

Leslie Haddon and Roger Silverstone

Lone parents and their information and communication technologies

Report

Original citation:

Haddon, Leslie and Silverstone, Roger, *Lone parents and their information and communication technologies*. University of Sussex, Falmer, UK, 1994.

This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/62461/>

Available in LSE Research Online: June 2015

© 1994 The Authors

LSE has developed LSE Research Online so that users may access research output of the School. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LSE Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain. You may freely distribute the URL (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk>) of the LSE Research Online website.

SPRU CICT REPORT SERIES

No. 12

**LONE PARENTS AND THEIR INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION
TECHNOLOGIES**

**by Leslie Haddon and
Roger Silverstone**

November 1994

**A report on the ESRC/PICT Study of the Household and Information and
Communication Technologies**

**Dr Leslie Haddon is a Senior Research Fellow in the Media, Technology and
Culture Research Group, Graduate Research Centre in Culture and
Communication and**

**Professor Roger Silverstone is Director of the Graduate Research Centre in Culture
and Communication, University of Sussex and SPRU Associate Research Fellow**

Contents

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Origins of the Study
- 1.2 Aims and Approach of the Present Study
- 1.3 Design and Conduct of the Research

2. Key Features of Lone Parenthood

- 2.1 Significance of Lone Parenthood
- 2.2 Changes in Lone Parenthood and Research
- 2.3 Heterogeneity of Lone Parents
- 2.4 Work and Lone Parents
- 2.5 Income
- 2.6 Housing
- 2.7 Making a Home
- 2.8 Social Isolation
- 2.9 Family Boundaries and Relationships

3. The Moral Economies of Lone Parent Households

- 3.1 The Dynamics of Lone Parenthood
- 3.2 Space, Time and Control
- 3.3 Home
- 3.4 Social Isolation and Social Networks
- 3.5 Gender and ICTs

4. Implications for ICTs

- 4.1 Economic Constraint: Access to and Use of ICTs
- 4.2 Lone Parenting

5. The Telephone and Television

- 5.1 The Telephone in Lone Parent Households
- 5.2 Television and Lone Parenthood

6. Conclusion

- 6.1 Hardship
- 6.2 Technologies
- 6.3 Implications

References

The names of all the respondents in the study have been changed to preserve their anonymity.

1. Introduction

1.1. Origins of the Study

In 1987, and again in 1991, the Economic and Social Research Council awarded grants under its Programme on Information and Communication Technologies for two projects on the domestic environment of information and communication technologies (ICTs). The aims of the projects were to conduct basic research into the relationship between families and households and their information and communication technologies in order to contribute to academic and policy debate.

The need for research was premised on the lack of detailed understanding of the social and cultural factors that affected the adoption and use of new technologies and services in the home. It was also premised on the lack of detailed understanding of the dynamics and consequences of that adoption and use. A new generation of ICTs based around the convergence of computer and video technology, advances in telecommunications, new delivery systems and the possibility of new interactive interfaces, all gave, and are still giving, grounds both for hope and anxiety. Hopes were, and still are, focused on the possibilities of integrating families and households into an increasingly sophisticated and responsive world of communication and information (eg. Bangemann, 1994). Anxieties were, and still are, grounded in questions surrounding the possible consequences of social isolation or alienation, as well as the possible effects of a division between information rich and poor, that might result. Manufacturers of new technologies as well as those marketing new services were also keen to understand the changing market and the likely factors that would affect future demand. Policy makers in government and elsewhere (at least some of them) wanted to understand the social dimensions of innovation both in technological change and its consequences.

The first phase of the research (1987-90) focused on the domestic lives of nuclear families, all of whom had a relatively high level of information and communication technologies in their home. The research involved a detailed examination of the families' everyday life. It enquired into those factors that encouraged or constrained the ways in which ICTs were bought and integrated (or not) into the home. It enquired into the ways in which ICTs facilitated or impeded families' relationships with the world beyond their front door. Class, gender and stage in the family life cycle were all seen as important in understanding differences between families and the precise character of each family's own technological culture. ICTs were not seen as determining changes in family life and certainly not, on their own, destroying it; nor was their use itself simply determined by wider social or cultural forces. The research indicated that it was necessary to understand the place of ICTs in the family and household as the product of a dynamic set of historical and social conditions, visible both in the micro-sociology of the family and its immediate environment but also in the macro-political economy of changing industrial and technological societies.

In the second phase of the research both the concerns and the approach were carried into three different kinds of domestic settings, differentiated both by household composition and presumed differences in their relationship to ICTs. In consecutive years the research focused on teleworking households (Haddon and Silverstone, 1993; 1994), lone parents, and the elderly (Haddon and Silverstone, forthcoming). The extension of the research into very different kinds of domestic settings, albeit all based in the South of England, provided a opportunity to think through some of the wider issues associated with the place of media and information technologies in everyday life (Silverstone, 1994) as well as offering a constant stimulus to confront those wider understandings as new research findings emerged.

1.2. Aims and Approach of the Present Study

The present study focuses on the lives of lone parents. The number of lone parent households in the UK is rapidly growing (see below). By far and way the largest proportion of lone parents is both female and in, or close to, poverty. Their lives could provide no greater contrast to those of many of the teleworkers who had already been studied, let alone the lives of the nuclear families of the first phase of the research who had been included in the research for, among other reasons, their relatively high level of technology ownership.

A study of the domestic lives of lone parents and the role of ICTs within those lives would open up quite a different agenda, one in which the focus would be both absence (both of partner and new technology) and, to a large extent, disadvantage. It would enable us to contrast their experience of ICTs and services with the supposedly more normal nuclear family, and in so doing address issues of the gendered use of technology, as well as the distinctive role that ICTs might have in households with limited material, social and sometimes cultural resources. We would also be able to assess, on the basis of existing patterns of use of existing technologies, what role new ICTs might have in the future in such households as well as hope to understand the nature and intensity of the factors that would get in the way of that role being fulfilled.

While the lives of lone parents are increasingly the subject of both academic and policy directed attention, no research, as far as we are aware, has focused on the role ICTs have had or might have in their lives. The issue is important, however, precisely because of the increasing pervasiveness of such technologies in everyday life, and the possible dangers of being excluded from full participation in such an increasingly electronically mediated world.

The methodology for the present research drew on the experiences of the first phase study. It involved qualitative case-study based research into the daily lives of lone parent households where the aim was not to provide a generalisable or representative tableau as much as an assessment of the various factors which contribute to the particular character of the domestic life of lone parents, and an understanding of their variation and dynamics.

This form of case-study based research is particularly appropriate because of the flexible and exploratory form of interview that can be used. Such interviews are conducted on the basis of a schedule defining topics and specific items for discussion but not requiring specific answers to specific questions. This allows those - in this case the lone parent - who are taking part to give detailed accounts of their experiences or perceptions and to cite instances where these are relevant. They are also encouraged to explore and formulate their attitudes towards the central issues being studied - both those which are predefined and those which are of most salience to them as individuals. There is the opportunity for them to discuss their underlying feelings and beliefs. Essentially, then, such methods allow the accounts and perceptions of those being studied to enter the research findings in a way that is usually impossible with pre-structured interviews or survey based methodologies. In this case it was precisely the ability of our subjects to negotiate their own agenda and define the particular character of their own experiences, both of lone-parenthood and of ICTs, that was crucial.

The subject areas covered by the research were as follows:

- household information including family/household size and composition, tenure, household income
- biographies of the lone parent, focusing on their relationship to information and communication technologies (principally television/VCR, radio and the telephone) both in their families of origin and in their present household, together with a focus on their educational and employment histories
- patterns of everyday life, including the use of time and space, and the relationships both within and outside the household (eg. with children, ex-partners, family and neighbourhood)
- the management of resources and the strategies relevant to the financial management of the household
- the acquisition, ownership, control and use of information and communication technologies.

1.3. Design and Conduct of the Research

The case study field-work was conducted during a six month period in 1993.

1.3.1. The Population

The population for the study comprised 20 lone parents, all with children of school or pre-school age. The population consisted entirely of never married or separated parents. There were no widows. Two members of our population were male.

The population for the study was assembled to include a wide range of economic circumstances, but with a view to representing roughly the imbalance within the recorded population of lone parents in the UK, between those living in poor circumstances and

those who had significant income from work or maintenance. The population was therefore substantially skewed toward the disadvantaged and this is expressed in the preoccupations of the final report. No attempt was made to control for the amount or quality of ICTs in the home. Indeed this particular study offered the opportunity to study a significant group of potentially low-tech households. Indeed this was the case; for example two households were without the telephone. All the remainder had at least the phone and one television set, around half had video recorders, but few had much else beyond walkmans and radios.

The lone-parent households in the study were recruited in a number of different ways: through organisations working amongst, and on behalf of, lone parents (whose help we acknowledge); from personal contacts and through snowballing within informal networks. They mostly lived in London and in Brighton.

1.3.2. The Research

The lone-parent in each household was asked to complete a time-use diary covering a full week. Details of their activities were sought with reference to their location, both inside or outside the household, whether it was undertaken alone or with others, and the use of technologies.

Subsequently in depth interviews were carried out following a predefined schedule identifying the main topics of discussion. These interviews, one focusing on personal circumstances, the other on relationships to technology, were conducted. We interviewed neither the child or children in the household nor any ex-partner. All interviews were tape recorded and fully transcribed. Interviews were supplemented by photographs of the main domestic space of the home and observations of decor and domestic arrangements. All interviewees were given a small gift as a token of our appreciation of their participation.

1.3.3. The Analysis

The analysis was conducted on the basis of the production of individual case studies. Each set of interviews was rewritten as an integrated case study which followed a common structure. The structure was in turn defined by the originating concerns of the research and the need to provide an accurate account of the history of the family/household and the individuals within it, their economic circumstances, their experiences of lone-parenthood and their relationships to information and communication technologies. It is on the basis of the completed case studies that the following report was constructed.

1.3.4. The Report

In what follows in the main body of the report we have used the case study material to explore a number of key themes relevant to our principal concerns with the place and

significance of ICTs in the lives of lone parents. Our aim is not to represent all experiences of lone parenthood or to claim the population in our study as representative. On the other hand we would like to suggest that many of the experiences we discuss have a wider relevance, illustrative both of the situation, for example, in some two parent households where one partner has the almost exclusive responsibility for child and house care, as well as to the wider set of concerns associated with the problems of living on low income.

In this report we start by reviewing the existing lone parent literature. This involves examining recent trends in the rise of lone parenthood as well as changes in its social construction and the way it has been researched. The heterogeneous character of lone parenthood, the images of work, income and housing are all discussed followed by attention on the experiences of lone parents both in home making and with respect to social isolation. During the following section, *The Moral Economies of Lone Parent Households*, we relate some of the more general understandings of the circumstances of lone parenthood to our own findings and perspectives, covering such topics as the trajectories through lone parenthood, time and space issues and social networks. Here we also explore some of the ways in which our case study of lone parents enhances our general understanding of households and domestic processes. In the final two sections of the report we focus firstly on the general characteristics of ICTs in the lives of lone parents, and secondly on the specific uses and significance of the telephone and the television.

2. Key Features of Lone parenthood

2.1. Significance of Lone Parenthood

There are over a million lone parents in the UK - an increase of over 50% in the last 20 years (Haskey, 1991:22), which itself reflects an increase in both divorces and a rise in single parenthood. This means that 1 in 8 children currently live in one parent families and that these family types make up 1 in 6 of all families with dependent children (Crow and Hardey, 1992:142)

2.2. Changes in Lone Parenthood and Research

'One-parent families' only appeared in official documentation in the 1960s. Of course, arrangements whereby one parent brings up a child have always existed but historically it was a phenomenon known by different names (e.g. 'unmarried mother', 'fatherless family') and regarded from different perspectives (e.g. as pathological). The change in name, some shift towards being regarded as a variant family form, the rise of pressure groups, changes in welfare provision and the collection of statistics on what is now more commonly referred to as lone parenthood all illustrate how this category and this experience is socially constructed.

Moreover, although the 1960s and 70s saw new milestones in the definition of what we now call lone parenthood, that definition has continued to change into the 1990s. If we look, for example at recent public discourses the 1993 Conservative Party Conference saw a revival of the vilification of lone parenthood as the source of numerous social evils. Legally, there have been recent changes in maintenance demands on absent parents, mainly fathers, and the actions of the agency implementing this (the CSA) has caused a backlash which has once again put lone parenthood in the news. And economically, there has been a decline in both real income and income relative to two parent households over the last decade. In 1978 the average gross income of lone parent households was the equivalent of 49% of that of couples with two children. By 1989, this had fallen to 35% (Bradshaw and Millar, 1991:18).

The study of lone parents has also undergone some transformation. That very process of social construction has become an object of study. While the poverty of lone parents, and implications for social policy, remains the main theme of research on this group, the terms of discussion have changed over time. For one thing, contemporary writers tend to look beyond economic considerations to consider the albeit related forms of social marginalisation. The lone parent is now increasingly perceived less as passive victim, and more as someone attempting to manage an often difficult experience by means of a variety of coping strategies (Hardey and Crow, 1991:2). Hence, the emphasis is not just on the problems faced by lone parents but includes how they attempt to mobilise resources to overcome those problems and the 'process of materially and socially constructing their home' (Hardey, 1989:122). Such perspectives link with our own work on the creation of domestic spaces and thus it is these perspectives which will be the chief focus of this review.

In recent years there has also been more appreciation of the positive dimensions of lone parenthood, including some questioning of the automatic desirability of people living together and being identified as a couple. However, the experience of lone parenthood remains 'full of ambiguities' with an overall picture of 'resilience and inventiveness as well as unrelieved responsibilities and frustrations in the face of adverse economic and social processes of marginalisation' (Hardey and Crow, 1991:3).

The other movement in the literature is draw attention to the need to see lone parenthood as dynamic - in several senses. This can be seen, on the one hand, in surveys that examine quantitatively the various passages into, through and out of lone parenthood (e.g. Bradshaw and Millar, 1991). And it can also be seen in qualitative analyses which deal with the experience at a phenomenological level, showing how lone parent identity can be emergent as relationships gradually break up or can slowly disappear as new relationships are formed and develop. Explicit in this approach is that entering and leaving lone parenthood should be seen as processes rather than events, as transitions into and out of a category whose boundaries are blurred (French, 1991:128; Crow and Hardey, 1992:147-152).

2.3. Heterogeneity of Lone Parents

Researchers examining lone parents have repeatedly noted the wide range of material circumstances and the variety of personal experiences both of which necessitate caution when making generalisations (Hardey and Crow, 1991, 2-3). Nevertheless, there are some patterns to lone parenthood, especially perhaps the key differences emerging from the main routes into it. It is to this that we now turn.

The 1991 General Household Survey indicates that numerically the biggest group of lone parents come from marital breakdowns: i.e. those lone parents who are divorced (49%) and separated (23%). Single-mothers are the next largest group (28%), while the smallest is widows and widowers (9%). Because of their small relatively numbers, the latter are not, on the whole, represented in this study. Although they provide a rough guide, these figures are based on official definitions which hide a more complex reality. For marital status is not identical with the pattern of relationships: some 'single' mothers have never experienced a long term relationship sharing a household with a partner whereas others have lived as part of 'couples' and then split up.

On the question of gender, only one in nine lone parents (i.e. with main responsibility for the children) is male. These male lone partners are more likely to be widowers, with older children and hence have a slightly different experience of lone parenthood from that of the majority of female lone parents. Hence, although we did interview some males for comparative purposes, the main focus in this study is on female lone parenthood. It is worth considering, however, the fact that even when not the main lone parent, many male parents have access to their children, taking over the role of lone parenthood on an occasional basis.

There appears to be little on class and lone parenthood, perhaps reflecting the problems of existing measures of class in coping with especially unemployed women living alone. Data

on ethnicity points to the variation of lone parenthood amongst different ethnic groups. By virtue of the size of the group, in total numbers most lone parents are white, but, for example, within West Indian groups the proportion of lone parents is higher - accounting for one in four of all West Indian households (Haskey, 1991: 40). To try to represent differences in experience, two West Indian lone parents were included in our sample. Finally, there are geographical variations, with a considerable concentration of lone parents in inner cities. In fact, the biggest concentrations were in London boroughs, the notable exception being Brighton. Because of the location of the University and the main researcher, most of our sample were in fact drawn from these two areas. On one hand, this means we represent the urban experience of most lone parents, but maybe do not capture the more exceptional circumstances of those living in rural areas of smaller towns.

