

There is (too much) pragmatics in non-use – to be pragmatic about it - a short investigation of classical pragmatism from a non-use perspective

Mats Edenius ⁽¹⁾ Jenny Eriksson Lundström ⁽¹⁾ Claes Thorén ⁽¹⁾

⁽¹⁾ Department of Informatics and Media,
Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden

Abstract

In this article we put classical pragmatism into play for the inquiry of non-use and non-users. The focus is how human experience and beliefs are at play in the choice of mobile phones, and how the context of actions in relation to these artefacts resolve the apparent dichotomies of use and non-use and user and non-user. Drawing on two illustrative examples from the promotional videos of the Light Phone and a contemporary smart phone, we investigate the logic of user expectations as terms of inquiries, doing and action. We illuminate the complexity of this inquiry, if taking the digital society seriously, and argue that even though pragmatism seems to be a useful venue for studying non-use as it focuses on what a user did do, instead of what a user would have done, i.e. what worked instead of what would have otherwise worked; the interpretation is always inherently situated and social. We conclude that there is no non-use in practice, however, within a pragmatic discourse there are alternative use in terms of inquiries, doing and action covering both use and non-use.

Keywords: Pragmatism, use, non-use, non-user, smart phones

1 Introduction

Pragmatism is a word with many different meanings and depths. A simple way to summarize this philosophy is to say that what pragmatists put forth is that the best way to approach different philosophical topics is in terms of their practical use. There is also a number of different directions and approaches that apply pragmatism in the field of information systems. In this paper we return to the roots and take our starting point in classical American pragmatism e.g. Dewey as interpreted by Morgan (2014). Dewey argues that we have to reorient philosophy, moving away from abstract concepts and instead we should emphasize human experiences, where inquiry is seen as an extraordinary important concept in human experiences. The inquiry is a process of self-conscious decision making, where beliefs must be interpreted to generate actions, and actions must be interpreted to generate beliefs.

Hence, pragmatism from this point of view is about finding satisfying outcomes from a freedom of inquiries, and the philosophy is built on trusting individuals' ability to reach the best or (at least) the most satisfying solutions (cf. Peirce 2.641). Worth notic-

ing is that we should not confuse inquiry with the purely rational or disembodied process of logical reasoning. Emotions and preferences operate throughout such an inquiry process, starting most notably with a feeling that something is problematic in a situation (Morgan 2014) no matter how subtly; and there is no distinction of meaning so fine as to consist in anything but a possible difference of practice (Peirce, 1878 in Goldkuhl 2012).

It is no coincidence that design researchers find the concept of pragmatism valuable (cf. Woolgar 1991); designers have to focus on what users actually do and what works. As Ågerfalk (2010) argues, many IS scholars also see themselves as pragmatists (cf. Goles & Hirschheim (2000), Hevner et al 2004, Baskerville and Myers 2004).

Use and users are thus central concepts in design. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that information systems scholars need “users” as an epithet to situate why we are in the research area at all, irrespective of whether the “user” is an organization, an environment, a machine, a society or an individual. If we in IS-research have something we call “use” and “user”, should there not be an equally important and equally central counterpart; a “non-use” and a “non-user” respectively? Absence of use has the potential to open up hitherto unexplored aspects of use and the systems in which the non-use takes place.

This question both becomes an important subject in the contemporary political discourse and a subject of research. Maybe the most salient example in the political debate is the digital divide discussion, where non-users are said to be those who are unable or reluctant to use digital technology (i.e. non-digital users) and users are those who fully adapt to different digital technologies. The political digital agenda maps out the target; all citizen should become fully fledged digital users (i.e. Digital4EU).

