

Leslie Haddon

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Domestication analysis and a case study of children's experience of smartphones and tablets

Leslie Haddon

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Abstract

The article provides a sense of how the field of domestication analysis has developed over the last 25 years, showing the range of ways in which has been deployed, and how it can address social issues relating to technologies.

Understanding cross-cultural differences has not been a strong feature of this framework to date, but examples are provided to indicate how this dimension could be included and developed. Finally, a case study of children's experience of smartphones and tablets is provided to illustrate how the framework can be used and be useful.

Introduction

The main aim of this article is to introduce the domestication framework for analysing people's experience of information and communication technologies (ICTs). The first section explains the origins of this approach and its original key elements. The next one discusses how the body of domestication literature has evolved over time in terms of the different groups and technologies studied, but also in terms of what elements of the framework have been further discussed and developed in the years

after the first formulation of this theory. We then turn to the variations in the methods used and how this micro-analysis of everyday life can be used to comment on macro-issues. Although explaining cultural differences has never been a strong point in this literature, they have been some attempts to reflect on the factors that might explain country differences in the domestication process. Finally a case study of children's experience of using the internet through smartphones and tablets illustrates some of the domestication principles, as well as indicating why some country variation may exist.

Origins of the domestication framework

The domestication approach as first developed in the UK (Silverstone et al, 1992; Silverstone and Haddon, 1996a) originated in part from anthropology (e.g. Douglas and Isherwood, 1980) and from consumption studies (e.g. McCracken, 1990). These disciplines asked how goods and possessions enter our lives and what symbolic meaning they can take (e.g. Bourdieu, 1986), both of which relate to how we use them. When applied to ICTs, an additional impetus to develop this framework related to particular strand within media studies that was interested in the contexts in which established media were experienced (e.g. Hobson, 1980; Morley, 1986; Lull, 1988). Parallel to formulation of the British version of domestication was being formulated, Norwegian researchers in Trondheim (Sørensen, 1994; Lie and Sørensen, 1996) contributed to developing the concept by linking it to the social shaping of technology literature, a body of work concerned with why and how technologies emerge in the form they do. These researchers were interested in asking how that shaping process continued once ICTs started to be consumed.

The framework that emerged considered the processes shaping the adoption and use of ICTs, but in so doing also asked what the technologies and services mean to people, how they experience ICTs and the roles that these technologies can come to play in their lives. In fact, the term 'domestication' itself evoked a sense of 'taming the wild', and we see in many domestication studies the processes at work as people, both individually and especially in households, encounter ICTs and deal with them, sometimes rejecting the technologies, at other times working out how exactly to fit them into their everyday routines.

In the earliest work on domestication in households, a number of processes were identified regarding how ICTs find a place in, or be made to fit in, the rest of (in this case, 'domestic') life. In brief, 'appropriation' captured the types of negotiations and considerations that led to the acquisition of technological goods, 'objectification' mainly referred to how the ICTs were located spatially within the home, 'incorporation' mainly drew attention to how their use was scheduled in people's routines and hence time structures, while 'conversion' dealt with how we mobilise these ICTs as part of our identities and how we present ourselves to others, for example, in how we talk about and display these technologies. The concept of the 'moral economy' was used to draw attention to the values of household members that influenced their decisions about the acquisition and use of ICTs (including the use by children, to be discussed later in this article). If these are some of classic concepts associated with the domestication framework, research in this tradition also considered the broader context of people's lives, their aspirations, their wider leisure interests, their economic circumstances, the demands of their working lives, etc. This serves to sensitise researchers to those types of questions, the aspects of consumption that they could be attentive to in order to understand not just the

meanings that ICTs have for different people, but also, sometimes, why and how users try to constrain their use of ICTs and how they evaluate these technologies. .