The sections below outline some of the key differences between different types of lone parent in terms of income, wealth, housing. We can note in addition a significant factor in the experience of both divorced and separated lone parents in contrast to widows and single ones: namely, the trauma of splitting up and longer term conflicts with ex-partners. A range of different effects this can have in terms of challenging self-identities, legal battles, conflicts over the family home and maintenance and the impact on wider social circles have all been noted (Clulow, 1991, 170-78). Often children can feel the wrench - more so when they are old enough to remember being in two-parent household and less so if they were very young when the split occurred. Indeed the ending of sometimes difficult relationships combined with the need for contact with ex-partners because of the children can add to the overall stress. Research has pointed to these higher levels of stress experienced by lone parents, principally related to low levels of income (Mednick, 1989: 445-6).

2.4. Work and Lone Parents

Since the majority of lone parents are women, and their labour market options are somewhat different to men, it is worthwhile comparing the employment of different types of lone parent with women who live in two-parent households.

%	working full-time	working part-time	not working
Married mothers	23	38	39
All Lone mothers	18	26	55
Divorced	24	31	45
Separated	20	27	53
Single	12	19	68
Widowed	21	32	47

(General Household Survey, 1991:27)

Table 1. Lone mothers and married mothers: employment

The difference in working full-time is not very different between women in couples and women who previously lived in couples. Other research has identified the latter as being predominantly older women with school-age children (Bradshaw and Millar, 1991:46). On the other hand lone parents in all categories do less part-time work than married mothers and this is quite clearly because the economics of lone parenthood, the point at which loss in benefits arise from taking on some part-time work (the poverty trap) force women to choose between full-time employment or simple dependency on the State¹. The other point revealed in these statistics is that it is single lone parents who are most likely to be dependent on Income Support.

Lone fathers, not covered in these figures, were far more likely to be working full-time - in part reflecting the fact that their children were often older and needed less childcare provision, in part that males often had higher earnings (Bradshaw and Millar, 1991:63). One last observation is that whether working part-time or full-time, non-manual or manual, research has shown that lone mothers are in jobs that are on the whole lower paid than the average for female workers (Bradshaw and Millar, 1991:63). Hence, even when working, they can experience more economic constraints than women in two-parent households.

2.5. Income

Commenting on their general economic circumstances, Hardey notes that 'families headed by lone mothers make up by far the largest proportion of families in or on the edge of poverty (Hardey, 1989:125). In fact, other writers note that the term 'feminisation of poverty' was coined because of the growing significance of this group amongst the poor (Mednick, 1989:441). The following table shows that gross weekly income of lone parents compared to married couples living in households.

	£0 -100	£100.01 -150	£150.01 -£200	£200.01 -250	£250.01 -300	£300.01 -350	£350.01 and over
Married	5%	5	6	7	9	10	59
Lone mother	48	22	9	7	4	3	8
Divorced	32	30	12	7	5	5	10
Separated	43	25	9	11	2	3	8
Single	69	13	5	4	3	1	5
Widowed	29	18	21	11	7	4	11
Lone Fathers	22	24	8	24	0	8	14
All lone parents	46	22	9	8	3	3	8

(General Household Survey, 1991:28)

¹ These figures, of course, hide the fact that some of the women on benefits do work in the 'black economy' at times not declaring earnings which supplement their State derived income.

Table 2: Gross Weekly Income: Lone Parents a Married Mothers

In general, the figures show how lone fathers have more income than lone mothers, and amongst the latter the single lone parent has the lowest income - reflecting their greater dependence upon Income Support. Other research points to the fact that, especially for lone mothers whose relationship has broken up, the decrease in income leads to downward social mobility and for all lone parents economic loss and hardship can lead to a considerable amount of depression (Arendell, 1989: 336-7).

In one recent survey, 29% of lone parents said that they received some form of regular maintenance from their partner (Bradshaw and Millar, 1991:79). At the time of survey, the average was about £27 a week (Bradshaw and Millar, 1991:82). However, the welfare system operates so that any such money is then deducted from Income Support.

When we turn to lone parents perceptions of their economic circumstances, reported in the same recent survey, 3% described themselves as 'comfortably off' and 35% evaluated themselves as 'managing alright' - judgements which mirrored the fact that these respondents tended to be those on a higher income. However, 31% said they were 'not very well off' and a further 31% classified themselves as 'hard-pressed'. Furthermore, 29% said that they quite often worried about money, 44% said that they almost always worried about it (Bradshaw and Millar, 1991:31). Although a majority thought that they were worse off financially than before marriage, various studies have found a substantial minority of lone parents who feel 'better off' because they are now in control of the household income (Bradshaw and Millar, 1991:18, 31).

2.6. Housing

Although the housing experiences of lone parents of course vary, their uniformly low income inevitably restricts their options. Single mothers rarely have the funds to buy their own home, while many of those whose relationship breaks up move out of their homes, either because they choose to leave or agree to sell their homes, or because in the long term they cannot keep up the mortgage. As a result, in 1991 64% of lone parents lived in rented accommodation compared to 36% in homes which they owned - with or without a mortgage (General Household Survey, 1991:27). The comparative figures for other families are 22% rented and 76% owner occupation. In fact, local authority housing is vital - 58% of lone parents rent from the council - which can also affect the location of lone parents. Many are offered accommodation in urban estates, along with other 'deprived' groups, where amenities have already deteriorated (Hardey, 1989:132). Lastly, since the decline in local authority building and sale of council housing an increasing number of one parent families have been housed in temporary council housing (e.g. in hostels, bed and breakfast) (Hardey, 1989:127).

Lone parents are also more likely to share accommodation with others: in 1991, 14% of lone parents shared accommodation with another family unit compared to 4% of married couples who did so (General Household Survey, 1991:29). Most likely to share were single parents

(23%). Those sharing include lone parents living with their own parents, who have been described as 'hidden' lone parents who do not make demands on local authorities nor appear in some official statistics (Hardey, 1989:126).

Commenting on the nature of lone parents housing, Hardey notes that 'a disproportionate number of lone mothers live in temporary accommodation, overcrowded and inadequate housing' (Hardey, 1989:125). Those whose relationships have broken up often have the extra burden of finding new housing, which often means a smaller space than they had before. Moving can take lone parents away from their established networks and those of their children, who may have to change school. On the other hand, the picture is not totally negative, with some lone parents gaining a sense of independence and perhaps making a break with a past relationship through creating their own home. And sometimes sharing accommodation with others can also have benefits in terms of providing the company that helps overcome social isolation.

2.7. Making a Home

When discussing the material side of 'making a home', Hardey notes that '65% of the total expenditure of lone mothers is committed to essentials of housing costs, food and fuel so that the acquisition of household goods presents a considerable problem.' (Hardey, 1989' p.128). Hence, it is common for lone parents, like many others on low income, to become experts at 'making do', to rely on second-hand markets and charity shops. In addition, lone mothers have to cope with the traditionally 'male' household tasks of home maintenance and repair, with many either learning new skills or utilising local social networks to provide the skills they lack (Hardey, 1989, p131).

Despite these constraints, many are 'keen to provide a home that offers the same degree of comfort and security as any conventional home ... and to escape the public image that the one-parent family is inferior' (Hardey, 1989:130). However, the poor physical condition of some accommodation can undermine such efforts and fears about security in some estates can mean that the flat becomes more like a fortress than a home (Hardey, 1989:133).

The more positive experience emphasised by many lone mothers is the greater sense of autonomy and independence through having their own homes. They no longer have to cater for the domestic demands of male partners, and could set their own standard of domestic work. They had more control over their lives, and over their children - some felt positive about not having to negotiate child-rearing practices (Hardey, 1991:133). In other research, lone mothers have mentioned the sense of control through being able to go out alone without asking permission, not having to ask for money and not having to consult a man before spending money - all of which reflected their particular experiences of relationships before becoming lone parents (Shaw, 1991:148). Finally, some of the advantages of being alone that have been cited include being able to watch what you want on TV and not having someone there all the time, under their feet (Shaw, 1991:149). Hence, the response of at least some lone mothers to the idea of a subsequent partner is to want to retain some of that control by having partners with whom they share only part of their life.

The other issue about autonomy concerned their relationship with their children. Hardey notes how it was sometimes important for lone parents to create their own separate 'adult space' within the home - when they could be an individual, not just a parent. This could entail setting up separate personal spaces, room permitting, or colonising spaces when the children were not around. For instance, Hardey reports cases where the living room was kept fairly free of toys and other impedimenta so that it could be quickly established as an adult space once the children had gone to bed (Hardey, 1989:135).

2.8. Social Isolation

Another theme from the lone parent literature is that of social isolation. This is by no means experienced by all lone parents. Besides, ex-partners can still provide emotional or practical support (French, 1991:136). However, in one major survey 'loneliness' was cited more than any other aspect, including financial difficulties, as the worst thing about lone parenthood - 48% of lone parents mentioned it (Bradshaw and Millar, 1991:14).

Isolation occurs at a number of levels. One is in terms of simply not having an adult partner with whom to share experiences. Apart from being adult company, this means 'lack of a companion, someone special, to talk to, to hold, to be with, who lives them, understands them and puts them first before anything else' (Shaw, 1991:145). Two points are worth making here. One is obviously that this experience may be absent even within some relationships. The second is that such desire for companionship stands in opposition to some of the benefits of being alone that have been cited above. Researchers in this area have therefore been well aware of the ambiguities in feelings and contradictions experienced by lone parents - ambiguities which can be reflected when there is the prospect of forming new relationships or re-marrying (Shaw, 1991)

Second, many lone parents, working or not, can feel trapped at home in the evening because of the expense of childcare and the lack of a partner to look after the children. Sharing childcare is also problematic because they often find it difficult to participate in circles which take turns to look after each other's children because they lack a partner to care for their own while they go around to someone else's house (Hardey, 1989:138)

Lack of income to participate in activities outside the home is another factor (Shaw, 1991:144), while many social activities are geared to couples rather than single women. Finally, for some, the effort of coping all day at home with young children leaves them too worn out to consider anything but recovering in the home during the evening. Hence, on the whole, lone parents tend to lead a more home-centred existence than do two-parent households. This has also been noted in what little writing there has been on lone parents' leisure, which has pointed to the relative lack of holidays and the weekly predominance of home-based activities reading and TV-watching (Streather, 1989:179, 183)

As a consequence of threatening isolation, family networks can play an important part in the life of the lone parent, providing practical, emotional and financial support. Friends too,

especially women friends, often take on a more important support role for lone mothers after the end of their marriages than it had been before they became lone parents. On the other hand, some researchers have added a note of caution that such support can itself be a source of stress (Mednick, 1991:447) and that there are 'problems of (family) boundary ambiguity when grandparents offer unsolicited advice about child-rearing or when children fail to turn to the custodial parent for emotional support' (Thomson and Gongla, 1983: 115).

2.9. Family Boundaries and Relationships

The final theme relevant to our concerns and which has been identified by social psychologists studying lone parents concerns family relationships. One facet of this involves the role of the absent, non-custodial parent in cases where a couple's relationship breaks down. Where the children remain in contact with, usually, the father they often still see themselves as being part of a two-parent family, and even if contact is not frequent the relationship with the absent parent may remain salient. This has led to the comment that 'Divorce (or any other form of marital dissolution) ends a marriage but not a family ... it changes the relationship between the parents (but) it does not end the relationship.' (Thomson and Gongla, 1983: 106). Writers on this topic note the stress that this can cause and note 'an interactively absent but psychologically present parent can increase boundary ambiguity and jeopardise the family's ability to reorganise.'

The second issue involves the relationship between lone parent and child. Here it has been noted that the authority structure in two-parent households is often grounded in an implicit coalition of two-adults aligned against the children. In lone parent households, researchers claim that the children are often 'promoted' and the lone parent 'begins to engage the children as if they were junior partners' (Thomson and Gongla, 1983: 107), consulting with them more in household decisions. These researchers also argue that a sense of equity, cohesiveness and closeness may be heightened by the greater social isolation often experienced by lone parents. Of course, where lone parents begin to form new relationships, this particular parent-child closeness and the child's status can be threatened.

While this type of analysis may underestimate the parent-child coalitions that can form in two-parent families and underplay parent-child conflict in lone parent ones, it does at least draw attention to potentially important relationships and forms of interaction within the daily life of these households.

3. The Moral Economies of Lone Parent Households

In the previous section we have set the scene by considering key specific dimensions of the lives of lone parents which will relate to our research. In this section our intention is to build bridges between the existing literature, our own framework for examining information and communication technologies in everyday life and the actual lives of lone parents taking part in our current research. Our concern here is with the particular and complex character of the domestic life of lone parents and its implications for the consumption and use of ICTs. The sections following this one provide more extensive illustration and analysis of the empirical findings from the research.

In previous publications we have attempted to formulate a way of thinking about the role and significance of ICTs in the home through a model of the process of technology's domestication. The model involves consideration firstly of the process of consumption itself: the various steps and stages through which commodities, both material objects and symbolic meanings, pass as they move from the public world of development and marketing to the private world of home and hearth. The model also involves consideration of the various different aspects of domestic life, distinguishing analytically between family, household and home as ways of approaching the social, the economic and the experiential aspects of our domesticity. It is this latter aspect of the model which provides the focus for the comments here, since it is precisely in the disturbances caused both by separation or divorce, as well as by the strains imposed by the demands of lone parenthood, that the complex nature of domesticity is revealed. This in turn has a strong bearing both on the present and future place of ICTs in these and other domestic settings.

We would like to distinguish, therefore between:

- the experience of the family
- the management of the household
- the meaning of home.

Each offers a different route into understanding our domesticity.

The family can be considered as a social unit both within the household and extending beyond it, offering support or generating conflict, but consistently the centre - especially at the present time - of ideological debates and an insistent and often conservative politics. The family can offer both challenges and support. For many lone parents their capacity to maintain their own family is dependent on continuing help from their family of origin (their own as well as that, in some cases, of their ex-partner). Parents and siblings can and often do offer material support (in the form of money, or hand-me down clothes and machines) as well as symbolic support (in the form of continuing access and communication, often via the telephone). An appreciation of the family life of lone parents has therefore to take into account not just the relationships between the lone parent and her own children, but the relationship between the lone parent and any extended family, without which in many cases, life would become well nigh impossible.

The household refers to the economic infrastructure of domestic life. As we have already pointed out, and as we shall see time and again in what follows, for many, if not most, lone-parents, the management of the household is the focus of considerable uncertainty and hardship, with consequences far beyond the problems of the daily management of income and expenditure. Most lone parents live in or close to poverty, receiving Income Support, and constantly struggling to make ends meet in the face - especially as children get older - of increasing demands to consume. Their capacity to manage material resources is clearly a matter for careful housekeeping, but it is also a matter of managing the on-going demands of everyday life within other constraints, especially spatial and environmental ones. Here too the moral economy extends beyond the obvious boundaries of the household, for the greater or lesser dependence on continuing support from an ex-partner, never mind the vagaries of the welfare system, impose constant externally generated strains. An understanding of the ways in which the lone-parent manages these challenges - to some extent mediated or facilitated by their albeit limited access to, and use of ICTs, especially the telephone - once again is a route into the complex web of the lone-parent's domesticity.

Home refers to the encompassing and containing *idea* of that domesticity, where all the feelings of security and anxiety that give a place (or undermine) its meaning are produced. Home, a concept that is easily and often romanticised, can nevertheless be considered the key term in understanding and evaluating the quality of our own and other's domesticity. Our capacity to create home, to feel at home, to return home, are all central in enabling us to find and maintain the degree of security necessary to conduct a viable daily life. The daily lives of lone parents are marked, very often, by more than their fair share of anxiety and insecurity: lives disturbed by broken or failed relationships, by the mercurial demands of landlords or housing departments, and by the increased vulnerability to many of life's familiar and usually manageable exigencies: the illness of a child; the breaking down of an important piece of domestic technology; missing the bus. Feeling at home, with all that that signifies (and which many of us take for granted) has to be seen, in the context of this research on lone-parents, as an achievement. It involves the management of space as well as time. And it involves the management of all that is necessary to imprint on what can sometimes be over-crowded, limited and temporary accommodation a set of meanings through which an individual finds his or her own private and personal security. This involves, among other things, the appropriation of both objects and machines, meanings and media - making what is publicly and generally visible (if not very often within reach) in the world outside, one's own.

Once again it is necessary to point out that home is not just a matter of what takes place in, and relevant to, the house. As many of our case studies will show, feeling at home depends on the experience of neighbourhood and community as much as on what it is possible to achieve behind the closed doors of privately or publicly rented accommodation. And once again the experience of this wider sense of being at home, is itself powerfully affected by the media's own representation of public space, and the consequent anxieties and fears that are often generated as a result.

