49. Sony Walkman, Japan (Nobutoshi Kihara, 1978)

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Design historians often describe the Sony Walkman as the first private mobile consumer technology, radically transforming the individual experience of social space in the late twentieth century. The Walkman's iconicity derives not just from its formal design and its technological function but also, indeed more so, from its social and cultural meanings and effects.

Inventing the Walkman

In October 1978, the Sony Corporation restructured its organisation, moving the design and production of its radio cassette players from the Tape Recorder Division to the Radio Division. This restructuring created a problem for Kozo Ohsone, the manager of the Tape Recorder Division, as it removed a significant portion of his department's business while the company still expected his section to generate the same profit. Left with only two products, a dictation machine for the business market and a semi-professional monaural recorder, Ohsone called an emergency team meeting to plan how his division would maintain its profitability.

The resulting idea was to convert the monaural recorder, called the Pressman, from a single channel recording device to a stereo playback machine. Prototyped with a set of heavyweight headphones, as were standard for the professional sound industry, the division immediately knew it had a strong new product, even though it was uncertain as to the new machine's place in the market.[1]

Following a visit to the Tape Recorder Division from Sony Chairman Masaru Ibuka, the uncertainty around the new stereo player began to fall away, as its functional and formal meaning emerged. Ibuka was reportedly deeply enthusiastic about the new prototype machine, but pointed out that the headphones were cumbersome, and suggested using the new lightweight headphones that were coincidentally being independently developed by Sony's Research Laboratory. Another shift towards the player's stabilisation occurred when Sony President Akio Morita tested the prototype with his golf partner during his weekly game. At this stage, the device still had a residual function from the Pressman, two headphone jacks for joint listening; Morita suggested that the record button was replaced with a mute, so that joint listeners could momentarily stop the sound to talk to each other.

Following these interventions, Ibuka and Morita formed The Walkman Team, an interdisciplinary group of ten people from across Sony, including engineers, designers and marketing professionals who were together given the brief to develop this new product for the market within a significantly shortened timescale of six months. It was at one of these meetings that the lead engineer Nobutoshi Kihara placed a small block of wood on the table, roughly 13 centimetres high by 4 centimetres wide, to explain the size of device he wanted them to achieve.[2]

On 22 June 1979, Sony launched the world's first portable private music player, the Sony Walkman TPS-L2, in Japan.[3] In blue and silver, with buttons on the long outside, two headphone

jacks, a mute button and one pair of lightweight MDR-3L2 headphones, the Walkman's success was immediate, with Sony's stock of 30,000 units selling out within three months and 1.5 million units of the TPS-L2 module sold globally within the first two years.[4] Additionally, in the same period, over fifty of Sony's competitors launched their own versions of the Walkman, capitalising on the technology's market success.[5]

SCOT: Explaining Success

The reconfiguration of an already existent technology, the Pressman, in a simplified form meant that the Sony Walkman was not a technological advance but rather a regression; and therefore, somewhat unusually for a new technology, its success was not part of the story of ever-increasing technological sophistication, but rather was entrenched within a web of social and cultural factors. The story of the creation and early life of the Walkman embodies important questions about the relationship of design and technology to society, culture and experience and exposes problems in how the histories of design and technology are told.

Until the 1980s, a key theory of the history of technology was technological determinism, which separates technological development from societal and cultural concerns while arguing for technology's constant improvement towards an as yet unreached but always potentially possible technologically perfectible end. Against this theory, in the mid-1980s sociologists of science and technology Trevor Pinch and Wiebe Bijker proposed an alternative mode of understanding called the social construction of technology (SCOT).[6] Their theory is based on a quasi-evolutionary understanding of technological development, underpinned by a process of variation and selection and embedded within a specific environment, so that "technology design is an open process that can produce different outcomes depending on the social circumstances of development."[7] Drawn from the sociology of science, SCOT proposes that the emergence of a new technology is first met with a period of interpretative flexibility, during which relevant social groups (RSGs) negotiate the social and cultural meaning of the technological object. In this negotiation, the design of the technology continues to evolve until any potential conflicts in its meaning are resolved to the satisfaction of all groups. The resolution of meanings leads to a closure and stabilisation of both the form and function of the object.

Certainly the history of the Sony Walkman can be told through the SCOT framework, as various histories of its creation and its initial functionality highlight its somewhat unclear meaning and function, pointing towards the interpretative flexibility stage of its life. This instability, at the same time as its explosive success in 1979-80, led to notable design developments when Sony launched its second model of the Walkman, the Sony WM2, in February 1981. Developments, including moving the control buttons from the side to the front of the device, the tapehead to the back of the cassette housing cover and removing one of the headphone jacks and the hot-line button, can be seen as attempts to stabilise and fix the Walkman as a device to create high-quality private soundscapes for its users in a portable form.[8] The pursuit of ever smaller and lighter portable private sound devices became the dominant factor in the development of the Walkman (and its imitators) throughout the 1980s, resulting in Sony's pursuit of technological miniaturization, as well as its release of nearly 250 different models of the Walkman between 1979 and 1991.[9]

