

Teleonomy Newsletter

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The Character and Meaning of Devices

By Michael Hulme, Chairman of Teleonomy

Last week I attended a most interesting evening set of talks on the subject of Digital Radio. Digital Radio is at a particularly fascinating stage in its development in terms of functionality, content and delivery devices. But it was during the ‘after event’ discussion that a conversation with a very eminent academic provided the inspiration for this piece. However before I return to the conversation, it might be useful to think further about the particular challenge for Digital Radio.

Traditionally, radio provides much of our ambient sound. At different times, items, music or a programme may receive our focussed concentration, but for much of the time it represents background sound. Our consumption of this sound varies by a whole range of demographics, times, locations and contexts. And for most of us the actual delivery device of radio has become part of this background.

Many radio devices are relatively inexpensive, and small or portable devices are increasingly becoming part of our lives. These feature in many different spaces and are embedded into a range of other devices including sound systems, alarm clocks, televisions and cars. For a few of us, say those interested in sophisticated sound equipment, radio does remain a distinct objectified entity, that is made an object via the device of its delivery, in this case the ‘tuner’. For most this is not the case.

Now along comes Digital Radio. At this point in time, its key differentiating characteristics over analogue radio are those of sound quality and, although this is only emergent, content and ease of use (possibly only recognised by those who have access to DAB receivers). Just as in the beginning of analogue radio, the delivery device moves out of the background and once again becomes centre stage. At this point we can return to my original conversation with my academic friend.

Our conversation was, I think, originally prompted by thinking of the effect of new listening and viewing behaviours on advertising revenues. This had taken us on to discuss the importance of context, time and location to the likely reception or appropriateness of any advertising messaging. At this point I suggested that a key factor, often overlooked, was the nature or character of the access device. My academic friend immediately rejected this, feeling that at best it was a very weak factor. I did not then and cannot now agree. However, reflecting on his position, I have come gradually to realise just how little consideration is given to the character and meaning of access devices.

The digital radio problem is an acute example of this. The £99 ‘kitchen’ radio represented a watershed in DAB listening, the first sub one hundred pound radio. And it also represents a point where the medium does to a significant extent become represented by the physical device. Indeed for the next few years (until a cheap chip able to embed digital radio is manufactured), the medium will continue to be synonymous with its form of delivery device.

Thinking of other examples, if we turn to examine the growth of the Internet we see a medium where advertising revenues are undoubtedly hampered by its primary delivery tool, the PC. For most of us the PC still represents a work tool. It is aesthetically unpleasing and carries utilitarian associations. And it is still relatively expensive, so penetration remains broadly static. However dress this device up as a Playstation or X-Box and you have a very different relationship to the device, a totally different set of social constructions.

If we extend this argument to the television, we quickly understand both the power and the weakness of this device. For decades the device has been a provider of pre-programmed, time bound social entertainment. Whilst it is wrong to emphasise our passive role in front of its screen (after all there has been no shortage of emotional or mental interaction!) we are not used to interacting back, to making choices and expressing complex decisions as interactive television would have us do. Not surprisingly

it is taking some time for us to rework the meaning of this device, some time for us to learn to exercise control. In its initial form this is through simple interactions such as betting, voting etc, but more complex interactions will come and at an increasingly rapid pace. With this will come a complete social reappraisal of the role, meaning and significance of the device.

In all these instances the devices of delivery take on new characteristics and meanings, characteristics, which in the short to medium term very materially affect the way in which we understand and receive messages from advertisers. We must ensure we take account of the social constructions we place on these devices, for increasingly each device will deliver several media and each device will play some role in our understanding and decoding of the messages sent via these media.

And in the longer term, perhaps, and only perhaps, analogue radio points the way. Perhaps a truly ubiquitous and successful medium is one that is independent of the delivery device, leading to the same scale of adoption - and cost profile - as analogue. But expect the device, as messenger, to still influence the message. So my eminent academic friend, don't shoot the messenger just yet!

Mystery Shopping – A true research method?

By Paul Hudson, Director of Research

I was recently discussing with a client the progress we had made with their worldwide mystery shopping programme. We have only been working with them for 6 months but already we had begun to re-shape the organisation's attitude towards mystery shopping. However, we both agreed we had a long way to go!