Together these three dimensions of our domesticity make up what we have called *the moral economy of the household*. This in turn is a way of signalling the more or less discrete social, economic and cultural spaces that we make our own, that we see as private, and within which we work out and pursue our own patterns of life, conditioned by our biographies and life-experiences, constrained by the availabilities of time, space and material resources, and informed by our own attitudes and values. The moral economy of the household is a way of focusing on the relative distinctiveness of our various versions of domesticity and a way of highlighting their relationship to the publicly articulated values and practices that make up the world of commerce, industry and politics. The notion of the moral economy of the household allows us as researchers to approach the domestic lives of lone parents with an analytic framework that vividly illustrates their complex, contradictory and often conflictful nature. And *vice versa*, the particular character of the domestic lives of lone parents has forced us to rethink certain aspects of our early versions of the model.

Specifically, therefore, the domestic lives of lone parents - which in many cases, especially for those women who are not in work, comprise almost their entire life - are marked by distinct challenges and disturbances: in the interrelationship with ex-partners, in the control of children, in the organisation of time, and the management of space. Together they allow us to reinforce Hardey's view that 'it is necessary to approach lone parents and their children as households in their own right, and not as a mutant form of the so-called 'normal' two-parent family' (1991, 2). They also reinforce his insistence on recognising their diversity both in their origins and trajectories as well as in their on-going engagement with the demands of everyday life.

In the following pages we pick up some of these considerations as we review some of the more significant dimensions of the domestic lives of lone parents as they have emerged in our research and as they bear upon the status and use of information and communication technologies in the home.

3.1. The Dynamics of Lone Parenthood

The existing literature already indicates the key routes to lone parenthood which make a substantial difference to the whole experience: from never having had a regular partner, separation and/or divorce and widowhood. Our research underlines some of the other significant factors.

These include the speed of the transition, how much it followed conflict or was foreseen and the stress involved. For example, Linda Spear had been shocked by the affair her husband was having and the subsequent confrontation led to physical abuse and court orders which meant a very traumatic beginning to lone parenthood whose resonances still continued years afterwards. The degree of commitment on the part of the father to provide some support, financial or otherwise is important. Anna Hill was one of those had at least some security when her ex-partner continued to pay for housing and their child's requirement while Monica Metcalfe and Rose Carpenter enjoyed at least some

days off from 'constant parenting' when their ex-partner and boyfriends respectively were willing to take over childcare whenever asked. Finally there is the age of the children and attendant circumstances such as whether the transition coincided with major life events such as giving up or starting work, need to move house or neighbourhood or future ones education. To illustrate, the impact of the latter from our own case studies, Jan Beckett's move to higher education was a part of the way she was re-evaluating her whole life and led her to come into contact with other women at university who were doing the same. Apart from study introducing a total change in routines, the ending of her relationship with her partner was part and parcel of this re-evaluation.

We might add that there are also different trajectories out of lone parenthood. While the obvious routes are finding a new partner and the children growing into adulthood, both transitions can be blurred. A few of our sample had boyfriends or continued relations with their children's father but only saw them for part of the week - they still kept some distance in their relationship. The question becomes, at what point does the status of boyfriend change to that of partner, and what exactly constitutes being in the same household? Since having her child, Paula Evans had moved in with a boyfriend for a while until that relationship ended and then she moved out again. Meanwhile, Jean Faulkner lived in the building next to her child's father, who was 'around' for part of the week. This obviously complicated the boundary of this household.

In addition to such entry and exit trajectories, we would want to reinforce the emphasis of other recent studies which note that the experience of lone parenthood also changes through time. Our own research provides examples where work options changed (along with childcare ones) allowing or hindering part-time or full-time work: which in turn had a bearing on income and security. For instance, Mary Ives had gone from full-time teleworking, to full-time work on site, then part-time working once the strain became too much and was now being made redundant because her firm was relocating. Meanwhile, Jackie Berry had taken on part-time work once her child went to school and had extended her hours when changes in Government rules allowed her to earn more. There were a number of lone parents who experienced repeated changes in housing, such as Paula Evans who had moved through numerous accommodation over the years. Others took up involvement in further study and training - with several achieving some success in moving out of poverty and making a career from themselves. For example, Joy Barker survived on Income Support for years after her separation before training, getting qualified and getting a job as the co-ordinator at a drop-in Centre.

Yet others moved in new social circles and had new 'leisure' possibilities: for instance, Diane Smith, Betty Roper and Marlene Charles had met through going to a drop-in centre run by Newpin. It was somewhere to go during the day where they had the chance to talk while the children played together and also re-gain some self-confidence. In sum, lone parenthood is clearly not a static experience to be managed in a once-and-for-all but involves the on-going re-organisation of daily routines, new opportunities but also new problems to resolve.

Apart from the changes listed above, it is in the management of new social relationships, and especially the growing older of children, that the situation of the lone parent can be seen to be at its most dynamic. Growing children make new demands on space and develop their own friends, interests and activities. Their own greater independence means that lone parents become progressively less pinned to the house in the evenings and can develop more of their own social life. For instance, Joy Barker's children were now old enough to go out with her when she visited friends. But there are two sides to this development, as growing children also make more economic demands, as they try to maintain a place in their peer culture. Nor is it just the children's own ageing process which is important: we have instances where ex-partners wanted greater or less access to children over time, where the time the children spent in different households changed - with a bearing on the 'free' time of the lone parenthood.

The reason why it is useful for our particular research to note these dynamics is that as such family circumstances change so do the needs for, the dependence on, or conflicts over ICTs; and this is especially the case over the two most significant ICTs in lone parents' lives: the telephone and the television. It is these technologies which are significant precisely because the economic circumstances of most lone parents prohibit major investment in anything other than the most basic forms of technology, and often these are hand-ons from family or friends, or the product of the less or more amicable redistribution of the machines of the recent marriage or partnership.

Our research shows how the demands on these technologies changed. In the early days of lone parenthood, many were dependent on the telephone as a social life-line to a supporting network of family and friends, where even the certain knowledge of high bills was no disincentive when it was set against the need to manage desperate feelings of loneliness. In the context of additional strains of child-minding (especially in pre-school children) as well as the loss of companionship, the television could also function as a life-support. Later, and especially as children got older and moved into adolescence, peer group pressures and the perceived demands of a wider consumer culture were significantly focused on the use both of these existing technologies, and also new ones: for example in children's demands for games machines or computers. A number of lone parents in our study with children approaching that period of their lives expressed anxiety about their ability to manage as teenage demands, especially on the telephone, would increase. Alongside these changes, as the children became less dependent and as the confidence of the lone parent grew, the latter's entry or re-entry into the labour market marked a new (and for some the first) engagement with life beyond the domestic. And this too had consequences for their relationship with, and demands for, new ICTs.

3.2. Space, Time and Control

The typical types of accommodation that lone-parents tend to occupy were all represented in our study. Various interviewees had experienced a succession of shared flats, with varying degrees of success given that young children are not always popular with flat-mates. On the whole, we preferred to explore un-shared accommodation because we felt

that the dynamics around the role of ICT were easier to explore. Nevertheless, our interviewees could talk about past experiences and one of them, Andrea Cooper, was currently living with her brother and sister. Apart from *being 'steeped in domesticity'* from taking on a 'housewife' role in relation to both of them, she felt acutely the lack of her own personal space.

Lone-parents who continued to occupy the marital home like Monica Metcalfe, Anna Hill and Joy Barker had one less concern to worry them. But we too found that even they experienced economic pressures, sometimes facing rapidly deteriorating financial circumstances on becoming lone parents which had significant impacts on the quality of life at home. For example, Linda Spear actually inherited some of her ex-husbands debts and was forced to seek part-time work as soon as the children were old enough and had overcome the trauma because of the prospect of her house being re-possessed .

A majority of our sample were dependent on local authority or private rentals, reflecting the national picture. There were some 'successes': for example, Naomi Shaw eventually managed to find a comfortable and large enough flat and make it a home. On the other hand, many had to suffer a succession of temporary lodgings with little opportunity to settle and make the place feel like home. In keeping with the findings of previous research, some of our lone parents had very little choice over the nature or indeed the location of the housing that they were offered or found. For instance, Diane Smith was allocated an flat in an anonymous block miles away from the support network of her family. Until going to Newpin, she did not know or even see anyone locally and after a few years still did not consider the flat to be a home. Lone parents in such accommodation were often short of space. Betty Roper spent most of her week in the same room as her two children - a bedroom room in her brother's flat. After a year there, she certainly did not regard this as home, its temporariness being exaggerated by the unpacked bags of belongings scattered around the room. Meanwhile, Jackie Berry endured cramped sub-standard basement accommodation, making the sitting rooms double as bedroom at night so that her teenage son could now have his own room.

The lack of space had, of course, many consequences, not least for the privacy of those living together, and especially for the adult. A number talked about the efforts, with various degrees of success, to create an adult space. Space constraints also had consequences for the ways in which meals are taken, bed-times managed and guests welcomed. The point of interest for us is that they also affected ICTs: for example, how adult conversations on the telephone were conducted. The location of the television set or the need to provide a second set as part of the child-minding or distracting apparatus of the home, as well as the use of the video, were all to a degree determined not just by the physical limits of the domestic space but by the way these limits are managed on a daily basis.

Similarly in relation to time. Time too was a finite resource, and whether lone parents had pre-school children at home, bought in childcare while they worked or worked for part of the day while they are at school, the management of daily and weekly time was an

issue and a constant preoccupation, where once again, ICTs had a role to play. The lone-parents in our study often talked of the problems of managing time. Monica Metcalfe, for instance held down two part-time occupational therapist posts involving travel, was doing a part-time OU higher degree and had to constantly arrange the logistics of having her child met from school by various people. For others, there was sometimes the problem of filling their time, looking for constructive activities with young children in the daytime, like Naomi Shaw going around museums in London, or Diane Smith watching TV in the evening to pass the time once the children had gone to bed. Lone parents sometimes faced the particular problems of synchronising their timetables with those of others who may be at work and therefore not available for telephone conversations during the day when the lone-parent may have time on her hands, but who alternatively would be available in the evenings when the lone-parent was likely to be at her most committed. On the other hand, time with children was often structured by the school day and then reinforced by the television schedules, when for many lone-parents, an opportunity for relatively unpressured family time could be created.

Clearly the management of time was very often the focus of considerable effort and anxiety for lone parents. Whether because of the demands of young children or the effort of holding down a job while organising the home, there was often very little free time, very little personal time. For instance, Andrea Cooper general domestic circumstances denied her the time alone to sort out strategies to change her circumstances.

Andrea: 'The main problem I find is I can't organise myself to launch myself into a kind of working situation. From moment to moment everything is interrupted. Every train of thought I have is interrupted so it's almost impossible to sit down and sort my life out, think about anything and in the evenings I just collapse. When I get the kids to bed I'm just a complete zombie. That's the real problem. If I could organise myself then I could do things, but I can't rise above the daily domestic sort of mentality of it for half an hour to even sit down and think "OK, well if I do this and this and this, then I can go out to work for half a day and three half days I can afford to this".'

For those with more economic resources, while management of time and their children remained an issue, they at least had more control. For instance, with her considerable lump sum from redundancy, ex-stockbroker Veronica Bond could take several holidays a year and pay for childminders while she followed her own interest during the day. This was the most extreme example, but not a unique one, where she retained her lifestyle to which her child was usually made to accommodate. A continuing relationship with an ex-partner could provide some escapes and personal space if the children spent some time with them. Some days, more usually some weekends, could be occasions for the kind of freedoms associated with the lives of the single, as some lone parents such as Jan Beckett re-discovered for the first time in years their interest in going out to clubs and cinemas. But while such child visiting arrangements were sometimes handled amicably, flexibly

and with ease, other were more fraught, involving the anxieties of managing the transitions and the child transfers which were involved.

Running through these various practical and material concerns of space and time management are issues both to do with anxiety and control. This is what we might call the ontological level of everyday life (Silverstone, 1994) and once again we can see how crucial is the role that ICTs can play in its definition. Everyday life consists in the mostly taken for granted activities geared towards creating and maintaining a sense of security in the world. Our routines in time and space, their familiarity and predictability, provide an essential precondition for our capacity to manage daily existence. Many have argued how central established daily (and even annual) patterns of broadcasting are, for example, in this task. So, indeed, are the familiar and familiarly reassuring narratives of news and soap opera. Television, therefore, is in all senses of the word, a comfort, and for those, like many of the lone parents in our study, at least during the moments of greatest strain, it is a pre-condition for holding something of their lives together.

But television also has an opposite tendency. This is to create or increase anxiety. As we shall later see, Marlene Charles provides the example of a lone parent quite isolated from many of the ordinary securities generated in social networks, whose life was dominated by real fears of the violence or threats of an ex-partner was prey to the more generalised fears of a threatening neighbourhood. For her, and other lone parents sharing some of the same situations, these anxieties were often expressed in discussions over the amount of television their children are watching, or the level of violence (especially) that lone parents identified on their screens.

We shall also see how the telephone had a similar, and perhaps a similarly paradoxical role to play, since it could be and often was used to alleviate the pressures of lone parenthood, through contact, conversation and its role in the organisation of daily life, in the management of uncertainty and anxiety. But its economic costs and its marginal indeterminacies (the inability to reach the person called; the reality of the interlocuters' continuing separation both during and after the call) make it a double edged machine.

ICTs then are used in the control of anxiety but can be themselves, in varying degrees, a source of anxiety. The particular problem that lone-parents face is that the management of such concerns and worries has to be undertaken, for the most part, on their own. Having said this, of course, many of our respondents agreed with previous research findings in noting that being alone could be a blessed relief. Their capacity to create and sustain a more or less secure domestic environment, both economically and in the broadest sense, morally, was actually made a good deal easier by the material absence of their partner.

This last comment and the paradox that it identifies raises a more general concern. It has to do with both the creation and the meaning of home.

3.3. Home

While the material constraints that are mostly associated with lone parenthood had a direct bearing on their capacity to make, and feel at, home there us in fact often a coincidence and overdetermination of economic, cultural and political pressures. The further one descends the ladder of economic security, the further society tends to assume an equivalent moral descent is taking place. For example, Joy Barker was one of those commenting on the stigma of lone parenthood, in this case shown by her elderly neighbours.

Joy: 'They're very difficult. They don't like the fact that I'm now a single parent. I was OK when my husband was here. My children weren't noisy. They were quiet because they were younger. Now they're seen as wild and off the rail and I'm a slag.'

That stigma also allows the State becomes in its right to intervene in what for the better off would be entirely private matters. Betty described her time in Bed and Breakfast accommodation, where the theme of authorities' surveillance of single-mothers emerged.

Betty: 'In those places you're not allowed visitors in your rooms. You know, it's just like a prison. Now half the time I'm at their father's house. I wasn't able to do that in bed and breakfast because the council comes to check to see if you're there. They come like early in the morning to see if you're still there and if you're not there still they'll kick you out. Say they could come 7 o'clock in the morning and if I'm not there then what they'll do is look at your toothpaste, your bed, you know, to see if you've slept there and had a wash, you know, to see if you've been there.'

Just as others had found, the capacity our lone parents to create a home was one that was, in significant degree, dependent on the acquisition of second hand goods and a very careful monitoring of expense on consumables. It also involved a conscious or unconscious, permanent or temporary, lowering of economic and social expectations and a redrawing of the map of the reference groups against which one's poverty or disadvantage is to be measured. The lack of resources, both material and, in the absence of a partner, also human, had consequences for the economic and social security of the household. In many cases, more time was needed to do basic jobs, like shopping. Sometimes less time (and fewer skills) were available to make essential repairs both to the building and to the objects and technologies that it contained. Sometimes stereos or videos lay unrepaired, awaiting the attention of a friend with the necessary competence

The absence of a second parent, and for most the absence of a male parent, was significant in a number of ways, some previewed in the existing research. It meant an inability to even minimally share the housework. I created the need to master repair and maintenance skills - in other words to manage traditionally 'male' activities. For some, like Joy Barker it meant suddenly having to deal with the household finances which her partner had previously handled. While those with ex-partners often did liaise with the fathers about their children's futures, Jackie Butler was one of the single lone parents who

missed the absence of someone to talk to about the problems of child rearing or child care. All of these are clearly problems which lone-parents had to confront, and to a degree master, if they were to create an acceptable (for her) level of domestic security and independence. Most, at least in our study, did. Male children sometimes filled the vacuum left by the absent father. More often the lone parent herself learnt sufficient new skills.

On the other hand, the absence of the partner, as others have already pointed out, could be seen both as a relief and a liberation, and one which above all enabled the lone parent to feel in control of all of her domestic space (and not just part of it) as well as the mistress of the moral fabric of her household - uncompromised by the different agendas or the lack of support of a partner. As Anna Hill noted:

Anna: '(I'm) a completely different person. Yeah. I was so dependent on him and I didn't think I had the intelligence or the wherewithal to do anything on my own or take responsibility for myself. (Now)'I've grown as a person and my life has changed quite a lot in that respect. Yeah, it just makes you more aware of what you want and what you don't want.'