The domestication literature

The domestication framework initially reached a European audience partly through the European academic networks in this field that were emerging in the 1990s but subsequently the approach was drawn upon further a field in, for example, in Australia (Lally, 2004), Canada (Bakardjieva, 2005a), the US (Russo Lemor, 2005), Korea (Yoon, 2005) and Singapore (Lim, 2005). The very first British research focused on nuclear families (e.g. Hirsch, 1992), but subsequent studies considered other family structures, such as single-parent households (Haddon and Silverstone, 1995a; Russo Lemor, 2005). In later empirical work, the groups studied have been identified by their work situation, such as teleworkers (Haddon and Silverstone, 1993, 1995b) and homeworkers (Ward, 2005a). Finally, some groups were chosen because of their age (the young elderly of the 60-75 age group, in Haddon and Silverstone, 1996; young adults, in Hartmann, 2005a), social class (professional and managerial, in Silverstone and Haddon, 1996) because they were migrants (Pavez-Andonaegui, 2014). or because of central activities in their lives, such as being computer hackers (Håpnes, 1996). There have even been studies of individuals (Berg, 1997).

Many of the earliest domestication studies had taken a holistic view, examining a range of ICTs in the home as an ensemble. But others focused on particular technologies, such as the telephone (Bergman, 1994; Frissen, 1994), Cable TV (Silverstone and Haddon, 1996; part of the Sørensen, 2014 research), the home

computer (Aune, 1996; Lally, 2002), the internet (Bergman and van Zoonen, 1999; Haddon, 1999; Ward, 2005b) the mobile phone (Haddon, 2003; Yoon, 2005), smartphones (Bertel, 2013, Haddon 2014) and even particular functionality like the geo-location software in smartphones (Bertel, 2013).

In a review of the field 10 years after first introducing his framework Silverstone reflected: *'All concepts, once having gained the light of day, take on a life of their own. Domestication is no exception'* (2005a, p.229). In addition to variation in the target groups and specific technologies that were studied, there have always been some differences within this tradition of research as well as shifts over time. How exactly the concept of domestication has been employed in particular analyses and with what emphases has depended both upon the researcher and the particular goals of the project. For example, while some of earliest British research stressed the collective identity of households or families (Hirsch, 1992), others have examined ICTs in relation to an individual's sense of identity (e.g. Berg 1997; Hartmann, 2005a).

Over the years, researchers working with the domestication framework have discussed the ways in which the approach has been, or could be, extended (Silverstone, 2005b; Haddon, 2004; Haddon, 2011) or whether some of its elements and goals could indeed be challenged. To illustrate the latter, there are debates as to whether it would be better to focus on the 'home' or 'household' (Bakardjieva, 2005b; Silverstone, 2005a). The origins of the domestication framework within media studies also reflected in a desire to move beyond a focus solely on textual analysis (e.g. in TV studies) by considering the context of ICT consumption. In 2005 Hartmann (2005b) noted that subsequent domestication studies had failed to return to the question of how context has a bearing on people's interpretation of actual (and

particular) media texts, although a recent study of children's reading of Disney programmes has returned to this question (Sørensen, 2014). In general, the Berker et al (2005) collection, taking stock of the domestication approach, is particularly interesting in terms of highlighting such reflections. Some examples of how this framework has been extended are provided below.

Many of very first, and most cited, discussions and examples relating to domestication referred to the period around the acquisition of ICTs. Although technologies come with pre-formed meanings through the influence of advertising, design and the media discourses surrounding them, both households and individuals then invest them with their own personal meanings and significance. Such domestication processes include the effort before acquisition to imagine how technologies might find a place in the home and a role in people's lives. They include any household discussions, where relevant, about the decision to acquire these ICTs or not. As noted, after acquisition the effort continues in terms of locating these ICTs in domestic routines and spaces. If this was the initial starting point of the domestication framework, later work in this tradition went on to examine the longer term careers of ICTs and how our relationship to them changed over time. Hence, this work emphasised a point noted from the very start - how domestication entailed ongoing processes rather than being a one-off event (Lie and Sørensen, 1996a; Haddon, 2004; Pavez-Andonaegui, 2014).

