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Roger Silverstone's legacies: domestication

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Working with Roger for many years in various projects, some of which are described below, was always very stimulating. Apart from being a very sympathetic collaborator and indeed mentor, he was very sharp and could quickly develop ideas about how to proceed in any situation while at the same time being open to negotiation. His friendship, his personal touch and his intellectual contributions will be missed. This contribution to New Media and Society outlines one of Roger's many valuable legacies, the concept of domestication, describing its origin, Roger's projects relating to the concept and the subsequent development of this approach.

Domestication had its origins in a number of traditions and interests. If we start with media studies, by the end of the 1980s there had been a long standing interest in media audiences, but the dominance of semiotic approaches meant that there was a limited amount of empirical research on actual viewer or listener experiences. One of the early exceptions was Hobson (1980) looking at the role and meaning of television in the lives of housewives, and a few years later Bausinger (1984) had argued for studying ensembles of media and media consumption in the home as a collective process. Dave Morley, a later collaborator with Roger in the PICT (Programme for Information and Communication Technologies) funded project that helped develop the domestication concept, had started to examine how viewing was managed in households, with an emphasis on the gender dimension (1986). By the late 1980s there was a collection of international studies on how families watched television (e.g. Lull, 1988), a discussion of general findings from this ethnographic work (Lull, 1990) as well as a study of memories of early radio (Moores, 1988).

One interest behind at least some of these studies lay in the question of how the context in which people lived and experienced television helped them to interpret televisual texts. Another interest was in the role that television as a technology played in people's lives, how they tried to manage viewing and how they evaluated television. Arguably the first line of enquiry was less developed in subsequent domestication studies (Hartmann, 2005b), while the second was that area that was elaborated in this research.

Another influence was the emerging literature on consumption such as reflected in the work of Douglas and Isherwood (1980)**,** Bourdieu (1986), Miller (1987) and McCracken (1990). This literature examined how and why we choose these goods, and how we feel about, organise and use the things that we possess. In particular, this tradition looked at the symbolic nature of goods. One of Roger's main contributions was to take these ideas and develop them into a framework for thinking about how we experience 'media' technologies.

The last strand to feed into thinking about domestication concerned the very object of media studies. By the 1980s technologies such as interactive games and personal

computers were entering the home, competing for time with television viewing and even making use of the TV screen as a display. The arguments about looking at the ensemble of what was becoming known as information and communications technologies (ICTs) prevailed. This broadening of the domestication framework beyond traditional media was itself helped by the fact that by the 1980s the earliest studies of people's experiences with satellite, VCRs, home computers and the telephone had started to appear.

The earliest public and most cited reference to the concept of domestication was Silverstone, Hirsch and Morley (1992), which appeared in a collection of some of the first empirical studies of ICTs. The metaphor of 'domestication' came from the taming of wild animals, but was here applied to describing the processes involved in 'domesticating ICTs' when bringing them into the home. Roger and his collaborators developed a range of concepts to capture these different processes, the most well known being appropriation, objectification, incorporation and conversion. Respectively, these describe how the entry of ICTs into the home is managed, how these technologies are physically (and symbolically) located within the home, how they are fitted into our routines and hence time structures and how we display them to others, and by so doing giving messages about ourselves. In fact, there were slight variations in how these were defined in later publications as Roger revised his ideas (Silverstone, 1994; Silverstone and Haddon, 1996), one example being whether to regard imagination as a separate process.

There was an empirical dimension to this work both in this first project (involving first Andrea Dahlberg and later Eric Hirsch) and in the subsequent PICT follow-up project in which I collaborated with Roger. Unlike studies that focused on individual motivations and perspectives, as in the uses and gratifications tradition, all these studies emphasised the social relationships surrounding ICTs, often looking at the interactions between household members, their negotiation of the rules about ICT use, as well as tensions or even conflicts over that use. In other words, this research explored the politics of domestic life in depth, producing insights into why people choose (or reject) technologies and how they try to control the ICTs in their lives.

Much of this material was, unfortunately, not widely published. In the original study there were 20 case studies of nuclear families, but it proved to be difficult to make these available, and many subsequent commentaries seem only to be aware of the first case study by Hirsch (1992). That project was also provided an opportunity to explore different methodologies. While this was useful internally within the subsequent project, many of these reflections were not made public. The second PICT project went on to study teleworkers (Haddon and Silverstone, 1993, 1995a), single-parent households (Haddon and Silverstone, 1995b) and the young elderly (Haddon and Silverstone, 1996), exploring boundaries between home and work, the experiences of non-nuclear families and the transition to retirement, respectively. These studies took a longer term view, beyond the early period when acquiring ICTs, to consider how the changing circumstances of individuals and households altered their relationships to their technologies.

