

Special Issue Editorial

by **Enid Mante** and **Eugène Loos**, Utrecht School of Governance, Utrecht University, Netherlands
(Guest Editors)

Broadband technologies and its users

From May 23rd till May 25th Cost 298 organised a conference in Moscow with the name *The Good, Bad and Unexpected* (<http://www.cost298.org>) the main objective of the conference was to bring together researchers from all over the world to exchange knowledge on the creativity of users and their empowerment in a broadband information society. From the perspective of Cost 298, the ***Broadband Society*** refers to a possible, but not inevitable, substantial transformation of our experience of telecommunications based on these technologies, allowing information and communication technologies to be used everywhere, all the time and by everybody.

During the last decade it has become increasingly clear that the development of information and communication technologies is unstoppable. Nevertheless there are large differences in the adoption and use in different regions of the world, by different groups in societies, and in the types of devices that are predominantly used and the ways they are used.

Up till now, broadband technologies have resulted mainly from technological and institutional imperatives. The question is to what extent potential users have managed to find ways in which such technologies can be useful, worthwhile and attractive. We certainly know from previous research (see for example Haddon et al. 2003; Sapio et al. 2007) that this can require those users to be creative in terms of fitting ICTs into their activities or using them to find solutions to the everyday problems that they already encounter. But how much is being demanded of those users, what considerations have a bearing upon whether these technologies actually find a place in their lives and what new issues, of indeed problems, can these ICTs themselves create, especially if they really are 'disruptive technologies'? Ultimately, we also need to acknowledge that users may well decide that their existing solutions suffice, in which case these new technological options may find only a modest place in their lives. Indeed, they may even be resisted or ignored. Whatever strategies users employ for assessing and dealing with such innovations, we need to learn more about these social processes. Only by so doing can we hope to empower them further in their relationships to technology and through this hope to increase the quality of their lives.

The user as co-producer

In this special edition of **Observatorio(OBS*) Journal** we bring together a number of papers that deal with the issue of innovation and the ways users fit it into their everyday lives. They were presented in the conference strand *Users as Innovators*. This strand was more or less a follow-up for a strand with the same name in the COST 269 Helsinki conference *The Good, the Bad and the Irrelevant* in 2003 (Haddon et al. 2003). In that conference the focus was greatly on design, in this conference we centered more on the interaction between users and technology. There is a long distance between design of technology and the actual use of it by individuals in diverse circumstances. The ways both designers and users cope with this distance is a relevant subject.

In general the development of new ICT's start with design. Information technology opens up again and again new ways and possibilities, which are supposed to make the old obsolete and are embraced and pushed by industry and economy. With the new possibilities new gadgets are created that are supposed to be consumed and assimilated by the intended users. Whether they will be depends largely on the consumers itself, the choices they make and the ways they are willing and able to incorporate the innovations in their everyday lives and the experiences they have with this new technology (cf. Mante-Meijer and Klamer 2005). Taking this into account, the focus in design and development shifts to a different role of the user: not anymore the development *for* but the development *together with* the user is the new adagium: *the user as co-producer*. The user is supposed to be empowered to play a more active role in shaping the technology to his or her own liking and needs. The question is how this role takes shape, how it is used as a source for innovative behaviour and change, which variables have to be taken into account and which models may be used for an explanation.

Content of the special issue

This special issue of **Observatorio(OBS*) Journal** on *Users as Innovators: innovation for users and by users*, focuses on user participation and user experiences, both in the sphere of everyday life and in the sphere of professional innovation.

We start with the paper of Lieven de Marez and Katrien de Moor, who go into the importance of the quality of experience of the user in the success and failure of innovation. In their paper they develop a model and a measurement approach to gain more insight in this quality of experience.

When we think of quality of experience, we discover that not only the business models and the way users are involved in the development of ideas, but also the user practices themselves hamper innovation. This is shown in the case of Video on Demand, presented by Wendy van den Broeck, Jo Pierson and Bram Lievens. Although V.O.D. was seen as a breakthrough in viewing practices, in reality its possibilities are very limited, due to these viewing practices themselves. Habit, love of ease, and the feeling of overload hamper the domestication of the innovation.

Another important factor is if an innovation really fills an existing gap in the needs of the user. Agnes Urban looks into the actual use of mobile TV in a number of pilot projects and comes to the conclusion that the expectation that mobile television can reshape the television prime time, giving a higher importance to daytime viewing, has not been proved. There is some demand for mobile TV services in certain circumstances and for certain types of content, but the demand is limited.

