
Refusing, Limiting, Departing: Why We Should Study Technology Non-use

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Abstract

In contrast to most research in HCI, this workshop focuses on non-use, that is, situations where people do *not* use computing technology. Using a reflexive pre-workshop activity and discussion-oriented sessions, we will consider the theories, methods, foundational texts, and central research questions in the study of non-use. In addition to a special issue proposal, we expect the research thread brought to the fore in this workshop will speak to foundational questions of use and the user in HCI.

Keywords

Non-use; techno-resistance; laggard; technology refuser; departure

ACM Classification Keywords

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

Introduction: The Case for Non-use

Most research in human-centered/social computing focuses on when and how people use technology. We argue that examining non-use – when and how people do not use technology – is an equally informative line of inquiry. Indeed, previous work has argued for the value of studying non-use (e.g. [17,18]), and some empirical work has done just that [9,10,24].

Much of the current research related to technology non-use, however, is conducted across many disciplines, not all of which are in regular conversation with one another. For example, some work has analyzed the sociocultural significance of media refusal and conspicuous non-consumption [1,3,7,13]. Others have considered *non-volitional* non-use, including socioeconomic, gendered, geopolitical, and other barriers to use [8,21,22,25] or compared users and non-users, e.g., of social media [16,20]. Discontents with and disconnection from infrastructure [11] also represents a form of non-use. Some work considers cases and categories of non-use not currently well-handled, such as death [4] or non-use as the norm [5].

Collectively, this work raises some provocative questions. What social roles might non-use play? What implicit assumptions about in/appropriateness of technology are evidenced by non-use? Under what conditions does non-use become analytically interesting? What is implied when researchers (or study participants) bother to talk about non-use? Despite these common threads, researchers have yet to connect them to construct an overarching understanding of technology non-use. This workshop aims to do just that: consider what these various research strands have in common and start a conversation about how they might beneficially draw on and inform one another.

Broadening Conceptions of Use and Users

While we suggest that non-use as an important theme that permeates many different areas, we also wish to avoid fetishizing non-use. Studying those who do not use a technology should not, we suggest, be exoticized or treated as a niche subfield.

Instead, studies of non-use help to challenge normative assumptions about the primacy of use and the “user.” Previous work has considered the rhetorical conceptualization of the user [6,23]. Those conceptualizations have significant ramifications in the conduct of HCI research and practice. For example, definitions of “user” form the implicit basis for such central concepts as “user interface,” “user study,” “user experience,” and others. Documenting non-use exposes implicit assumptions about who the user is not. Furthermore, understanding the sociocultural contexts and significance of various forms of non-use, as well as various types of non-users, helps to deepen our understanding of complex sociotechnical systems. Thus, thoughtful consideration of technology non-use may help in moving beyond HCI’s normative assumptions about use and users, thereby speaking to, and perhaps even offering the opportunity to rethink, foundational questions in the constitution of the field.

Workshop Format, Goals, and Foci

Since work related to technology non-use occurs across a broad array of disciplines, this workshop will encourage participation by researchers both who regularly attend CHI and those from other communities, such as science and technology studies (STS), the humanities, sociology, and others.

In the spirit of ethnographic participant observation, workshop attendees will engage in a week of reflexive technology non-use prior to the workshop. Observations and anecdotes from this temporary non-use will provide a set of personal experiences that will help scaffold discussion sessions.

The workshop itself will center on discussion and agenda-setting. Specifically, we seek to facilitate meaningful dialogue around four guiding foci:

Theoretical Grounding - What existing theoretical frameworks (e.g., SCOT [12], Technofeminism [21], diffusion of innovations [15], practice theory [19]) might be usefully employed to help understand technology non-use and guide our investigations? What value judgments do each make about non-use? Do these existing theories suffice, do they need extensions, or might we benefit from new conceptual frameworks?

Methodological Approaches - Studying non-use poses unique methodological challenges, even with such seemingly simple tasks as recruitment [14]. What techniques do researchers who study non-use related topics employ in their work, and to what effect?

Living Bibliography - Finding and connecting the disparate research threads related to non-use can be challenging. What work should every researcher of technology non-use know? Looking forward, how might we allow such a canon to evolve so as to highlight its import to human-computer interaction and sociotechnical studies more generally?

Research Agenda - We seek to foster the creation of a community of interest around non-use. How should researchers interested in technology non-use proceed? What are the central important questions in this area? What should these researchers try to accomplish in the next five or ten years? How can this research speak back to the various areas on which it draws?

Finally, the outcomes of these discussions will be used as the basis for proposing a special issue of a journal, which

will both introduce the topic of technology non-use to a broader audience and to demonstrate its relevance in a variety of research areas.

Conclusion

This workshop presents an opportunity for scholars from a variety of disciplines to exchange key concepts, theoretical frameworks, seminal references, and driving research questions around the topic of technology non-use. We seek to use this workshop as a starting place for developing a pan-disciplinary community around the study of technology non-use. We anticipate that outcomes of this workshop will include collaborative initiatives, a set of resources for researchers interested in this space, and scholarly publications.

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