

Uncovering new ways people use technology to connect

In recent years, there have been dramatic changes in how people use technology to connect and share experiences with each other. People are increasingly sharing bite-sized content (a short text instead of a long email), capturing experiences in new ways (not just photos and videos, but also gaming, exercise, travel) and, they are always “on” (accessing any content through multiple devices anytime, from anywhere).

Sony wanted to explore what these shifts could mean for future consumer products and experiences. It engaged PARC to conduct an ethnographic study to better understand how these changes affect how groups of people use technology to stay in touch and share their lives.

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OVERVIEW:

Observing how close groups communicate

PARC’s ethnographic team set out to observe how close-knit groups of friends and family members use different kinds of technology to connect with each other. The study did not center on any one specific technology, but instead focused on how the groups integrated all technology at their disposal to stay connected throughout the day. Sony’s product lead joined the PARC team for the study so he could gain first-hand experience with some of PARC’s social science methods.

For each group observed, the ethnographers followed and video-recorded each member separately, and simultaneously, to see each person’s point of view as they moved around and connected, whether remotely or in person. The research team then generated video clip collections that revealed related practices and micro-analyzed them to understand the interactions from the participants’ points of view.

Discovering a new mode of communication

Using these ethnographic observation and video analysis methods, PARC identified an emerging content sharing and communication phenomenon it calls “channel blending.” This is the integration of interactions and content across multiple channels and multiple devices into one coherent conversation. It often involves multiple people in the same location connecting to one or more people in another location.

Indirect self-reporting methods such as interviews or diary studies could have suggested that channel blending is another form of multitasking. However, PARC’s direct observation methods revealed that it is actually the *opposite* of multitasking in that it involves merging together content and interactions across multiple channels, devices, times, and places into a *single, coherent conversation* – rather than switching attention between unrelated tasks.



Getting insights for developing new products and experiences

By examining how people were unwittingly adapting technology to meet their interaction needs, PARC and Sony identified gaps in current communications technology among close-knit groups of people and opportunities for improving it. For example:

- Since channel blending is the opposite of multitasking, the main challenge is not in managing interruptions and attention, but in maintaining common ground while sharing content and communications within the group.
- Current technology tends to support one-to-one *or* many-to-many interactions, and often assumes that individuals are alone in a space with a single device. But researchers found it was common for multiple people (each with their own personal devices) to gather in one location and connect with several friends in another setting. They would struggle to maintain a single conversation or to share content between both locations. One person in the group often played the role of a “pivot person” who integrated the contributions of local and remote participants as they attempted to carry out one conversation.
- Groups sometimes re-share content they previously shared over another channel. So rather than thinking of sharing as a one-time event, one can expect repeated sharing with the same people or others. The response to a storytelling can then become part of the story as it is retold to others.

Through these and other insights, PARC enabled Sony to identify a range of technology opportunities for better addressing channel blending and capitalizing on people’s desire to stay connected. Sony is now considering products based on these findings, and is also working to incorporate PARC’s human-centered approach into its own innovation practices

More information

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