

BLOG POST September 15th 2022

Changing lifestyles: a digital case study

Auteur

Fabrice Flipo

Professeur, Institut Mines-Télécom

 Reading time: 5 min



Following the [“Laying the foundations for a collective eco-sufficiency policy”](#) blog post published on June 16, 2022, IDDRI is continuing its deliberations on how to organise social changes in the ecological transition. As part of this reflection, IDDRI has invited philosopher Fabrice Flipo to share his analysis from the perspective of the digital world. Fabrice has written several books on this subject, including “L’Impératif de la sobriété numérique. L’enjeu des modes de vie” (Matériologique, 2020), which forms the basis of this blog post and also the one titled [“Changing lifestyles: theory before practice”](#).

How can ways of life change so quickly? What structural processes related to innovation have enabled the development of the smartphone, which has become indispensable albeit being unknown until 2007?

Ways of life can change rapidly or seem fixed in a situation known as a socio-technical “lock-in”¹. There are many reasons for this: financial interests (ways of life determine jobs, incomes, market shares), the extent of material changes (converting motorways into cycle paths, housing estates into villages), political and cultural ideologies or ethnocentrism (“faith” in nuclear power or renewables, “collapsology”, nationalism, etc.).

Thus, there are multifactorial reasons behind rapid change. For the smartphone and the internet, the “roads” already existed: the copper network, abundant investment (via the stock exchange and speculative bubbles), small groups of people eager for innovations and who are ready to try out new devices and become their advocates (“geeks”, specialized press, a raft of government reports highlighting the risk of losing competitiveness and missing the innovation train, etc.), a multitude of major stakeholders with the means to test multiple products and usages simultaneously until they find the right combination, etc.

In all cases, **four factors** play a structural role.

Firstly, innovations are always practical, resulting from experience, trial and error and are never decreed “from above”. They are the product of collective **learning** and not of abstract deliberation, which puts into perspective the scope of solutions such as participatory democracy or planning, which, while not useless, are not a sufficient response to the challenge. Representative channels in the broadest sense (press, elections, but also rumours and various conversations) remain relevant. And they must, in particular, speak of types of life, of choices that have been experienced, tested and lived, and not only of abstract and prospective statements. Hence the importance of interpersonal relations, and the role of games in the computerization of households through children or the “pink Minitel” (online adult chat services), from which Xavier Niel raised the money to launch Free, the French telecommunications company.

This learning process places a great emphasis on **emotion** and consequently also on hype, which sometimes turns out to be very exaggerated². This applies to the stock market, but also to ecology and cycling. This is the second factor. These emotions are intentionally contagious. Steve Jobs has rationalized to the extreme what he called the “keynote”, a conference whose aim is above all to provoke emotions; he compared the iPad to an event as important as Moses and the Stone Tablets. Advertising is an outstanding form of communication in terms of its ability to provoke emotion. But so are political and activist speeches. As the Latin origin of the word suggests, “e-motions” are about movement, they can change the hierarchy of our individual or collective interests. They can be translated into crowd movements, for example. The role of emotions does not imply abandoning reason; reason and emotion are as complementary as they are antagonistic, depending on the moment. However, a major challenge is ensuring that the hype is informed and enlightened.

The third factor is **social dynamics**. While the concept of “network assets” is usually narrowly defined and refers only to objects such as network infrastructure³, we can in fact see that most goods are “network assets”, i.e. their utility increases with their dissemination, such as the telephone. For example, the usefulness of cars increases the more car ownership increases, because greater numbers of cars encourage more roads and petrol stations to be built and support more car repair garages, while ensuring that new drivers are never far away from more experienced drivers that can help them learn, etc., all of which supports employment. The same is true for the smartphone, which users consider to be highly personal as they hold so much private information: developers would not continue to support the various operating systems and apps, which are largely standardized, if user numbers were too low. Ways of life are associated with these devices, which are produced on a large scale and in a repetitive way, and it is very difficult to do without them. Minority influence plays on the feeling of exclusion it can create, persuading hesitant or critical individuals with majority-held views to change their opinions.

This brings us to the fourth factor, known as the “**chicken-and-egg problem**”. Jean Tirole won the Nobel Prize for his work on this subject⁴. Indeed, if an object becomes more useful the more widespread it becomes, then who will be the early adopters? Hence the question of what comes first: the bicycle or the bicycle path? Members of a minority influence that adopt a certain way of life will face criticism from the majority and opposing minorities, such as the heroic cyclist, alone in the rain on a road made for cars, who will be regarded by the majority as a militant or

activist; or the courageous mayor who implements cycle lanes in an area where cyclists are rare or non-existent. Overcoming this situation requires “visionaries” capable of imagining more than just a scenario, but an enthusiastic narrative, relying on a growing network of diverse actors, and resorting to the usual storytelling techniques, particularly those that make the reader the hero of the story (cf. components of the iPhone deployment process put in place by Steve Jobs). If the story is convincing enough, then people will want to participate, without sacrificing their lifestyles.

Humanity seems to be structurally trapped within the quadripartition of ways of life/lifestyles/types of life and systems. Modernity has given it a particular twist: increasing and diversifying production. Breaking with this type of growth-oriented innovation would in no way imply abandoning novelty. Nor does it mean abandoning the risks that go with it. It would mean supporting, individually and collectively, and perhaps improving the capacity to foster, the types of life that are likely to bring about more egalitarian and environmentally-friendly lifestyles.

¹ Paul Bouvier-Patron, “L’application des concepts de ‘lock-in’ et de ‘barrières à la mobilité’ à une théorie des réseaux d’entreprises”, Revue française d’économie, 1994, 205-32.

² The consultant Gartner has theorized about the role of hype: <https://www.gartner.com/smarterwithgartner/whats-new-in-gartners-hype-cycle-for-emerging-technologies-2015>

³ Nicolas Curien, Economie des réseaux (Paris: La Découverte, 2000).

⁴ J.C. Rochet and J. Tirole, “Platform competition in two-sided markets”, Journal of the European economic association, 2003, 990-1029.

MODES DE VIE

SUFFICIENCY

DIGITAL

ENJEUX SOCIAUX