In IT-related Social Science research, the question at hand has rather been focused on if and how non-users is a concept in its own right (e.g. Selwyn, 2006; Morris and Venkatesh, 2000). The previous research is mainly focused on furthering the understanding of why people decide to use or not to use various digital solutions. Research questions around use have focused on ICT for social inclusion (Diaz Andrade and Doolin, 2016), bridging the gap between users and non-users in service innovation (Srivastava and Shainesh, 2015), computer access and ICT acceptance (e.g. Frissen, 2000; Verdegem and De Marez, 2011). While Satchell and Dourish (2009) provide a taxonomy of non-use, a second stream embraces the infusion of political theory and power into the concept of non-use, presenting a take on non-use as the manifestation of collective consciousness and active, individual political choices (e.g. Carpentier, 2011). Such perspectives open for a critical discussion on whether “use” as well as “non-use” can be understood in terms of power (cf. Ang and Hermes, 1996). A third stream shows how

active use and active non-use are related to each other as different operational modalities of users, and how this may explain deception as a form of bullying or protest (Casemajor et al 2015).

This brief overview of current research in the field of non-use comprises different research philosophies related to positivism and various stands of interpretivism. In all position non-use is primarily situated in the intentionalist rather than consequentialist sphere (i.e. Casemajor et al 2015). However, especially for information systems design, as stated above, there is a third possible research philosophy to relate to; pragmatism. This brings us to the aim of this paper: How can we understand the dichotomies of “use” and “non-use”, and “user” and “non-user” through a pragmatic lens?

Following in the footsteps of classical American pragmatism we have to ask: What difference does it make if we do it this way or another way (see James 1907 in Morgan 2014). If we replace the word “do” with “use” we see that the concept of non-use takes a twist, revealing that there is no non-use at all. However, such statement may not account for all possible answers. To further investigate how we can understand non-use by applying a pragmatic approach, we will start from two illustrations that concern two devices aimed at supporting user groups with different operational modalities of use; The Light Phone and the iPhone 7.

2 Notes on Method

As Goldkuhl (2012) reminds us, Dewey's thoughts are central to the application of pragmatist thoughts in research in general, and to “walk the talk” we posit that our inquiries into non-use and non-users are “reasonable hypotheses”. We are aware that the validity of our inquiry could be called into question. However, as we are following the vein of classical American pragmatism (Peirce 2.663 f; see also Tsoukas 1989) making a reasonable guess is the only way of getting closer to attaining new and fruitful knowledge. Hence, the main ambition is the search for fruitful knowledge and richness of good points, rather than trying to reach “full” reliability in our conclusions.

The empirical setting is two promotional videos, both launched by the manufacturers of the two artefacts (<http://www.thelightphone.com> 15th Sept 2016) and (<http://www.apple.com> 15th Sept 2016) with the explicit purpose to contextualize the product and attach to it a particular form of utility and use. The content of the films are substantially richer than the following text and summary depict. Different data in the movies were identified and put into different sub-themes of classified patterns in line with Constat's (1992) considered as a “distinct point of origination” related to our theoretical framework. Instead of treating the films as a machinery for harvesting data from we regard them as an arena for interaction in its own right (Potter 1997). Our analysis consists of an examination of the visual, aural and textual language of promotional and journalistic material relating to these artefacts.

The choice of these two films is based on a basic assumption that the producers of these two films act on consumers' wishes, where demand and use - to some extent - is transformed by social emulation among consumers, thereby making producers adapt to demand (see for example Fernández et al 2016). The promos, like other discursive formations, not only communicate things but also appeal to preferences (beliefs) in how we want to do things (actions) and who we want to be (self-consciousness). By watching the promos we are to be convinced to buy the phone, becoming users and by this, allows us to assume different social identities. This enables us to interpret the two films in terms of use and users as they are expressed in the data.

The iPhone 7 has become quite familiar to many of us, however the Light Phone is perhaps not so well known. The "Light Phone" is a Kickstarter project that has currently raised 415,127 US dollars, been backed by 3,187 people (Spring 2016), is currently in its beta-testing phase among pre-ordering customers, and has a scheduled mainstream launch date in early Spring, 2017. It was at the time of its product launch, May 13th 2015, described on the Kickstarter website as "a credit card-sized cell phone designed to be used as little as possible.

