

## **Editorial: Reflections on Comparative Research**

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(Guest Editor)

This edition of OBS is the second to draw upon material originally presented at the conference held in Russia in 2007 and organised by COST298: *The Good, the Bad and the Unexpected: The User and the Future of Information and Communication Technologies*<sup>1</sup>. This event itself followed up a previous conference held in Helsinki in 2003 by the predecessor of COST298, COST269. Published material from this earlier event is to be found in Haddon et al (2005) and Loos et al. (forthcoming).

Within the more recent Russian conference one strand of papers reflected an interest of the COST298 workgroup 'The Multiple Cultures of the Information Society'. This interest evolved originally within COST269, looking at the complex issues involved in making sense of international differences in ICT adoption and use, as well differences within national cultures. This first initiative asked what types of cultural influences exist and examined examples of how cultural influences work, which has to date has been relatively rarely addressed. It brought together the various 'cultural' factors identified in previous studies of ICTs (Thomas et al., 2004), looked at the particular case of factors shaping rural experiences of ICTs (Gilligan, 2005) and developed some worked examples as think-pieces to reflect upon how cultural factors might work in relation to particular technologies, both established and more recent (Gilligan and Heinzmann, 2005a and 2005b).

The aim of COST 298 was both to continue that line of enquiry and to apply these insights to the field of the broadband society in Europe. Apart from addressing the academic community, as a COST action the aim was also to inform an urgent policy and commercial dilemma. This lies in the paradox that the awareness of and wish to preserve cultural diversity (as reflected in EU cultural policy) contrasts with implicit assumptions in the ICT domain that we are moving towards an homogeneous broadband European society. Hence, this current workgroup asks where cultural diversity in the experience of broadband exists and at what level and in what forms cultural influences operate. To this end we have a subproject

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<sup>1</sup> Held at Institute of the Information Society, Moscow, Russian Federation, 23<sup>rd</sup>-25<sup>th</sup> May, 2007.

measuring broadband speeds, one asking about comparative European adoption of Web2.0 services, one looking at new forms of digital divide relating to those services and one charting and trying to understand variation in national media coverage of broadband and the Internet more generally<sup>2</sup>

One of our intentions has always been to invite and encourage a wider community of those interested in the topic to contribute to these discussions in various ways. For example, one of our meta-goals is to explore what aspects of broadband are researched in different countries and why those differences in research occur. To help achieve this we have developed a searchable database open to everyone on the COST298 website that documents this research. We have invited others outside COST28 to add to the studies that we have identified (See also Haddon's paper in this edition of OBS). The Russian conference, as well as the next one that we will hold, provided another opportunity for us to seek further material in this field, some of which is published in this special issue of the journal.

The actual contributions below are varied, reflecting the fact that the conference call for papers specified more than one way in which 'cultural factors' could be addressed. One approach was to discuss methodological issues relating to cross-cultural analysis, which is to be found in Dolničar and Haddon articles. Another was to invite national studies where authors were asked to make some comment about potential cultural, as well as country-specific, factors at work. This is captured in the Mascheroni and Bakardjieva pieces. A third approach, not represented in this issue, would have been to provide an analysis of some international comparative data relating to ICTs. Meanwhile Green provides another, original, perspective on how to address the issues of interest.

Turning now to the individual contributions to this issue of OBS, the article by Mascheroni et al. reports on a study of Italian youth's changing ICT consumption in the face of an evolving media landscape. Here youth are shown to be redefining their relationship to both established and newer media. Drawing on the domestication framework, the authors note how in this process young people also 're-domesticate' older technologies so that they take on a slightly different role in their lives (for a discussion of this concept, see Lie and Sørensen, 1996). The authors specifically reflect on writings relating to the convergence paradigm, one of whose features is the fact that people can increasingly choose between different ICT options. Hence the authors document some of the key factors affecting those very choices, covering intra-family interactions, interactions with peers, the symbolic meaning of media, financial considerations and the constraints imposed by the everyday time structures in which people operate. These factors can all help to

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<sup>2</sup> The work of this Action can be found on <http://www.cost298.org>.

shape both the usage of ICTs as well as the timing of their consumption (in relation specifically to communications, this is explored in Haddon, 2005). The multiple processes, or as authors sometimes say, 'logics', that are at work are identified at various points in the article.

