



Outside the Laboratory: Mobile Methods and the User Experience — Introduction [1]

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Outside the Laboratory: Mobile Methods and the User Experience — Introduction [1]

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In the fall of 2010, the First International Workshop on Observing the Mobile User Experience was held in Reykjavik, Iceland. This all day workshop was a part of the annual conference of Nordic Researchers working in HCI (NordiCHI 2010), and brought together researchers primarily from the European Union to share their methodologies, reflections and experiences on engaging with mobile technology users in places outside of the laboratory. As the original call for participation stated:

the usage of mobile devices is rapidly becoming an integrated part of everyday life. This means that in order to understand the user experience and the usability of a product it is in general not enough to perform studies in the laboratory. Instead the mobile context needs to be taken into account explicitly, and one needs to be able to study users and usage “in the wild”.

The articles included in this issue of wi are the outcome of our participation in this stimulating conference.[2] Included in this volume are essays on eye tracking in the

wilderness (Kuparinen and Irvankoski), evaluating mobile location-based applications in realistic settings (Larsen, Peterson, Zandi and Handler; Wang, Young, and Coxon), the use of derive to understand the mobile experience (Tollmar, Harling and Ramberg), and flexible research methods for mobile industry practitioners (Harrison, Medrington and Stransom). The majority of papers are located in the field of Human-Computer-Interaction (HCI) studies, with the exception of our contribution and that of Maria Fernández-Ardévol. What links all of the work is a focus of users in context. All are engaged with how individuals and groups engage with mobile technologies in specific locations, such as a retail store (Poppinga and Pielot) local urban environments (Crow and Sawchuk) and national and transnational locations (Fernández-Ardevol).

As we learned, location matters in a myriad of ways. It matters economically and politically. As some of our readers may know, Canada's entry into the mobile phone market has been quite different from the European Union. The overwhelming majority of Europeans use the cell phone as their primary form of communication. Although most of these papers do not touch directly on politics, the significant reliance and delivery of many public services on mobile devices makes the user an integral subject to researchers interested in citizenship and inclusion.

A unique feature of the workshop was that it brought together people from industry and academia to exchange methods and experience in mobile research methods. And here it is worth noting that in the European context, it is not at all unusual to find PhDs working

in industry-lead laboratories (Harrison et al). A rather close relationship has evolved between industry and academic researchers studying mobile, wireless media in Europe. This partnership gives some researchers access to the latest technologies and timely opportunities to explore user experiences in an industry-backed setting. The goal is not merely to make money, but to do research that might lead to more appropriate technologies for consumers (Harrison et al and Wac and Dey). While this may produce timely interventions, these relationships may also bring limitations: the time and cost required for longer-term studies with a wider range of demographic groups are often prohibitive for profit-driven, time-constrained businesses. These partnerships ask us to reflect on the kinds of research that can and will be produced within these settings. Who has access to public/private research? How will this research be used? What are the products being made and who are these devices for?

In this encounter between HCI and media studies scholars studying telecommunications and mobile media technologies and practices disciplinary connection and differences also become evident. For many of the scholars in this collection, the HCI presentation-format has different expectations than social science and humanities peer-reviewed articles. These empirically driven research papers have a more limited discussion of theory and methodology and concentrate more on data and findings. These difference also come about because of the disciplines that are cognate to most HCI research: psychology, hardware and software engineering, advertising and marketing research (Harrison et al and Wac and Dey).

Many of the articles raise ethical questions of “surveillance” and the ties of university-based research to data-tracking. In studying users “in the wild”, the attempt is to try and offer scenarios for testing that requires less human input of data, which is filtered, by the relationship of researcher to the researched (Poppinga and Pielot, Tollmar, et al). How is the dream of knowing what users would really do with technology in everyday life mitigated by research methods, processes and protocols? Is automatic data-gathering of user practices and habits possible? What are the challenges in terms of privacy?

The dream of data-gathering “in the world” also raises a number of key epistemological questions. Is it possible to collect “raw data”? Does this create more objective findings? While many of these papers present the usual charts, graphs, tables or photographs one of the challenges is to find the means to visualize and present this data in meaningful and highly creative ways that show different patterns of complex relationships between individual users moving through locations (Larsen et al) or patterns across national borders (Férrnandez-Ardevol). In other words, while the world of empirical research may seem like foreign territory to researchers in communication, cultural or media studies we have much to learn by reading research coming from traditions that are far more empirical and statistical than our own.

In closing, these wide-ranging studies bring us out of our labs and away from our desktops into some risky settings, markedly different contexts, and very specific milieus. We hope that you enjoy, and are provoked, by this rich interdisciplinary foray.

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Notes

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[2] The abstracts and paper presentations were referred in the Conference proceedings: Observing the Mobile User Experience: Proceedings of the 1st International Workshop Held in Conjunction with NordiHCI, October 17, 2010, Benjamin Poppinga, Charlotte Magnusson, Wilko Heuten, David McGookin, Niels Henze, Ginger B. Claasen, Martin Pielot, Hakan Efring, and Jorn Peters, <http://omue10.offis.de/>.