To take a second example, much of the British research in general, as well as the majority of other studies, focused mainly on what happened in the home. However, it was always clear that this was not the only place where meaning was given to ICTs and where practices evolved. In the 1980s, schools, computer clubs and gaming arcades were, for instance, significant sites for the development of young boys' early

interest in computers and interactive games (Haddon 1992). Norwegian writers identifying themselves with the domestication tradition also argued the case for looking beyond the home (Lie and Sørensen, 1996b), as exemplified in a study covering the places where computer hackers met and where their individual and collective domestication strategies emerged (Håpnes, 1996). Another example beyond the home was the study of introductory internet courses, which could have a bearing upon whether people decide to find a place for these technologies in their lives – or reject them (Hynes and Rommes, 2005). In addition, several later studies paid more attention to communications and relations with wider social networks, especially once communication by the internet became of interest (e.g. Lally, 2002; Ward, 2005a). The growth in portable ICTs, initially the mobile phone, also required those working in this tradition to think more about how the domestication framework could be expanded to consider interactions with these wider social networks outside the home (Haddon, 2003, 2004).

Domestication was also extended the world of work. In his study of SMEs, Pierson (2005) drew attention, as do the other domestication studies of telework and homework, to the mixed personal and work motives for acquiring and using ICTs in home-based work. Like those other studies, he also notes the influence of the context where people are trying to manage the boundaries between home and work. Going beyond this, however, Pierson argued for, and illustrates, the study of 'professional domestication', whereby new ICTs can be fitted into (or fail to find a place within) existing work arrangements.

Methodologies

The main methodologies used by domestication have been qualitative in nature, which is understandable given the interest in the meaning and significance of ICTs to people, as well as their ambiguities and contradictions (Silverstone, 2005b).

This can mean paying attention to fine nuances and detail, such as carefully examining what people say when they present themselves (e.g. Hartmann, 2005a), or how they construct boundaries in their lives and around their identities (Pichault, et al. 2005).

In Britain the earliest studies had been more ethnographic in the sense of developing an in-depth knowledge of the particular households through a variety of methods. These initially included participant observation (alongside interviews and time use dairies) and subsequently a raft of other methods (constructing mental maps of the home, drawing diagrams of social networks, talking about family albums, making technology inventories, mapping media use, analysing family budgeting, etc.) in order to build up a more comprehensive overview of the families concerned (Silverstone et al, 1991).

In later work within the domestication tradition there has been some experimentation with other methodological approaches, for example, using self-interviews and semi-structured interviews (Hartmann, 2005a). New additions, especially relating to new techniques in Internet research, include the use of on-line research tools, web-based content analysis, and an online survey – in combination with face-to-face interviews (Ward's research, described in Pichault, et al. 2005).

Finally, apart from arguing how this qualitative work can complement quantitative methodologies (Silverstone, 2005a), some standard surveys have been carried out by domestication researchers themselves, such as European research on people's

control of their telephone use (Haddon, 1998), and Belgian research on non-adoption (Punie, 1997) and on SMEs (Pierson, 2005).

Micro studies and macro issues

Although the focus of domestication studies is at the micro-level, regarding how technology is experienced in people's everyday lives, this can throw light on wider issues. For example, domestication analysts suggest that it is often best to think of innovation as evolutionary rather than revolutionary (Silverstone, 1995; Lie and Sørensen, 1996b) because of the time scales involved, because of the overall significance of the change, but also because of continuities with previous activities. Uses of new ICTs are often built upon existing practices, which they then supplement. For example, one study was critical of the utopianism of some earlier writers who had stressed how much change the internet can produce, underlining endless possibilities. In contrast, this study showed how internet use was very firmly grounded in the everyday interests of households by focusing on how the things that its members already did influences their interests online (Ward, 2005a).