3 Illustrations

Excerpt from the Light Phone promo

The sun rises (a new product is born), the film is accompanied by soft music. A young woman sits at home at the kitchen table with a Light Phone in her hand. The home on display is sparsely furnished, exhibiting an Apple-like aesthetic of cleanliness and clean technology. We see a smart phone in need of battery charge left behind. In its stead, the Light phone is promptly put inside a zipped-up purse. The phone disappears out of sight, out of mind. What follows is a sequence of cuts where the Light Phone is easily spun inside the hand – a literal "lightness". The next cut shows a group of young adults socializing out in nature, in a park, followed by scenes of individuals engaging in various outdoors activities. There is an obvious absence of a phone in these sequences so as to emphasize the activities one can or should engage in without a traditional smart phone – the absence is enabled by the Light Phone. A few short cuts show how easily the phone is put away, how easy it is to make it disappear, out of sight; out of mind inside a wallet, inside a card holder.

Sequences of nature paired with brief urban landscapes and relationships between people and pets. Relationships equal ease of movement; there is a mobility in relationships that are important to mimic in the artifacts we use, this is literally evident in images of biking, walking, playing and figuratively in images of the phone easily being taken out and put away. Easy because of its size and weight, but also easy in how it has limited functionality and therefore has an easier "pull" on its user, it becomes easier to distance oneself. The distance is particularly evident in an image of a person swimming.

Mid-sequence there is a two-second image on how first of all to turn it off, the message of disconnect loud and clear, followed by turning it on. It is shown to be easy, intuitive.

The sequence ends with images of vistas, clouds, skies, dogs, running and exercising followed by a leisurely answered call. The text “Your phone away from phone” is followed by the word “Light”.

Excerpt from the Apple iPhone 7 promo

Loud music fades in and a voice proclaims “This is iPhone 7”. The phone is shown from various angles high up in the air, followed by sequential cuts of hands, lower- and upper bodies holding the new phone in their hands. A voiceover states “better, faster and more powerful”. The technique of the voice-over, of the disembodied, omnipotent, all-seeing voice directs us as viewers and potential users in-waiting what the product is and highlights its main features. The convincing voice is accompanied by faces and people holding this new product in their hands.

To show the high resolution of the display and camera, several peoples’ profiles are shown with great clarity followed by sequences where we can see different motives through the camera lens. The speaker voice lets us understand that this gives the user a powerful experience. Other technical qualities are presented; resistance to water, the power of the processor and the long battery life. We see people doing a lot of empowering things with the Smart Phone. In the background a boxing match is going on; signifies power and strengths. With loud powerful music plays in the background, the voice ends with saying: this is the best phone ever.

4 Discussion

The Light Phone does not exclude communication – rather the opposite. The slogan “Your phone away from phone” paraphrases not just “Your home away from home” but stresses the proximity aspect of the local network of families and friends. The Light Phone is for the active user, but surely only for the one who can control the need for unrestricted caller access, not for an active user who needs to answer every call, nor for a non-user of mobile phones.

We could ask whether the Light Phone is better than a Smart Phone. The pragmatic view gives an answer; finding satisfying outcomes by inquiries and a trust in people’s self-conscious to reach the best solutions.

What does this mean for the understanding of use and non-use, user and non-user? If the users, based on their experiences and needs (Morgan, 2014), believe the culprit of action is to be resolved via the camera feature, the iPhone 7 becomes the rational choice. If on the other hand the users find themselves fully occupied by constant connectedness and believe that the preferred action is to restrict the ways to connect, the outcome is to buy and use a Light Phone. What there is, is alternative actions (use) based on people’s beliefs (to generate action) and the outcome of these beliefs in a specific context. We do not take the detour via what might be going on in the minds of the users or use as a result of different structures. We do not have to, by for example dressing the situation in terms of a political wilful engagement of a technology as Casemajor et al (2015) have stressed, not as long as the freedom of inquiry is the case. Instead the outcome of

the user's beliefs is the result, and given a specific structure or context it should be interpreted as a satisfying result.

We can from this backdrop - tentative as it might appear - define non-use and non-users within a pragmatic approach by turning it towards an emphasis on human experience: *Non-use is the way in which the user did not do it.*

So let's become pragmatic and look at how these two promos can guide the user to find the best or a satisfying solution.

