Problematizing Social Uses of Information and Communication Technology: A Critical French Perspective

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ABSTRACT In France, the study of social uses of ICTs has given rise, since the 1980s, to a community of researchers referred to as the “sociology of uses” (sociologie des usages). Under this common label, many sociological works have been developed, primarily focused on the concept of use. In this article, we would like to briefly recall the main theories which have been the basis of research concerned with the social materiality. We would then like to recall some of the scientific requirements for the conduct of research that aim to describe and explain the social uses of ICT in an empirical and theoretical dialectic. Finally, we suggest a few ways to support a critical sociology of uses that could assess the social facts it examines.

KEYWORDS Critic; ICTs; Sociology of uses

Introduction Over the past 30 years, uses of information and communication technologies (ICTs) have become highly developed, ultimately becoming—with the advent of the Internet—everyday social practices. While communication networks and their uses have been broadly displayed throughout our societies, social sciences have questioned the role that these uses play in the conduct and the renewal of an increasingly varied, if not overflowing, set of social activities (domestic, professional, leisure, etc.). In France,
while the technical factor of ICTs has not been a major focal point of contemporary sociological work, studying social materiality has nevertheless maintained a place among the interests of the “founding fathers” of French sociology (Schlanger, 2006). That said, a great deal of research conducted today in the social sciences (sociology, information and communication studies, history, psychology, linguistics, political science, educational sciences, etc.) is focused on the uses of ICTs (email, chat, instant messaging, blogs, social network sites, etc.). As Josiane Jouët (2011) noted,

The rapid progression of the internaut population during the first decade of the 21st century is often assimilated into ‘the return of the user’ or the ‘user turn,’ while the uses employed by the general public have exploded and become a theme of many research dedicated to ordinary neo-telematics, which is the internet of today. (p. 57)

In France, the study of social uses of ICTs in the 1980s has given rise to a community of researchers, which was later recognized to be an entire current of research and ultimately referred to as the “sociology of uses” (sociologie des usages) (Chambat, 1994; Millerand, 1999a, 1999b; Jouët, 2000; Bajolet, 2005; Beuscart, Dagiral, Parasie, 2009; Jauréguiberry and Proulx, 2011; Denouël and Granjon, 2011; Jouët, 2011). Then, under this common label, which lent consistency and unity to what had been a sort of invisible college, many sociological works were developed, primarily focused on the notion of use (Jouët, 2000). Historically, this current of research emerged alongside the functionalist sociological uses and gratifications approach, which also sought to mediate the media-centrism of the effects model. This approach would later become central to the study of reception, the heart of Cultural Studies (Le Grignou, 2003), as it would propose the recognition of the subjective construction of meaning, negotiated practices, and the valorization of autonomy and freedom that every individual is assumed to possess. But we can observe that, during this period of the 1990s, other sociological approaches were also developed to question the role of hardware devices (less so ICTs) in the organization of social practices (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1991; Dodier, 1995). Never mingling, those many approaches served to re-introduce the technical dimension into understanding the social. In the mid-1990s, and especially at the start of the 2000s, they paved the way for other work that oriented attention to the uses of networked technology (Granjon, 2001).

In this brief article, I first introduce the primary theoretical approaches on which, in France, sociological approaches concerned with social materiality are based. Next, from a critical epistemological perspective, I denote certain limits in contemporary research in this area, which is now preoccupied with the Internet, and I examine some of the imperatives of research aiming to describe and explain the social uses of ICTs in an empirical and theoretical dialectic. Finally, from a critical axiological perspective, I advance certain ideas for supporting a critical sociology of uses that, by its critical nature, would analyze the social activities that it documents.

