
Das Versprechen mobiler Freiheit: Zur Kultur- und Technikgeschichte von Kofferradio, Walkman, und Handy.

By Heike Weber. Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2008. Pp. 366. €29.80.

We are living in the midst of the “mobile revolution.” More and more portable gadgets and mobile services promise mobile freedom everywhere for everyone. Heike Weber’s well-written and innovative inquiry historicizes the mobile craze and traces its origins back to the emergence of portable devices in the 1950s. As examples, she has chosen the portable radio, the Walkman, and the mobile phone. Her geographical focus is on Germany and her time span is the second half of the twentieth century.

In her introduction Weber starts with a brief discussion of different concepts that aim at understanding the mutual shaping of technology by producers and users—e.g., SCOT, the consumption junction, or the mediation junction. Following the notion of the coproduction of technological artifacts, she introduces her own concept, the “user de-signs,” arguing that this theoretical approach radicalizes the user perspective by focusing on the configuration of users. She distinguishes between prospective user de-signs, which can be found explicitly in market research or implicitly in the manufacturers’ frames of meaning, practiced user de-signs as the cultural appropriation and domestication of technological artifacts, and the objects as material mediators of user de-signs. In short, her analysis looks upon “the mutual shaping of user de-signs” (p. 49).

The portable radio was introduced in the 1950s as the ideal traveling companion for businessmen and people on holiday. The first generation was not engineered for mobile, but for stationary, use; the radios were rather heavy, and the designers kept the technology hidden behind shades and cases. The prospective user de-signs configured the ideal user as conservative and quality-conscious. Further miniaturization was not seen as an end in itself. The introduction of transistors in the 1960s and the appropriation of the portable radio by new user groups—young people—stimulated the emergence of a new listening culture: listening peripherally in more and more places. Accordingly, the growing product variety can be seen as the materialization of different practiced user de-signs.

In the second chapter, Weber describes the Walkman as the creation of a new listening practice: not a new technology, but rather the combination of portable devices with the notion of listening tactfully by using headphones was the key to success. Headphones were experienced as an acoustic cocoon that converted public spaces into private stages—the familiar music comforting and shielding the user. At first, the use of the Walkman in public was seriously criticized as antisocial behavior. Only with the greater diffusion of the technology at the end of the 1980s did the debate die down, and Walkman use became normalized.

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Until the 1990s, the use of mobile phones in Germany was very expensive and elitist. The manufacturers' user de-signs addressed businessmen and yuppies. Because the mobile-phone takeoff at the end of that decade took manufacturers and telephone providers by surprise, the prospective user de-signs lagged far behind user practices. The initially subversive Short Message Service practice is a paradigmatic example of the user's coconstruction of technology.

Weber dates the emergence of the everywhere-and-anytime mobile culture back to the 1960s. Whereas the prospective user de-signs were at first focused on particular locations, users started to operate their portables at many more places. Furthermore, this extensive use established new spatial and temporal routines, blurring the boundaries between private and public spaces, and exclusive and peripheral use.

Weber shows that the concept of prospective and practiced user de-signs is a fruitful approach to integrate a wide range of sources such as trade journals for dealers, advertisements, pictures, and the artifacts themselves. But along with these sources, a focus on prospective user de-signs seems to be inevitable; thus, the mutual shaping of technology often vanishes behind this dominating account. The strong point of the concept can best be seen where Weber integrates market-research surveys and sociological studies into her narration; there, the circulation of prospective and practiced user de-signs becomes visible. An in-depth analysis of only one of the case studies would perhaps have better demonstrated the explanatory power of the concept. Still, *The Promise of Mobile Freedom* is an intriguing cultural history of portable technologies, and readers will profit both from the empirical case studies and from the theoretical reflections of user de-signs.

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Critical Digital Studies: A Reader.

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When I was a kid growing up in Canada, there wasn't much on the telly. *Hockey Night in Canada* and *The Galloping Gourmet* were easy favorites but the joker in my deck was a strange news program. A veteran journalist staged mock interviews with a variety of historical figures, usually played by some Shakespeare festival tippler happy to chew the scenery incognito and in the bag. One night Rasputin was the guest and the host quickly put the boots to him. "Sir, please explain how you came to seduce all the ladies in the Russian court and even some of their men?" The guru-cum-swinger