CAN YOU HEAR ME NOW?

revaluing listening's role in user research practice

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WHY LISTENING?

Architecting experiences involves **getting to know technology users through research**: we must first understand the needs of users before we can advocate for them. How do we do this? First we must **listen to users**.

It seems like common sense, but listening is actually an overlooked and under-theorized practice in our field. While 1290 items in the ACM Digital Library (published from 1951-present) contain the term "listening," few of them come from human-computer interaction (HCI), and none of them come from our SIG. The Association of Teachers of Technical Writing (ATTW) is similarly silent on this topic, with three presentations from the last five ATTW conferences mentioning "listening." While designers of communication may be encouraged to "listen to users"—their experiences, their concerns, their goals and purposes—scholar-practitioners rarely provide explicit recommendations for how to do it, or how to teach it.
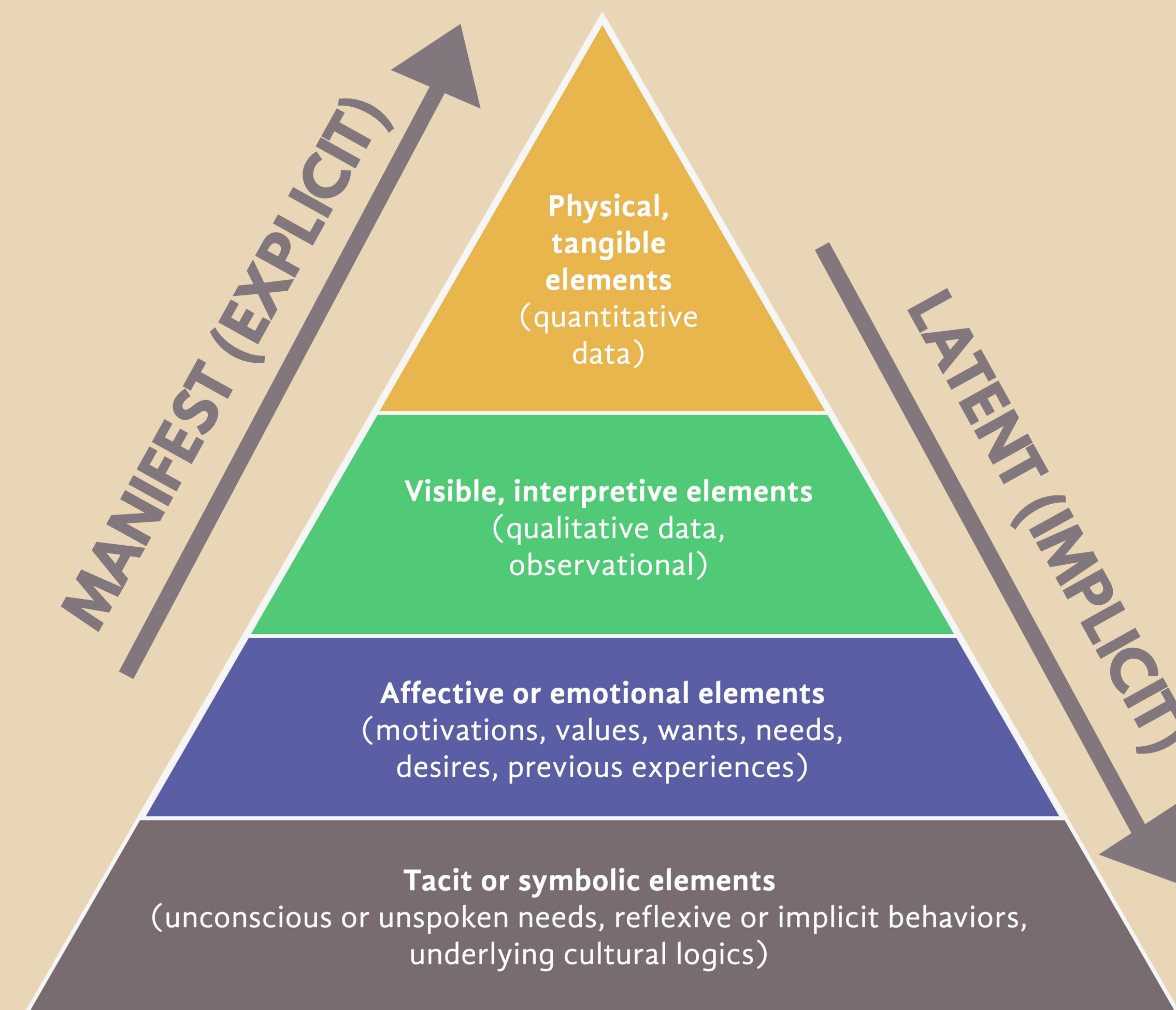
Listening has become an implicit, tacit, and assumed component of user research, downplaying its critical importance. Listening serves as a bridge between designer and user, researcher and participant, strategist and client. For this reason, additional work is required to extend our understanding of how to listen in UX contexts.