**Thinking about social materiality**

At its origin, the sociology of uses is founded on theoretical perspectives that exhibit two common traits: they postulate the relevance of the logics of individuation...
and propose the need to account for logics of emancipation from different sorts of domination. This sort of research focuses on social facts of communication that are considered as allegedly new and, thus, examined under the auspices of social change. Right from the start, the sociology of uses propped itself up with a new breed of functionalism that is interested in individuals’ issues and that endeavours to analyze “social innovation” principally (Jouët, 2000). In opposition to determinist visions of technology, this stream of sociology established a distinction between the strictly functional uses of ICTs (as opposed to their practical utility), the morphology of activities to which they are related (for example, frequency, duration, etc.), and what can be qualified as “social uses”—practices linked to the social characteristics of individuals, groups, or institutions using the technology. However, it was ultimately the “social” gaps in expected “technical” performance that attracted the attention of scholars. The differentiation of practices, as well as the hijacking of use scenarios by users, were considered to be signs revealing arts and ways of operating (de Certeau, 1980): through misuses and minute transgressions, this would be an independent and engaged individual that one could recognize, as he would be capable of invoking occasional silent and poetic displays that could also be considered as acts of resistance. Marking the return of the ordinary person as “common hero,” in a framing close to the Foucauldian microphysics of power, this interest in craftiness, tactics and practices of poaching (literary, theoretical, etc.) has also led to a widespread lack of attention to macrostructures frameworks and potentially negative user experiences (Jaurégui-berry and Proulx, 2011).

In spite of its intense focus on autonomy, the sociology of uses also highlights the existence of a symbolic universe accompanying the different phases of adoption and stabilization of the ICT’s use, which are the object of subjective investment on the part of the user. Technologies were no longer understood within a strictly infrastructural framework. The varying significance of use and strategies of distinction through which users are associated with technical devices fell under the umbrella of social appropriation. Little by little, the user would come to be considered in terms of his memberships, but also in terms of perceptions and dispositions that structure his relationship with the world and, conditionally, his desires and his ways of operating, as well as his practical capacities for appropriating one device or another. It was then shown that the uses of ICTs

insert themselves into the social behaviours that constitute the matrix of their production. ... They do not construct themselves in a vacuum but rather insert themselves into the social relations of power that traverse social structures, forms of domination surely being more or less pronounced and modulated. (Jouët, 2000, pp. 507–509)

Other scholars have documented the sociogenesis of uses (de Fornel, 1991). These researchers generally aim to develop research on Human-Computer Interactions frameworks, based on micro-sociological perspectives that may tend to “reduce the effect of the environment to the effect of direct action undertaken over the course of a singular interaction” (Bourdieu, 1982, p. 42). Here, the sociotechnical reality will never
be constructed from the perspective of social structures or constraints, but will be considered as embedded in situated activities (de Fornel, 1989; 1994). Praxeological approaches are uniquely concerned with the local organization of interpersonal communication, but explicitly question the implication of the technical configuration in the moment-by-moment arrangement of technology mediated interactions. Based on an ethnomethodological conception of the individual—a “capable” being mobilizing a set of practical arguments in order to make sense of the context in which she is engaged—these approaches emphasize the different kinds of “adjustments” that are executed by the users. Along the way, they also present a panorama of different forms of practice. In effect, these sociological approaches describe situations where uses do not necessarily match up with the execution of fully coordinated and realized tactical actions. At the same time, they focus on micro-phenomena that may lead to incoherence, incomprehension, or dissension in technology mediated communications, or phenomena wherein certain devices or services are rejected (Bonu and Denouël, 2011).

In the 1990s, several authors insisted that social uses manifest themselves in the continuation of industrial supply (Vitalis, 1994). As they denied any prevalence of the technical over the social, but also any prevalence of the social over the technical, other researchers put forward the concept of (double) mediation, thus advocating for the concrete analysis of sociotechnical relationships. This idea of the double mediation of the technical and social served as the impetus for a large number of research projects (Jouët, 1993). The concept of “sociotechnical mediation” means that when we consider the construction of the social, we cannot ignore the technical elements, and further, we cannot describe technical devices without referring to the acts of habitus, skills, practical sense, and social knowledge of the individuals themselves. Things that may at first appear to be evidence of uses later make themselves known as the co-specification of technical devices and forms of social organization.

