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What's 'home' got to do with it?

Contradictory dynamics in the domestication of technology and the dislocation of domesticity

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ABSTRACT This article focuses on how we can understand the contradictory dynamics through which communications technologies have been domesticated at the same time that domesticity itself has been dislocated. The article addresses questions of historical periodization and the need for a more developed historical perspective on the futurological debates about the new technologies with which so much of media and cultural studies is concerned today.

KEYWORDS *deterritorialization, futurology, geography, individualization, mobility*

It's now a commonplace that the new networks of electronic communication, in and through which we live, are transforming our senses of locality/community and, on a wider geographical scale, our senses of 'belonging' to either national or transnational communities. In this context, it has been argued that we need to develop what Larry Grossberg calls a 'politics of dislocation' which is concerned with 'what it [now] means to be situated in particular places ... what different modalities of belonging are possible in the contemporary world ... and the various ways people are attached – and attach themselves affectively into that world' (Grossberg, 1996, cited in Allon, 2000; see also Allon, 1999).

Which brings me to the question of what 'home' has got to do with any of this. In this connection, I want to point to one – perhaps specifically British – articulation of these anxieties, which is represented by the growing saturation of UK primetime television with 'house and garden' and 'lifestyle, health and cooking' programmes (Brunsdon et al.,

2001). The filmmaker Patrick Keiller (2002) notes that 'until quite recently, it seemed as if the house, and domesticity in general, had become unfashionable subjects, in an era characterised by mobility', whereas nowadays, on British TV, 'images of domesticity flood the screen'. Keiller is referring to the recent proliferation on British TV of 'makeover' programmes about how to furnish, decorate, buy or sell your house. In one of his stand-up routines, the Scottish comedian Billy Connolly dismissively describes these programmes as showing no more than 'people sitting in their house, watching pictures of other people in their house – get a fucking life!'. However, following Brunsdon et al. (2001), I want to suggest that these programmes can also be read symptomatically as reflecting the contemporary obsession, in the UK at least, with the materiality of 'home' in the form of the privatized lifestyle of the domestic house(hold).[1]

John Sinclair (2002) argues that the spatial reality of 'home is now often displaced by its virtual meanings, as mediated by culture and communications'. It used to be said that one of the most unrealistic things about TV fiction in the UK was that it never showed people doing what is, in fact, the most common of all leisure activities – watching TV at home. However, nowadays one of the most popular situation comedies on British TV is *The Royle Family*. The key formal feature of the programme is that the camera is placed in the position of the TV set, watching the viewers as they watch it. The narrative premise of the programme is that, for many people, family life and watching TV have become indistinguishable to the extent that, in this fictional household, it is almost entirely conducted from the sitting positions of the viewers clustered around the set. Certainly, one could argue that some part of the programme's popularity is based precisely on its (groundbreakingly) realistic representation of much of UK domestic life, which takes precisely this form.[2]

As I have argued elsewhere (Morley, 2001), under the impact of new technologies and global cultural flows, the home nowadays is not so much a local, particular or 'self-enclosed' space, but rather, as Zygmunt Bauman (2001) puts it, more and more a 'phantasmagoric' place, as electronic means of communication allow the radical intrusion of what he calls the 'realm of the far' (traditionally, the realm of the strange and potentially troubling) into the 'realm of the near' (the traditional 'safe space' of ontological security). Electronic media can thus also be argued to produce a psychic effect which we might describe as that of the 'domestication of elsewhere' – a process whereby Hollywood brings images of the streets of the 'global cities' of the world to people everywhere, without their having ever visited them.

However, I was very struck recently when a friend, who lives in a small village in Central America, brought his 12-year-old daughter, who had hardly been out of the village in her life, to visit London. Of course,

this young girl was thoroughly familiar with much contemporary Hollywood film, which circulates, even in her rural location, on video. She had thus seen screen images of all the tourist sights of London on film, but her actual experience of the scale and nature of the city was a quite different matter. For her, London was both thoroughly 'familiar' (from film) and yet totally strange, and the contradictory nature of this experience was evidently hard for her to digest.

The contemporary media may well provide us with a secondhand sense of the 'global familiar' and also with what (in the words of the Tina Turner song referred to obliquely in my title) we might describe as a set of 'secondhand emotions' about them. But we should still remember that, nonetheless, whatever range of imagery they may be familiar with, for most viewers, their 'horizons of action' – that sense of the scale on which they can act meaningfully in the world – are still very limited. Moreover, despite all the talk of 'postmodern nomadology', so is most people's actual experience of geographical mobility. Thus, global cultural forms still have to be made sense of within the context of what, for many people, are still very local forms of life.