This material was used to comment on contemporary popular discourses and policy interest such as 'technological revolutions' and the 'digital divide' (Silverstone, 1995; Haddon, 2000). Later Roger was to argue that a certain amount of scepticism tends to

be built into the domestication approach (Silverstone, 2005a) and this is reflected in both the above texts and the work of later researchers (Hartmann, 2005a; Ward, 2005; summarised in Haddon, 2006).

By the mid-1990s the domestication approach had attracted some commercial attention in the UK. Hence, we conducted further studies looking first at professional middle-class households' take-up or rejection of cable TV and second at early Internet use in a five-country study. In other words, Roger was thinking about and refining ideas about domestication up until the late 1990s, as indicated by our attempt to integrate this with the social shaping of technology literature (Silverstone and Haddon, 1996). However, apart from reports, conference papers and the occasional book chapter, much of this remained largely invisible, in part because efforts always went into managing the next study. At least some of this material and work from the second PICT project has belatedly been made available (Haddon, 2004) but many researchers in the field would know little about this later work.

Arguably it was the adoption of this concept by the various researchers in other, initially European, countries that helped to consolidate the domestication concept.[1] In particular, Norwegian researchers in Trondheim, who came from a technology studies tradition helped to co-develop domestication (e.g. the collection by Lie and Sørensen, 1996). But there were some significant variations. Whereas the British (and many other studies) had focused on the processes at the level of the household, some of the Norwegian researchers considered 'domestication in society', e.g. the domestication of the car in Norway (Sørensen, 2005).

One particular development that stimulated European studies using the domestication framework was the two EMTEL (European Media Technology and Everyday Life) EC-funded projects that Roger created. This underlines the fact that he was also an organiser of academic debate and research. The first of these projects, in effect a network, produced mainly working papers, but they helped to create a dialogue between researchers from different traditions as well as countries. The second EMTEL project involved funded research, with some domestication studies appearing in Roger's *Media, Technology and Everyday Life in Europe* collection (2005a). In fact, this generation of domestication researchers went on the produce an edited collection which specifically re-evaluated the domestication concept after nearly 15 years since its introduction (Berker et al., 2005), including reflections from Roger (2005b).

Many of the critical discussions of domestication come from within the community of researchers making use of the concept rather than those from other traditions. For example, even when focussing on domestic relationships, there were critical discussions of Roger's concept of the 'moral economy' (Bakardjieva, 2005a) and also whether the focus should be on families, households or homes (as regards the latter two options, see Bakardjieva, 2005a; Silverstone, 2005b). The original British focus on the home is understandable, given that this is the site where some ICTs were mostly experienced, especially television. But the Norwegian researchers, for example, had from an early stage argued the case for looking beyond the home (Lie and Sørensen, 1996) and later the spread of portable ICTs, particularly the mobile phone, 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). In practice, both early and later studies had looked at groups other than household members and at sites other then the home, such as computer hackers in clubs (Håpnes, 1996) and participants in Internet training courses (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 become of interest (e.g. Lally, 2002; Ward, 2005).

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, 2005a). But Roger noted how quantitative methodologies can complement qualitative ones in domestication studies, and in practice various researchers were already exploring this option (e.g. Punie, 1997; Haddon, 1998, Pierson, 2005). Various studies also combined domestication with other theoretical frameworks and approaches, such as cohort analysis (Haddon and Silverstone; Haddon, 2004), Bourdieu's work on social and cultural capital (Hynes and Rommes, 2005) and the linguistic insights of Voloshinov (Bakardjieva, 2005b). Yet others had applied domestication to the world of work, arguing for the study of 'professional domestication', whereby new ICTs can be fitted into (or fail to find a place within) existing work arrangements (Pierson, 2005). And while various domestication studies had by now taken place outside of European, in Australia (Lally, 2002) and North America (Bakardjieva, 2005; Russo Lemor, 2005), one Chinese study more explicitly raised questions about the cross-cultural dimensions, observing different circumstances in Chinese households compared to the West (Lim, 2005).

These are some of the various ways in which domestication research has moved on since the early 1990s. While certain core features have remained, such as the focus on the context, domestic or otherwise, in which we experience ICTs, 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. Arguably it is being enriched both by these discussions and by the types of exploration outlined above. To let Roger himself have the last word, when reflecting back on 15 years of domestication research he observed *'All concepts, once having gained the light of day, take on a life of their own. Domestication is no exception'* (Silverstone, 2005b).

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Note

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[1] Within Europe, Dutch examples include Bergman and Van Zoonen (1999) Frissen (2000) and Rommes (2002). Belgian examples include Punie (1997, 2005) and Hartmann (2005a). Ward (2005a) provides an Irish example.