In its radical form, which has been especially developed by the actor-network theory (which, in fact, has been little concerned with ICTs and their uses: Akrich, 1990; Akrich, Méadel, & Paravel, 2000), the principle of the co-specification of the technical and the social led to a symmetrization of determinants and to indecision among human and non-human agents. It was only the association between these agents that made the situation worthy of sociological attention. According to this approach, the whole of society is constructed with objects, for it is these objects that assure the sustainability of social links and enable the construction of collective actions. Fully comprehending the “social signification” of a technical device then comes down to “comprehending how this device reorganizes the social fabric, of any kind, in which we exist and which defines us” (Akrich, 1990, p. 84). Within this framework, the social uses of technology have also been approached through what Madeleine Akrich has termed a “semiotic hypothesis,” concerned with analyzing the modalities through which objects are used over the course of a given action. Hardware devices are considered both creators and carriers of meaning, as they represent the different modalities through which people or organizations establish a link between what they are, their expectations, and the traces left by their environments. The technical object here is conceived of as a hybrid entity where human forms, which become material forms,
are laid down. These forms impose constraints on users in the form of operations to be carried out, procedures to respect, and instructions to interpret.

By the definition of the characteristics of its object, the designer advances a certain number of hypotheses concerning the elements that compose the world within which the object will insert itself. It proposes a ‘script,’ a scenario that demands predetermined arrangements that the users are called upon to imagine with the use of a technical device and the prescriptions (notices, contracts, advice, etc.) that are associated to it. (Akrich, 1987, p. 52)

In its own way, pragmatic sociology also contributed to the establishment of a sociotechnical approach to uses. The concept of the “investment in forms” (Thévenot, 1986), for example, describes the different processes through which various elements (instruments, norms, customs, technical objects, etc.) are agglomerated. Thévenot’s orientation considers organized action as being founded on a necessary coordination between humans and non-humans, by which multiple arrangements present themselves as mechanisms of regulation and are among the conditions essential to the successful realization of a project or the appropriate action (Thévenot, 1986). Thus the choice of one tool (one thing or one person) involves a supposition about the relevance of its potential within a given context and about its ability to meet the demands of the situations with which human actors will be confronted. This comprehension of organized action as a process of adjustment between people or organizations and their (technical) environment can also be found in the work of sociologist Nicolas Dodier. Specifically, Dodier (1993) proposes an analysis of what he terms the “conventional foundations of action.” These foundations are composed by the entirety of supports used for the memorization of resources which, for example, a group of people would possess and that would allow them to construct a set of common perspectives (even minimal), in order to coordinate actions. According to Dodier, there are two kinds of supports: “internal supports,” that are memorized within the body and the spirit and used either consciously or unconsciously; and “external supports,” that are composed of technical equipment and are seen as conventional aids in that “their existence evidences previous work to constitute the preconditions for a common orientation between people, or between people and their environment” (p. 65).

Concerned with the innovation phase or the appropriation phase (a strict separation that will later be challenged), the sociotechnical mediation approach points out that technical devices have to be considered as central elements to social activity because they support and influence the processes that organize and structure it. Thus, this approach gives the opportunity to analyze technology as part of the set of resources that allows the creation of a group of minimal common perspectives in order to coordinate various activities. Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot (1991) demonstrate, for example, in Les économies de la grandeur that the normative horizons of criticism are embodied in a world with objects. They go on to propose that public justification relies equally on both exercising principles of general equivalence and constructing devices that enable an ordering of people according to their level of magnitude:

The reference to a common order of magnitude permits for the comparison of these capacities according to a certain kind of effectiveness … .
Because it is shared, order serves to extend the validity of a judgement on what has occurred. Because there is an order, it makes agreement possible on the importance of unequal beings engaged in an action, and thus on the unequal weight that they will have with regard to the inference and establishment of proof. This is how a shared and relevant ‘context’ may be constituted with depth of field ordering the relative importance of identified beings in the context. (Thévenot, 1990, p. 63)

In this way, objects also play a part in the maintenance and crystallization of social behaviours and offer prescriptions for desirable or necessary uses. Action, and its efficient justification, can only take place from the moment when the convened magnitudes start relying on hardware devices that treat people and things as equivalent.

