

# Recovering the Social Life of Things

**Alex S. Taylor**

Digital World Research Centre  
University of Surrey  
Guildford, Surrey GU2 7XH  
alexander.taylor@surrey.ac.uk

**Anne Cohen Kiel**

Microsoft Corporation  
Redmond  
WA 98052  
annekiel@microsoft.com

## THE SOCIAL LIFE OF THINGS

“Our culture affects our use of artefacts”: a platitude if there ever was one. Monographs from the grand old masters of anthropology, Malinowski [e.g., 6], Mauss [7], etc. have shown us precisely that artefacts or objects have *social lives* and that these lives are set in motion, animated, enlivened, inscribed and made worldly by the cultures in which they are apart.

There is more, however, to this apparently simplistic relationship between cultures and artefacts than meets the eye. True, our cultures *writ large* impact upon how we see and use artefacts. But once we have recognised this, we must also acknowledge that artefacts come to embody our cultures and, in turn, reflect back upon how it is we know our worlds and actively live in them. Our interactions, then, might be seen as shaped by the socially imbued artefact, but in such a way that we are unaware of all that the artefact carries with it. This is because the material thing—the artefact, the object—is thoroughly socialised, inextricably interwoven into the fabric of people’s memories, experiences and actions [1, 3].

There are important implications for design to be drawn from this intermingling of things with people and people with things. This is particularly the case in the domestic sphere where technologies of all kinds have come to be taken for granted part of our daily routines and bound up in our social lives. What we would like to suggest in this position paper is that if we can get to grips with how it is that material artefacts permeate home-life we might just begin to understand the ways in which new technologies should be designed so that they ‘work’ for people. That is, through *recovering* the particular circumstances in which an object gets used and the characteristics of that object, we might begin to consider ‘what-comes-next’ and how ‘the-next-best-thing’ might be incorporated into our social lives.

In our view, one way in which to recover the social life of an object is to discover the cultural practices to which it is intimately entwined. The basic premise for this approach is that, amongst people, various cultural or social practices exist and that these practices are played out or *recreated* time and again. These social practices are seen to have an ordering influence on how we come to understand and thus use technologies. Artefacts, some of which may be technological, serve as vehicles for these practices: they provide the means by which certain trajectories might be followed and others left. Crucially, the artefact’s reflective role in social activity means that social practices are not inert or inactive. Over time

the social life of the artefact is thought to reflect back on the practice so that the practice itself evolves and comes to have particular meanings amongst certain peoples and in specific places.

## RECOVERING SOCIAL LIVES

To illustrate what we mean by recovering the social life of things and how this approach might help inform design, we have chosen to present examples from three separate field studies. One example is from a study of television (TV) viewing, the second from a study of teenage mobile phone use, and the third from a study of families and technology and more specifically on parental controls.

### *The TV and leisure time management*

This first example draws on a field study of TV viewing undertaken to explore the opportunities for interactive TV, e.g., electronic programme guides and interactive content [see 11]. Through a study of a number of households across the UK—using focus groups, interviews and ethnographic fieldwork—what became apparent was that a significant proportion of the TV viewing that takes place is done to “*switch off*”; parents, young people, children, etc. regularly switch the TV on to unwind and relax, treating the TV much like the proverbial wallpaper. A ‘natural rhythm’ of TV viewing appeared to be evoked, where levels of engagement with the TV varied over the course of the day (and in the evening in particular). The levels of engagement dictated what programmes were watched and how the TV channels were navigated.

Such findings have several immediate implications for the design of interactive TV technologies. In the context of our discussion thus far, however, there is one key point that we wish to highlight. What was evident from the study’s findings was a clear distinction between work and leisure—and crucially the specific functions of leisure. Despite the apparent blurring of work and domestic life [e.g., 5], this study indicated that people have distinct but routine ways to manage their leisure time and these are played out in observable ways via the TV. Leisure activities are categorised by the willingness to engage with the TV and these are set against the demands and stresses of work.