Mystery shopping is a common but often misunderstood or over-used method of research. It is not the 'be all and end all' that many operations or quality managers make-out! As a quick check of operational processes it can be very useful, but it is often misquoted as an objective measure of 'customer experience'. I say this with no hesitation, despite Teleonomy being the 7th largest (and probably the largest telephone-based) mystery shopping organisation in the UK!

In its crudest sense, mystery shopping is no more than an assessment of what I (or someone else) think of the service. A key part to mystery shopping is not actually how the data is collected (the mystery visit or telephone call) but how the results are analysed and collated. All visits or calls should be analysed or marked against a list of criteria, in the same way that a consumer answers a survey. But the fact remains that these visits and calls are not consumers – it is an artificial situation. And if we also use a pre-prescribed list of criteria used by our client, then we further decrease the objectivity of the exercise.

Returning to my client situation above, mystery shopping has been employed very successfully for over 10 years, but it has probably been over-used and mistreated in its application. They have probably over-spent on volumes of mystery shopping calls and under-spent on consumer-led research such as perception surveys – in fact they had never undertaken the latter until they worked with Teleonomy.

The reasoning behind my statement comes with an assessment of their objectives. In the situation of my client, the objective is twofold – on one hand to give operational data on process and training to each office manager, but on the other hand to provide information to the board on the progress of their CRM strategy. The former can accept a degree of subjectivity, so mystery shopping is suitable, but to get a more objective view of the whole company's customer management, the customers themselves must be involved in the assessment process.

Teleonomy carried out an extensive consumer research programme to understand the expectations and importance levels across our client's customer base. From this, a CRM strategy was designed and

agreed. The data was also used to set the criteria and prioritise the measures to be used in mystery shopping. The measures were also weighted to reflect the relative importance of each to reduce subjectivity.

Teleonomy will now move the emphasis from monthly mystery shopping to quarterly mystery shopping. This will improve the sample sizes on which findings are based, whilst also freeing up budget to plough into bi-annual customer perception studies – which will provide the objective assessment of progress the board requires, and corroborate the mystery shopping.

In summary, the design of any mystery shopping exercise needs to be carefully considered in light of the project objective. If it is to provide operational information to allow managers to intervene in processes, procedures or training, then it is a useful tool as it is more about qualitative information and checking against internally designed processes. If it is used as an objective measure of ‘customer experience’ then we need to look further afield for our information.

The Power of Mobile (A Short Fable For Today)

By Michael Hulme, Chairman of Teleonomy

‘Snappy messages can ruin your marriage...’ ran the headline in the last edition of the Sunday Times. The article goes on to recount the story of a married man caught in a somewhat compromising situation by a friend of his wife. This ‘helpful’ friend, using her MMS mobile phone, takes a photograph of the cavorting couple and promptly dispatches it to his wife! I leave you to guess the nature of subsequent conversations between husband and wife.

At one level this an amusing, even one might say slightly moral story. However it also makes explicit the ‘power’ characteristics of mobile devices and how we use them to control events, time and others. And even this is not the full story, for whilst we attempt to control others they in turn may attempt to control us. Welcome to the real world of ‘Big Brother’ where ‘Big Brother’ may indeed be your own brother or sister!

You may feel this is all a little exaggerated, but consider the following. We now attempt to control others because of the personal and time censorship we can achieve with our mobile devices. For example, many calls/texts to mobile devices are simply ignored, in some cases never to be returned to, as users decide whom they want to have contact with. Recent research also clearly demonstrated that mobile phone users felt less commitment to keeping appointments or time related meetings, confident that by calling on the mobile, times could be renegotiated.

Such behaviours, whilst simple in themselves, are part of the ‘power’ dynamic that is an integral part of our relationships, a dynamic reinforced and provided with new opportunities through mobile devices.

Again, what we are doing to others, others are doing to us. One of the most commonly used questions for mobile users is ‘where are you?’ Recent research unearthed many quotations from individuals along the lines of “it’s the only way I have any idea where he/she is or what they’re up to”. In the past, merely saying where we were was not exactly tantamount to empirical proof. Now, we may have to start providing photographic evidence!