Starting in the 2000s and due to the success of the Internet, the social sciences concerned with ICTs began to focus principally on networked computing. Work undertaken under this umbrella took up a large part of the expectations of these sociological approaches oriented toward social materiality, especially their goal of bringing the technical back into social construction and their opposition to technical determinism. For Jouët (2011):

French Internet Studies rose from a ferment of research initiated by work around Minitel, even if it has rarely been referred to in recent publications. ... Internet Studies has enriched the analysis of technical mediation taking place in social practices. The issues are made more complex in terms of considerations that graft themselves onto the explosion of internet services, onto the evolution of sociotechnical configurations and on the diversification of social uses. New interfaces were erected as research objects, introducing a wrinkle in the study of circumscribed practices, to the detriment of the problematization of broader questions. This research thus gained in terms of theoretical vigour and methodological technicality, but has most definitely lost in terms of critical vision and sociological imagination. (pp. 79–80)

A necessary epistemological vigilance

Charles Wright Mills (1959) understood the sociological imagination as a form of creativity in the service of social sciences. In some respects, sociological approaches interested in networked technology do seem quite creative. Research undertaken in France in the final decade of the 20th century, for instance, called for a desectorialization of research by decompartmentalizing domestic and professional fields (Denouël & Granjon, 2011). Researchers engaged in this work knew how to design and build complex proofs, mixing quantitative query devices and ethnography-inspired observations. They were interested not simply in the social uses of a particular technology or service but rather in the technological ecosystem distributed by individuals and groups (see the journal Réseaux, No. 125-146, 2007), and a certain amount of shared knowledge was thus re-evaluated. Benefiting from the technical possibilities emerging from the traceability of digital data, research protocols themselves were renewed: instrumented ethnographic observation, large corpus composition, network analysis, and more.
However, in other respects, the sociological imagination of use studies is quite uninspired. Outside France, the classical diffusionist, functionalist, and quantitative orientations continue to mark a great deal of the research undertaken within a certain North American social science tradition; for example, work examining the role of ICTs in the ways people get news and information (Granjon & Le Foulgoc, 2011). Meanwhile, in the country of René Descartes and Auguste Comte, the legacy of “traditional theory” tends to embrace the positivist form, which concludes a bit too quickly that there exists a happy coincidence between scientific objectification and the factuality of empirical data. A large part of Internet use exhibits the particular trait of leaving public traces (links, personal status updates, user-generated content, etc.) that enable the objectification of practices. The exploitation of this type of data is without a doubt useful, but analyzing the social uses of these technical devices on the unique basis of this material may capsize the whole project into a state of empiricism. The fact that it is possible to make visible and accessible cross-linked relationships and interactions—which were previously more difficult to identify—tends to devalue the work of interpretation. While, as noted earlier, there does exist a praxeological version of this pitfall, the technicist “quantophrenia” of some Web Sciences research (Jouët, 2011) is a shining example of this issue. Instead, one should “analyze in order to measure and not measure in order to analyze” (Bachelard, 1970, p. 213), so that one might avoid what Pierre Bourdieu qualifies as a “positivist fetishism with data.” What can one say about quantitative studies that aim to perform a typology of networked computing uses, yet fail to consider users by anything other than … their uses? Even if the sophistication of the tools at work is quite impressive, it is impossible to hide the intellectual poverty of this type of sociological analysis.