The pride in being able to budget for oneself; the freedom to decide what to watch on television or listen to on the stereo, notwithstanding the constraints and compromises associated with child-rearing, were palpable, and in this our study confirms findings of more extensive surveys (Bradshaw and Miller, 1991).

These are some of the tensions in the everyday lives of lone parents. A sense of home has to be produced in the face of all of these uncertainties, contradictions and absences. The lone parents in our study followed a number of different strategies in their efforts to make a home, and it is clear that while most feel they were in control, few would suggest that the struggle was not a continuous one, and some were clear that their present circumstances - in temporary accommodation or in accommodation that perforce has taken them away from familiar surroundings - made it impossible really to feel at home.

3.4 Social Isolation and Social Networks

We have already indicated the importance of understanding the domestic life of lone parents, both with and without their technologies, in a wider social context. Indeed we shall be discussing and illustrating, at length, the role of information and communication technologies in mediating the public and the private in the lives of lone parents. But one general issue still needs to be raised. It is that of isolation, a theme discussed in previous research. We can point to a number of different kinds of isolation, as well as reasons for it. We can also make the point that while isolation of some kind is often the lot of the lone parent, particularly with young children, it is not always felt to be an issue, either because the lone parent herself feels happier without the involvement of an elaborate social network or because the lone parent actually had a lively and extensive social life.

The primary support for lone parents was in at least half our own sample provided first and foremost by family: in terms of financial support, childcare support and moral support. Parents, but also brothers and sisters provided help which was greater appreciated. However difficulties with this which others have noted were echoed in our own research. Joy Barker noting that while she accepted their help it made her feel like the poor relation while Andrea Cooper, who shared a house with her brother and sister, captured some of the ambivalence about family when noting how parents could sometimes be too helpful.

Andrea: 'They've had Finn for like four days at a time. I know that if I was stuck and I needed to do something, I'd phone up my mum and, although she's pretty busy, she would always want to have him and really want to help. Yeah, they're brilliant. I mean, they're too...they're a bit too interfering for me in some ways. They'll ring up almost every day. In a way, all three of us tend to be protecting ourselves against their help a lot of the time rather than seeking it'

LH: 'So in what types of ways do they want to help?'

Andrea: 'They want to come round and do jobs around the house. I mean, now they've got Sarah and I living without any men in the house, dad wants to come over and do things for us all the time. And mum, when she comes to visit, because they don't live that far away, she's just like a whirlwind through the house cleaning the toilet. She doesn't actually give you any choice of whether you want those things done and sort of re-organising the cupboards and things.'

LH: 'They also seem to have helped quite a lot financially as well though?'

Andrea: 'Yeah, they do. They run the car and they did things like buy a washing machine. But, I still feel that I have to put down barriers and I don't like taking anything from them because they... they're just too interfering, you know.'

As regards other social networks, it is important to recognise the effects of economic disadvantage on the capacity to socialise. Joy Barker reflected on her 'leisure time' with friends during the years on Income Support.

Joy: 'It was once a week - usually on a Sunday daytime with the kids and maybe once a month in the evening on my own without them, because of financial reasons really.'

Economic constraint is exacerbated for lone parents by the lack of support for their childcare. Many of the lone parents in our study needed to make significant efforts to make the time and resources available to go out at all, never mind to engage in a consistent set of social activities. Alongside this, the move to a new neighbourhood or a new kind of social life that often accompanies lone parenthood throws the lone parent very much onto her own resources, and this sense of social and cultural isolation is often reinforced by the expression of some of the prevailing and deprecating attitudes to lone parents in general as well as by the practicalities of integrating the lone parent into social circles which are organised around the couple. Anna Hill was feeling her isolation in part because she had

been excluded from married social circles after separating from her husband. And in keeping with previous research findings, Jan Beckett observed:

Jan: 'I think you undergo quite a major lifestyle change when you move from coupledom to single parenthood. Obviously routines in the home change but I think your social life, the change in that to me has been incredibly noticeable as well. We were on this sort of dinner party circuit, for want of a better expression, where we would entertain and be entertained by other people of a similar social standing. This now does not happen. When you're on your own you don't get invited round to other people's houses like you used to when you were a couple. It's just the way it is.'

Organisations like Newpin and Gingerbread have been created to ease the path back into some kind of normality and also to encourage the disadvantaged lone parent to gain more confidence in herself. For some, like Naomi Shaw, Gingerbread had been a vital route to meeting people who shared the same situation and was her major weekly social event. However, these formal organisations are not always acceptable, and some lone parents such as Anna Hill and Andrea Cooper felt both type-cast and stigmatised by any suggestion of involvement with them.

All of these dimensions of isolation inevitably have one more consequence. They can deny the lone parent access to the public sphere. Interest in, and information about, what is going on the world, beyond the immediate demands of managing the complexities of their own world, was for some a luxury. Their own perception of themselves as marginal and the experienced rigours of everyday life forced these lone parent to focus on the management of only those aspects of public life that impinge directly on them. And indeed some of the lone parents in the study are extremely adept and successful at that. But is not until a degree of release from child-care is possible, together with the confidence to enter or re-enter the labour market or the world of education that both the economic and political (as well as the cultural) horizons of such lone parents can be seen to shift. Until then, as we will suggest, their position can remain marginal and disadvantaged, and that marginality and disadvantage is increasingly being reinforced by the progressive inability to participate in an increasingly electronically mediated universe.

3.5 Gender and ICTs

Feminists have long and consistently argued that the social relations of technology are gendered relations (cf. Cockburn, 1992), and while the precise nature of their gendering is still at issue, there is enough evidence, both in relation to production and consumption, to suggest that at the very least gender is a significant variable in understanding the social and cultural status of technology, including information and communication technologies.

The present study is a study of gender in technology and we hope that it will contribute to the debates and discussions on the distinctive characteristics of women's relationship to media and information machines and services. However a word about our approach is

required. We have not, at any point in the study insisted on gender as a category for analysis. We have noted but not laboured this aspect of our subjects' identity. The lone parents in our study were (with two exceptions) female. Our concern to understand their lives with technology was premised on a clear focus on their status as female lone parents, and we were not in a position meaningfully to offer a gender based comparison. The study however attempts to be faithful to our subjects as lone parents and as women. Their experiences, are necessarily gendered experiences (which is not to say either that they are exclusively or entirely gendered or that male lone parents will not share some of them in at least some respects). Indeed the statistical predominance of women in the social category 'lone parent' makes that category almost by definition a gendered one.

It might be objected that both researchers, as male, will systematically fail fully to understand or fail accurately to represent the experiences of female lone parents. It might also be objected that the lack of comparison undermines any claims for persuasiveness. We would resist the first (without denying that qualitative research is always subject in some degree to the distortions engendered by cultural or sexual difference). We would also resist the second, but point out that further work which draws on the findings of the whole study will address the issues in a focused way.

4. Implications for ICTs

While the next chapter focuses on the particularities of different ICTs, this first discussion explores how lone parenthood can affect a range of technologies. Its two key themes concern the effects of economic constraint and the consequences of only one adult being present in a household with children.

4.1 Economic Constraint: Access to and Use of ICTs

This is more likely to be a gender specific experience - a female one - in that we noted earlier that male lone parents were more likely to continue working. In our sample, Geoff Viner did give up work for a while to look after his son, and so experienced some constraint. But even then, as a widower, the more common male route to lone parenthood, he had some security from the house and capital from the life assurance payout on his wife's death.

4.1.1. Work and the Social Use of ICTs

The term 'access' in the heading signals two things. First, the fact that we are relating to a broader debate which deals both with access to various resources and with barriers to that access: access to education, access to skills and competences etc. Policy issues often address the existence of differential access and the removal of impediments to access. At a second level, the term access indicates that we are dealing with more than the acquisition of goods and services: it can be just as important that people are able to utilise resources even if they do not own them.

This latter point clearly emerges in relation to lone parenthood and work. Facilities at work are regularly used by employees for social purposes, sometimes illicitly but often with the knowledge and acceptance of employers - as long as the practice is limited. So, for example, people use word-processors to type letters, and they use the work phone to make and receive personal calls. Those lone parents who still worked or had gone back to work, acknowledged how useful this was. However, many had had to give up work to cope with young children. These noted the loss of access to work resources which meant increased costs and inconvenience. For example, more than one person in our sample pointed out that in cases where relatives and friends worked, it was often easiest to catch them at their workplace or themselves be reached at work when phoning to make social arrangements. Once lone parents had to give up work they had either to phone friends from their own phone when the tariffs were still expensive, which might mean rationing the number or length of such calls, or else they had to try to reach friends at home at potentially more inconvenient times.

4.1.2. Interest in ICTs

Questions about access to resources assume that those resources are desired in the first place. It is therefore appropriate to introduce an initial note of caution on this issue in the

case of ICTs. The range of responses of lone parents to the ICTs in which we are interested is as broad as that from any other section of the population. Some have no or little use for, or interest in, facilities like answerphones, mobile phones, computers, video games, cable or satellite, or even TVs, videos, or audio technologies. Others go further and positively reject the idea of having these technologies in their home.

On the other hand, others wanted one or more of these technologies, but the lack of financial resources denied them that access. It is worth adding that despite some discussions of technologies and gender which portray women as being wary of ICTs, the female lone parents in our study often expressed interest in a range of technologies. Sometimes they felt that possession of certain ICTs would specifically be useful in relation to their circumstances as lone parents (e.g. a VCR to occupy the children). But in other cases, they would have liked ICTs such as computers or satellite access because of their general interests in life and their ambitions.

However, the very horizons of lone parents can be more limited by the experience of low income. They can evaluate the benefits of technology in an interview, and go through the exercise of discussing in principle whether it would be useful or desirable. But they do not necessarily think about such ICTs in their day-to-day life. Even where they do, technologies which are desired often have a much lower priority than other aspirations. For instance, if they had extra money, many would talk of preferring to spend it on childcare so that they could have more of a break from the home and increase their leisure options. For others, holidays were more important. Andrea Cooper, single and living on Income Support with her 2-year old, captured the sense in which many technologies were not really salient to her:

Andrea: 'If I had a higher income it might be different. I mean I just don't ... it's out of the question for me to think "Oh, I wouldn't mind a CD player", you know. I just don't think about it. I think things like "Oh I wish I lived in the country".'

As we have already noted, lone parenthood is a changing, not a static experience. Helen Leigh had originally been involved in low paid manual work. Subsequently, she had been a lone parent for eleven years, her relationship having broke up when her son was two. Much of that time was spent living on state benefits, until she began to study for a degree. At the time of the interview, she had a counselling role with a professional's level of income. When talking about the phone facilities she would consider having, Helen discussed how her horizons were changing, albeit gradually.

Helen: 'I watch 'Tomorrow's World' and things like that, so I have an interest there. I'm interested if people are telling me about the latest gadgets and everything. I find it quite interesting but I don't really feel it relevant to me. I don't find it relevant because I think I've been a single parent on a very low income, very isolated, for so long that modern technology has had no relevance in my life whatsoever. But now that I'm getting out in the world, my son's growing up, I can actually afford a life and a career for myself, then, yes, these things are going to become a lot more relevant.'

4.1.3. The Process of Access to, and Acquisition of, ICTs

Apart from the question of access to technologies via work, ICTs could also be made available through friends and relatives. This was best illustrated by the only lone parent in our study who was not on the phone: Naomi Shaw. Naomi lived on Income Support, was single and had a 2-year-old son. She was one of a number of lone parents who had very good relations with her own family, from whom she received considerable support. Naomi saw her parents several times a week and helped them out with chores at their home. She also used their phone when possible to contact her friends and make arrangements. Like other lone parents, she received significant gifts from her family: for example, her brother gave her his TV when he up-graded. Meanwhile, her father bought her *The Radio Times* each week so that she could plan her TV viewing - illustrating how we need to be sensitive not only to the more expensive hardware or software, but also to the smaller consumables relating to the use of those technologies.

Linda Spear was divorced with a 4-year-old son and 8-year-old daughter. She had experienced a major drop in income when she gave up her well paid job to stay at home with the children just before her ex-husband had the affair which led to their marriage breaking up. The video games software for her daughter's console were usually bought by her widowed sister and her parents. Her sister has also bought her a second phone extension and a handset as a Christmas present.

Linda: 'The one that she really wanted me to have, was the one in my bedroom just on a security level. Just so if I did hear any bumps in the night, then I could dial 999 without getting out of bed really.'

ICTs were not only acquired as gifts. Helen Leigh had stolen her second handset from a derelict home many years ago.

Debby Sadler was now living on Income Support with her 2-year-old son and 2-year-old daughter. When she walked out on her husband, he had kept most of their possessions. However, she had managed to take a spare telephone handset on one of the visits where she gave him parental access to their children.

Debby: 'I nicked it off of Bill. He didn't realise I don't think until I started using it.'

Debby offered another case of the family helping, in this case supplying a replacement TV. However such largesse is not always an unmixed blessing:

Debby: 'That's my uncle's and it's no good at the moment. I've got to buy a new one as you can probably see. It's just bearing up until I get some money. So I've got to buy a new TV.'

In fact, the image was of such a poor quality that it was sometimes difficult to see what was happening on screen. While other lone parents' technologies not quite so bad, it was quite common for those on lower income to have older, second-hand and cheaper technologies with few features.

Jackie Berry was single, with a 10-year-old son. She had been on Income Support for much of her adult life, but for the last few years had held a part-time job dealing with difficult children in a local school. This brought in slightly more money than in the past. Her's was a familiar story in that her walkman and her son's video games had all been bought as birthday presents. She herself bought the cheapest TV guide each week. She was also hoping to get an old BBC computer cheaply when her school upgraded its equipment - although her son was less than enthusiastic about acquiring such elderly technology when his peers had more modern versions.

Lastly, it is worth noting the time and effort required to save up for some purchases. Marlene Charles, a single West Indian mother with 12 year-old twins, had been on state benefits for most of her lone parenthood. She had managed to get the occasional temporary job while her mother looked after the children, but such jobs were now much more scarce. She had wanted to get a phone in 1986 when she moved into the flat. It was only just before the interview in 1994 that she felt that she could afford to have one installed - and even then was very worried by the prospects of phone bills. Returning to Debby Sadler, she had only managed to pay for the installation of her phone because of a rota whereby she could earn a little extra by cleaning at the local women's centre.

Debby: 'I obviously wanted a phone anyway but I couldn't come up with the money. And then finally I managed to get some money where I did the cleaning at Newpin and then the rest of it I just paid out of the children's money.'

4.1.4. Constraints on ICT Usage: The Phone

Apart from constraints on purchasing equipment, the economic limitations experienced by many lone parents also affected subscription to services and payment for usage. None of the lone parents in our sample had cable or satellite, although in the past some had subscribed when they used to live in two-income households. Of course, a number of lone parents had made the decision not to have cable or satellite - but lack of income often meant that not conceivable in any case. A clearer example of poverty restricting use was in the case of the telephone - and this was far more significant for most lone parents.

A majority of the lone parents we interviewed had concerns about their telephone use and felt some pressure to cut back on usage and to ration calls. Most phoned mainly during the cheap phone tariffs and many consciously kept their calls short. And where this was not the case, they worried about the consequences! Other ways in which awareness of economic constraint was manifest was in the mode of paying and monitoring costs. Telephone stamps (and TV stamps for the licence) not only provided some self-discipline in saving but also spread the cost of bills. A number of lone parents also checked in

detail their itemised telephone bills - and regarded itemised billing as a significant and useful innovation.

This need to ration calls was expressed by Anna Hill. She was separated from her husband, lived with her 7-year-old daughter and worked part-time as a secretary - on an income still below £5000 p.a.

Anna: 'I used to just phone people when I thought of them that minute, like ... a friend would pop into my head then I'd phone that minute. But I can't afford to do that any more. So I have to wait 'til after six unless it's ultra urgent.'

In fact, it will become apparent in the next chapter that lone parents often have more need of the phone than people in two-adult households. They can be isolated in the home and lonely. They often benefit from being able to keep in touch with support networks, and phones can be of considerable use in the practicalities of managing children. The phone also provides security, which another more gender specific dimension concerning the vulnerability, real and perceived, of women living alone with children. Many also found the phone useful because of all their dealings with the welfare state. For instance, Debby Sadler had to phone the council repeatedly in the daytime to sort out housing matters - which itself incurred considerable costs. While Naomi Shaw demonstrated that the phoning was not always satisfactory; like so many lone parents she was often in contact with the local authority.

Naomi: 'I write. I wouldn't waste my time phoning them if I had a phone ... I've rung them from a call box before now with a two pound phone card and it's run out before I've even spoken to anybody. By the time they've put through. I used to write quite a bit anyway but much more now, especially with social security and poll tax. I write to them every week.'

