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Affordable needs and rights: anticipating techno-moral change

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Typically, when an innovation is successful, the argument is that there must have been a need for this, albeit 'latent'. Yet, empirical studies show that when technologies are promised, developed and used, many things change in the same movement, including needs and, eventually, rights, when new needs have become self-evident. The malleability of needs and rights raises the intriguing question how novelty and needs are co-produced and whether such changes can be anticipated. When needs are not pre-given, but dependent upon socio-technical configurations, and, in fact, both cause and effect of technological change, a range of philosophical, sociological and anticipatory questions come to the fore.

In this paper I will address the central question by following three steps. First, the various uses of the concept of 'need' in technical change are studied and categorized. Here I explore various strands of innovation literature as well as technological and cultural criticism. A recurrent theme is whether and how what is conceived of as needs depends on the historical period and the locality. Central here is the institutional definition of needs by experts or markets. I conclude with a definition of needs which centers around a sense of loss: needs can be defined as items that incite efforts of repair in case the item is lacking. This sense of loss may be institutionalized by granting the item the status of 'right', as when access to Internet is proclaimed as human right.

In the second step of the paper, three case studies of the co-evolution of needs and novelty are compared and contrasted: water supply around 1800, the Kodak compact camera around 1900, Internet around 2000. This allows a partial reconstruction of a co-evolutionary process of technical, social and moral change and provides new suggestions how to anticipate emerging needs in society.

The third step of the paper is to argue how anticipation of techno-moral change introduces the question when needs and rights can be said to be affordable. Anticipation on new technologies cannot assume needs and rights to be pre-given. Hence, claims of users and citizens about their needs and rights of new technologies, thus, are not self-evident and a false (but popular) yardstick for various forms of Technology Assessment. The paper, therefore, ends with a design of alternative practices of reflection and anticipation, inspired by the research tradition of the 'learning organization'. The basic idea is that participants take account of their taken-for-granted partial truth and seek more productive forms of sensemaking.