Despite hearing that Mercury’s current orbit is disrupting our ability to communicate at the present time, I rather fortuitously learned last night that a BBC Radio 4 series has just started looking into the history of private life. I wish I could claim that this coincidence, in terms of content, with my initial blog posting for Connected Communities was all exquisitely planned but the truth is far less strategic on my part.

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The 30 programmes-strong series, which started yesterday, looks at the hidden history of the home over the past 400 years. While a primary reaction might be that this will be of little relevance to us in Connected Communities, on closer inspection a number of interesting ties emerge. In the half hour discussion used to launch the programme, then, Professor Amanda Vickery argues that “households are the founding social and spiritual unit of society in the early modern period” and that they are the platform for our engagement with the public.
world. Through her socio-historical analysis of first-hand accounts from letters and diaries, then, we hear that over time distinctions between the private and public spheres have been far from stable.

Moving to the present, anthropologist Dr Daniel Miller points out the role of media in moderating this relationship between public and private. Specifically, he emphasises the ways that Web 2.0 platforms can expose the intimacies of the private domain to the public, even to strangers. For him, privacy is changing – as a result of the proliferation of new media – in ways that we’ll struggle to keep up with. But at the same time, this ‘privacy’ is being increasingly publicised.

The overarching theme, then, is that relations in the home might not be so much distinct from those taking place out in public, but rather that the former are a microcosm of the latter – interactions in the home are connected with the public world, and vice-versa. Fascinating stuff, and it might just stop me from tuning-in to Five Live for football results every morning!

As a small postscript, I also noted today that forty-five local authorities have approached the national housing and regeneration agency (the Homes and Communities Agency, HCA) to express interest in putting their land into its new programme for building homes on publicly-owned land. While the need for new homes in the UK is great, this rather stark transformation of public into private land (regardless of the grey areas) may have serious implications for our health. This is particularly true if the public land being earmarked is green or ‘natural,’ as I read with interest in Jonah Lehrer’s article earlier today, or if it could be planted to be so. As we look to provide housing for our growing populations, then, shouldn’t we also be looking to provide the green infrastructure to mitigate the psychological damage of built-up environments? How can this be achieved in the communities in which our project is going to work? I think it’s time for me to look back at the RSA’s long-record of tree-planting for some of these answers...
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