Silverstone (2005a) argued that scepticism tends to be built into the domestication approach. One can appreciate this in the challenges to claims celebrating the revolutionary nature of technology noted above. However, it is also revealed in challenges to populist discourses, as in Hartmann's (2005a) critical approach to claims about a new 'net-generation'. She portrays a mixed picture of young adults who in some ways embraced ICTs, but at other moments were hesitant about them, if not rejecting technologies at least controlling the place that these technologies had in their in lives.

More specifically, some studies have been used a basis for commenting on the nature of social exclusion or the 'digital divide' (Silverstone, 1995; Haddon, 2000, 2004). In this case it was possible to explore what the presence and absence of ICTs meant to people in everyday life, the possibilities they opened up or closed down. More generally, even when looking at particular groups, there are often some common trajectories, or as Bakardjieva (2005a) calls them, common 'life situations' - e.g. the immigrant, the battered wife, the person made unemployed – and hence common ways of using technologies to engage with these situations (common 'use genres').

Cultural and country variation

In general the cross-cultural dimension has not been so developed in domestication research. One study that did make a specific effort to explore how this might be managed was Lim's (2005) study of Chinese middle-class households. This observed how the particular national one-child policy in China meant that the lack of sibling interaction around ICTs was the norm in this country, and different from other countries. This study also discussed the, arguably, more distinct traditional division of roles in Chinese families (compared to that in many Europe countries) where the father had a stronger disciplinarian role. This had a bearing upon the experience of ICTs in a context where father-child distance exists. Meanwhile, the particularly high value placed upon education not only affected the desire for ICTs but also the growth of after-school education, and hence the time structures within which children operated. Finally, the small size of Chinese apartments, and the lack of any 'bedroom culture' as described in some Western studies (Bovill and Livingstone, 2001) could itself have a bearing upon ICT use. For example, in the Chinese study, if children were doing homework in the living room, some parents abstained from TV

watching because of the potential noise, preferring to use more silent technologies. Clearly this research begins to illustrate the scope for exploring domestication processes in very different cultural contexts. So in this short example we can see the role of national policies, traditions of family relationships, value systems and material culture (here, the nature of Chinese housing) can all influence the domestication process. Another possible influence is media representations in different countries. The *EU Kids Online* project noted below also carried out an analysis of discussions of children and the internet in various national newspapers, and found that in different countries different online risks were emphasised (Haddon and Stald, 2009), which might then have some bearing on parents and children's perceptions and mediation of children's online experiences. More generally Thomas and Haddon (2011) explore a range of 'cultural' factors that have been considered in studies of ICTs, and which could be considered in domestication studies.

Case study: Children's domestication of smartphones and tablets

Elements of the domestication approach can now be illustrated through a qualitative study of children's adoption and use of smartphones and tablets, especially for accessing the internet (Haddon and Vincent, 2014). It was part of the *Net Children Go Mobile* project, funded by the European Commission's *Better Internet for Kids*' programme and motivated by a broader interest in whether mobile access to the internet had implications for online risks. This qualitative component of the project itself built on research by the related *EU Kids Online* project. The latter involved many of the same researchers, but in this case looking at children's use of the internet more generally (Smahel and Wright, 2013). The smartphone and tablet qualitative study took place in nine countries (Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Romania, Portugal, Spain and the UK). While the ultimate interest was in

issues of online risks, the limited amount of research on children's use of these portable devices meant that it was first important to appreciate the place of smartphone in their lives. Hence the domestication framework was used to explore this aspect, making this research one of few cross-national studies using domestication analysis. Methodologically, this approach did not involve the in-depth study of particular households as in the earliest domestication studies, but while the interviews and focus groups concentrated on technologies, in the course of doing so they touched upon some points highlighted above about the rest of children's lives. The interviews took place with children, but also with parents, teachers and other types of 'youth worker' The *Net Children Go Mobile* qualitative research was complemented by a survey (Mascheroni & Ólafsson, 2014), and indeed an earlier survey by the sister project, *EU Kids Online* (Livingstone et al, 2011) meant that there was some information about trends over a four year period Hence explanations from children and various adults could be set against known and changing patterns of adoption and use.