A response to such a failure can be found in essayism and theorization, which refuse to conduct scientific analysis based on adequately substantial primary data. This type of research has become essentially speculative, stumbling through a form of over-interpretation that forces the explication of the social realities it aims to document. This is exemplified by some of the work produced under the banner of “Digital Humanities” (Thaller, 2012). Conducted on the basis of epistemologically weak approaches, the results have an extremely circumscribed empirical validity, yet they nevertheless have the tendency to be presented as if they are generally representative. This, for example, is the case with a generalization process that is constructed solely on the participant-observation experiences most familiar to researchers (Blondeau, 2007). In this case, unreasonable explanations are made in two ways. First, they may constitute a ventriloquist sociology, wherein the empirical experience and/or the theoretical knowledge of the researcher are projected onto informants’ practices. This breaks down the distance between the scientific specificities inherent to the empirical-theoretical construction of social reality and the ordinary conditions for understanding the social world. The researcher over-theorizes his own experience, while avoiding any preliminary break from the preconceptions that underlie this experience. Secondly, over-interpretation may reveal a form of intellectualism that, like anachronism in history or Occidental-centrism in ethnology, inflicts on social facts what Bernard Lahire (2007) refers to as a “scientifically illegal transfer” (p. 52). In this case,
the researcher projects “into the head of those whom he studies the connection and the knowledge he has, as a knowing researcher, with the object of analysis” (p. 52).

It is worth noting the penchant for micro-sociological approaches and the interest in studying the uses of marginal interfaces or services have led to the dwindling, if not the disappearance, of the full scope of the social contribution of networked technology practices. If research on ICT’s uses is indeed rarely undertaken with the goal of compiling results, it is not even considered as being related to broader social issues. More than ten years ago, Jouët (2000) had already insisted that observed use is “[generally] not analyzed in its social depth, in relation with other practices of sociability, labour, leisure and as a stake in power, transformation and negotiation within pre-existing social structures such as the family or the firm” (pp. 511–512). The diffraction of research, coupled with this attention to the micro scale and to the examination of digital traces, tends this time toward a form of under-interpretation that restricts sociological analysis to elements produced online, even though these clearly make up only a fraction of the larger social dynamics in which they participate. In other words, the “social” cannot be reduced to uses (that are only one dimension) and thus must always be resituated in relation to other social practices that bear them, frame them, or graft onto them. The sociometry limiting the question of the production of the social to a “Who’s linked to who?” cartography is nothing more than an expression of tautological reductionism that takes as an explanation precisely that which needs to be explained. The sociologist who has moved on to the study of mere measurements simply perceives a social reality whose meaning escapes him, as he tends to confuse, not uses with social practices, but some of the traces of these uses with the social truth of the (non-)practices that correspond to this reality, and which cannot be deduced solely from the indicators they employ (hits per page, number of friends, comments, etc.).

Moreover, scientific interest in ICTs ultimately meets a certain social expectation. Apart from the usual failing of expertise that often reduces problematization to a simple process of questioning very circumscribed aspects of the social realities it examines, a reductive image of the user can also prevail within the study of uses, further reducing the user to the state of consumer. In the case of the economy of attention, for instance, the user is understood as an individual increasingly at risk of information overload. His capacities are limited and subject to dispersion, notably due to the multiplication of symbolic solicitations whose own digital environments have facilitated this proliferation (Napoli, 2003). Such a perspective is evidently related to the need to find new conventional audience indicators and to the rationalization of opportunities for monetary valorization in a multimedia universe and many-sided markets where advertising is a central economic model. The theoretical innovations introduced with the economy of attention are doubtless a way to pull the plug on the conception of a supposedly rational economic human (homo economicus) continually following through on optimization calculations. These innovations effectively valorize a hypothesis that proposes the limitation of rationality and describes an agent operating on uninsured choices, briddled in a technological environment that becomes ever more complex (Kessous, Mellet, & Zouinar, 2007). Indeed, they remain prisoners of a consumerist approach to users and of a paradigm of transaction measurability whose attention is bound up in
market issues. Its heuristic method is quite practical—establish conventions that standardize the advertising market—and not very representative of practical experiences, such as social activity.