Revealed here is what we believe to be a social practice—one in which time (and specifically leisure time) is ordered in specific ways to manage the burdens of social life (including work). What is interesting is that the TV is viewed as a device to disengage from particular events, times and spaces. That is, by and large, TV viewing is not an active pastime but,

quite the opposite, a passive one and intentionally so. Thus, the TV takes on a social life of its own as part of a practice of managing time; the TV helps to coordinate, arrange and produce certain sorts of time and operates to compartmentalise home life into distinct moments of activity or inactivity. Such an insight has significant design implications because it reveals the TV is not about interactivity (in the sense that content providers would like)—at the very best it is used as a device to coordinate activity and at the worst to achieve inactivity.

#### *Text messaging and gift exchange*

This next example presents what might be considered a more concrete instance of a social practice, *gift exchange* [see 4, 7, 8]. The example comes from an ethnographic field study of teenage mobile phone users in the UK. Through examining the detail of phone-mediated interactions, the study brought to light the role mobile phones play in cementing and sustaining teenagers' social relationships. Text messaging, in particular, was found to be a well-used resource, allowing teenagers to share jokes, manage their social activities and participate in personal exchanges.

What became increasingly apparent in studying 'texting' amongst teenagers was the orderly way in which the exchange of messages occurred. The spirit of reciprocity seemed to pervade text messaging and, in doing so, evoke the age-old practices of gift exchange [9, 10]. Teenagers would be bound by the obligations of exchange: to give, to accept and to reciprocate [7]. They also seemed to view their messages as containing particular memories and having value over and above their mere content. In short, the *ritual qualities* of texting were invoked through teenagers' routine phone-mediate activities.

This treatment of the text message as a gift recreates the social practice of gift exchange. In recovering this sense of the phone as a vehicle for gifting, we also uncover the social life of the phone, and in this case a particular feature of it, namely text messaging. The text message is shown to mobilise social relations, strengthen the bonds of social allegiance and provide a means to draw lines between friend or foe. For designers, this suggests that in considering future designs thought should be given to how mobile phones might nourish this social life [2]—understanding the phone's spirit and its part in social practice enables the designer to consider just what it is that makes it so popular among teenagers and what new features might do so.

#### *Child Safety and Parental Controls*

This example of parental attitudes around child safety draws from an 18 month ethnographic study of everyday life and technology within households in the United States. It illustrates how an artefact created for one intended purpose led, over time, to new but unintended social practices. The example thus reveals how social practices are assembled across time as artefacts' social lives become intertwined with our own daily activities.

The same attitudes that parents display concerning the security of their children are reflected in their attitudes and actions around computer and internet usage. In the development of one of our recent technologies, the introduction of parental controls was made in direct response to parental fears about dangers on the internet. It became apparent, however, that these controls ignored the importance of parental authority and responsibility for their children. A neglected piece of the puzzle reflected in every day life scenarios was the parents' desire to monitor what their children were doing and who they were with. Based on this information, monitoring features and individualized parental controls were then designed for internet usage.

While parents were successfully able to monitor their children's actions on the internet and control access to websites of their choosing, the features created social practices of their own. After reading reports or being sent inquiries by their children related to desired web access, parents began to have dialogues with their children about the sites/places they were visiting and activities and things they were doing on-line. These dialogues had not existed before, and probably would not have occurred if children's social lives were not being played out so explicitly on the internet.

It was observed that the new feature not only solved a specific need (knowing where my child is going and what s/he is doing), but also created new social practices that were incorporated in to the daily lives of these families. In essence, the evolving life of the technological artefact had shaped how the families had come to see the artefact's role in their homes.

#### **CONCLUSIONS**

To briefly conclude, what we have attempted to demonstrate in this paper is the importance of recovering the social life of objects in the home and the social practices to which such objects are bound. Through three examples, we have illustrated that such an interpretation offers a basis from which to consider the features for new technologies and just how these features might be used, as well as how these features create new social practices in everyday life.

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