Concern about cost could also lead to cutting back on the children's usage. For example, at the moment Jackie Berry's son managed to make arrangements to meet friends with a minimal use of the phone. But she could foresee the day coming soon when he would want to use it more himself:

Jackie: 'I won't let him unless he pays for it. I don't encourage it. (But) That'll come, don't worry, in the next year or two.'

LH: 'Why, is he starting to ask to use the phone more and more?'

Jackie: 'Well no but he will do, won't he. Once he's in seniors he'll say "Can I phone so-and-so." You'll see. What happens now is I go up the school and he'll say "Right, I want to go to such and such's house". And he'll go (straight) from school, instead of having to come here and phone them up to organise it. It's already been organised and I just pick up his bag and come home.'

Jan Beckett was separated and lived with her 11-year-old daughter and 8-year-old son. She was currently studying for a degree and living on a grant. In her own youth, she had used the phone extensively to chat and arrange meetings with her peers. Economic constraint meant this experience was now being denied to her son as she re-evaluated what counted as 'necessary' calls. For instance, she had persuaded her son to walk across the fields to speak to his friend who lived five minutes away rather than use phone. She had also introduced a regime of charging for calls such that most of her son's pocket money was now spent on the telephone. Her other attempts to rein in expenses also impinged on her children.

Jan: 'Another thing I used to do was share transport for various children's activities. So I would often ring rather than pop round. Now I send one of the kids round to my neighbour to see who's taking and who's collecting from Brownies rather than picking up the phone.'

LH: 'Right. So you've created a whole new range of errands for your children to do to help out.'

Jan: 'Yeah. And you hear all sorts of horror stories as well about ... I know someone who had a lodger who was an 0898 addict and ran her up a bill of about £400 I think, something like that. So I'm quite tough on the kids about ... I mean there'll often be things on the TV now, competitions, where you can ring in with an answer. So they always have to come and ask first. the phone isn't there as a right. They always have to ask permission to use it.'

LH: 'Do they ring in sometimes to competitions?'

Jan: 'My daughter does occasionally, but she has to think about whether what's on offer is something that is worth winning. We had a big debate at the weekend about roller boots. She's already got a really good pair and she wanted to ring in for a competition that had roller boots. So we convinced her that she didn't really need any more.'

This discussion illustrates several points. The phone was no longer used as a convenient means to network locally and demands on the children's labour had increased to compensate. Jan's awareness of cost could well have increased her sensitivity to public scares about 0898 bill - when to date her own children had shown no signs of being 0898 'addicts'. Third, while her daughter was not banned from phone-in competitions, money worries had provided an incentive to negotiate the worthwhileness of using the phone for this purpose. Her daughter seemed to want to participate in the contest whatever the prize. Since participation had a cost, Jan insisted that it be evaluated by more utilitarian criteria.

This household also showed how economic constraint could make it problematic for lone parents to take on organisational roles. Jan helped in running the local Gingerbread group:

Jan: 'Of course the downside of having an answerphone is that people, once they've left a message, feel the onus is then on you to get back to them. I did at one point change the message when I had several events across a couple of months, saying that if it was a Gingerbread call, to call back. But yeah, I mean that is the one disadvantage. I think it probably does put your bill up a bit until you get used to it.'

For those lone parents not on the phone, the bill is obviously not an issue. On the other hand, the absence of the phone can mean that they sometimes miss out on social events through not being contactable, as Naomi Shaw noted:

Naomi: 'At Gingerbread there's only three of us who don't have a phone and that's quite ... I missed out on a couple of things because Dave who organises the trips, Variety Club will, say, ring up Tuesday and say "We've got tickets for children this Wednesday" and he'll phone round getting everybody together. I'll miss out on things like that. Even though they are single parents, a lot of people are surprised three of us haven't got phones.'

4.1.5. Economic Constraint and other ICTs

The case study which best illustrates how low income effects a range of ICTs is the Berry household. Jackie described her sensitivity to the electricity being used up by the TV:

Jackie: 'Leo has the telly on from the time he gets up, all the time he's in. That's the first thing that always happens is the television goes on. Then he'll go outside and leave it on. It drives me mad, more so now because with VAT being on electricity. He's got to become more aware that he must turn things off because television takes a lot of electricity because I can hear the meter tick, tick, tick, tick. The meter, see, is in the little hallway, so if I'm in the bath or something, I can hear it ticking over. I don't think people realise that, how much a colour TV does take. I think "Aaahh, money".'

In fact, she was so sensitive to these costs that she restricted her own TV watching turning the set off in the late evening and reading instead before she went to sleep. Even the fact that she listened to music programmes rather than discussion on the radio was ultimately influenced by her cost consciousness. She explained her choice:

Jackie: 'Because I'd be moving from room to room and as (the radio runs off) electricity rather than battery, it means you've got to miss half of it or (else have to) stand there and wait and that would make me cross. Plug it, unplug it and plug it in another room. Mind you, I could buy batteries for it but they cost money. And the

little that it's used, the batteries would probably go and leak or something after a while with it being damp out there.'

Leo did have a computer: an old Sinclair Spectrum given to him by his aunt when she emigrated to Australia. Given that this was no longer fashionable among his peers he had stopped using it and, as noted earlier, he was not enthusiastic about his mother's hopes of buying an old BBC Micro. However, he did have a Sega console. When Jackie had managed to get her part-time job two years earlier she had earned marginally more than when she had been on Income Support. After years of very tight constraint, she had decided to treat her son, and had hunted around to get the console at a bargain price.

Yet, he was still limited in the games he could play. He had bought one game himself and received two others as birthday presents. In principle, he could have swapped games with his peers to give him more access to boys' games culture. In practice, in the Berry household, the financial situation was interpreted in such a way that for Leo even this was not an option:

Jackie: 'He doesn't swap games for his Sega anyway and I never really encourage it. Because if anything happened to the game or it got lost or it broke, I'd get the bill at the end of the day for replacing something.'

His mother's worries about damaging other people's possessions for which she might have to pay resulted in her son's inability to access the IT that meant so much to his contemporaries. Nevertheless, he attempted to participate in boy's games culture by watching computer games programmes on TV such as 'Bad Influence' and by following developments in magazines:

LH: 'If he's not using the computer much, or so much, how come he's buying the computer magazines?'

Jackie: 'Well, I don't know. I did wonder. I did say to him about it but I think he likes to go into his friends and say "Well, I know how to do a such and such on a computer like they've got"'

Finally, economic constraint has a bearing on space, a point to which we return in the next chapter. The existing literature on lone parenthood notes how the low income experienced by many lone mothers especially limits the housing which they can afford, including the size of the accommodation. The Berry home was a one-bedroomed basement flat with a fairly small, cramped living room. It had also been broken into twice, which made Jackie sceptical about buying anything expensive even if she could afford it. Jackie described how in the past she had managed to half-watch some TV programmes while doing her chores in the kitchen, That had now become impractical:

Jackie: 'I used to have it quite well organised so that I could have the lounge door and the kitchen door open and I could still watch the telly if something was on I wanted

to watch. But it doesn't quite work out that way nowadays because the smoke alarm (in the hallway) goes off. I have to shut the doors so it doesn't go off.'

Such an example draws attention to the minutiae of low income where the sheer smallness of the flat can have an effect on TV consumption. She had bought herself an old black and white set for the kitchen, but that had now gone to her son Leo. The reason was that for many years they had shared the same bedroom. Recently she had moved out and slept on a sofa-bed in the living room. Giving him the TV helped to keep him out of her 'space' - the living room - on weekend mornings:

Jackie: 'Because at weekends he's not allowed in here until 8 o'clock, so if he wakes up, he puts the telly on and watches cartoons in there. Then he comes in here at 8.'

So far, this section has followed much of the literature on lone parenthood in focusing on disadvantage. Its novelty lies in showing the numerous and often subtle ways in which low income affects ICT consumption. We mentioned at the start of the report that a more positive form of analysis is starting to emerge which captures how lone parents are not merely victims: they also strive ingeniously to cope with their situation. In this spirit, we end the section with the Cooper household. Andrea described how she resisted her son's demand for video games:

Andrea: 'When they're this age you can just say "No" ... and also ... "We can't afford it" is an easy answer to it. It's simpler in a way (to say that rather than argue). We just can't afford anything; blanket sort of reason for everything. But if there's something you really want then you find the money, if it's not too expensive. But kids want everything all the time anyway, you know. They want everything they see. You have to say no about 99% of the time.'

In other words, economic constraint was used in part as a resource: pleading poverty could also serve as an excuse to control what technologies came into the home.

4.2. Lone Parenting

4.2.1. The Absent Partner and Parent

The first theme here concerns gender roles and technologies. As noted earlier, the responses of female lone parents to 'traditional male' household tasks, like some DIY and repairing equipment, had been mixed. Some had learnt these skills, or learnt them as new skills when they split up with their partner. Others learnt some skills, but felt they had a low level of technical competence and so asked for male help when something needed attention: from parents, friends or their new partners. So, for example, when Jan Beckett's washing machine broke down, she asked both her ex-husband and boyfriend to look at it - although neither could repair it in that particular case. Meanwhile, Jackie Berry's old audio equipment stood unused for years until a friend's husband was able to connect up the complex of wires at the back.

Male children could also take on a 'male partner's role' as when Jackie Berry's 10-year-old son Leo handled most repairs and DIY. He had established a role, one which commanded some respect, because Jackie found it difficult to deal with such matters. But some of the ambivalences about re-establishing traditional gender roles were best illustrated in the case of Helen Leigh. She had come from a working-class background with little technical training and certainly no experience of computers throughout the early period of her lone parenthood. She first encountered PCs when in higher education and had then bought her own:

Helen: 'I had a computer whiz kid living opposite me, you see. He was the father of one of my son's friends who's really into computers and doing things so any problem I'd pick up the phone and he'd come and sort it out.'

Eventually her 14-year-old son also developed some competence through playing on his home computer and could help rectify mistakes on hers:

LH: 'You didn't worry about him damaging your one?'

Helen: 'I did. I did first of all. Then when he could use it better than me I decided to let him have a free rein on it. There was something sometimes "file in limbo" and I thought 'oh no, what does that mean?' "Tony", and I'd call him and he'd sort it for me.'

Nowadays, when she was thinking of buying something extra for her machine, she sought his advice:

LH: 'He just specifies what he wants and you sort of get it.'

Helen: 'I haven't got a clue what it is. It's very unfair actually because he would be really willing to teach me and I think I should use his knowledge and his expertise to teach me about such things.'

LH: 'Does it make a difference that there you are with someone who has a relationship as being a son but has developed their own area of expertise where they are now better than you in that field. I mean, or is it very important to him, for example?'

Helen: 'It's very bad in some ways because, for example, the video. I leave all the programming to him. I say "Tony"... oh God this sounds terrible, I'm afraid to admit it ... "there's something on Channel 4 at 10 o'clock, can you set the video up for me?" So it makes me very lazy because I have somebody else around that can do it for me. You see, if I didn't, I would have to do it myself. And he's able to use it. Yes, you know, he can work it a lot better than me because he's more interested in working out how it works and finding out how it works.'

In effect, she was noting that she could probably develop technical competences herself, but even without a male partner in the house, it was very easy for some traditional gender roles to re-assert themselves.

One positive aspect of lone parenthood has been cited especially by women who have given up a relationship: being without a male partner could give them more control over their lives. This theme also emerged in some of our case studies and indeed came up specifically in relation to technologies. Linda Spear contrasted her control over TV, now, to her experience of TV when living with her husband:

Linda: 'I found it most irritating that I'd be halfway through something and go and make a cup of tea and come back and think "Well, I don't remember this happening" and find out I was on a different channel.'

LH: 'So your husband had that did he?'

Linda: 'Oh yes, yes, the channel hopper.'

Being a lone parent was sometimes viewed positively when it came to decisions about how to bring up young children: there was no need to negotiate a number of decisions with another parent (although, by the same token, there was no need to get potentially useful feedback from a second adult). For example, Rose Carpenter had a 1-year-old daughter and was living on Income Support. Although she still maintained a relationship with the child's father, they had decided to live in separate households and lead separate lives to a large extent. Rose had a higher education background and lead an 'alternative', somewhat bohemian, lifestyle - albeit constrained by low income. She was also a lone parent with a clear and articulate view of the values organising her life, including child rearing.

Rose had no TV. She was thinking about buying a monitor at some time - i.e. a screen with no tuner so that it would be unable to pick up broadcast TV but could be used to play videos. One advantage, which she had checked, was that such monitors required no TV license. But this innovative selection of her TV technology would also give her more control over her daughter's TV viewing. She explained how it would enable her daughter to get what she regarded as the best from TV:

Rose: '(It) means that you can go to the video shop, get videos, or if your child gets really keen on a programme, you can buy video tapes and get their friends to video tape them. (Its) to encourage a more selective thing and to encourage a building up of a library of things that she's interested in, in the same way as you build up a library of books. You know, and get grandma and grandpa to record things on tape that they think she'd like and give her that. But indiscriminate television watching is out. I mean, which would also mean that she would be able to have friends round here and they'd be able to watch things or whatever so that it's partly a social thing.'

While such decisions might have been possible in 2-parent households, they may well be easier to achieve as one person's vision.

However, as children grow older they also make demands and press for more involvement in negotiating household rules. Time and again it seemed that children were able to achieve a stronger negotiating role - in effect, more voting rights - when only one parent was present in the home. For example, Anna Hill outlined the arrangement she had to make with her 7-year-old daughter in determining what they watched on TV:

Anna: 'I'd like to watch that news on Channel 4 sometimes that's on about 7 o'clock. But I'm not allowed to watch the news at that time of night. She hates the news.'

Sometimes this meant that they had to compromise: at 6pm Suzanne refused to watch the news, and Anna refused to sit through one of her daughter's cartoon videos. So instead they watched something they were both willing to tolerate: *Mork and Mindy*.

Meanwhile widower Geoff Viner recalled how he and his wife had never bought a VCR while she was alive, but as a lone parent had taken into account the wishes of his 9-year-old son

Geoff: 'It seemed we'd got to the point where it was the next thing to acquire, I suppose. I guess we were probably one of the last of friends to have a video and so...I can't remember. I imagine there was a certain amount of pressure from Nicholas to have one. I mean we bought it at Christmas time. We were going away for Christmas and I suspect he was sort of aware of what films were going to be on and what we could record while we were away.'

4.2.2. Managing Family Break-up

Clearly 'family break-up' is not a neutral term and many who question family ideals, including a number of the lone mothers in our study, would be wary of its connotations of failure. They could point to new opportunities as well as relief from the tensions of sour relationships. In many sense, it might be better to talk of 'new household formations'. However, what the section heading is specifically meant to signal is how the transition from a two-parent household can nevertheless be traumatic, and give rise to lingering tensions, problems and issues.

Hence, this section applies mainly to those lone parents who have reached their current circumstances through the trajectory of divorce, separation or the ending of a two-parent household with unmarried partners. One effect is that these lone parents can be conscious of how the transition is experienced by their children and hence want to ensure a stable environment thereafter to spare them from further change. For example, Anna Hill was isolated in many ways: the few female friends that she had lived quite far away in an area where she used to live. But since her daughter was established at the local school and had

made friends there, Anna was unwilling to move and introduce any more upheaval into her daughter's life. An example relating specifically to technology came from the Beckett household, where the children had become somewhat averse to change after the separation of their parents. While Jackie was aware that she could have saved money by switching from BT to Mercury, her children's resistance had led their mother to drop the idea:

Jan: 'The children made a real fuss, Alan particularly. He doesn't like change. I remember he had absolute hysterics when we got rid of this ancient old sofa we had. We had tears for weeks afterwards because he didn't want us to get rid of it. I mean at the moment I'm trying to persuade him to get rid of his bunk beds because I feel he's a bit big for them now really and he doesn't want to do that. So it seemed like an unnecessary trauma in the end to me to have this other telephone line. I may review it in the future, I don't know.'

Handling relationships with ex-partners can also be difficult, for example, over issues concerning the children. Jan Beckett was one of the lone parents who noted that telephone technology can be useful in mediating such communication:

Jan: 'And I mean the telephone is a weird thing too, isn't it. It's often easier to talk to somebody on the telephone than it is face-to-face, if there's some sort of problem involved. Yeah? I don't know if it's because you can get hold of them like now, when you need them so you're not arranging a meeting which might be sort of difficult or confrontational. There's that sort of distance there. I mean I've had some very long conversations with my ex-partner on the phone which have probably been a lot easier to do over the telephone than they would have been to do face-to-face.'