In addition, the figure of the individual underlying this sort of construction proposes a vision that is overly cognitivist, envisioning the person as a computational entity whose competencies are considered separately from all situated social experience. We find here a pitfall typical to a functionalist approach to sociology, fascinated by the interests of users reduced to needs and motivations. It should, of course, come as no surprise that a relationship is sometimes established between this approach and (neo-) functionalism, insofar as it has maintained a certain proximity via concepts of influence and virality and as it tends to respond to the questions of the advertising market concerning the relevance of its investments. Research on the media and sociability, re-launched by the recent development of Web 2.0 services, is indeed marked by the idea that opinion leaders among the population will be more informed and likely to influence individuals with whom they are in contact (Granjon & Le Foulgoc, 2011). The “social sense” of uses in these circumstances is but one distant interest and suffers from a tendency to drown in the troubled waters of a mechanist bath, where influence is considered to result from frequent contacts with social groups. One of the characteristics of such groups is they are increasingly connected by networked communication devices that enable the speedy circulation of digital content, especially by means of “word of mouth” phenomena and peer-to-peer recommendation processes. The identification of new opinion leaders, marketing leaders, prescribers, and other manifestations of influence within these digital social networks (blogs, social network sites, etc.) takes the place of a research program which, taken in the nets of the information society’s mythology (George & Granjon, 2008), would be inclined to dish out a leftover meal of social engineering without so much as mentioning its real name.

Within the French academic world, the valorization of new models has, at times, teamed up with certain strategies based on the importation of academic work that have been identified as largely ignored by the national scientific community. While confrontation with foreign research is essential, we think that its importation should come into the scope of, not a process of social positioning, but merely the work of scientific debate. It could help, for example, in evaluating the limits of research driven out of France, and in systematizing the critical appropriation of this work. To be heuristic, this opening should not be considered as a possible competitive advantage in the academic market, but instead as an epistemological imperative allowing us to break national and disciplinary isolation.

A critical sociology of uses

Research on uses, according to Jouët (2011), has also lost its critical perspective in recent years. Indeed, it is clear that, save for a few exceptions, the critical frame of reference (Corcuff, 2012; Granjon, 2013) is not a benchmark within the subfield of social sciences addressed here. The majority of sociological approaches interested in social materiality—actor network theory, interactionist sociology, pragmatic sociology (of critique), ethnomethodology—all turn out to have nothing at all to do with critical
perspectives. Some of these approaches are even ferociously opposed to critical research. In the 1980s, however, research that sidled up to issues constituting a large part of the concept of appropriation paved the way for an understanding of uses that, in some respects, came quite close to a critical perspective (Jouët, 2000). Concerned with the personal and social identities of users, with the social relationships of meaning and with the contrary logics of the self construction through technology, they quickly developed a very tenuous vision of uses. The primary interest of this perspective was in the distribution of theoretical tools for comprehending technical devices in and of themselves, as individual repositories of history that in their objective form—as an inscription—play a full role in the workings of the social contexts in which they are mobilized by users. More recently, in the wake of this perspective, some research has also considered that technical infrastructure should be envisioned according to its enabling, as well as its constraining, abilities (Rueff, 2011; Voirol, 2011; Granjon, 2012). Supporting itself largely on the theory of recognition (Honneth, 2008), the main objective of this research is to lend a bit of attention to the prescriptive part of technical infrastructure in the organization of interactions and social ties. Thus, it envisions the ways in which ICTs tend to participate in the maintenance or displacement of social behaviours, whether it is in the sense of accomplishment or limitation of the individual using those devices. The critical has thus not completely disappeared off the radar of use-focused sociology.