Return to our ‘discovered’ husband, or more interestingly, the position of the wife’s friend. She has literally been empowered) by her mobile device: she has made several choices, she could have informed the husband of her ‘record’ and intentions, she could have ignored the situation etc. Certainly her relationship with both the husband and wife has been changed, probably irrevocably, by the use of the device. In turn she has transferred the power of secrecy from the husband to the wife; his ‘secret’ assignation becomes his wife’s secret information with which to confront him. Some time in the early hours of the morning, the husband may be about to witness the results of a very significant shift in the ‘balance of power’.

Importantly it is the new combination of ease of use, mobility, immediacy and visual data that makes this story so telling. This is a simple tale with an ending we may only guess at. However, it should make us stop and think how we use our mobile devices and how others via them may attempt to use, control and watch and even, heaven forbid, record us.

Style over Substance: Branding on the Web

By David Dawson, Editor Teleonomy Newsletter

The Internet is nothing short of revolutionary in terms of its impact on brand. Gone are the days when your impression of a brand was based on the occasional phone call to customer services and a wander around a high street store once a month. Now we have glamorous, complex, expensive websites, available 24 hours a day, to directly influence our appreciation of a company’s brand.

At least in theory. The reality reveals that, even though many lessons have been learnt, many manufacturers are still unwilling to treat their websites as anything more than an electronic brochure. And that can have a hugely negative impact on brand as visitor’s expectations grow.

Take online shopping, for example, one of the most constructive uses for a manufacturer’s website. Not only can a company sell products without all those annoying expenses like shop rental, display advertising, shop assistants, salesmen hovering over your shoulder and so on, they can create a single highly-effective journey through all their website pages from product information to purchase. And once the journey is designed, everyone can use it for every product available. With a little care and attention, this journey can appear useful, reliable and add value to the consumer’s experience to create excellent brand associations – in other words, provide all those emotional attachments that people expect a brand to provide.

Trying to buy – or at least research – the right video recorder online yesterday, my first stop was Panasonic.co.uk. There was an immediate assumption that I knew what NTSC Playback was. Not to mention Qasi S-VHS/S-VHS ET Playback, which sounded like a tactical weapon. After asking for further information about some of their video players (photos of which were lined up next to each other so as to make them almost impossible to tell apart) I was occasionally offered a link to an online shop ‘the eshop’ to buy the product online. Not that the video I was reading about was actually available to buy in the eshop, but the thought was there.

The Sony site marches down the same confident route, because everyone knows what ‘Smart Trilogic’ means don’t they? It also offers connectivity diagrams to really baffle the novice. However, it does offer a long, badly laid out glossary of terms if viewers really insist on understanding what they are buying, and provides links to dealers that might sell the product I want (although these dealers, it turns out, may not have a website).

Running out of brand names I could remember, I tried the Philips site. This site is under the impression I should be far more interested in its pension fund than its products, but some cunning wordplay in the search engine eventually led me to the shopping area. Here, the desire to explain the terminology has gone into overdrive, so much so that each phrase is explained twice – once on the page, and once on a pointless extra window that pops up.

So finally I went to Amazon. Of all the retailers I visited, Amazon's sales process is the single most important definition of their brand. Amazon's brand is unaffected by the quality of the products they sell. And yet I still got a clearer indication of the quality of products than on the manufacturers' websites, with a crisp, succinct summary of each model's capabilities without unnecessary jargon, coupled with actual user opinions about each video player.

Add to this Amazon's unique ability to line up all the video players I was interested in on one page so I could compare them next to each other, and I had a near-perfect online shopping experience. Of course, I couldn't see all the video players that Amazon didn't stock, but given the hassle trying to find out about them – I'd probably have to use pen and paper, of all things, to make notes as I went through each website – it really wasn't worth the effort.

As the manufacturer websites all equally failed to consider the customer experience in enough depth, I was not terribly aware of what brand video recorder I was purchasing. In the end, I bought a Philips video recorder because it did exactly what I wanted and three people said it was reliable – oh no, hang on, it's a Panasonic. So much for branding...