Ageing and Technology

Sara J. Czaja and associates present CREATE in the first issue of this journal[1]. CREATE searches for technical-instrumental solutions at the level of the individual user, as shown by the cooperation with psychologists. Modern computer technology and ICT are seen as the main resources for problem solving. This approach is characteristic for science and technology in the industrial era. Phenomenology in the 20th century showed the restrictions of the technical-instrumental approximation.

Technical-instrumental approaches presuppose a certain way of living. The user may judge the implementation of these solutions as positive (Life becomes more comfortable), but also as negative (With more technology there will be less face-to-face contact, leading towards social isolation). Secondly, efficacy of technical-instrumental solutions depends on a certain social context[2]. In other social or cultural environments they may not be effective. And thirdly, the chosen solutions and their implementation by themselves are directing implicitly towards a technical-instrumental lifestyle. Technical solutions form a script[3].

Confronting the research of CREATE with these limits, leads to a search towards the dimensions gerontechnological research should have. In a recently erected European Graduate School, named USO-BUILT[4], PhD, MPhil-level and postdoc projects are stated as user-oriented. To make this type of research possible, researchers in the school distinguish three dimensions: intentional (cultural sciences), structural (social sciences), and functional (natural and technical sciences). The cultural-geographer Jones[5] was the first to use these dimensions to explain historical changes in land use.

According to Jones a complete investigation includes each of the three dimensions. Since this is hardly possible within one researcher, teamwork is needed with a multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, or transdisciplinary view. CREATE shows the functional and the intentional dimension of Technology & Ageing, leading to elucidation of mechanisms and development of functional solutions. The individual user will incorporate these solutions into his own lifestyle following his own intentions.

To be complete, the multidisciplinarity included into CREATE according to its authors, should imply confrontation with the structural dimension, and with other combinations of the three dimensions. One of these combinations is the Intentional-Structural one that researches the relationship between changing societal conditions and social context on the one side, and ideology, aims, and values of future society and its technological-scientific functions. Here we touch philosophy of life and man. The individual user is seen as subject to paradigms, not as an individual manipulating its technological environment according to his own ambitions.

Ageing in this time and age is not the only change we may observe in society. We are in the middle of an evolution from an industrial to the post-industrial society, but the built environment in which we function falls behind. The city, formerly the location of industrial production, becomes a landscape for consumption, recreation, and shopping. No longer will the future city function as an organic whole of residential areas with daily shopping on walking distance. Increased mobility has taken away this necessity.

Gerontechnology, just as architecture and urban planning, should redirect its aims to follow the evolution from the industrial to the post-industrial society. Of course, ageing of society is an integral part of this evolution. The ideal, healthy and vital society of the

20th century showed an age statistics in the form of an Egyptian pyramid, with many young and few elderly. In the new society the pyramid grows widening at the top, and slackening at its foundation. How should this new pyramid be interpreted in terms of intentional, structural, and functional solutions? These are core research questions of today.

As stated in the CREATE program, elderly too are involved in the change. They will have to use ICT and other new technologies according to CREATE. But what else will change for them? Social cohesion in neighbourhoods and city-quarters has vanished, and with it the ideal died of the neighbourhood community that supplies protection and security for elderly. In the Netherlands, shortly after the 2nd World War, older persons in apartment buildings were considered the natural guardians of youths. A societal way of living was planned and designed by architects and urban planners. After this ideology and the resulting paradigmatic person, the built environment has then been shaped with dramatic results. The planned person educated to standards, did grow into the unwanted, highly diverse, freely expressing individual. In the sixties of the 20th century the misfit became clear. Will the same type of drama result from CREATE planning and implementation? It might be, except when additional cultural changes and prognoses are taken into account.

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