Theorizing place(lessness)

Following the lead provided by Franco Moretti's (1998) groundbreaking work on the geographical determination of narrative possibilities in literary fiction, I want to consider how attention to questions of geography can best inform our work in media and cultural studies. I shall be specifically concerned with the ways in which different geographies systematically produce different types of events and, conversely, with how certain types of events tend to happen in particular types of places. Returning, as I have elsewhere (Morley, 2000), to Foucault's (1980) insistence that our analyses must be sensitive both to the 'grand strategies of geopolitics' and the 'little tactics of the habitat', my analysis of the interlinked processes of globalization and domestication will attempt to bring together micro and macro issues. I want here to address questions of identity from the point of view of how we understand the idea of home and to address questions of technology from the point of view of how we can understand the process of its domestication.

In doing this, I shall talk at some length about TV – long the principal focus of media studies. However, by way of acknowledging the age of media convergence in which we find ourselves, I will also situate TV within the broader context of the significance of a range of other communications technologies. In doing so, I shall hope to avoid the kind of technologically determinist vision (whether in utopian or dystopian modes) that unfortunately characterizes so much of current work on the 'new media'.

In this context, I also want to develop a perspective that tries to

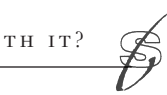
articulate the symbolic with the material dimensions of analysis. Lynn Spigel puts this point another way when she argues that the 'simultaneous rise of the mass produced suburb and a ubiquitous place called "Televisionland" raises a set of questions that scholars have only recently begun to ask' (Spigel, 2001b: 15). In pursuing these questions, I return, following Spigel, to Raymond Williams's old formulation of 'mobile privatization' to describe the lifestyles of mediated suburbia. For Williams, mobile privatization offers the dual satisfactions of allowing people to simultaneously 'stay home' – safe within the realm of their familiar ontological security – and to travel (imaginatively or 'virtually') to 'places that previous generations could never imagine visiting' (Williams, 1974: 26).

Spigel argues that, in the North American context at least, we can usefully understand the genealogy of ideas about domesticity in a media-saturated world as developing through three main phases in the postwar period. The first phase involved the model of the 'home theatre' (based on ideas of accessibility) bringing 'an imaginary night out on the town' into the sedentary domestic culture of the passive viewers, safe at home in the 'family circle' in their living rooms, allowing imaginary visits to the delights of the city and an ersatz sense of participation in public life for family members who, in fact, remained safe in the suburbs. It is this first phase, in Spigel's view, that Williams's model of mobile privatization really encapsulated. With the advent of portable TV sets in the USA in the 1960s, designed to symbolize the aspirations of what the industry now figured as a more active and mobile audience of 'people on the go', this model, Spigel claims, was superseded by the (still dominant) model of the 'mobile home', characterized not so much by mobile privatization as by what she calls 'privatized mobility'.

In the latest stage of these developments, Spigel argues, we see the model of the digitalized 'smart house' (of which, more later) which offers not so much an image of mobility, but of a 'sentient space', which, we are often told, so thoroughly transcends the divisions of inside/outside and work/home as to make it unnecessary to actually go anywhere anymore (Spigel, 2001a: 386, 398). In its digitalized form, the home itself can then be seen as having become, in Virilio's (1991) terms, the 'last vehicle' (cited in Spigel, 2001a: 400), where comfort, safety and stability can happily coexist with the possibility of an instantaneous digitalized 'flight' to elsewhere or the instantaneous importation of desired elements of 'elsewhere' into the home. Nonetheless, as both Allon (2000) and Spigel argue, all this 'hi-tech' discourse is often carefully framed and domesticated by a rather nostalgic vision of 'family values'.

New technologies

However, before I go any further, a word of caution about the new technologies – digital or otherwise – that are the subject of so much



contemporary debate. One key problem lies in the characterization of them as 'interactive' technologies. The issue here is the nature of the contrast that is implicitly drawn between these technologies and older media such as conventional TV broadcasting. I was talking recently to a young 'interactive media' professional who referred, unblinkingly, to that 'old' world – and thus, implicitly, to the audiences who inhabit it – as the world of the 'slouchback' media. This was clearly an updated formulation of the image of the traditional TV audience as a mass of 'couch potatoes'. In this phrase, the virtue (and the importance) of the 'new' media are characterized precisely by the idea that their viewers/participants are assumed to be sitting forward, actively doing things, not 'slouching' back. The problems here are various: first, we know that TV audiences were never simply passive; and, second, the forms of activity that most viewers of interactive media are engaged in are often relatively trivial, such as clicking a remote control or mouse to select an item (a camera angle, for example) from a predetermined menu of choices. Nonetheless, it remains the case that these new technologies have been widely credited with producing a range of transformative effects on the way we live, and these we shall now examine.