The timing of using the phone to talk about sensitive issues to ex-partners (or others) could be influenced by a concern for the children, as Anna Hill noted:

Anna: 'I don't usually have long conversations when she's around. She doesn't allow me. Besides which there's lots of things I can't talk about in front of her anyway and that just makes it too difficult. It's easier to wait until she's gone to bed.'

Linda Spear, whose relationship with her ex-husband was very difficult, commented on what she called the 'secrecy button' on phones:

Linda: 'I use it when Marie is talking to her dad because if I just picked up the phone, they can hear me breathing so they know I'm listening. But if you press the secrecy button just as you pick up the handset, you can hear what's going on but they can't hear you. Very handy.'

Of course, splitting up can mean a reduction in the technologies available to the lone parent. For example, Anna Hill's replacement TV did not have access to teletext like the

old family set and she could not longer afford to subscribe to satellite. Although in this particular household, the losses were not deemed so significant, they did nevertheless have a bearing on the routines of both mother and daughter. Having only one TV instead of two previously available also forced more compromises over TV watching.

When her husband had an affair and moved out, Linda Spear had to send their TV and video back to the shop because she could not keep up the rental payments. She had then bought a second-hand TV for £25, and when that broke down she purchased another second hand TV and a video. She contrasted the equipment she could now afford with the technologies to which she aspired:

Linda: 'Really what I'd like if I could afford it is something like a twin 28" colour and digital sound, teletext, hi-fi, automatic remote job. But that one was just in the window and I like the look of it and it was £80 and that was about my price range. The one I want's about £600, you know, the JVC teletext, remote, digital sound stereo job. I just basically, if I could afford it, would go for a top of the range.'

While some lone parents had limited their ideals because of existing on a low income for so long, Linda had experienced a considerable drop in income and change in lifestyle from the days of her married life when she personally had earned a substantial salary.

Although households may have split up and re-formed, the economic relationships between lone parents and their partners were often not completely severed - mainly because of the children. When Debby Sadler left her husband she had left most of their joint possessions behind. However, she had subsequently persuaded him to buy her and the children a washing machine and was currently trying to arrange for him both to purchase a TV and to return their old VCR.

Debby: 'If I get the (new) telly, I will try and get it back and say to him the children sit here bored and I'll moan a bit. It normally helps.'

Meanwhile, Anna Hill had managed to persuade her husband that he should buy their daughter some games for her video console. However, some tensions remained between the ex-partners. Anna's husband had bought a computer for their daughter, which Anna also found useful for word-processing. Yet, she explained why she would not ask him for a copy of his word-processing software, but instead would buy it for herself, even though the package was quite expensive.

Anna: 'I didn't want to ask him to do that. Because then, what would happen then would be he would accuse me of only getting (their daughter's) computer so that I could use it. If I said to him "All right, good, get the computer and then I can use it", then he wouldn't have got it.'

4.2.3. The Experience of Children in Two Households

After households have split up, many children will still often spend some time with both parents - most commonly with the father having 'access' at intervals. Eventually, one or both partners may make new relationships - although still might remain a lone parent if a separate household is maintained. The first implication is that the different households can have different technological resources, as Linda Spear noted:

LH: 'Would the children be interested in getting satellite, in you getting satellite?'

Linda: 'Oh more than likely, yes. I believe my husband's got satellite. They've been watching The Simpsons round there and they're quite pipped that they can't watch The Simpsons here.'

Her children had clearly expressed a little dissatisfaction that she did not have satellite when their father did - i.e. she was seen as technologically deprived given their other reference point.

The second implication of the children spending time in two different households is that they may experience different rules and regulations, different regimes, relating to ICTs. Joy Barker, a divorcee with two sons aged 8 and 11, had been through a period on Income Support but was now relatively comfortable, running a Women's Centre. Earlier in the interview she had commented the fact that their father bought them certain computer games about which she had reservations because of their violent content. A similar theme emerged over the TV which they were allowed to watch in their father's home:

Joy: 'It's the violence that I don't like. Mark loves Terminator 2 and all those sort of films, which is what he watches. His dad bought him that video and he sees films at his dad's that I would never allow him to watch. We have discussed it but that's just one of those things. He doesn't ... he makes decisions what they watch when he's there and he lets them watch horror films and Terminator and other things I don't know about.'

From her perspective, she had lost some influence over this part of her children's lives through not being present when they were at their father's place. Of course, from the children's perspectives, the ability to operate in two different households might have actually given them more freedom. The same applied in Paul O'Brien's case, where his children were able to indulge their taste in horror films from the video rental store when they visited him every other weekend.

Paul: 'Their mother has never allowed them to have it because... I mean my youngest boy, his favourite author is Stephen King. He's into horror and the most horrific video that he could possibly get his little hands on, that's what he'll go for. Mind you they go round their friends' houses and they've all got (these) bleeding videos. You name it, they've seen it.'

5. The Telephone and Television

We now turn to examine lone parents' experience of two key home technologies: the telephone and the TV. The first section on the telephone explores what this ICT can mean to lone parents, including how the technology relates to themes such as isolation which have been discussed in the existing literature on lone parenthood. The second section on television and related equipment examines the various roles of TV, as well how media content can be interpreted in the light of lone parent experiences.

5.1. The Telephone in Lone Parent Households

5.1.1 The Role of the Phone: Emergencies, Convenience and Organisation

The telephone had a high priority for most of our participants - some could not do without it, others acknowledged that its absence would be a considerable inconvenience. Several mentioned how important it was to have access to a phone in emergencies. Jan Beckett drew attention to the extra salience this had for lone adult females:

Jan: 'When I had this succession of really huge bills, I did consider making it incoming calls only. But I think if you live on your own and especially with kids or emergencies or anything like that, I felt it was really important to be able to call out as well. I've discounted that for the time being.'

What counts as an 'emergency' and the precise role of the phone can, of course, vary. For example, the phone was very important to Debby Sadler for maintaining general social contact, but she explained how it had provided a means of obtaining urgently needed advice when her children were sick:

Debby: 'The children have been ill and like and (if I didn't have a phone) it would mean I would have to go right down to the phone box to ring up or try and cope with them. And if they're really seriously ill, I can just ring the doctor up and ask for information, which is what I've been doing lately; (the doctor has) been giving me some help and it's been OK.'

The phone could also provide some personal security for adult female parents themselves - again, a gender specific role for the technology. For example, Marlene Charles was having some extreme problems with an ex-boyfriend. He had beaten her up in her flat and in public, as a result of which she no longer dared to go shopping in her own area. Her security fears were therefore very specific. Although she had recently installed a telephone for convenience, she also pointed out its role as a means to summon help:

Marlene: 'People are able to contact me. If there's anything going on at school, I'm able to know about it because their school isn't in this area. My family are able to contact me. I'm able to just lift up the phone and dial instead of running

downstairs to a phone box. When I'm having problems with the person I'm having problems with, the police I can call straight away now instead of relying on the neighbours that won't pick up their phones, you know, while I'm bleeding or something.'

LH: 'So do you feel more secure with a phone now?'

Marlene: 'Now that I'm able to dial for the police, yeah, yeah. I've had to do it. When my front door was getting booted in, I had to phone the police.'

In fact, given the lack of response by her neighbours when she was in trouble, Marlene had no intention of ever letting them use her phone:

Marlene: 'When I've been having problems, I've never known one of them to pick up their phone and dial the police or ambulance for me. So I'd politely shut my door in their face if they did (ask to use the phone). I'm very bitter about that, you know. The police couldn't believe it. They actually knocked on their doors and said "If you do hear her door being kicked in or screaming and blah, blah, or if you see the kids running up and down - Mum's hurt - just pick the phone up. You don't have to give your name." Of course not. They didn't.'

'Emergencies' blur into exceptional and difficult circumstances. As an example of this, Jackie Berry referred to occasions when illness had rendered her housebound and without social contact - if not for the phone:

Jackie: 'I couldn't do without it because it's a ... because when I had a bad asthma attack a few years ago, it was my main link, or if Leo was ill, it was my main link to the outside world. You're even more pinned to the house than aren't you if either you or he is ill. (And) I hate it if I'm pinned indoors. I hate being ill. It's horrible. I don't like looking at the bare walls. I can't stand it. I hate being indoors.'

Later, we will be looking more closely at issues of isolation and loneliness and hence the importance of the phone for social contact. By no means all lone parents experienced loneliness and a number did not use the phone much for chatting. But even if only used occasionally, the very presence of the phone could provide a kind of general reassurance that the outside world was available if needed:

Martina: 'I don't feel so cut off. It's like having the car. If I never used it I would still feel better if it's just sitting there. I feel if I wanted to I could pick up the phone and arrange something or I could get in my car and drive off somewhere. It's psychological.'

The sheer convenience of the phone for lone parents has already been referred to, and was well illustrated by the case of Mary Ives. She had had access to a phone when sharing a flat in Stratford, but when she went into council accommodation she was

advised to wait to see if her tenancy became more permanent before incurring the cost of installing a new phone:

Mary: 'It must have been a month or two. I was running down to the (public) phone. That was a real pain because I couldn't make any calls after eight o'clock after Eileen had gone to bed. And of course if I wanted to make a phone call, I had to take her with me.'

LH: 'That must have been a bit inconvenient.'

Mary: 'Yes it was, yes. Yes. I definitely do find that I do need to have the phone in the house having a child because, you know, you can't run around the corner to the phone just when you want to.'

The difference from two-adult households or lone parents living communally was that there was no other adult with whom to leave the child. This was also appreciated by Betty Roper, the other West Indian girl in our sample. She was single and lived on Income Support with two young children aged 6 and 18 months. She had, for a time, lived in bed and breakfast accommodation, and now occupied a separate room in her brother's flat. In some ways, the payphone in the flat was inconvenient in that she had to have the right change. But it was better than nothing:

Betty: 'Well to be honest, it is a bit of a pain but I'm glad the phone is there anyway just in case if anything happens to them two I can pick up the phone. So it's better than nothing. I should be lucky to have the phone there, you know.'

Meanwhile, Naomi Shaw, the only lone parent in the sample not on the phone, noted another main difficulty with trying to ring people from phone boxes:

Naomi: 'Come six o'clock I can't go out and phone people because you're getting him ready for bed about seven so ... I can only ring people sort of from phone boxes if I know they're going to be in in the day, which isn't many people because they're all at work.'

The telephone could also serve as a significant support, helping lone parents to organise their life. For example, several of the lone parents in our study commented on the flexibility it gave them in terms of negotiating child arrangements with friends and ex-partners: they could easily phone and change arrangements at short notice rather than plan childcare or access far in advance.

A good example illustrating some of the extra logistical concerns which lone parents can face was provided by Monica Metcalfe. She was separated from her husband, worked and lectured as an occupational therapist and lived with her 7-year-old daughter. For such a working lone parent, the phone was a boon in terms of arranging for a rota of friends to pick up her daughter from school. In fact, the increase in the need to co-

ordinate such arrangements had been one of the main effects of becoming a lone parent, in Monica's. In addition, she was one of the few lone parents with a high enough income seriously to consider acquiring further supporting telecoms technology:

Monica: 'The one thing actually I have thought of is having a car phone because again it's mainly to do with Susan really. It just sort of frightens me to idea that I'm driving to pick her up from somewhere and I'm in a traffic jam and I can't get out of it and she's waiting for me to pick her up and I'm stuck in a traffic jam. That sort of scenario bothers me, especially as I'm going to start to work full-time as of September and probably will do more travelling. So I might even get a car phone.'

5.1.2. Isolation: The Phone as a Social Lifeline

Two preliminary points need to be made. First, we noted earlier that being isolated and feeling lonely are not identical. While the two often go together, some of those in our sample who had relatively little adult social contact during the week were not particularly concerned about this. Second, isolation can occur at different points in a lone parent's life and for different reasons. For instance, Paula Evans was studying at a university and living with her 6-year-old son on campus. She had often lived in communal settings in the past, and now that she was living in her own flat, albeit on campus, she was feeling lonely. With this one qualification, the most acute forms of isolation and sense of loneliness often occur immediately after the break-up of two-adult households.

At this point in particular the phone can be a 'lifeline' to deal both with loneliness and trauma. For example, Anna Hill had always used the phone a good deal, but it became even more vital when she first split up from her husband. She joked:

Anna: 'It was attached to my ear. It had to be surgically removed! ... I needed support and people were at the other end of the telephone.'

LH: 'Would that be mostly in the evenings?'

Anna: 'No it was fairly erratic. Just if I needed to speak to somebody, I'd just pick up the phone. There was always somebody available. If I didn't get it on the first try, I would try somebody else.'

Anna still regarded the phone as being an essential technology, although she had started to use it less over the years:

Anna: 'I've gotten more used to being on my own. I don't need to phone people all the time.'

For Joy Barker, the telephone was a highly privileged technology in her value system. She had run up some huge phone bills - we might consider these the price of loneliness -

and had at one stage taken on a part-time job at Marks and Spencers largely to finance these phone costs:

Joy: *'I think when my husband was here they were less. (Afterwards) I used the telephone a hell of a lot more (than now). I used to phone up Talkabout Lines and all those chat lines ... phone up and speak to people. That was because the children were sleeping and I was lonely so ... Massive phone bills - and New Zealand - all the people I knew that weren't here so it was like long distance calls and things. And then since work, probably a mixture of more ... there's more social in the last few years than there were before that. More friends and stuff phoning, family and work.'*

LH: *'Right. What appealed about the things like the Talkabout; just for the company or what?'*

Joy: *'Yeah. Because there's ten people on a line. It's great. I used to love it. I mean I was a bit sort of thingy at the time. I mean I wasn't right in the head but they was good, yeah. Find out who's on the line. Just chat to people.'*

LH: *'So why did you give it up?'*

Joy: *'Because my social life picked up so I didn't need it as much because I was doing more things. People were coming up in the evening and I sort of got myself in gear a bit more. Also I started the training so I was more ... I was at college in the evenings. I was doing different things.'*

Linda Spear still used the phone to overcome the fact that she felt trapped in the home with the children in the evening. But she also recalled how the phone had been even more significant to her when she initially became a lone parent:

Linda: *'I speak to my sisters quite a bit on the phone and I speak to (my friends) Maria and Alison and Jan quite a lot on the phone. Sometimes of an evening it gets very lonely and you think "Oh". I think the phone, not so much now because I'm more used to it, but at the very beginning it was my lifeline. I remember sometimes getting up at three in the morning and phoning the Samaritans but I don't do that any more.'*

Some of her current calls were very local, but distance was not the point - even where friends lived nearby these women with young children still could not get out of the house to meet face-to-face:

Linda: *'Martina and I are terrible. If we get on the phone it's invariably at least an hour, even though we see one another.'*

LH: *'Is she far away from here?'*

Linda: 'No, just round the corner. But I can't get out to see her and she can't get out to see me. She's got two children and I've got two children, so the only means of communication is by phone. I used to phone Paula and she was only next door. We did think about getting CBs at one time. We thought it would be a lot cheaper.'

On the whole, Rose Carpenter was neither isolated nor lonely: she had a wide network of friends and regularly saw her daughter's father. However, even she occasionally felt the lack of social contact:

Rose: 'Just on the occasional day, you've hardly actually spoken to another adult and just being able to ring up somebody and have a chat in the evening.'

It is perhaps worth adding that given the literature on the phone already notes the greater tendency for women to use this technology to maintain the family's social networks in general, there may be some degree of gender specificity in its significance for female lone parents.

One phenomenon noted in the existing literature on lone parenthood is the change in accommodation which can accompany becoming a lone parent. An example of this was provided by Mary Ives. When she had her daughter she had to apply for Council housing since living with the young child had strained relations with her flatmate. As a result, she moved out of the shared flat in Stratford into a Council one several miles away. Mary then found that she used the phone more to keep in touch with the circle of friends she had left behind:

Mary: 'I do find I need the phone now, you know. Just to get in touch with people. Quite often just local calls to my friends in Stratford, you know, to find out what they're doing and we'll get together, invite them round, go round there. Things like that. I think basically since I've moved out of Stratford; moved away from everybody into this area. I'm at least a bus ride away from everybody I used to know.'

Similarly, when Debby Sadler left her husband and eventually sought help from their Council, she was placed in temporary accommodation in an anonymous building in Marylebone, Central London - whereas her own family and friends lived in Tottenham, North-East London. Travelling between them on several forms of transport with two young children was extremely difficult, and so she had phoned them frequently instead. Now she was worried about the bill:

Debby: 'I don't know really because I've been on the phone so much lately for the past couple of weeks. I dread to think what it's going to be like. I'm going through this stage where I'm feeling a bit lonely. I've come to terms with it. I realise I'm lonely and I've said it at my (therapy) group (at the Women's Centre). And they've all realised, yeah, you've got a right to be lonely in the situation I've been in.'

