

EXPERIENCE: THE POWER OF MAPPING EXTREME MEDIA THROUGH A USE-CENTERED APPROACH



Credit: Xeni

In *The Shock of the Old: Technology and Global history since 1900* (Oxford University Press, 2006), David Edgerton makes a distinction between the human need to see ahead into the future to forecast trends and developments, and “futurism.” “Futurism,” he says, is the tendency to overrate the impact of dramatic new technologies.

In an effort to correct this overrating (which results in scenarios of the future that prove to be incorrect) Edgerton takes a use-centered approach to mapping technological change.

He introduces his book by saying:

“No one is very good at predicting technological futures; new and old technologies coexist; technological significance and technological novelty are rarely the same--indeed, a given technology’s grip on our awareness is often in inverse relation to its significance in our lives. Above all, we are wrong to associate technology solely with invention. We should think of it rather as evolving through use. This needs a “History of technology-in-use.”

That's just what Edgerton provides. He traces technology-in-use and finds patterns in the ways that people tend to fit technology to their needs and purposes. He lists those patterns: "We come to terms with new technology by adjusting, adapting, domesticating, altering it to suit our purposes. No instruction manual can explain how a technology will evolve, in use, together with the rhythm of our lives."

Take a look at Steven Shapin's *New Yorker* review of Edgerton's book, called "*What Else is New? How Uses, Not Innovations, Drive Human Technology.*"

Shapin says that a use-centered mapping of technology's history shows that everyone in the world, not just high-tech cultures, has a "history of technology."

We are all, to some extent "fitters" when it comes to technology. Shapin explains:

"John Powell's marvellous study of vast vehicle-repair shops in Ghana, *The Survival of the Fitter: Lives of Some African Engineers* (Practical Action:1995), describes a modern world in which vehicles imported from the developed world initially decay. But then something changes: "As time goes by and the vehicle is reworked in the local system, it reaches a state of apparent equilibrium in which it seems to be maintained indefinitely. . . . It is a condition of maintenance by constant repair.' Much of the world's mechanical ingenuity is devoted to creating robust, reliable, and highly adapted creole technologies, an ingenuity that is largely invisible to us only because we happen to live in a low-maintenance, high-throwaway regime."

Shapin concludes his review with a point that is highly relevant to students entering the field of media studies. It is not necessary, he says, to understand everything about a technology before we can use it:

"There is an enormous gap between the knowledge of the makers and the knowledge of the user--but that is exactly as it should be. Users acquire knowledge about a technology that would never have occurred to the innovators. Ultimately, the narrative of what kind of thing a piano is must be a story of all users. It's a narrative in which we turn out to know a surprising amount about the technologies that have infiltrated our lives, and in which knowing only as much as we want and need to know about them is, in a sense, to know a lot."