Eyes in the Sky: New Narratives in Consumers’ Technology Consumption
Arundhati Bhattacharyya, York University, Canada

Drawing on Assemblage Theory and Actor Network Theory, this study reveals that consumers of technology perceive some technological products as an assemblage of actors. These actors are perceived to exert territorializing agency through the network that the technological product is embedded in. In response, consumers engage in several deterritorializing practices.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1017994/volumes/v42/NA-42

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
Eyes in the Sky: New Narratives in Consumers’ Technology Consumption
Arundhati Bhattacharyya, York University, Canada

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

When and why would consumers eschew a particular technological product despite its relative advantage? Extant theorizations on consumers’ perceptions of technology suggest that such a behavior could perhaps arise from consumers’ perceiving technology to be a de-naturalizing force (Kozinets 2008) or from consumers using avoidance as a coping strategy to assuage the anxiety and conflict that technology’s perceived paradoxes engender (Mick and Fournier 1998). Yet these theorizations are inadequate to explain IBM (a technology company) recently banning SIRI from all of its offices. The current study argues that today’s consumers might eschew certain products when they perceive those products and/or services not as stand-alone products, but as assemblages of several self-subsistent components, each of which is capable of exerting agency in the network that forms each assemblage.

Theoretical underpinnings
An assemblage (Deleuze and Guattari 1980/1987; DeLanda 2006) is “a collection of heterogeneous parts and acts that form contingent relations across time to produce an emergent whole.” (Sellar 2009). Assemblages can be anything – nation states, social movements, even an organism (DeLanda 2006, p. 5-6, 11). The heterogeneous parts of an assemblage are self-subsistent, and the properties of the whole is not a given, but instead emerge from the interactions of the parts (DeLanda 2006, p. 5), making an assemblage always “a process of formation and not a form” (Sellar 2009). Within an assemblage, the roles that components or actors can play range along a material – expressive axis. Components may also engage in territorialisizing or deterritorialisizing processes that can change the assemblage itself (Shanafelt 2009). Echoing the central tenets of Assemblage Theory, Actor Network Theory too draws attention to the various networked material actors and actants—both natural and man-made, human and non-human—that exert agency and can “authorize, allow, afford, encourage, permit, suggest, influence, block, render possible, forbid, and soon” any act in that network (Latour 2005, p71-72).

Drawing on these theoretical concepts, the current study seeks to understand:

1. How do today’s consumers perceive the complex technologies they possess, especially when current technologies are capable of emergent capabilities?
2. When and how do consumers attempt to navigate the network that their complex technologies are embedded in?

Method
In situ phenomenological interviews were carried out among technology savvy internet and cellphone consumers in India who were recruited through convenience sampling. “Grand-tour” questions (McCracken 1988), specific probes and metaphor elicitation techniques were used to obtain responses to the research questions. 11 depth interviews were taken before the point of data saturation was reached. All interviews conducted were audio taped and transcribed. Data analysis followed a grounded approach, coding data iteratively to seek themes both within and across informants. Codes and themes were refined as patterns among the data emerged (Strauss and Corbin 1998) in terms of the ways and means of consumers’ construction of actors/actants and the practices they engage in to avoid being part of someone else’s network.

Findings
The data showed consumers who (possibly unconsciously) envisage a technological product as a collection of actors (a main actor and some sub-actors) in an assemblage. There is a prevalence of a cost-benefit analysis oriented behaviour towards the product/service assemblage, where consumers weigh the benefits of being part of the assemblage against the cost of losing privacy. Consumers seem to have a mental “snoopable-data” index in that they differentiate between appropriate leakage (for example snooping by institutions to safeguard a country) and inappropriate leakage (for example, snooping by individuals on private videos and pictures uploaded onto the net).

When the perceived benefits of being part of an assemblage outweigh the costs, consumers choose to become a part of the technological assemblage. When some consumers perceive the costs to outweigh the benefits, they engage in cautious practices to avoid being part of such an assemblage. In this, the existence of a single non-preferred actor in an assemblage might be enough to make a consumer try and avoid being part of that entire assemblage altogether and even choose a sub-par (in terms of perceived benefits) assemblage to be a part of, instead.

In situations, when costs and benefits are perceived as being equally important, consumers engage in several practices to utilize the assemblage without being territorialized by it. In such situations, the practices -- used either in isolation or in combination--- that consumers engage in are:

1. An active choosing of the assemblage to be a part of: In this practice, the consumer proactively draws on different sources to make sense of the constituent actors’ and/or actants’ intentions, looks for alternative yet very similar assemblages and then chooses an assemblage to be part of, based on where s/he perceives that benefits can be received with no cost at all or at the least costs.
2. An active modification/structuring of the assemblage he chooses to be a part of, drawing in preferred actors and tossing out non-preferred ones: In an action-reaction interplay, the consumer draws on actor’s from outside the assemblage and uses it/them to replace an existing sub-actor (especially when it becomes an amorphous actant) in the assemblage, as counteracting moves to the “main actor’s” perceived territorializing moves.
3. Using leakage as a resource: Here the consumer proactively allows the leakage through the assemblage to occur when the leakage helps him in some manner.
4. Actively toning the leakage up and down as required: This is exemplified by a consumer’s recruiting the “leaking actors” more frequently when he wants to and recruiting them less frequently when he does not require their service as much.

Contribution
The findings of the current study shed light on tech-savvy consumers’ perceptions of technology in networked conditions. That much of technology is networked has been overlooked by extant theorizations of consumers’ technology perceptions. The current study also empirically substantiates academic theorization of privacy being a tradable commodity and highlights the complex practices through which consumers conduct this trade. Finally, the current study also
unearths conditions under which consumers might eschew technological products with greater relative advantage and opt for something sub-par instead.

REFERENCE