Andrea Cooper lived with her sister, also a lone parent, in Brighton. In fact, outside inner London boroughs, Brighton has one of the highest concentrations of lone parents in the country. A few of our participants had moved there after becoming lone parents, after they had become aware of the cosmopolitan nature of the town and hoping as a consequence that they would find less stigma attached to lone parenthood there. Andrea, like some others, had therefore left her friends behind and had made new social contacts. However, the phone still remained important. Because she was fairly pinned to the home by her domestic routines she had little chance to get away to maintain her old friendships on a face-to-face basis:

Andrea: When your whole life revolves around being at home, you know, you do use the phone for (chatting). You don't get out and see people much apart from locally.'

In fact, the Andrea's parents, both on a professional income, had installed a Mercury link for their daughters precisely to provide them with cheaper access to their social networks. Even so:

Andrea: 'Normally I can just about manage to pay the bill. But I don't use the phone as much as I want to use it. I don't talk for an hour. I talk for ten minutes if I phone a friend long distance. I don't let my hair down on the phone.'

Lastly, the fact the careers of lone parents undergo transitions was reflected in the case of Helen Leigh. Having been a lone parent on a low income for many years, the move to higher education and then to a professional job meant that her economic circumstances had improved dramatically. She now used the phone less since she had bought a fast car with which she could quickly drive down from Luton to see friends and relatives in East London.

5.1.3. The Phone and Social Networks of Lone Parents

Lone parents can meet others in similar circumstances through formal organisations such as Gingerbread, although only a few of our participants had joined their own local group. Some had met other lone parents through going to bodies such as Newpin, a centre for women under stress. In addition, many others had developed friendships with other lone parents informally building up a social network of people with common circumstances. Jan Beckett noted how when she had gone into higher education as a mature student, this move was itself part of a process of re-thinking what she wanted out of life - a process that also led her to re-evaluate and give up her marriage. She observed that many peers of a similar age were going through the same transition:

Jan: 'I don't know how much it is to do with being a single parent but I have one or two friends who are going through traumas, I think it's partly the age as well. I mean sort of it seems to me that sort of the 30 to 50 time, especially for women, is when they start to re-evaluate their lives and where they're going, you know, as their

kids get older and when I actually split up with my husband I didn't know very many people who had done the same thing but I do now. Now whether that's because I've become involved in higher education. I think partly because there's quite a lot of people who are doing a similar sort of thing to myself who have recently separated and obviously being involved with an organisation like Gingerbread, you meet people so you may then sort of spend a lot of time, you know, talking to people on the phone about their problems or your problems.'

Such a process was by no means confined to higher education students. Linda Spear described the evolution of the phone-based network that existed between her and other lone parents:.

Linda: 'If I'm on a real downer ... then I can go on (the phone) for hours. Or if one of my friends is on a downer because a lot of my friends are single parents ... not by choice. I don't pick people that are single parents. I pick people, they just happen to be single parents. In fact, a lot of them have become single parents since I became a single parent, so they were quite happily married ...'

LH: 'So you've become a sort of an expert on this topic?'

Linda: 'Oh yes, I'm the Marje Proops of Hadley Lane. It's good because it's very rare that you're all on a down at the same time or something awful's happened at the same time. So you can talk one another through it. And the chances are one of you has experienced it at some time or other. So you can say "Look, this is what happens" or "Da, da and da". So you can actually help one another.'

Betty Roper observed how such a phone network was not only a social support, but a mechanism for checking up on each other to make sure there are no problems:

Betty: 'Sometimes, if they haven't seen me for a while then they'd phone to find out how I'm doing, if I'm all right because they know my situation.'

Such support arrangements between lone parents could sometimes lead to difficulties: mainly, when someone in the network overstepped the amount which they could call upon others. Marlene Charles had recently had a calls few in the middle of the night which had disturbed her sleep. One, at about the time of the interview, was from another woman who went to Newpin and who wanted to discuss her problems:

Marlene: 'Oh this woman that phoned me this morning, she's become the pest, I'm afraid to say. It's getting on my nerves. You see, I'm having my own problems and I have tried my best to help this lady and I can't do any more. Apparently each time that I've had these phone calls, a lot of other people have had these phone calls. So it's not only me. So I wish she'd stick to these other people at the moment because I really don't need nothing else on my mind, you know. I don't mind looking after her kids. I don't mind helping in a way that I can help. But I won't be woken up

two, three o'clock any other day and listen to nothing. It's doing my head in. Sorry.'

5.1.5. The Phone and New Relationships

The fact that lone parenthood is a dynamic process is shown by the fact that a few of the female lone parents in our study had found new boyfriends, even if they maintained their own households. As with single childless people, the phone had a role to play in building relationships, although the fact that their children were present could raise new privacy issues. For instance, Jan Beckett mentioned her embarrassment when the answerphone message from her boyfriend played aloud. She also now took more of these intimate calls on the bedroom handset.

New relationships can also break up. For example Marlene Charles was receiving disruptive calls came from her ex-boyfriend:

Marlene: 'One of my problems at the moment (is that) the person I'm having problems with decides to phone like at 2 o'clock, 3 o'clock, 5.30 - morning, early morning times. That means I have to leave my room, keep coming up and coming up. And I don't want to leave the phone off the hook because then my grandmother, I never know if she needs to get in touch because she's ill. So it's a bit of a bugger at the moment.'

LH: 'What, you can't get back to sleep again very easily?'

Marlene: 'No. I'm not sleeping very well at all. It's driving me mad in fact. So in suppose in a few weeks I'll have to think about changing my number and all the rest of it.'

LH: 'Oh, that'll cost you.'

Marlene: 'I know. But what can I do for peace of mind?'

Again, although this situation could emerge with someone who was single and childless, it helps to avoid stereotypes if we appreciate that lone parents can experience similar phone issues to others.

5.1.4. The Phone and Young Children

If these examples show an overlap with the circumstances of someone who is single and childless, lone parents also share experiences with two-parent households. For example, phone calls had frequently to be made after the children had gone to bed, as Mary Ives observed:

Mary: 'It's better these days actually because other people phone when she's gone to sleep because if she's awake she wants to talk to the phone. It's really annoying, you know. I'm making an important phone call and fending her off. She's trying to climb up me to get the phone.'

At least in two-parent households, a second adult can be around to occupy the child in these circumstances.

Because of her young children, Debby Sadler unplugged both the phone and radio every night when she went to bed and locked them up in the kitchen:

Debby: 'I disconnect them both at ten o'clock and put them in there and then I bring them back out when I get up in the morning 'cos (the children would) play with them and they break them. And if I leave the phone out like this, the phone bill would be twenty ... (because) they get up before me. They get up say five o'clock and I don't get up 'til about seven. I've got a key for the kitchen, so I lock the kitchen up and I keep this room empty for them to play in because sometimes I don't realise 'til I actually wake up that they're up.'

In fact, on one occasion when she had forgotten to put the phone away the children did indeed create problems by tampering with the ringer - they turned it down so that she could not hear incoming calls. Her ex-partner was at the point of calling the police after a few days to see if she was OK, when he managed to contact her elsewhere and they discovered what had happened. Once again, while lone parents may share common experiences with other parents, the situation can be exacerbated by their circumstances.

5.2. Television and Lone Parenthood

Whereas most lone parents were positive about the usefulness and desirability of the phone, television drew mixed responses. To a large extent, these depended on lone parents' previous biography: if the television had never played a major role in their lives when they were younger, it did not necessarily do so when they became lone parents.

However, the fact that it was important for many lone parents was noted by Naomi Shaw. She had found that she often felt left out of conversations when so many of the other lone parents in her network watched a good deal of TV and talked about it:

Naomi: 'Because I find when we go to Gingerbread on Friday everybody talks about the television. It's the one thing we all have in common and I don't. Because it seems to be, especially with single parents, you don't go out in the night and they all watch the telly.'

5.2.1. TV as Leisure

The above observation captures how TV watching is not always a matter of positive choice but reflects constraints and lack of other leisure options. Many on low income cannot afford other leisure outside the home and the childcare responsibilities which Naomi noted further reduce their ability to get out - hence the pressure towards adopting some form of home-centred leisure.

Naomi reflected that she herself had watched a good deal of TV when first pinned to the house with a very young child. But as it became easier to get out and she established a network of friends via Gingerbread she had cut down her TV watching. On the whole she regarded it as not being a constructive enough activity:

Naomi: 'I realised I was watching a lot and tried not to. I don't like the habit of watching telly. It's just the way we were brought up and I could be doing other things.'

In the same spirit, Andrea Cooper tried to resist too much TV watching. Her's was a hectic domestic day looking after her own son and her sister's daughter after she came home from school. This in itself did not give her much time to watch anyway. But she was aware of how much easier it would be to relax in front of the TV in her few free hours in the evening. When she succumbed to temptation this squeezed out the other things which she wanted to do.

However, not all lone parents had a multitude of alternative activities which they preferred. For example, Debby Sadler was not enthusiastic about reading and had no other hobbies to fill her time in the evenings once the children had gone to bed:

Debby: 'I don't do much else apart from sit and watch this telly or if the phone rings or have a bath. Because obviously I can't go out. Normally the programmes whisk away the time. Once I've seen the programme the times gone and I'm ready for bed.'

Helen Leigh had been both isolated and lonely even before she broke up with her partner because he was away working in another part of the country for most of the week. Their move to an idyllic home in the country had proved to be a disaster because she made few contacts in the rural area. Hence TV played the role of an important time filler both before and after becoming a lone parent: soap operas in particular giving her something with which to engage:

Helen: 'Oh yes. I lived for soap opera. My whole life was a soap opera, yes. I think I would have killed myself if I didn't have TV because I didn't read then either. I just used to sit in front of the TV all day and all night.'

5.2.2. TV as Company

Jackie Berry was one of several lone parents who referred to TV as providing a form of companionship when there was no other adult with whom to talk:

Jackie: 'Because it's nice to sit and look at somebody else. It's company more than anything.'

On the same theme, Martina Phillips observed:

Martina: 'It's just on. It's just a noise and it's a visual thing. It's like it's as if someone else's there. It's seeing other people. It takes the quietness off the room. I don't feel ... you know. If I was just in on my own and there was nothing, it feels more isolated.'

The role of TV as company was by no means limited to female lone parents. Geoff Viner started watching more TV when his wife died.

Geoff: 'Certainly I'd probably watch quite a lot more in the evenings because I was on my own and here and, I shouldn't say there was nothing else to do, but it would be on as a sort of company, as it still is. As I say, I can be working but the television will be on because I like that sort of noise. It sort of reminds you that there is a world outside.'

And for Betty Roper, TV's presence was important even if the children were awake:

Betty: 'Because if we're playing and the room's quiet, it seems dead kind of thing. Do you see what I mean? Quiet and boring ... I can't stay in a place where it's quiet, quiet. The television has to be on.'

5.2.3. TV as Child-Minder

As with two-parent households, the TV could be used to pre-occupy the children so that lone parents could get on with other jobs, or simply have a rest. The absence of a second parent to take over this role added to the pressure to use the TV for this purpose. Betty switched her set on first thing in the morning partly for this purpose. Debby Sadler put her set on to 'give them something to look at' while she prepared the evening meal. Jan Beckett added that the video 'buys some peace' so that she can find the time to study for her university course. And for Linda Spear, the TV and VCR counted as her most valued technologies after her washing machine. While she watched a good deal of TV herself, the main significance of these ICTs was the fact that they pacified the children:

Linda: They keep the children quiet while I'm doing the washing. It's peace, perfect peace. (If I didn't have them I'd want) a soundproof room, I think.'

Because of her concerns about children watching too much TV, Naomi Shaw tried to involve her son in her most of her activities, including the household chores. But even she relented and did sometimes use the TV as a child-minder:

Naomi: 'I tend to do that when I'm cooking. When I'm cooking I put him in front of the TV. Or if I'm cleaning the kitchen or the bathroom and you've got a horror running all over a wet floor and slipping.'

5.2.4. Time and TV

Yet another blurring of the boundary with two-parent households (or at least some of them) concerns the way in which 'family-time' - i.e. moments set aside for the being together - can become shared TV-watching time. For instance, Joy Barker commented on the slot from 7-9pm:

Joy: 'All of us sit in here and watch it. It's our family time to watch TV. All on the sofa...it's just their time to sit and cuddle. '

For Anna Hill, Sunday morning was another such slot:

Anna: 'Because I like to lay in, so then she'll come in to me and get in bed with me and watch the telly and we usually have breakfast in bed.'

Changes in work patterns - from unemployed to part-time to fully (re)employed for example - obviously have consequences for the organisation of the daily schedule and will in turn affect those times when they can be at home to watch television.

For example, Linda Spear had given up on some soap operas when she took on part-time evening work in the local video store because she missed episodes and so lost her place in the storyline. Comparing her current situation to when she was married, Debby Sadler did not think she watched any more TV overall. However, the times of watching had changed since she was now at the Women's Centre in the day:

Debby: 'I have watched about the same because whereas I used to watch it during the day in Canvey, I only watch it here in the evenings now. You see normally evenings I was either trying to get the children to bed or doing the dinner. Whereas evenings I don't do a lot of dinner now. I mean obviously I'm out and I can cook dinner out - buy chips and things, whereas here I just quickly do myself something and something quickly for them and I can sit down and watch telly.'

5.2.5. Space and TV

In our particular sample, only a few lone parents were faced with severe space shortages - but these do provide illustrations of the experience of some of those on low income. Betty Roper and her two young children were restricted to a small single room in her

brother's flat with all her clothes in bags on the floor. She did not consider this to be a 'home' and was looking forward to the chance to move to her own flat. In these cramped circumstances, the TV could serve as a light source and since it disturbed no-one else she could watch it in the middle of the night:

Betty: 'If I can't sleep then I'll see what's on. Sometimes I turn the TV on because I can't be bothered to get up and turn the light on when she's awake. But I turn the TV on to see what I'm doing. Like when I'm breastfeeding, I do it lying down as well. But if there's anything interesting ...'

LH: 'So in those cases you're not actually watching TV? You're just using the light from it.'

Betty: 'Yeah but if there's anything interesting, then I'll watch it. Sometimes I turn it on to find out what the time is. There's Teletext on there so I can play games on it, read my horoscope, anything. And you know you can read the news or anything on there. So it's not only television programmes I'm watching (But) if there's anything like Alfred Hitchcock or like Donahue, anything that's good that doesn't come on in the daytime (I'll watch it).'

Jackie Berry had at one stage served meals for herself and her son in the kitchen, but she had found that the area was too small. Hence, they had meals in the living room, which meant that they ended up watching TV while eating. She would rather the meal time was free of TV, but when it was in such proximity, as she notes, the TV was too easy to watch.

Jackie: 'We eat in here and the television is here. So it's turned round, I'm afraid. So it is watched.'

LH: 'What, you'd rather it was turned off?'

Jackie: 'Well, I would really, yes. But it's very difficult to make a rule because I've never done it and we eat in the same room. When we go to someone else's house, there's no television. We just sit at the table and we don't think of it.'

Here, space considerations had an impact on the very regimes concerning an ICTs use. Paul O'Brien too was on a low income and lived in a room with access to shared kitchen facilities. He had bought a TV partly for his children when they visited him every other weekend and observed that the lack of space meant that his two teenage children had resorted to watching more TV by default.

Paul: 'They tend to make the choice much more now to slob around and watch the telly or videos. Also I think that they tend to watch more television here when they're here because there's less space so there isn't other places for them to go within the house, hang around or do something else. That is a real limitation.'

5.2.6. Television Content and Social Experience

The experience of lone parenthood had a bearing upon how lone parents reacted to media content at a number of levels. For instance, in Anna Hill's case it affected her perception of the way in which family life was portrayed on TV:

Anna: 'Oh Yeah. It's an ideal, isn't it. It's a pure fantasy and I got very cynical about it and couldn't watch it for a while. There was such a lot of crap. No one lives like that. But I got over that.' (laughs).

In contrast, Helen Leigh never did see TV in the same way again after many years of thinking about her experiences. Her values had changed radically, a process accelerated when she went on to study for a social science degree. She questioned her own, earlier romantic ideals and desires for consumer goods, commenting that she had been '*seduced by images*' and '*brought up on fairy tales*'. Not only had her TV viewing habits changed but she now tried to sensitise her son to the nature of the mass media:

Helen: 'I hardly watch any TV. Well, I mean, it's all relative, isn't it. I watch 'Home and Away' and 'Neighbours' because we sit down and have tea and we talk about it, and I'm sort of like talking about how sort of like how he now has been socialised into this and happy families business and everything, this isn't reality, this is fiction. And he's always saying to me, like, "Why aren't you a mum like that?", you know. "My God, they're actors, they're getting paid. Pay me and I'll behave like that". So there's a lot of talk that goes on around Home and Away and Neighbours, these sort of like ideologies that they're pumping out. And I feel if he's watching and I want to watch it with him, to point out that there is this dominant ideology that's going on. He just thinks: 'Shut up mum' but I sit down and talk to him.'