We might argue that mobile phone usage, like information technology in general, performs in ways that can be described as ironic, perverse, contradictory and paradoxical (cf. Latour 1987, Idhe 1990, Orlikowski 2000). By its technical outfit the Light Phone is **quite robust** in its construction; long-life battery (a capacity even mentioned in the iPhone 7 film in terms of "better"), easy to carry around at the same time as it is easy to put away. These properties all together captured as robustness may all be activated in the Light Phone, maintaining a physically active lifestyle with different outdoors activities at the same time as the user's identity is maintained by an artefact that does not break down. However, this robustness of its construction may be illusory. To the contrary, the iPhone 7 is actually water resistant, quite light too, etc.

According to the promos, the Light Phone is something you put away or just forget. Instead of using a mobile phone you do a lot of things, you go out in nature or to the city to meet friends, to play with your pets, and so on. Going outside - is stretched to different physical activities where the phone is almost forgotten. The Smart Phone, on the other hand, could be more seen as an extension of the body (cf. Cooper 1993), letting you do a lot of things, like taking photographs with high quality, sharing information in a convenient way, etc. The Smart Phone is with the user all the time, where the world is seen through camera lenses like a retina of an eye. The body and the technology becomes intangible – the technology becomes almost forgotten (cf. Scarry 1985).

Still, even if it is water resistant, it cannot easily or without risk for malfunction be brought during swimming. We see it in the Light Phone film, where a man is swimming with no possibility to carry any phone.

Two seconds in the Light Phone promo is devoted to its **simplicity** of use. You can either switch it on or off. The individuals in the Light Phone film are casually dressed, situated in nature (in contrast to individuals in the iPhone 7 film, who are well dressed, well-styled youths, situated in an urban setting). The iPhone 7 film, on the other hand, shows a technology which is highly sophisticated, how different technological components work, the large amount of applications that could be linked to the phone, all applications shown on the screen, etc. All these functions manifest different roles which the different components of the two phones may play. The Light Phone expresses simplicity and robustness and the iPhone 7 technological sophistication. The identity of the Light Phone is quite simple seen from this technical aspect. An on and off button makes it simple, on the other hand, the iPhone 7 consists of a large amount of different applications. All of which require power, memory and user data. However, if one of these

applications would cease to function, for the iPhone 7, the functionality as well as the identity it brings would be quite stable anyhow. For the Light Phone, however, a malfunction of its only feature, would put a end to the robustness, and thus, the simplicity, and with it, one can posit, the identity enforcement its user believed it to bring. Moreover, the communicative practices surrounding the Light Phone requires supplements such as pens, note books, or a smart phone (storing phone numbers), printed maps, (for finding one's direction). In other words, there seems to be a strong force towards supplements which makes using the Light Phone more **complex** to use in its simplicity.

We also conjecture that communication via a Light Phone could be as complex as one made in an iPhone 7. However, as communicated by the promo, a call made by a Light Phone is within a sparse network of close relations. The iPhone 7 signifies a much larger and thus, dense network, with a capacity for a lot of multimodal handling of (also remote) contacts and applications. In the Light Phone case, one can and has to be selective. And that is just it, if just a few contacts in the sparse network of the Light Phone become obsolete, the simplicity is gone. The strength, availability and closeness of the sparse network is what builds the simplicity of the Light Phone, and thus, the identity enforcement of the artefact. If some contacts in the larger network become obsolete, it may not interfere so much with the use, and the features of the phone remain largely unaffected.

One of the main, advertised features of the Light Phone is its ability through a mobile app to forward voice calls from the stowed-away smart phone to itself. In essence this allows for partial, situational active non-use, where one can still be a smart phone user at certain times, and choose to be a Light Phone user/smart-phone non-user at other times, as technology is shaping and constraining social practice (cf. Swidler, 2002:90).