EXTENDING UX LISTENING: FROM ACTIVE TO INTERPRETIVE

Existing work on listening within user research is usually found in books geared towards educating practitioners, such as Portigal's *Interviewing Users* (2013) and Quesenbery & Brooks' *Storytelling for User Experience* (2010). These authors provide best practices for "active listening," drawing from counseling psychology and business. These "recipes for listening" involves techniques such as...

- Reflecting "perceptions of content that are heard or perceived through cues"
- Posing questions "in a supportive way to request more information or clear up confusion"
- Restating and responding "to the person's basic verbal message"
- Being quiet to "give the person time to think as well as to talk"
- Supporting by showing "warmth and caring" (Quesenbery & Brooks, 2010, pgs. 40-41)

Active listening techniques are valuable because they're affirming: they give the interviewee a sense that they're *being heard*. This opens them up to share more readily and honestly. While these focus on identifying listening barriers and developing strategies to overcome them, they're often atheoretical: they lack attention to subtext, underlying cultural values, and other more latent elements of experience. Researchers not only need to listen to help users feel heard, but also to engage "...an interpretive meaning of the symbolism underlying the physical data... the deep structural meaning conveyed by the message" (Berg, 2001, p. 242).

MANIFEST (EXPLICIT) → LATENT (IMPLICIT)

Physical, tangible elements (quantitative data)

Visible, interpretive elements (qualitative data, observational)

Affective or emotional elements (motivations, values, wants, needs, desires, previous experiences)

Tacit or symbolic elements (unconscious or unspoken needs, reflexive or implicit behaviors, underlying cultural logics)

METHODOLOGIES: RHETORICAL LISTENING & MAPPING

Rhetorical listening (Ratcliffe, 2005) provides one potential frame for deepening listening practice, as well as illuminating the role of cultural influences in user experience. Rhetorical listening involves four "moves:"