The paper of Pat Byrne shows however, that if there is a latent need, a clever use of the possibilities of an existing technology can mean a real innovation and a real change. The introduction of broadcast SMS, to send information simultaneously to all members of a sports club was considered highly successful, as it not only saved members' time and travel, but it also strengthened ties and reinforced feelings of inclusion.

The (r)evolution of personal and collective publishing offers new tools, allowing the Internet users themselves to become content creators. The boom of virtual writing has created a whole network of blogs and blogging culture, a kind of a *blogosphere*, in which private people feel free to share their everyday narratives, form different communities to construct data basis around topics of their interest or even corporations to promote their business, products and services. One of the presumptions is, that the mob log is a way to support self-presentation or intercommunication of the participants. The study of Koskela and Arminen shows nevertheless that the ways mob logs are used is highly situationally conditioned.

Blogging, rating, commenting, sharing and participating in making the news are only but a few features publishers offer their audience on their websites in order to enhance their news experience. While these aspects are much hyped as a part of the upcoming web 2.0, history teaches us not to lapse into media determinism. The needs of and uses by the public will play an important part in the success or failure of these applications. This is the conclusion of a case study by Ike Picone which looks into the attitude of the Flemish newspaper audience towards online news services by means of qualitative research of lead users (heavy users of new media on the one hand and newspapers on the other hand).

Users not only are involved as individuals in the adoption and creation of new technology. Quite often they are participants as professional users in professional innovations. Raija Halonen studied the users' roles in the development of an information system project. The significant character in the project was that the users were involved in the project from its beginning, even before the project manager was invited to join the project. Trust and the role of the project leader, who was mainly facilitating, were key factors in the participation.

Things become more complicated when we try to involve lay end-users in the production of professional products. This type of user participation is hampered by the traditions and ideas of the profession itself. The paper of Steve Paulussen, Ari Heinonen, David Domingo and Thornsten Quandt looks at how mainstream media are currently reacting to the trend of citizen media in four countries. Their data suggests that despite of the differences in context, media in any of the four countries tend to develop very limited opportunities for audience participation. The professional culture of journalists is suggested as the main factor preventing the development of participatory projects, while marketing and business strategies somehow push for the exploration of such proposals.

A complete different view on the possibilities of user participation gives the paper of Stefan Verhaeg. He studies the building of a broadband provision outside the official channels in a community around a medium-large city in a do-it-yourself way. Not only this experiment is highly successful, it also gives insight in the ways participation developed, the different types of participation and the maintenance of the system revolving around the different types of users.

Nicolas Auray, Céline Poudat and Pascal Pons, and studied the complete database of Wikipedia, looking for statistical regularities in the cooperative co-writing of the articles, the weight of the diverse contributors (newbies, editors, administrators and the heavy contributors). Also they look into the ways quality is ensured.

The presented cases give a general overview on attitudes and behaviour of users in situations where they are invited to participate in broadband society, and a number of the factors that influence successful user participation and user co-production. What is to be expected in the future about 'The Golden Age of Information Society'? Mijke Slot and Valerie Frissen argue that in the Web 2.0 era it no longer holds to think of users as 'end-users', as they have moved to the heart of the value chain. This paper explores these innovative roles of users and reflects on the future impacts of this shift. As we are still at the beginning of

what Perez describes as a potential golden age of the information society, it is at this point in time far from sure whether we are indeed approaching a 'golden age' of technological development. In the final part of the paper they highlight some future aspects from the perspective of changing user-producer relations.

References

Haddon, L.; Mante-Meijer, E.; Sapio, B.; Kommonen, K-H; Leopoldina Fortunati, L.;

Kant, A. (eds) (2003) *The Good, the Bad and the Irrelevant: The user and the future of information and communication technologies*, Conference proceedings COST Action 269, Helsinki, 3rd- 5th September 2003.

Mante-Meijer, E. and Klamer, R. (eds) (2005) *ICT capabilities in action: What people do*. Luxemburg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities.

Sapio, B.; Leopoldina Fortunati, L.; Haddon, L.; Kommonen, K-H; Mante-Meijer, E.;

Turk, T. (eds) (2007) *The Good, Bad and Unexpected: The user and the future of information and communication technologies*, Conference proceedings COST Action 298, Moscow, 23rd-25th May 2007.