The original empirical research using domestication, and a substantial amount since, dealt with the negotiations between household members, which could include children albeit often as junior partners. But when we turn to devices that may be principally, or at least heavily, used by children there are further specific dynamics at work. This is partly because of children's economic dependency, where parents may be paying, or partly paying, for the cost of the artefact and of its use, as has been the case for some time with children's mobile phones. But adults, including parents, operate against the backdrop of a long history of concerns about children's use of a variety of ICTs (Cricher, 2008) and so they intervene in and mediate children's experience, usually more would be the case when partners negotiate. Hence, there

has been long history of mediating children's TV use and, or more relevance here, children's internet use (Kirwil, et al, 2009.) This reminds us that we may see particular interactions on a micro-level as ICTs are domesticated within households, but that is influenced by wider discourses in society, in this case concerning the 'risk agenda' (Haddon, in press).

Turning to the first phases of domestication, there is clearly a longer term process, and not just a moment, of appropriation as children often try out smartphones especially long before acquiring one- for example, using a parent's device for accessing games. One implication is that children can experience these technologies at younger than suggested by statistics on ownership, but that use is often limited use, with few risk implications, In effect they are sometimes serving an apprenticeship before acquisition, learning about the technology in advance, a similar point being made in the related *EU Kids Online* study that children are sometimes introduced to SNSs like Facebook, including by parents, some times before getting a profile themselves (Haddon, 2014).

As regards the decision to buy children one of these portable devices, in many households there were discussions of the child's maturity, whether they were responsible enough to have their own devices, not only because of online risks, but also because these ICTs are expensive purchases. Here the study revealed examples of country specific considerations, where in the mainly Catholic countries Italy, Portugal and Spain smartphones and sometimes tablets, were given to children at the rite of passage associated with events like Holy Communion and Confirmation, markers of reaching a certain lifestage. Sometimes there were secular markers such as going to secondary school (often at age 11). Where acquisition is tied to such markers, this fixes the age of acquisition, it makes it less flexible. But it is not the

only factor at work: parents also buy smartphones for younger children as rewards, and given more and more parents have smartphones, it becomes more and more common to receive the smartphone, as opposed to a mobile phone, as a hand-me down.

As regards children's use of the technologies, the financial considerations noted early play no small part. Considering that smartphones, like mobiles, are symbolically associated with mobility, with use on the move, it is striking from the survey that in practice children use first and foremost in the home where the wifi free (Mascheroni & Ólafsson, 2014). Again, there was country variation in the qualitative research with Portuguese and Romanian children appearing to be most cost conscious, perhaps reflecting the broader poor economic situation in those countries at the time of the study. Cost considerations also influenced which brands children bought or, more often, had bought for them by parents, what apps they would download (or be allowed to download), and their sensitivity to the cost being incurred by certain uses (e.g. video when on 3G). In other words, when children paid they were cost conscious, and when parents paid children were often persuaded be cost conscious, whether through parental rules about use, or reaching some negotiated understanding.

As regards time (the process of incorporation), and reflecting the findings of *EU Kids Online* study (Haddon , 2014) parents in addition often had concerns about children spending too much time online, or more broadly (to include TV and gaming) having too much screen time. This was sometimes thought to be (physically) unhealthy, limiting their sociability or taking time away from other important commitments, like school homework. Such concerns sometimes led parents to impose limitations on how much smartphones and tablets can be used, but sometimes the constraint is on

the timing of when they are used - e.g. after completing homework or not in special 'family' times, like meal times in some households, or holidays. Lastly, time constraints are not only imposed by parents. Children sometimes have other activities they want to follow up (e.g. sport) which take precedence over using these portable devices, and they too can be wary of using the smartphones especially too much because they are tempting but can waste time.