The (much-advertised) 'death' of geography

Among other things, these new communications technologies have been trumpeted as heralding the ultimate 'death' of geography. One striking contemporary example that would seem to point in this direction is the growth of telephone 'call centres' based in India which, because of its combination of a low-wage economy and a high level of indigenous English language skills, now handles a lot of the customer service calls for a variety of British businesses. The workers in these call centres are given crash courses on contemporary British culture and are carefully trained to present to their callers a highly developed form of 'virtual Britishness', entirely disguising their actual geographical location. They are encouraged to use 'English-sounding' first names to identify themselves when answering the phone and to disguise their Indian accents. Their computer screens show Greenwich Mean Time and the current temperature in the UK and they are required to operate on British time for the convenience of their callers. They have to keep up with British daily news and soap operas and consult local British weather reports, the better to engage their callers in sympathetic conversation (Harding, 2001).

The point here is that, while these call centres no longer need to be on the geographical territory of the UK, in order to deal effectively with British customers, they are not (as the advocates of postmodern nomadology might claim) just anywhere, nor indeed are they in any significant sense 'deterritorialized'. They are located where they are precisely

because of the history of British imperialism. That history implanted the English language and many aspects of British culture in that particular territory throughout the long history of Britain's imperial presence on Indian soil, leaving behind a low-wage economy when Britain pulled out of India in 1949. The supposedly 'deterritorialized' geography of our postmodern era is much more legible if one reads it as a set of secondary or 'shadow' geographies created through the complex history of imperialism.

Moreover, despite widespread dissimulations of the kind practised in these call centres, cyberspace still has a very real geography. As research at the Centre for Advanced Spatial Analysis in London has shown, the relative density of internet web connections per square kilometre in different geographical locations varies enormously, and access to these technologies (and to the 'connectivity' that they offer) depends very much on where you are located in both geographical and social space (Dodge and Kitchin, 2001). The distribution of these new technologies frequently mirrors established structures of power, and flows of internet traffic tend to follow the routes laid down by previous forms of communication.

Besides, as research in the 'Globalised Society' project, based in Copenhagen, has shown, despite all the claims about how the internet heralds the death of geography, 'where are you?' is (still) one of the most insistent questions in internet chatrooms, and questions like 'where do you live?' (or, more technically, 'where are you mooing from?') are posed frequently (Sunden, 2001: 15). All of this seems to suggest a continuing desire to reterritorialize the uncertainty of location inherent in online worlds. To make a parallel with my comments above about the use of British time and British cultural norms in Indian call centres, the Copenhagen researchers also found many examples of what they call the 'taken-for-grantedness of America as place and culture on the net' (2001: 18) so that, in effect, America (and American time) still provide the perceptual horizon of what we might call the 'online real'.

To take an example from another technological realm (to which I will return later), as on the internet, the first question in many mobile phone conversations is 'where are you?'. Notwithstanding Meyrowitz's (1985) argument that the advent of broadcast TV means that 'we' (whoever that is) now live in a 'generalized elsewhere', rather than a specifiable place, and despite Wark's (1994) claim that we no longer have roots or origins, only aerials and terminals, it seems that we, in fact, do still inhabit actual geographical locations that have very real consequences for our possibilities for knowledge and/or action (Hagerstrand, 1986).

It is also worth considering what all these utopian visions actually mean in practice. Not so long ago, while I was at home reading Thomas Friedman's (2000) latest book about the 'wired world' and the inexorable triumph of globalization, it took three whole days of engineers coming

and going, huffing and puffing in their frustration, before they got a dedicated computer phone line connected to my house. Perhaps that's just a particular experience of British inefficiency, but the journalist Mary Dejevsky has also written of the hair-tearing frustrations she experienced in trying to transfer an email account from the USA to another country (Dejevsky, 2001). For all their wonders, these technologies are only as good as the material, social and institutional structures in which they are embedded, from the reliability of the local phone lines, to the electricity supply, to the efficiency of the relevant bureaucracy.

Dreams of the future

Let me now turn to questions of 'futurology'. There is a long history of visions of how it has been imagined that technical advances in communications – from the telegraph, to the telephone, to the internet – will somehow lead to 'better understanding' (see Carey, 1989; Marvin, 1990). It should be remembered that the telegraph – or the 'Victorian internet', as it has recently been redescribed (Standage, 1999) – was heralded as ushering in an era of world peace for this very reason. Armand Mattelart (1996), among others, has already critiqued this ideological vision, which mistakes technical improvements in modes of communication for the growth of understanding in human affairs (see de Saint-Simon, 1976). As Robins and Webster (2000) argue, such utopian – seemingly futuristic – visions can also, paradoxically, often be seen to actually represent backward-looking forms of nostalgia for technological fixes to the supposed problem of the loss of the idealized communities of some lamented golden age.