What emerges is complex picture of the interrelationships between ICTs. At times there is competition between media, such as some shift from SMS to Broadband based Instant Messaging. But Mascheroni et al. argue that new technologies and services usually lead not so much to the substitution of older ones as to an adaptation of their use, a point noted independently by other researchers (Bolter and Grushin; 1999, Jouet, 2000). This, the authors demonstrate, has implications for young people's experience of familiar ICTs such as their TV-watching. In some senses this becomes more marginalised, but it nevertheless remains a central practice, indeed a driver of some forms of new media use. In this respect, the authors explore 'cross media consumption' where, for example, interests that originate from viewing TV lead to the collection of related Internet material and newer practices such as the storage of audiovisual content for trading, sharing, gift-giving (see also Haddon and Vincent, 2007 which shows some similar processes amongst British youth). The latter underlines the importance of peer networks for this age group as the greater 'social spendability' of some of the material they collect helps to shape consumption choices, leading to new ways of generating social capital.

Throughout the article, the authors pick out the specific social circumstances of youth, such as their relatively large amount of disposable time (that supports practices like file sharing) as well as values that derive from those time constraints that they do experience (e.g. the importance of flexibility of consumption). But at times Mascheroni et al. also differentiate between youth of different ages and, of significance for the multi-cultural focus of this edition of OBS, they reflect upon the specificities of the Italian situation, including a review of Italian ICT developments and patterns of consumption.

My own article, Haddon, is the first of two 'methodological' pieces. It looks at how to approach certain types of cross-cultural research, reporting on work in progress within a 21-country EC funded project called *EU Kids Online*. The principles in this analysis can potentially be applied to other multi-country projects and, indeed, at the end of an article there are some reflections on the related type of study taking place within COST298, noted in the introduction to this editorial.

One part of the article covers the challenges faced in charting research in any field: the practical decisions that had to be taken about what to collect and what to exclude and the issues that actually arose when we

tried to implement the collection and documentation of studies. In the end one can produce numbers and identify patterns that represent something about the field, but when interpreting this one has to realise how this is also inevitably influenced by the numerous decisions made during the very collection process.

On the basis of the patterns identified, a second strand of the *EU Kids online* project faced the challenge of how to explain the similarities but also the differences in what was researched in different countries, something that is rarely attempted in a systematic fashion. Here we asked about the social shaping of research, in the same spirit as the literature on the social shaping of technology. There are certainly methodological issues, and some examples are provided, since even if we can identify factors that may be important, actually finding the relevant information and then organising it in order to make systematic comparisons proved to be far from straightforward. Ultimately we had to try out and evaluate a variety of research strategies given these difficulties, as well as the constraints of any projects with limited resources.

The third strand of the article turns to the process of comparing the actual data in the studies identified, asking how we can make sense of the patterns of results observed. While one part of this work compared studies across countries, asking what general hypotheses held true, another involved trying to explain differences between countries, looking beyond the data set assembled in order to ask how we can make use of 'softer' qualitative data about the countries observed in a systematic fashion.

Dolničar's article examines another methodological innovation, this time addressing the problem of how to make comparisons of the digital divide over time, given cyber-optimists and cyber-pessimists claims about how this divide is developing. She argues that not enough attention has been paid to the issues involved in actually measuring this divide. For example, comparing single percentages of technology's adoption across time produces oversimplified, partial or indeed contradictory findings. Thus, judging whether the digital divide is increasing, decreasing or constant even in one country turns out to be less than straightforward, depending very much on the particular measures examined. The article aims for a more holistic approach by combining measures of absolute and relative differences with the measure 'S-time-difference', based on the number of years one group in society lags behind another.

