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"Love e, Love e not...."

Why the UK's ambivalence towards new technologies should be treasured.

Looking around any crowded train carriage in Britain, one would be justified in thinking that our culture has whole-heartedly embraced the benefits of mobile technology. Letting your loved ones know that yes, you are on the 5.20pm train and shall indeed be home for dinner, is now nationally recognised as a token of responsibility rather than a mindless waste of money and privacy. A night out in a strange city is no longer complete if the gory details are not discussed loudly on a mobile during the next day's journey home. If these are the phenomena we observe just on public transport, then we can assume that the average UK punter's private life is equally mobile-saturated. And, given that British mobile phone ownership increased from 27% of the population to 73% between 1998 and 2001, that would be a fair conclusion.

However, recent studies on British attitudes to new technologies, including workplace IT and home mobile technology, suggest that as a demographic we are deeply suspicious of new developments, lagging seriously behind the US in terms of workplace IT management and behind Japan, Germany and Italy in terms of willingness to embrace new mobile technologies like camera-phones and internet-capable mobiles. A recent report by [Work Foundation](#) group I-Society about UK workplace IT use, came to the conclusion that:

"...many UK workplaces are characterised by a 'low-tech equilibrium'. They are still grappling with the promise and reality of new technology. They are getting by, not getting on. The powerful tool of ICT is being blunted by unrealistic expectations, organisational inertia and a failure of leadership."

A MORI survey, entitled "[Rage Against the Machine](#)" revealed that 70% of UK respondents had sworn and shouted at computers in the workplace, while a smaller proportion admitted to actual physical attempts to damage stubborn hardware by punching, hitting, or kicking it. A recent advertisement promoting use of broadband internet access in Scotland plays on this stereotype, when a man take out his rage on a computer by smashing it up and eventually hurling it out of a window.

Workplace frustration with IT is not a specifically British trait – lack of training, unrealistic expectations of IT developments and

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uninterested management are probably equally prevalent in the U.S. as they are in the U.K. However, what can be pointed to as a specifically British tendency is the suspicion of new IT developments on the part of company executives, with the result that IT managers are not given the free rein which they would typically have in a U.S. or Japanese setting. The standard attitude towards IT developments is suspicious — the first question typically being "And why would I need this?" rather than "When can we have one installed?".

Some experts would say that this level of fear and disenchantment with technology in the workplace could harm the British economy. Being unwilling to move with the times is not a key feature of successful industry. However, I would argue that the examples given above of the supposed "bloody-mindedness" of British IT managers reflect a general ambivalence towards technology which has great historical precedent in UK culture and should, for various reasons, be cherished.

In this case, bloody-mindedness does not have to mean "resistance to change". What it constitutes is a certain kind of cynicism, a stand-offish unwillingness to be "taken for a ride", which causes the UK embrace of new technology to be self-regulating in its enthusiasm. Take, for example, the case of mobile phones. While loud, public use of mobiles is guaranteed to annoy, and the British public is by no means innocent of this particular crime, there is a certain self-regulation which generally comes with the use of mobiles. Although they are often used loudly and indiscreetly, there is no need for public legislation over their use — compare this with the state of New York, where mobile phone use is outlawed in the majority of public places.

Telecommunications reports suggest that the UK is around 18 months behind Japan when it comes to mobile technology developments. Hearsay suggests that this gap is larger — camera phones had been developed and were on the market in Japan a good 5 years before they reached Britain. Obviously this has to do with a number of factors — economic climate, manufacturing capability, the mobile technology rather than PC based culture prevalent in Japan — but ultimately, it takes a long time to introduce the UK public to new technologies like camera phones. Once they are accepted, as has occurred over the last 12 months, they spread like wildfire, becoming instant classics, a new part of the status quo. But the process of acceptance is initially slowed by the sense that such frivolous use of technology is perhaps too strangely new, and dubiously useful, to be accepted.

Most of us know at least one person who is vehement in their anti-technology stance on social grounds. I used to work in a bookshop with one such man, who would refuse to serve customers if they approached the cash desk while using a mobile phone. This self-regulating social perspective on mobile use has been taken to its logical conclusion by a UK design group, IDEO London. As a submission to this year's Machinista art festival in

Glasgow, they designed a series of "[social mobiles](#)", customised mobile phones which play on the idea of anti-social public use of mobile technology. In the words of the designers:

"Social Mobiles is a set of five mobile telephones which try to alter their user's behaviour to make it less disruptive. The Social Mobiles were all made as working GSM telephones (the European standard for mobile phones).

SoMo 1: The Electric shock Mobile

This phone delivers a variable level of electric shock depending on how loudly the person at the other end is speaking. As a result the two parties are induced to speak more quietly. SoMo 1 phones would be given to repeat offenders who persistently disturb others with their intrusive conversations...."

The Social mobiles go from 1-5, and include a musical phone, which has to be played like a recorder in order for a number to be dialled, the knocking mobile, which has to be knocked in a particular way for the user to be recognised, and my personal favourite, the catapult mobile, which enables you to disturb other people's mobile phone conversations with noises or static if you feel that they are using their phone in an anti-social way.

IDEO London's social mobiles are funny, and they make us think about mobile technology use from a social perspective. What is even more interesting about them, however, is the fact that they elicit an almost universal reaction of "brilliant!" or "I wish I had one of those" when on display. This brings us back to the ultimately self-regulating nature of UK social technology use – we are all too aware of the implications for personal relationships that such technology has, and are subsequently wary of its ubiquity. While this wariness can have negative consequences, particularly in the realm of workplace IT, it provides an invaluable self-regulating mechanism for social uses of new technology.

So even when we are happy to discuss our affairs loudly on mobiles while using public transport, to dump our partners by text message or to send a camera-phone picture of flowers rather than the real thing as congratulations, there remains an awareness of the slightly ridiculous nature of communications technology which enables us to avoid blind acceptance of the mobile communications revolution. Maintaining an ambivalent attitude towards these developments makes it easier to remember that the whole point of communications technology is to facilitate communication between human beings, rather than to encourage alienation. And given that many companies report that a substantial proportion of their e-mail traffic is taken up by requests for personal contact (e.g. "Can I have so-and-so's extension number"), it seems that the UK public is decidedly unwilling to allow communications technology to remove the essential humanity from their daily interactions.

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