The artefact itself has, aside from material properties and its potential outcomes, also some important properties in its ability of choice compared to the iPhone 7. A service provider, and pay-as-you-go SIM-cards allows the Light Phone to be operated without a long-term commitment to a corporate phone plan that includes paying off the phone on a monthly basis (the current incarnation of the iPhone 7 costs between 650 and 750 US dollars) in addition to costs for calls and Internet access. The Light Phone costs 100 US dollars, and represents paid ownership, and pre-paid calling rather than monthly installments and phone bills – the Light Phone then emerges as a form of financial disconnect as well as a communicative disconnect. The smart phone, on the other hand, highlights its complexity and potential, supported with different capacities, like a powerful processor, a well elaborated camera, etc. The Light Phone is always at hand but at the same time invisible, the Light Phone gives us freedom in place, but let us be dependent on different supportive material things and the opportunity or mistake to forget it.

To sum up, both mobile phones can signal busy and available, close and distant, simplicity and advanced, robustness and fragility at the same time. What we have illustrated is that the two films shows the (potential) use and utility of two different technologies. It can be argued that these two technologies works as a logic of opposition (Robey and Boudreau 1999). Such way of thinking allows us to say that using one of the phones instead of the other could be both more efficient and less efficient, more

relevant and less relevant (and neither), not because different measures of different things can produce both results, not as a failure of method, but that such seemingly hopeless inconsistencies are a product of an ontological view; the world seen as a Janus face (Arnold 2003). Nevertheless, also from a more realistic model of ontology, a pragmatic lens, it seems to be inevitable not to front the complexity of determining the ideal use and outcome of the two mobile phones. Simply put, it is fraught with great difficulty to find out a satisfying or the best alternative choosing between the two alternatives. So, even if we believe in that pragmatism is grounded in freedom of inquiry, even if we believe in that no distinction of meanings so fine as to consist in anything but possible difference in practice, we have shown the complexity of this process in light of using new technologies. Non-use becomes an agile and volatile concept in the process of free inquiry and in a constant state of becoming; always inherently situated and social (cf. Tsoukas and Chia 2003). What does this say about “use” and “non-use” and “user” and “non-user”? To come to a conclusion about why a user did or didn’t do it one way rather than the other seems quite idealistic even if the theory may work as a coherent agenda for action. Such criticism is not new and has accompanied Dewey’s pragmatism a long time (see for example Midtgarden, 2012). Nevertheless, it does not take the sting out of that if one is to take the digital society seriously, its opportunities and challenges, as Digital4EU; a lot of question marks become unanswered. Who is the fully fledged digital user of today if not someone oscillating between different technologies; someone who is user and non-user of particular technologies at the same time.

The division between more analogue and digital users, between users and non-users as reflected in contemporary political statements would probably be understood by pragmatism as a set of beliefs and actions that are uniquely important within a given set of circumstances. However, as circumstances change it may call for a new agenda. We propose a pragmatic approach to the digital society that shifts its focus from the study of a digital divide in favor of pursuing a research agenda that requires examining not just what people are (non-users, fully fledged digital users, digital citizens, etc.) but examining why do they make the choices they do and most of all; what is the impact of making the choices (cf. Morgan 2013: 7).

All this brings us to the conclusion that there is no non-use in practice, however, within a pragmatic discourse there are alternative use in terms of inquiries, doing and action covering both use and non-use. In other words: Non-use is what you did not do instead of what you did to make it work. Pragmatism again.

References

- Ågerfalk P J (2010) Getting Pragmatic, *European Journal of Information Systems*, Vol 19 (3), pp 251–256
- Ang I (1996) *Living Room Wars - Rethinking Media Audiences for a Postmodern World*, Routledge, London
- Arnold M (2003) On the phenomenology of technology: the “Janus-faces” of mobile phones, *Information and Organization*, Vol. 13, pp. 231-256
- Baskerville R, Myers M (2004) Special issue on action research in information systems: making IS research relevant to practice – foreword, *MIS Quarterly*, Vol 28 (3), p 329-3