The critical is fundamentally a polymorphic theoretical perspective. There is not one single critical approach, but rather multiple critical theories and approaches to critical thinking, whose theoretical models may vary (cultural studies, analytical Marxism, gender studies, etc.). Nevertheless, in its ideal and typical form, the critical is describable from several epistemological expectations, of which the following list should not be considered exhaustive and is thus not exemplary of this critical approach: 1) update, analyze, and evaluate social orders; 2) nourish itself with dialectics and interdisciplinarity; 3) base itself on non-trivial scientific materialism; 4) refuse the principle of axiological neutrality; and 5) maintain solidarity with a certain kind of social progress. In addition, a critical sociology of uses may attempt to take this baseline and adopt it in part or in its entirety. It should be noted that the use-oriented social sciences cannot claim adherence to any epistemological orientation in particular, especially regarding their preferred research objects. They are social sciences like any others, anchored in a scientific imperative that imposes itself on all practitioners. Uses must be fundamentally understood as social facts that are constructed, observed, and accounted for through a process of historicization. All the same, the way in which they can be critical should not be overly demarcated by the general portrait sketched out by the few tasks listed above.

In spite of the diversity of social practices related to ICTs, critical research on uses could begin to consider the utility of uniting these uses, especially in that they can be the expression of forms of domination interacting with one another. Rather than proposing dense descriptions that necessarily lead to the recognition of a variety of practical forms, research could, it seems, take the opportunity to consider the social realities of communication as historically anchored, and, could consequently adopt a point of
view that allows for uses to be placed within global social structures. This would respond to the need for an aggregation which, in its reconstitution as a singular unit, would not necessarily mash together the specificities of “lived worlds” in the phenomenological sense, but which, while recognizing the uniqueness of experience, would nonetheless provide the means necessary to locate the systematic unity of social orders. The recognized significations of an individual’s actions (the symbolic charge of uses) can, for example, be resituated in the framework of larger relationships of meaning (especially framed by ideologies), which are engendered by processes of historic determination (for example, current social relevance). It is clear that in the case of social sciences in general, and among those concerned with uses in particular, the contribution of aggregation is necessarily modest. The full depth of such aggregation can only be the result of research on empirical material, which must be conducted through an iterative method.

In order to extend the objective of aggregation toward a generalization process, interdisciplinarity crops up as an essential element that should be taken up against the dispersion of social sciences into mutually indifferent disciplines. To recognize the singular, plural, and contradictory nature of uses without losing ground to a Balkanization of knowledge is most definitely a gamble. Aggregation, as a necessity, can not be carried out without a renewed dialogue between disciplines encouraging cross-border dynamics, far away from the hegemonic tendencies of theoretical construction (Corcuff, 2012). Aggregation is thus based on the promotion of a critical ecumenism of conceptual referents, all the while keeping a safe distance from the postmodern festival grounds and patchwork thinking that results from uncontrolled heterogeneity. In addition, rehabilitating this old thing that is the dialectic could be a useful supplement to meet the target of challenging substantialist perspectives, “disembodied empiricism” and “supreme theories” (Mills, 1959). This, in turn, would benefit the study of contradictions, changes, mediations, and processes, as well as overcoming the traditional mutual incompatibilities between idealism and materialism, micro and macro, collective and individual, et cetera. Interdisciplinarity and the dialectic allow for a revitalization of the sociological imagination by insisting on the historical and comparative method, to compare forms of domination and potentials for emancipation, as well as to ensure compliance with the empirical-theoretical necessity. These imperatives match those of scientific materialism in order to maintain a relationship between theory and practice. In a world crisscrossed by technical innovation and communication technologies, use-focused social sciences must, in carrying out their work, seriously consider the dialectic between knowledge and action.

The critical approach in and of itself questions its own relationship to a social ethical framework for research on practical effects. In other words, it makes practice a central criterion for evaluating the interest or validity of a theory: “the question of attribution of objective truth to human thought is not a question of theory, but a question of practice. It is in practice that man has to test truth—the reality and the power of his thought, the proof that his thought is of this world” (Marx & Engels, 1975, p. 24). The critical is thus conditioned by the practical (or the project as Sartre would say), which then becomes a criteria for the judgement of knowledge and its political utility.
The pertinence and scientific validity of a critical theorization is in fact built on a praxis with the goal of participating in the construction of resistance involved with the transformation of social reality:

In relation to the given, the praxis is negativity; but that is always involved is the negation of the negation. In relation to the object aimed at, praxis is positivity, but this positivity opens onto the ‘non-existent,’ to what has not yet been (Sartre, 1963, p. 92).