The Walkman Effect

While SCOT is a useful framework for understanding the emergence of new technological objects, it does not account for either the success or failure of a technology within a particular culture or set of cultures. Although Pinch and Bijker tried to accommodate the 'wider context' in which a technology becomes closed and stabilised in its meaning, it plays only a minor role in SCOT and its results are, as critics point out, rather limited in explaining how social factors affect the history of design and technology, particularly how relevant social groups are chosen and delimited by SCOT theorists, and how they negotiate their consensus.[10]

However, in a different field of understanding, cultural studies, the 'wider context' of the Walkman became the subject itself, when the cultural theorists Paul du Gay, Stuart Hall, Linda James, Hugh Mackay and Keith Negus seized upon the Walkman as a paradigmatic object of culture for their seminal introduction to the field, *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman* (1997). In this book, the authors tell a cultural history of the Walkman through such concepts as representation, identity, production, consumption and regulation, identifying the ways in which the Walkman represented and reproduced historically dominant cultural discourses. For, as the first mass-produced commercially available portable sound device, the Walkman's success was rooted in the way in which it radically altered its users' experiences of the everyday, particularly their experience of social space. Therefore, as du Gay et al., together with cultural theorists Shuhei Hosokawa, Iain Chambers and Michael Bull, have argued, the Walkman was both representative and productive of the central discourses of the 1980s – autonomy and mobility. These modes of being were embedded within the Walkman as can be seen in its ever-purified function as an individual and private soundscape production technology, whilst at the same time being refined into ever smaller and lighter models. The autonomy and mobility that the Walkman promised in its form and function can also be seen in its representation in numerous advertising images showing young fashionable individuals (normally women, normally white, normally blonde) listening to their Walkmans whilst cycling, on roller-skates, or running. The Walkman was a technology of desire, of freedom and, most importantly, of the self.

Hosokawa explored the relationship between culture and the Walkman, calling the freedom that the Walkman offered its users the 'autonomy-of-the-walking-self', arguing that it was not a technology of alienation but rather one that reconfigured the relationship of the individual to the group, allowing the user to feel a sense of superiority over the crowd through her or his private, and therefore secret, soundscape.[11] Through what he called the 'Walkman Effect' Hosokawa argued that the device allowed the user to 'screen out' the sound of urban life and wall themselves into their own sonic fields, thereby cutting "the auditory contact with the outer world where he really lives."[12] This feeling of superiority leads, theoretically, to Walkman users becoming ever more narcissistic and self-involved social actors, separated from the experience of social space by overlaying social experiences with their own private soundscapes, so that there is an "apparent refusal of sociability."[13]

Cultural theorists argue that the emergence of this technology of narcissism and self-involvement during the 1980s is no coincidence. The same decade that saw the Walkman as one of its most dominant mass consumer technologies, giving its users the ability to create individual and private habitats, overlaps with the birth of neo-liberal conservatism, embodied by Reaganomics in the

US and Thatcherism in the UK, a political climate that privileged the individual over the state, the private over the public, and the corporation over society. Within this political landscape, sociologists Carl Gardner and Julie Sheppard note that the Walkman was the 'ultimate consumer commodity' because of its "a-social, atomizing, individualizing tendencies."[14]

Sony and its subsidiaries retained over 60% of the private portable cassette player market throughout the 1980s in the face of significant competition from a number of other electronics manufacturers. That this type of device became synonymous with the word 'Walkman' reveals the strength of Sony's branding and market share. Furthermore, even though these devices are now classed as 'dead technologies', overtaken by more technologically advanced machines, the name 'Walkman' still has currency as the name for Sony's contemporary portable media technologies, including smartphones and digital music players.

Notes

[1] She Ueyama, "The Selling of the 'Walkman'," *Advertising Age*, March 22, 1982, 131.

[2] Dorothy Leonard-Barton, "Inanimate Integrators: A Block of Wood Speaks," *Design Management Journal* 2, no. 3 (Summer 1991): 65.

[3] Paul Du Gay, Stuart Hall, Linda Janes, Hugh Mackay and Keith Negus, *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman* (Milton Keynes: Open University, 1997): 56.

[4] Susan Sanderson and Mustafa Uzumeri, "Managing Product Families: The Case of the Sony Walkman," *Research Policy* 24 (1995), 763.

[5] M. Dreyfack, "Sony Walkman off to a running start," *Marketing and Media Decisions* (October 1981): 70-72.

[6] Trevor J. Pinch and Wiebe E. Bijker, "The Social Construction of Facts and Artefacts: or How the Sociology of Science and the Sociology of Technology might Benefit Each Other," *Social Studies of Science* 14 (1984), 399-441.

[7] Hans K. Klein and Daniel Lee Kleinman, "The Social Construction of Technology: Structural Considerations," *Science, Technology & Human Values* 27, no. 1 (Winter 2002): 29.

[8] The WM2 device weighed just 280gms, 110gms lighter than the TPS-L2.

[9] New models offered additions such as a radio, remote control and solar power. Sanderson and Uzumeri, "Managing Product Families", 769-70.

[10] Klein and Kleinman, "The Social Construction of Technology," 32-5.

[11] Hosokawa, "The Walkman Effect," 177.

[12] Ibid., 167.

[13] Ibid., 167; Iain Chambers, "A Miniature History of the Walkman," *New Formations: A Journal of Culture/Theory/Politics* 11 (1990): 1-4.

[14] Carl Gardner and Julie Sheppard, *Consuming Passion: The Rise of Retail Culture* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989): 53.