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Messy Realities

The Secret Life of Technology

23 July -
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A special display exploring the work of SCALS: Studies in Co-creating Assistive Living Solutions.



Who hasn't had high hopes that a new piece of kit will help someone live more comfortably and safely in their own home?

Technologies (from pendant alarms and communication devices to 'wearables' that track certain bodily functions) are supposed to make our lives easier and even help us live longer. But research by Professor Trisha Greenhalgh's team in the Department of Primary Care Health Sciences has shown that so-called 'assisted living technologies' may fit awkwardly in people's lives even when they successfully assist with the particular health or care need they were designed for (and especially when they don't).

This awkwardness arises partly because technologies may not work as expected (or are insufficiently customisable to people's unique needs) and partly because the home is not merely a roof over one's head but a personal, social and symbolic space. We fill our homes with things we find aesthetically pleasing and meaningful (perhaps because they have cultural or religious significance) and with technologies that help us achieve what matters to us (building things, making things, studying, keeping in touch with loved ones).

Up to now, most research into assisted living technologies has focused on demonstrating functionality and ‘proof of concept’ in demonstration settings rather than on what actually happens when those technologies meet the messy realities of real people in real homes. Indeed, because assisted living technologies are typically viewed as freestanding exhibits, what actually happens to them in the homes of real people is something of a mystery. If we could unravel this mystery, we may be able to explain why so many potentially useful technologies are either never adopted or are quickly abandoned.

Our research group approached the Pitt Rivers Museum to explore these findings further, seeking inspiration from the museum collections to discuss use of technologies, and to generate new insights to inform our ongoing research. Working with community members and design students from Rycotewood at the City of Oxford College, we experimented with putting different objects together to spark new ideas, and to see technologies in new lights. We used a storytelling approach to try to capture the (sometimes mundane and imperfect) real-world settings in which assisted living technologies come to be used and acquire meaning – or, alternatively, rejected as lacking meaning or not ‘working properly’.



We met as a group four times and shared stories from our own lives as well as our research about how we all use technologies. We grouped devices from our research with artefacts from the museum collections, comparing their properties and meanings. We started by looking at pendant alarms and amulets, and different containers used for medicines and other substances used to enhance health. We shared stories about how we used different technologies in our daily routines; to organise medicines and remember what, and when to take. People showed us their own personalised devices, and how they had modified and repurposed objects. Comparisons of different kinds of devices highlighted tensions between the need for practical, wipe-clean functioning and a need for aesthetic appeal - and even a spiritual dimension - a ‘soul’. This led us to talk about whether, and how things ‘work’ and ideas of magic and protection. We asked: what is technology? What does technology mean to us?

We also explored ideas of progression, and discussed our hopes and fears for technology. We discussed how technologies are curated, researched and conserved in the museum, and how technologies are made, designed and marketed. In keeping with our hands-on approach, we met Paro, the robotic seal. Paro represents the latest in therapeutic robots designed to stimulate people in hospitals and care homes. We shared an experience of being stimulated and animated by Paro, and discussed the ways in which he works to make connections between people.



The wealth of examples shared in the group illustrated that assisted living technologies do not exist in the home as purely functional objects, nor do they work in isolation. At best, a technology is not only beautiful and meaningful for an individual but also comes from and remains richly connected to and through human communities (especially families), who help choose, install, optimise and repair the technology and negotiate its meaning in particular settings. Our experience of technology in use in the community we created in our workshops was humanity in action, connecting profound issues of aging, togetherness, and beauty.

We would like to offer ‘community’ as a future possible answer to the question of what is technology. Technology was the theme that brought us together as a group, and the exploration of the technologies in the museum and those from our research stimulated our discussions, and enabled us to be together. We came to the shared conclusion that technology is adopted and loved when it puts us in touch with people who matter to us, and when it enables us to be part of a community. Conversely, some of our fears about technology relate to it being used to distance us from each other, for example to substitute for face-to-face interaction or to distract us from being present when we look at our screens instead of each other. We found that people who use assistive living technologies and their family members would like to see a future where technology is more, not less, intrinsically human. Our hopes are not only that this will inspire better, more beautiful and more soulful design but that the processes of designing, making and adapting can create and connect communities.