- Carpentier N (2011) The concept of participation. If they have access and interact, do they really participate? *Communication Management Quarterly*, Vol 21, pp. 13–36
- Casemajor N, Couture S, Delfin M, Goerzen M, Delfanti A (2015) Non-participation in digital media. Toward a framework of mediated political action, *Media, Culture & Society*, Vol. 37 (6), pp. 850-866
- Constas M A (1992) Qualitative analysis as a public event: The documentation of category development procedures, *American Educational Research Journal*, Vol. 29 (2), pp. 253-266
- Cooper R (1993) Technologies of representation, In *Tracing the semiotic boundaries of politics* (Ahonen P, Edt), de Gruyter, Berlin
- Diaz A, Doolin B (2016) Information and Communication Technology and the Social Inclusion of Refugees, *MIS Quarterly*, Vol. 40 (2), pp. 405-416
- Fernandez C, Fatas-Villafranca F, Vázquez F J (2016). *Computational Economics*, Vol. 47, pp. 1-17
- Frissen V A J (2000) ICTs in the Rush Hour of Life, *The Information Society: An International Journal*, Vol. 16 (1), pp. 67–75
- Goldkuhl G (2012) Pragmatism vs. interpretivism in qualitative information systems research, *European Journal of Information Systems*, Vol 21 (2), pp. 135-146
- Hevner A R, March S T, Park J, Ram S (2004) Design science in information systems research, *MIS Quarterly*, Vol. 28(1), pp. 75–105
- Ihde D (1990) *Technology and the lifeworld: from garden to earth*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press
- Latour B. (1987) *Science in action*, Milton Keynes, Open University Press
- Midtgarden T (2012) Critical Pragmatism: Dewey's social philosophy revisited, *European Journal of Social Theory*, Vol. 15 (4), pp. 505-521
- Morgan D (2014) Pragmatism as a Paradigm for Social Research, *Qualitative Inquiry*, Vol. 20(8) pp. 1045–1053
- Morris M G, Venkatesh V (2000) Age Differences in Technology Adoption Decisions: Implications for a Changing Workforce, *Personnel Psychology*, Vol. 53 (2), pp. 375-403
- Orlikowski W (2000) Using technology and constituting structures: A practice lens for studying technology in organizations, *Organization Science*, Vol. 11 (4), pp. 404–428
- Peirce C S (1935-1966) *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce* (Hartsthorne, C P, Weiss and A W, Burks Eds), Vol 1-8, Cambridge, Mass
- Potter J (1997) Discourse analysis as a way of analyzing naturally occurring talk. In *Qualitative Research: Theory, Method and Practice* (Silverman D, edt), Sage, London
- Robey D, Boudreau M C (1999) Accounting for the contradictory organizational consequences of information technology: theoretical directions and methodological implications, *Information Systems Research*, Vol 10(2), pp.167–185
- Satchell C, Dourish P (2009) Beyond The User: Use And Non-Use in HCI, *Proceedings of the 21st Annual Conference of the Australian Computer-Human Interaction Special Interest Group: Design*: Open 24/7, No. November, pp. 9 – 16
- Scarry E (1985) *The body in pain. The making and unmaking of the world*, New York, Oxford University Press

Pragmatics in non-use

Selwyn N (2006) Digital division or digital decision? A study of non-users and low-users of computers, *Poetics*, Vol 34, pp. 273-292

Swidler A (2001) What anchors cultural practices. In *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory* (T Schatzki, Knorr-Cetina and Savigny E, Eds), Routledge, London

Tsoukas H (1989) The Validity of Idiographic Research Explanations, *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 14(4), pp. 551-561

Tsoukas H, Chia R (2002) On Organizational Becoming: Rethinking Organizational Change. *Organization Science*, Vol 13(5), pp. 567-582

Verdegem P, De Marez L (2011) Rethinking determinants of ICT acceptance: Towards an integrated and comprehensive overview, *Technovation*, Vol. 31 (8), pp. 411–423

Woolgar S (1991) Configuring the user—The case of usability trials. In *A sociology of monsters—Essays on power, technology and domination* (Law J, Edt), pp. 58-99, London, Routledge