"1. Promoting an understanding of self and other
2. Proceeding within an accountability logic
3. Locating identifications across commonalities and differences
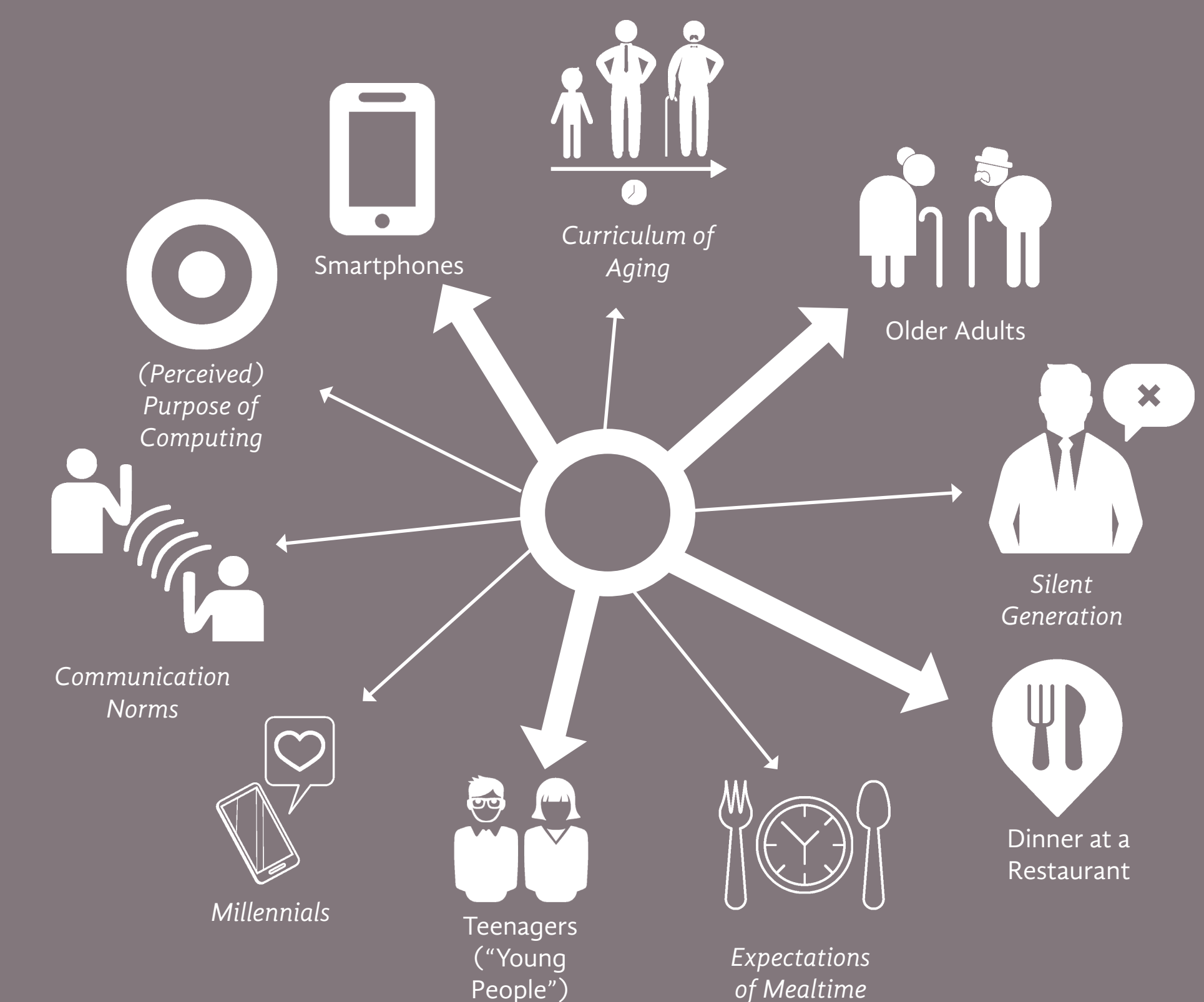4. Analyzing claims as well as the cultural logics within which these claims function" (Ratcliffe, 2005, p. 26)

Attending to cultural logics enables us to better "listen" to behaviors that are grounded in user identities, values, and/or contexts of use. These encompass factors that shape the choices users make in their interactions with an interface: age, gender, race/ethnicity, nationality, etc.

One way to engage and extend this type of listening practice is through visualization: specifically, through mapping. Potts (2009 & 2013) and Keller (2013) identify actor-network (ANT) mapping as a way to visualize the relationships between humans and technologies in an ecosystem. By also incorporating abstract or intangible "actors" into this system (like race, gender, history, cultural logics, etc.), we can better "listen" to how these forces shape a user's goals, choices, and experiences.

CASE STUDY

I currently study the computer and internet use of older adults (age 60+), and have noticed a recurring narrative of technological dysfunction in my interviews with research participants. Several interviewees have described experiences of frustration and sadness when having dinner with "young folks" who have their mobile phones out at the table.

Instead of bristling at what can feel like another technophobic rant about "kids these days and their smartphones," diagramming the "actors" at play in older adults' assessment of the role of technology can help bridge the gap between participant and researcher, here. An ANT diagram that includes the presence of latent actors (cultural and generational forces) as well as physical ones (humans, spaces, and technologies) yields insights into troubled identifications that shape the way that elders see themselves in an increasingly digitized world. Putting these elements on paper is the first step to designing for specific cultures and their corresponding contexts of use.

Smartphones · Curriculum of Aging · Older Adults · (Perceived) Purpose of Computing · Silent Generation · Communication Norms · Dinner at a Restaurant · Millennials · Teenagers ("Young People") · Expectations of Mealtime

CREDITS + REFERENCES

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References provided upon request, or at allegra-w-smith.com.

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