Of Technoscapes and Elderscapes

Editor's Commentary on the Special Issue "Aging the Technoscape"

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It was 2006 and I had just come back from eighteen months of fieldwork with older adults in Japan. Suddenly everyone seemed to be talking about something called "YouTube," but the first few times I looked at the site, I was pretty unimpressed. Then one day I saw a video of an older English gentleman, sitting in front of his webcam with a pair of headphones on, telling his life story. There was something about his use of this new technology to reach out to a world of strangers with nothing more than his one and only story that hooked me instantly. I followed Peter Oakley's (a.k.a. geratric1927) intimate, no frills videos for years, and I was far from alone. When he died on 23 March 2014, at the age of 87 younger YouTubers posted video dedications about how this "grandad of YouTube" inspired them to rethink the possibilities of the medium.

How did Oakely, a widowed pensioner with basic digital production skills change the way I viewed this new technology? In the simplest terms, he made it feel safe. In many ways his calm and regular videos (he made 350 of them over the years) were a pefect example of what Margaret Mead (1970:72) saw as the role of older people to teach youth "not what they should be committed to, but the value of commitment." While technological innovations, materials, and know-how circulate the globe, and as technologies are increasingly designed for older users, how will our relationship to technology and to age change? Are we in the midst of global shift in the values that propel technological flows? Will the technoscape be "aged" to reflect a richer and more diverse range of experiences and outlooks?

Aging the technoscape means rethinking age through technology while rethinking technology through age. Here Appadurai's definition of the technoscape as configurations of technology that move across "previously impervious boundaries" (1990:97) can be applied not only to national or cultural borders, but to the separations between generations, developmental stages of a life course, or to the borders between the personal home and care institution. Technologies are moving more rapidly than ever across and between these boundaries, creating the grounds for new abilities and disabilities, ways to better include older adults in society, and disjunctures that marginalize them.

While the majority of research on aging and technology privledges arenas of care, Bob De Schutter and Vero Vanden Abeele's commentary shows us that older people also play computer games, lots of different kinds of games, and sometimes they do so for the joy of play. De Schutter and Vanden Abeele are not merely interested in older adults who happen to play games, but argue for a field of gerontoludics through which we will be able to see with greater clarity the ways ageist assumptions about the medicalized older person are embedded in gamescapes and the ways that game players point to a broader possibilities that have been too rarely explored.

De Schutter and Vanden Abeele's research on gerontoludics is the kind of work that opens, rather than closes new doors of inquiry for anthropology. To explore these paths further,

A&A invited responses from experts on our editorial board. These responses, and the authors' reply that follows them, give a sense of the intellectual debates relevant to other areas of aging and technology. In what circumstances does technology enhance life by affording opportunities for creativity and self-expression, social contacts and even alternate identities? Following this discussion of gerontoludics are two essays on design and engineering, the imagination and production of the embodied technoscape. Caitrin Lynch's commentary centers on the opportunities for empathic imagination that arise as students enrolled in her Design for Aging course learn to use participant observation and person-centered approaches to research with older people. Here, the collaborative process of design, the emotional, reflective experiences of the project are instantly recognizable to the ethnographer/educators who themselves are also implicated in the flows of technical production. Baldewijns, Croonenborghs and Vanrumste echo Lynch's concern that when it comes to technology, little attention is paid to the experience of the older adult users themselves. Their research report details how taking engineers into the "field" of the elderscapes not only improves the design outcomes, but can have results, like building ongoing relationships between engineers and users.

As engineers cross into the care homes to seek technological solutions to the need for care, Lutz provides a critical examination of the possible transformations or distortions these kinds of crossings may produce. As forms of mediation and surfacing, care and surveillance technologies suggest relational meanings, of oneself and others. As if to mirror Lutz's idea of surveillance and "care-valence," Bes Young's portfolio depicts subjects longingly dreaming out windows or into the distance, seemingly alone in the care home for person's with dementia in Japan. Doors are unattended, unobserved. Is this a space where technology has not yet penetrated? What then is the role of the camera, or the one who documents and mediates such spaces? The two remaining articles both examine technology in activities for older adults. In the article by Peter Biniok and Iris Menke, technology not only crosses boundaries into rural spaces, but it also then creates an expansion of the terrain of participation in social life near and far. Kaplan, Sánchez and Bradley are also interested in the ways technology mediates connections, and how it can be used to develop innovative activities. They survey 46 programs that employ techniques similar to the "social junctions" described by Biniok and Menke, going on to develop a valuable thematic overview of the strengths and challenges of intergenerational technoscapes.

Even with these exciting contributions, there is much more to be said regarding age and the technoscape, conceptually and practically. The mix of contributions to this issue represents some possible avenues for future collaborations and exchanges at the convergence of technoscape and elderscape.

Jason Danely, Editor-in-Chief

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