Moreover, while the contemporary vision of virtual space is usually presented as one of openness and exploration, one can also readily see that virtual space often, in practice, actually functions as a space of withdrawal into closed communities of the 'like-minded', of those who subscribe to the same email list or bulletin board or chatroom. We might also think of the personalized computer news services, about which there has been so much excitement in some quarters, as providing the same 'cocooning' effect.[3]

Mediated histories

Surrounded, as we are, by future-orientated debates about the impact of new communications technologies, it may well be that the first thing we need, if we are to avoid the twin dangers of utopianism and nostalgia – and to avoid the historically egocentric error of treating the dilemmas of our own age as if they were unique – is some way of placing these futurological debates in historical perspective.

This concern, of course, leads us to one of the central issues in historical work: the question of periodization and the issue of how to distinguish between the developing forms of media access and provision as they are transformed by processes of institutional, economic, political, technological and cultural change. We have some guidelines to work with here. John Ellis (2000) rightly points to the necessity to distinguish, in the realm of TV broadcasting, between what he calls the 'age of scarcity' (when there were few channels), the 'age of availability' (as the number of channels on offer to the viewer gradually increased) and the current 'age of plenty and uncertainty' (as we move into a multichannel broadcast environment, replete with remote controls, time shift videos and audience fragmentation). The key issue is what exactly is being transformed here and how, in response to these changes, we need to adjust our analytical paradigms. Here, alongside Spigel's helpful genealogy of models of domesticity and media consumption, we might usefully also consult Robert Allen's (1999) work on the current transformation of the film industry. Allen's analysis focuses on the way in which, in the USA, not only has domestic video now become the main mode of film consumption, but film-on-video itself now functions, crucially, as a form of marketing for sales of the ancillary products that today constitute the industry's main source of profit. What Allen's and Spigel's analyses offer us is a way of tracing the interconnections between demographic changes in household structure, cultural definitions of domesticity, modes of media consumption and their retroactive effects on modes of industrial production.

Technologies, contexts and traditions

Todd Gitlin tells a story about the difficulties posed to a customs officer by a man whom the officer is convinced is smuggling something, who turns up at his border post week after week, driving a truck. The guard can never find the contraband, which he's convinced is hidden somewhere, until he realizes that what the man is in fact smuggling is the trucks themselves. In this metaphor, evidently we are the customs officers, too often suspicious of the ideological or discursive vagaries of media content, while ignoring the more significant fact of the transformation of the fundamental modes of media presence in our lives (Gitlin, 2001: 3–4). Without necessarily falling into a mode of technologically determinist analysis, Gitlin's story usefully points our attention towards what Stanley Cavell (1971) calls the 'fact' of TV; or what Medrich (1979) calls the 'habit of living with television' as a 'constant presence'; or to what Jeffrey Sconce (2000) has more recently called the process of TV's 'colonisation of the home'.

In parallel with Spigel's (1992) work on the history of TV's entry into the North American home, Tim O'Sullivan in the UK (1991) and Shunya

Yoshimi in Japan (1999) have investigated the crucial symbolic role played by the acquisition of TV in the development of postwar consumer cultures. Just as Yoshimi points to the significance of the TV, along with the washing machine and the refrigerator, as the 'three sacred things' in the symbolic repertoire of Japanese consumer culture in this period, one of O'Sullivan's respondents, looking back on the 1950s, remembers that 'when a house had got a television aerial and a car – then you could say they'd really "arrived" ' (1991: 166).[4]

However, the dynamics at play in the entry of TV and other media to the home are complicated, as we know. If, as Barthes (1980: 1) once argued, TV 'condemns us to the family, whose household utensil it has become, just as the communal stewing pot was, in times gone by', so too we have to note the ways in which the nature of domestic life itself has effects on how TV is consumed. We have also to attend to the ways in which the nature of TV programming has itself been designed for the specific forms of (distracted) spectator attention routinely available in the home. Moreover, as Spigel (1992) points out, the material structure of the home itself was also gradually redesigned, in architectural terms (for example, the invention of the 'through lounge'), to accommodate the needs of TV viewing. There is a complex symbiosis at play here, as TV and other media have adapted themselves to the circumstances of domestic consumption while the domestic arena itself has been simultaneously redefined to accommodate their requirements.