The articles then critically reviews the assumptions made in Roger's diffusion of innovation theory, and in particular raises doubts about claims based upon it that the digital divide will disappear. Dolničar outlines the nature and implications of the normalisation and stratification models of diffusion, discussing the

relationships between different measures of the digital divide as a step towards developing a broader methodological framework in this field.

Finally, the whole approach is demonstrated using Slovenian data. In part this draws existing data comparing Internet access for the entire population with that of the access of elderly people for the period 1996-2005. In part hypothetical data is used based on assumptions from a number of different plausible possible future scenarios. Dolničar is able to illustrate even more complexity in the dynamics of the digital divide, as it increases or decreases at different time points according to the various measures and the varied scenarios being used. The aim is show the principles of this methodological framework through a worked example, although it could be extended to cover other dimensions of the digital divide.

The Bakardjieva article draws upon the social construction of technology and domestications frameworks, among others, reporting on a project aiming to bring broadband to a rural community in Canada. The article looks at the meaning that this development had for various residents and, drawing on her previous work, the 'use genres' that they anticipated when they reflected upon how broadband might fit into, or be a threat to, their current lifestyles

The study adds to the limited number of studies of the rural experience of ICTs, being sensitive to differences within the rural community as well as examining rural-urban differences based upon her other material from longstanding research on Internet use in Canadian urban settings. Bakardjieva considers a number of levels including the nature of rural life (e.g. isolation, fewer education options, the need for children in agriculture to be available to help the family business) and the lag behind urban experiences: the Internet was new in this rural setting whereas it was by now more taken-for-granted in the city. Over and above the detailed experiences that are outlined, the article makes the point that in general residents perceived themselves to be on the wrong side of the digital divide. As so much of what they wanted from broadband was framed in terms of rights, Bakardjieva refers to 'broadband citizenship' issues involved.

This is a good example where we see what wider contextual factors influence not only how the broadband project originated but also how it was perceived and whether residents felt it to be useful or desirable. We can appreciate both the provincial and national influences and understand the particularities of this cultural setting such as the costs of the broadband infrastructure given the population distribution, local economic developments and employment histories, political initiatives and aspirations and also unforeseen events (e.g. the BSE crisis that had affected the viability of the local agriculture).

Green reflects on her personal experiences of contributing to the journal *Digital Review of Asia Pacific* because, especially when making comparisons to the fairly wealthy conditions in Australia, the national and cultural differences in the region were striking. The journal itself aims to allow readers to compare different national experiences of the Internet in this part of the world. Understandably, Internet uptake, by various measures, was very uneven across the region. But Green illustrates how the picture is made more complicated by the fact that the same technology, such as wireless broadband, was being used for very different purposes in different countries. Even policies cannot be promoted universally, as Green notes the difficulties in promoting Internet use if there is a low level of mother tongue literacy and no standardised fonts in the written language.

But we also learn something about 'culture' and 'national context' from the very process involved in collaborating in the journal's production. There were the (implicit) challenges of producing comparative data at all, given the different background of the participants. It is was also clearly more easy to find things to talk about in some countries compared to others since the very digital resources available to different national contributors varies so much. In this respect, Green was able to reflect on her own privileged position compared to some of her counterparts, given the amount of Australian research that is to hand. But she also highlights differences in contributors' decisions when selecting examples, for instance, of what counts as a national 'success story' and what counts as a 'cautionary tale'. We also see differences in political stances on the issue of 'free speech'.

In other words, the article provides a, usually undocumented, behind-the-scenes look at producing material for making international comparisons. Moreover, the very editorial process, including reviewing other contributors' chapters, was itself a mechanism for sensitising participants (and now OBS readers) to cultural and contextual differences in the countries concerned. Green captures what emerges when people get into discussions of 'how it is in my country' and 'how yours sounds different', noting the very difficulties of this process but also what we can learn from it.

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