

Ann LIGHT

Whose Convergence? When Technology Meets Experience

For whom is telecoms convergence significant? Clearly, it is of interest to business analysts and the companies they monitor. Engineers may value the standardisation and interoperability of devices and the transferability of content that come as part of the trend.

So may the people that use these devices. But when people use a tool, they bring a series of practices to it that are culturally embedded, including their understanding of what particular media are for and where they are to be encountered. They use the functions they know about in ways that already make sense to them. They are unlikely to ask about parameters; instead they orientate towards a technology's potential to integrate into their everyday lives. So, critically, how does convergence affect use?

This paper reports on two studies. The first is of the recipients of phone calls who were asked about their experience of mobile and landline phone use. Their accounts show the effect of the integration of devices and functions and raise a series of design questions.

The second is of people making timelines of their introduction to technologies. This reveals how they describe the tools and services they use and the boundaries they see between them. Since this elicitation method also allows people to look forwards to things they would like to see developed, it provides a good means of assessing what convergence of practices and tools is seen as desirable.

Ann LIGHT is Reader in Interaction, Media and Communication at Sheffield Hallam University, and a Senior Research Fellow in the Drama Department at Queen Mary, University of London. She is primarily interested in the social impact of technology and the politics of participation in design, explored in a range of projects including Democratising Technology (DemTech), Fair Tracing (www.fairtracing.org), and Practical Design for Social Action (www.technologyandsocialaction.org). She also helps run a charity on using ICT for cultural exchange between Africa and Europe (www.fiankoma.org) and works one day a week with a user-centred design consultancy on staff development. Her recent research has explored how people's relationship to space has been altered by using phones on the move, taking a phenomenological perspective. This develops work on perceptions and use of new media, begun with websites and online discussion lists in 1995. E-mail: annl@dcs.qmul.ac.uk.

