake of technologies. For example, a number of the part time working mums and mobile professionals talked about the blurring of work-home boundaries due to the internet providing access to work e-mail at home.

The mobile phone is also used to fulfil the role of parenting – given to children as a 'safety net'. Participants feel they are more able to survey/protect their child(ren) if they remain available to them via a mobile when they are away from the home.

A number of the students referred to Facebook as a way of maintaining their sense of social belonging – if they don't sign up and 'join in' they will be missing out. To this end they are constantly logged on, and use it as a preferred way of communicating with their peers.

The image/identity participants associate with different technologies was also discussed. Participants perceive different technologies can be associated with specific age groups and gender – older people never switch on their mobile; Facebook is for young people; women have more 'text conversations' than men, men prefer texting because they do not like talking on the phone.

The participants also talked about their lifestyle aspirations, many of which link with their self-identity. In particular, the car is seen by many of the participants as key to maintaining independence, access to amenities, saving time and saving money. In turn these link with role-identities such as 'being a Mother', 'being able to

work on the move', 'being a lift-provider amongst their peer group'.

Talking about cars prompts environmental 'guilt', with recognition that the participant, as a driver, is part of local congestion problems, or having a second car is not good for their household's environmental footprint, while perceiving not having a car a challenging proposition. Most students who can not afford a car see it as a desirable future acquisition.

Those who cycle eulogise about the journey time reliability of cycling compared to the car. Cyclists are acutely aware of their personal vulnerability to road accident or attack on cycle networks.

Many mums who walk children to school see this as an important part of their day to communicate with their children, and meet other parents. Whether by foot or car, accompanying primary school children at least one way facilitates social integration into parent networks through face-to-face meeting in the playground. Giving lifts to children's friends also benefits the child's social capital within the peer group.

3. Doing something different with something ordinary

On the whole the participants are not 'innovators', although there were a limited number of 'sparks' with regards creative use of technologies. These creative uses are often driven by communication costs or making everyday life run more smoothly.

The beep system: Sarah (Part Time Working Mum) referred to the 'beep system' she shares with her husband in order to manage the time her severely disabled son spends in hospital.

> "*I'll text him and say… beep me when you're outside. So then he'll ring my phone, so I'll check my phone and it will be a call from him and I cut it off. So he knows that I've got it, and if he rings again that means he needs to talk to me so then I'll answer a second.*"

The coded text message: George (Mobile Professional) referred to the coded text message system that he and his partner have set up in order to save money when contacting each other during the day,

> "*I have a standard text that says Hmmmm?...we just ask if each other's alright, nobody else understands it, …so then he will phone me because it works out cheaper*"

Photo aide memoire: Anna (Part Time Working Mum) uses her phone to photograph in-store retail prices in order to discuss price comparisons with her husband.

Linking in text to computer software: Lisa (Part Time Working Mum) attempted to link her phone with software that enables texts to be sent via email in order to reduce costs.

Safety on the line: Sarah (Part Time Working Mum) explained that she and her friend will talk to each other via their mobiles when walking home from their work in an effort to ensure their safety after a mugging incident.

Personal calendar on line: Lara (Part Time Working Mum) set up a Google calendar for her and her husband to share in a number of locations.

Nonofficial online work spaces: Lynne and craft community co-workers have chosen to work collaboratively through an online forum rather than through an official work system to facilitate shared access to communications.

4. Problem spaces

The participants were able to identify a number of problem spaces which relate to infrastructure, organisational, social and physical challenges. A selection of these include:

Disabled spaces on the bus: three key issues – reliably accessing a disabled space, the hostile nature of other bus users, bus advertising that obscures the window-view adjacent to the wheelchair space.

Lift-sharing: Specifically the difficulties of co-ordinating the conflicting schedules of those sharing a car, as well as the apprehension of travelling with 'strangers'.

Congestion: Referred to by participants from all groups, although they also suggested that it is not a factor likely to encourage them to reduce, or give up, use of the car.

Time constraints, reliability, cost and information provision in relation to public transport: the many 'barriers' to public transport use.

Car Clubs: solution to occasional car use, but costs and lack of flexibility if needed to travel to work (i.e. charged for sitting in work car park).

Misuse of email: effective communication often lacking, overwhelming numbers of email and absolving of responsibility.

Online security: lack of control over other people's postings, fear for children's identity.

Cycle theft and safety: few secure cycle storage areas in cities, and general lack of safe cycle infrastructures.

Carrying things: large and delicate items cannot easily be carried if walking on a bike and often limited space on public transport ensures the car is the chosen mode.

The key finding here is the degree to which the participants are unwilling, or consider themselves unable, to attempt to solve these problems/challenges - either because they believe they have no power to effect change, or because they lack the motivation to try – they have simply 'got used to them'.

Conclusions

The mundane use of everyday communication and travel indicate how many practices are socially embedded and ubiquitous. Clearly in general people use technologies in relatively simple and habitual ways. Mainly people do not do anything particular different with what have become ordinary everyday tools, how people choose to communicate and the social context for these choices provide some interesting social insights which may benefit other innovators (user or other).

Communications cultures are associated with identity – the roles individuals play and their relationships with technologies (functional and iconic desirability). Identity and relationships with technologies and travel modes feeds into considering how groups define themselves with the preferred technology use, and the social and cultural attitudes to different modes of transport.

The few exceptions of 'doing something different with something ordinary' were not related to travel but indicate that creative uses can occur. While the problems spaces are opportunities for 'user innovation' with ICTs the research participants were not doing anything remotely creative or innovative.

This outcome presents a series of issues to be resolved by the Ideas In Transit project. Firsly knowing where to look to the creative spark remains a key research puzzle. The second issue relates to the issue of transport as a driver for user innovation. People are not transport 'enthusiasts' in the same way as hobbies and activities clearly draw people into on line communities etc and do not seem empowered to innovate. It is therefore key that other parts of the project provide a detailed understanding of the motivation to act or innovate in the field of transport.

The final issue for wider discussion beyond this report is how the project takes forward and uses the list of problem spaces compiled through this research. Clearly they operate as an important resource, and may indicate areas worth further probing for user innovation 'in the swamp'. Equally, such problems spaces could be raised as opportunities for existing user innovators from the 'Innovations Portal' to debate solutions.

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