For Marlene Charles, some of her experiences, including her experience as a lone parent had a bearing upon what she was prepared to allow her 12-year-old sons to see on TV:

LH: 'Are there any things that you censor in any way? You'd rather your sons didn't see?'

Marlene: 'Oh there's quite a few things, you know. Violent things I suppose. But then again they've seen so much of what's gone on in my life so I don't really know. They've seen things they shouldn't have seen but have had to see because they've been here. So they know already. I mean if they see a woman on the television bleeding or a man bleeding, you know, they've seen their mum bleeding. They hear about a death - they lost their other grandmother this year. They know about death. I don't know.'

LH: *'Right. So nowadays there's no point in ...?'*

Marlene: *'I just want them to be careful. I try and make them realise about, you know, the children that get abducted and things like that and about talking to people.'*

She later commented on how her own experiences of being beaten up by a boyfriend had affected her interest in police dramas:

Marlene: *'I used to be more into The Bill. I'm not that much into it any more. I suppose, as I said, because of what I've been going through and you see other people go through things ... That's another true to life thing, isn't it?'*

LH: *'But that one's too close to home, is it then?'*

Marlene: *'Yeah, I suppose it is because we've seen so many things happen. They're acting whereas we're living it, you know.'*

Lastly, for Debby Sadler, westerns on TV represented her husband's interest from which she was in the process of distancing herself. In addition, she felt she was less oriented to classic films, since they represented a past enthusiasm which she was now rejecting:

Debby: *'I wouldn't watch country and western because I used to go regularly to a country and western place so it gets a bit boring. I don't know about old time films - black and white films, I wouldn't watch many of them.'*

LH: *'Why is that?'*

Debby: *'I don't know. It doesn't appeal to me.'*

LH: *'What, the style of acting or...?'*

Debby: *'Yeah, and people go on about these old people (actors) and I don't know them. I don't want to go back to the old past again. Obviously, you know, people do but I don't know; I'd rather stay up this end of the 20th century.'*

Later when she was talking about her interest in *Top of the Pops*, she clarified further why she wanted to associate with youth and modernity after her marriage broke up:

Debby: *'I like watching Top of the Pops. I'm trying to come back to the 20th century.'*

LH: *'Why, do you think you've been shut off from it for a little while?'*

Debby: *'Well no. When I used to live at Canvey, I used to always (listen to) country and western and rock and roll. I used to feel like I'm old and now I know I'm only 25, I feel like I want to come back to the 20th century.'*

LH: 'Why did you listen to this country and western and rock and roll; because your husband's interested in them?'

Debby: 'Yeah. He's 30 and that's what his main interests are; country and western and rock and roll. (So) he joined clubs. The 'Mustang' we used to go to, it's called. And the one he's joined now is ... oh I can't remember. But he goes to one now still with his friends.'

In fact, even the audio equipment she desired, a CD, reflected this aspiration to rediscover her youth:

Debby: 'I would like to have a disc player so I can get back into the swing of the 20's again. Because I feel like I'm coming back to life in this day and age so obviously I'd ... yeah, I'd love to have one.'

These examples illustrate an important role for the media, one perhaps especially important for many lone parents deprived as they are, albeit temporarily, from the familiar and more or less intensive networks of social life. The media offer a route into their own identity, now, in the past and also, for some, in the future. The television, and recorded music too, of the past are associated powerfully with that part of themselves and their lives which they want to put behind them. Personal renewal involves a redefinition of their relationship, obviously among other things, to media consumption.

This discussion of the role the television and the telephone in the everyday lives of lone parents raises a number of issues about the salience of such ICTs for the management of those lives. From the representation of a world - of the family or the police station - which fundamentally challenges their own experiences, to the particular management of children's watching of violence in the light of more immediate experiences; from the attempts to use television as a focus for family togetherness to its function as a midnight companion, television has a significant role to play. Equally important, though in other ways, the telephone provides a more interactive route to the world beyond the front door, though one powerfully constrained by anxieties over its costs. In each case, though, use is confined (almost entirely) both to the basic level of broadcast television (though with some video use) and equally basic telephony. We will address some of the wider implications of this observation in our conclusion.

6. Conclusion

In this final section of the report we attempt to summarise some of the main conclusions and identify the main themes of the research on lone parents.

To begin with an obvious but still crucial point. It is that the lives of lone parents with and without their technologies is both distinctive and not distinctive when compared to the lives of those in nuclear families. The stress in this report on the particular experiences of lone parenthood should not blind us to the ways in which those experiences are of a piece with those of others in other domestic environments. The creation of home, the management of family finances, the challenges of bringing up children, the demands of life in the late twentieth century are familiar and common. Lone parents are not some exotic species whose experiences are relevant to none but themselves. Others too will struggle with inadequate income or housing; others will, as they do, confront the daily struggle of bringing up children in the face of peer group pressures and the seductions of contemporary culture; and of course others will be denied full participation in the public sphere by the constraints of poverty.

But the absence of a partner and the strains, often, of poverty are undeniable. Together they create a particular kind of domesticity with significant consequences, at least within the terms of the present research, for both the ways in which information and communication technologies are used and the limits on their use.

We have been careful not to suggest that all lone parents are the same. We have also been careful not to suggest that the economic hardship undeniably felt by many, if not most lone parents, is the lot of all. Yet statistical evidence as well as evidence from our own research suggests that poverty is a key dimension in the experience of the lone parent, and if anything our sample underestimates the extent of that poverty relative to national data.

6.1. Hardship

Economic hardship has profound social and cultural consequences. The lone parents in our study who are dependent on State support as well as those whose limited income fails to raise their earnings much beyond a basic level and are constantly struggling to make ends meet rarely are in a position to place much emphasis on the acquisition and use of ICTs. Other things and activities are clearly a priority. The daily demands of managing on a limited budget leave little time for what might be seen as the luxuries of new technology. And of course as many before us have noted, life within limited economic horizons does have consequences for cultural horizons too.

Many of the lone parents in our study were not in a position to imagine, never mind strive towards, a high-tech information and media environment. Their lives are to a significant degree dependent on the television and the telephone, but they do not in the main feel deprived by the absence of anything more advanced than basic and indeed often poorly

functioning technology. Some talk longingly of better reception on their existing set, or of hoping to get the marital VCR back, but teletext, satellite or cable, let alone interactive TV or multimedia are simply not in the frame. Equally, when it comes to the telephone, their concerns are focused on the management of its costs, and rarely if ever extend even as far as an answerphone, let alone a cordless handset or a modest service like call waiting.

In addition to the continuing pressure on costs and expense associated with the maintenance of existing media and information technologies pressures emerge via the peer culture of growing children for new and different machines and services, especially for access to games playing consoles and computers. Teenagers also make increasing and divergent demands on the telephone and the television. This peer group pressure is on occasion also supplemented by access to a more advanced and attractive media and information culture which the child's father might provide during periods of his care.

These comments on the effects of economic constraint on the capacity of lone parents to manage might give an impression of the lone parent entirely as a beleaguered figure, struggling with disadvantage, worn down by the constant pressures of child rearing and struggles with ex-partners, isolated from social contact and support, and increasingly ill-equipped to participate in a changing world. There are of course elements of truth in this characterisation. But it is at the same time only a partial view. One of the most striking things to emerge from our research was the capacity of our subjects, literally, to manage their lives. Far from being, as they are sometimes presented, irresponsible and incapable, the lone parents in our study accepted the realities of their situation, and were committed to transcending it. This may seem a patronising thing to say. It is not intended to be so. It is important to record our own recognition of the efforts that, on a daily basis, are exerted by the lone parents in our study to create and sustain a viable family life.

There is another and different point to be made. While it is obviously the case that lone parenthood increases the demands and strains of home-building and child-rearing. It offers, for many, significant compensations. Lone parents are relatively free within their own homes of the conflicts and the compromises of an unsatisfactory relationship. They have control over their own space and time in ways that would be impossible if they were still living with their partners. Many indeed talked about a renewed sense of worth which emerged once the trauma of separation and loss began to wane. The freedom to manage their albeit limited household budget, and to decide on how to bring-up their children, while never uncompromised by the demands of both the State and ex-partners, is appreciated by many. A number of lone parents in our study had attended Newpin, an organisation geared to the support and encouragement of vulnerable women, but even those who had no links of this kind (by far the majority within our research) were committed to improving the quality of their lives.

6.2. Technologies

Communication and information technologies may be seen to have little role to play in all

of this. But it would be a mistake to underestimate both their present importance and their future potential. From the use of the phone to conduct difficult conversations with an ex-partner relatively free from emotional or even on occasion physical pressure, to the use of the VCR or a second television set to create a certain amount of personal space within a cramped physical environment, these technologies can be seen to have strategic importance. Neither the telephone nor the television can be considered, in these terms, luxuries. They become - both of them - essential prerequisites both for the management of the inner life of the household, and in their various ways also its relationship to the outside world. We have suggested that this is especially true for lone parents whose lives with these technologies has so far been so little studied before now. Indeed the crucial role of the telephone in situations of structural isolation and the ever present threat of loneliness is one which has emerged most forcibly in our present research

There is little surprise, therefore, in recording the significance that is attached to the telephone as a life saver, and as key link for the housebound lone parent with family and friends, as well as with organisations and professional services that are often in continuous demand. It is a precondition for the security, both ontological and physical, for many if not all the lone parents in our study. It is, indeed, for many lone parents their sole means to make social or administrative arrangements outside the home. But yet the freedom to use the telephone to its potential (as a basic plain old telephone, let alone with enhanced or advanced services) is powerfully constrained by both the scale and the uncertainties of its costs.

Television has a parallel, though perhaps a more complex, role. It is seen both as a comfort and companion as well as a source of anxiety. Television provides an element of security in the family and household. It is familiar and regular in its appearance. It is the source of pleasure and information, the former sometimes based on nostalgia, more often based on the joys of family watching and the opportunities to participate - through inside knowledge of soap opera narratives and characters or active engagement in quiz shows. News too, for some, is important, and television news is likely to be more significant than that provided by the, costly, newspaper. Yet the relationship to news and to other mediated information about the outside world varies. It is very much a function of the culture of the household as a whole, and above all of the capacity of the lone parent to engage in matters beyond the immediate demands of getting through the day.

On the other hand there are concerns, as we have noted, albeit less intense than in the case of the telephone, over the cost of its use. The television is the focus of other more pronounced anxiety too, especially in relation to the lone parent's ability to control their children's access to what they see as, as others do, the possible negative affects of bad language or too much violence on the screen. The watershed time of 9.00 has added significance, perhaps, in households without an additional voice to reinforce bed-time.

In many of these respects lone parents are not, at root, much different from other television viewers. Their relationship to the medium is often moulded by prior attitudes and patterns of use. On the other hand the costs of going out, as well as the problems of

managing child-care, consistently reduce a lone-parent's ability to maintain an active social or cultural life outside the home. To some degree inevitably therefore, this enforced home-boundedness increases both their access to, and dependence on, television. Those who had little time for it previously find themselves watching it more, those who were always enthusiastic become even more involved. Yet this is not a simple matter of passive viewing. Nor is it at once and for all phenomenon. Lone parents, like others, discriminate in their use of television, and can be seen, like others, to use and control the medium in accordance with their values, standards and resources. The lives of lone parents, as we have already discussed above, are constantly changing and with those changes come changes in their relationship to their various media. How we come to understand the differences in their patterns of use, and the implications of those differences for a consequent understanding of the power of television over their everyday lives depends on how we understand the moral economy of their households and through that their relative desire and capacity to engage in the various attractions and repulsions offered by the medium.

6.3. Implications

This modest study of lone parents and their information and communication technologies raises a number of wider issues. It provides, we think, a striking example of both social and cultural disadvantage. Lone parents are not the only group in contemporary society whose lack of economic resources denies them access to basic social and cultural rights. Nor are they the only group whose lives are constantly being scrutinised by an increasingly, and paradoxically, intrusive State. Indeed this political visibility both distorts and reinforces their social importance.

Given all these various - political, economic, social and cultural - pressures, lone parents risk becoming increasingly marginalised and increasingly disadvantaged. That disadvantage is at root economic (but also of course still believed by many to be moral). We have shown how important information and communication technologies are - even at their most basic - in the lives of lone parents and how without them, or with the limited access imposed by their present costs, lone parents risk becoming even more isolated from the institutions and culture of the wider society. In the light of this one major conclusion it follows that as the next generation of technologies and services - ones that are trumpeted as having the capacity to transform the quality of our lives - begins to emerge and be marketed it will become essential that ways will need to be found to make them available to those who would not otherwise be able to afford them. The costs of telephoning, the cost of access to new information services, the cost of subscribing to satellite and cable channels, the cost of new machines and new software - all are *costs*. But all are also opportunities, and indeed, increasingly perhaps, necessities. Economic accessibility, of course, is no guarantee that the technologies and services will be bought, or once bought be used in ways either intended or approved by those who designed or marketed them. Nevertheless the progressive inequalities that the market will continue to impose on media and information provision in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century must be reduced if we are to reduce the equally progressive and iniquitous

exclusion of marginalised groups like lone parents from the mainstream of national and European culture.

References

Arendell, T. (1989) 'Mothers and Divorce: Downward Mobility', in Skolnick, A. and J. (eds.) *The Family in Transition*, Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Co., 328-340

Bangemann, Martin et al. (1994) *Europe and the Global Information Society: Recommendations to the European Council*, Brussels, 26th May

Bradshaw, J. and Miller, J. (1991) *Lone Parent Families in the UK*, Department of Social Security Research Report No.6, London: HMSO

Clulow, C. (1991) 'Making, Breaking and Remaking Marriage', in Clark, D. (ed.) *Marriage, Domestic Life and Social Change*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 167-187

Cockburn, Cynthia (1992) 'The Circuit of Technology: Gender, Identity and Power', in Silverstone, Roger and Hirsch, Eric (eds.) *Consuming Technologies: Media and Information in Domestic Spaces*, London: Routledge, 32-47

Crow, Graham and Hardey, Michael (1992) 'Diversity and Ambiguity among Lone-Parent Households in Modern Britain', in Marsh, C. and Arber, S. (eds) *Families and Households: Diversity and Change*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 142-156

French, Maggie (1991) 'Becoming a Lone Parent', Hardey, Michael and Crow, Graham (eds.) *Lone Parenthood: Coping with Constraints and Making Opportunities*, Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 126-142

Haddon, Leslie and Silverstone, Roger (1993) *Teleworking in the 1990s: A View from the Home*, SPRU/CICT Report Series 10: University of Sussex

Haddon, Leslie and Silverstone, Roger (1994) 'Telework and the Changing Relationship of Home and Work', in Mansell, Robin (ed.) *Management of Information and Communication Technologies: Emerging Patterns of Control*, London: Aslib, 234-247

Haddon, Leslie and Silverstone, Roger (forthcoming) *Information and Communication Technologies and the Young Elderly*, SPRU/CICT Report Series: University of Sussex

Hardey, Michael (1989) 'Lone Parents and the Home', in Allen, Graham and Crow, Graham (eds) *Home and Family: Creating the Domestic Sphere*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 122-140

Hardey, Michael and Crow, Graham (eds) (1991) *Lone Parenthood: Coping with Constraints and Making Opportunities*, Basingstoke: Macmillan

Haskey, John (1991) 'Lone Parenthood and Demographic Change', in Hardey, Michael and Crow, Graham (eds) *Lone Parenthood: Coping with Constraints and Making Opportunities*, Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 19-46

Mednick, M. (1989) 'Single Mothers: A Review and Critique of Current Research', in Skolnick, A. and Skolnick, J.(eds) *The Family in Transition*, Glenview, Illinois: Scott Foresman & Co., 441-456

Office of Population Censuses and Surveys (1991) *General Household Survey*, London: HMSO

Shaw, Sandra (1991), 'The Conflicting Experiences of Lone Parenthood', in Hardey, Michael and Crow, Graham (eds) *Lone Parenthood: Coping with Constraints and Making Opportunities*, Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 143-155

Silverstone, Roger (1994) *Television and Everyday Life*, London: Routledge

Streather, J. (1989) 'One-Parent Families and Leisure', in Coulter, Fred (ed.) *Freedom and Constraint: the Paradoxes of Leisure*, London: Comedia/Routledge, 175-186

Thomas, E. and Gongla, P (1983) 'Single Parent Families: in the Mainstream of American Society', in Macklin, E. and Rubin, R (eds.) *Contemporary Families and Alternative Lifestyles: Handbook of Research and Perspectives*, London: Sage, 97-124