For the critical, the question of negative freedom (Hegel), borne emancipatory necessity, should be a central point of interrogation, as it touches on the role of the scholar-researcher in our advanced capitalist societies, which, as Bourdieu has suggested, must above all invest in “providing weapons” before providing education and thus surrendering some power of thought and action to individuals. Ultimately, what the critical objects to is the mythology of objectivity, the artificial distinction that is made between the descriptive, the explicative, and the objective. The critical obviously does not reject objectivity, but considers objectivity as a social construction. In this way, it renegotiates the opposition between distancing and engagement. Reconsidering this separation, it guides a new relationship between the scientific judgements that identify and explain social reality and value judgements. The “traditional” social sciences (many of which are concerned with uses) consider the principle of axiological neutrality as a categorical imperative of sociological practice, prohibiting the mingling of factual statements and axiological statements in demonstrative logic. In contrast the critical attitude is founded on a normativity proclaimed for what it is, that is to say an analytical framework which is rationally constructed and which does not ignore the ethical framework it carries.

A critical sociology of uses thus must necessarily have political consequences, especially because its principle objective is to disclose or reveal. The critical inevitably constructs itself against the illusion of immediate comprehension of the world and against common sense. It breaks through the veil of ideologies that legitimize relationships of domination, whose efficiency resides specifically in the lack of knowledge of individuals who suffer from what those relationship dominations really are. To give but one example, the discourse that has taken place around the “digital divide” or the “information society” operates de facto as an ideology. The positions taken are that of a guarantee of greater social insertion, increasing competence, and greater independence. However, the conditions for fulfilling these promises of self-realization are not obvious. When certain practical expectations are met by individuals, the gains obtained are not always what was expected, as both are integrated “in the institutionalized profile on which social reproduction is founded, [losing] their internal finality and [becoming] a legitimizing principle of the system” (Honneth, 2008, p. 311). Thus, the ceaseless summons to become a technophile entrepreneur of one’s own life, do not mechanically subject individuals to the all-powerful influences of a propagandist and manipulative ideology, but participate nonetheless, with other social relationships, in shaping perceptions and actions while conforming them to behavioural expectations.
Conclusion

Problematicizing the social uses of ICTs from a critical perspective is something that must be understood as essential. Doing so allows us to re-conceptualize these uses within a hermeneutic framework that does not condense itself into the mere production of empiricist descriptions or speculative developments, both of which repeatedly fail to comprehend the need to consider ICT practices in relation to the social order within which they take form. The critical constitutes, de facto, an epistemological vector for the sociology of uses and serves as an important barrier against “the risk [of] seeing the field of theoretical reflection restrain itself under the influence of a return to empiricism and a myopic vision of professionalism where the reason of the engineer [or the consultant] prevails” (Mattelart, 1996, p. 22). The critical position creates a space for problematization, wherein unity is found less in the sociotechnical nature of uses than in the critical itself (that is to say in its expectations), because this, interestingly enough, can enhance scientific aggregation, dialectic, as well as praxis composed of concrete and theoretically informed responses. A critical sociology of uses must also fight academization, against the logics of its own field (essentially oriented toward disciplinary reproduction), and against the social division of intellectual labour, which, in France, maintains a fissure between the production of knowledge and the realization of social change.

Notes

1. Translator’s note: The French term internaut is used differently than user and imparts a more holistic understanding of individuals using Internet technology. Here, the individual is not, de facto, defined by her uses. To the contrary, in English, we consistently refer to users to talk about, well, Internet users.

2. Telematic (or télématique) is a term used in France to describe the networking devices in telecommunications computer terminals. The Télétel or Minitel (France’s domestic predecessor to the Internet) is thus considered to be a first-generation telematic technology (a paleo-telematic), while the Internet represents a new generation of telematic technologies (a neo-telematic).

References