As regards space, schools are regulated spaces where children can be banned from using their smartphones at all, or only be allowed to use them at specific times (e.g. between lessons, when about to go home). Once again, there is country variation in this respect where the survey showed that children had with far more freedom to use smartphones and the school wifi in Denmark compared to the other countries (Mascheroni & Ólafsson, 2014). But there were also safety concerns about using smartphones in any capacity in public spaces, for fear that they would be stolen – and here there appeared to be far more concerns in the UK compared to the other countries, reflecting the more general safety awareness promoted in schools.

In discussing the social (and economic) reasons for constraints on use, it is clear how domestication analysis can be used here to address wider issues. One chief concern about portable devices and online risk is that children might be potentially exposed to more risks through having more 'anytime/anywhere access' with smartphones especially being 'always at hand'. However, here we see that this picture of anytime/anywhere access is not entirely true, more so for younger children. but also for older ones.

Domestication analysis does not only deal with access and use but more generally examines all the other interactions around technologies. The above discussion of

constraints touched upon the way in which parents mediate their children's smartphone and tablets, not just by making ruling but also through such modes as giving advice and otherwise supporting their children's use. It was also clear that like the mobile phone before, the smartphone in particular provided a way of knowing where their children were and being able to contact them – i.e. its role as what has been called an 'umbilical cord'. But whereas the mobile phone enabled this by voice and texting, some (but few in our study) parents made use of geolocation apps to locate their children. As with the mobile phone before, this could lead to tensions because children do not always want to be under this degree of surveillance. More generally there is a balance between parents desire to protect their children and giving children a degree of free space. On the other hand, smartphones (and to a degree tablets) also posed some challenges to parental monitoring. The strategy of casually observing in passing what children were doing on a large PC screen placed in a fixed location was reduced when children could use smaller and portable devices, that could be moved to more private spaces in the home (and, indeed, be used outside it). Checking children's browsing histories, as on PC, remained an option and indeed some parents regular asked to see their children's portable devices in order to do this. But once again this could be a source of tension as older children in particular desired more privacy on the way to adulthood, and it could be trickier to ask them to hand over the smartphone because it was simply a more personal and intimate possession than the computer, a quality inherited from mobile phone. In fact, the earlier research from *EU Kids Online* had already shown that children who were early adopters of smartphones were monitored less by their parents (Haddon and Ólafsson, 2014). The qualitative data examined in the *Net Children Go Mobile* project suggested that arrival of the smartphone had in at least

some households had consequences for parental mediation strategies, sometimes leading parents to rely more on talking to children or have to trust their children more.

Conclusion

This article provided an overview of the field of domestication studies and showed how it might be applied to children's experience of particular technologies: smartphones and tablets. At the heart of this approach is an interest in the broader context of people's lives, beyond technologies, in order to understand where and how ICTs might find some role, but how they might also be controlled. Many researchers who use the domestication approach refer back to the classic components first formulated in the early 1990s, and these are still valuable in terms of sensitising researchers to the possible areas of enquiry. But the article also aims to convey a sense of how things have moved on, how domestication has been developed in different directions by a body of work over many years. We have examples of where this form of micro-analysis can be used to provide insights into wider issues, but where and how, in the case of cross-cultural analysis, it could be further developed.

The study of children's domestication of smartphones and tablets did not attempt to cover every aspect of domestication – no single study ever does. However, it did show what processes like appropriation could look like, and how time and space issues were relevant to use. It showed how the qualitative data could be combined with quantitative material, and indeed be used to reflect upon what lies behind the statistics and why they may or may not change. Where possible, reasons for possible cross-cultural variation were noted. Finally, the case study indicated why

understanding the constraints on children's use was relevant for the wider concerns about online risk.

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