Given my own previous involvement in research into the range of different appropriations and interpretations made of a range of technologies by households of different types, I am not sympathetic to any technologically determinist approach that would conceptualize communications technologies as responsible for transforming our lives in any automatic way. Even the very latest technologies can always be adapted (or 'domesticated') to suit very traditional purposes. The most popular website in the UK is now 'Friends Reunited' (http://www.friendsreunited.com), which, as its name implies, allows people to rediscover old friends from their schooldays – clearly a fundamentally nostalgic project, even if in 'hi-tech' form. According to Manzoor (2003), the site now has 8 million members – rather more than the number of those who belong to trade unions or attend church each week in the UK. The websites now set up by Turkish migrants in Europe for the purpose of facilitating 'arranged marriages' demonstrate the same capacity for 'tradition' to recruit technology to its purposes (see Robins and Aksoy, 2001).

Clearly, any conception of a static realm of tradition that is then transformed by new technologies will be unhelpful here; rather, what we need is a conception of how 'mobile' traditions incorporate new technologies as they develop. As the German ethnologist Herman Bausinger rightly argues, far from imagining that we have now passed into some

new period, in which tradition is a thing of the past, we must recognize that folk culture is alive and well in the world of modern technology and busily recruiting and adapting new technologies to old purposes (Bausinger, 1990).

The domestication of TV

The development of historical work on the communications media has been one of the key developments of the recent period: notably that of Paddy Scannell (1996) in the UK; Spigel (1992) and Sconce (2000) in the USA; and, from a longer-term perspective, that of Siegfried Zielinski (1999) in Germany. However, despite these honourable exceptions, when media history is addressed, it is still too often conceived either in institutional or technological terms.

My own primary concern in this respect is with what Maud Lavin (1990) calls the 'intimate histories' of living with a medium such as broadcast TV. This Lavin describes as involving 'a collection of personal memories of growing up with TV ... [of] how the TV set [has been] gradually incorporated into the home, family and leisure time ... and [the] history of how we design our spaces, habits and even emotions around the TV' (1990: 85). This is a question of how our personal memories – especially of childhood – are formulated around media experiences such as emblematic programmes and TV characters. In this respect, we might usefully draw a parallel with Gaston Bachelard's (1994) analysis of how the material structure of the house provides the 'trellis' around which childhood memory is entwined – but perhaps we now need to extend the analogy so as to think also of how that trellis now has a mediated, as much as a material, structure.[5]

From this perspective, we perhaps also need to treat TV not so much as a visual medium, but as a visible object (Morley, 1995) because, as Matthew Geller (1990: 7) puts it, too often we simply 'look through' the object of TV to the images it provides, while the set itself remains, as it were, 'invisible' to us and we ignore its role as a totemic object of enormous symbolic importance in the household. It is in this context that we must also address the long history of TV's domestication, as we trace its journey from its initial position as a singular 'stranger', allowed only into the most public/formal space of the house (in the living room), through the development of the multiset household and TV's gradual penetration of the more intimate spaces of our kitchens and bedrooms, to the point where the new individualized/personal media delivery systems, in their latest portable and miniaturized forms, might more properly be conceptualized as 'body parts'.

The domestic history of TV is by no means singular in this respect. Eliseo Veron in France details the similar pathway traced by the 'journey of the phone' in the household, as it gradually multiplied and moved

from the public space of the hallway into the other rooms of the house (Veron, 1991). To jump forward for a moment, when we come to the era of the mobile phone, not only is it entirely personalized – and very much understood by many of its users as just as much a 'body part' as their wristwatch – but it becomes, in effect, the person's virtual address, while their land line becomes a merely secondary communication facility (and one of seeming irrelevance to many young people).

Earlier, Simon Frith (1983) rightly pointed to the historical role of broadcasting technologies in enhancing what he called the 'pleasures of the hearth', leading, as a consequence, to what he described as the 'rediscovery of the home' as a site for domestic leisure activities that had previously taken more public forms. The contemporary issue, in this connection, is what the emergence of public forms of TV and of the new personalized communications technologies now do to correspondingly destabilize the centrality of the domestic home.

Clearly, in the present context, we do have to move beyond media studies' historically rather exclusive focus on TV so as to also address the contemporary significance of a broader range of communications technologies. However, I also want to argue that we need to transcend the unfortunate media-centrism of much work in this area by decentring the media in our analytical framework, so as to better understand the ways in which media processes and everyday life are so closely interwoven with each other. That problem will not be solved by contemporary proposals to 'modernize' media studies by reconceptualizing it as 'web studies' or the like, for this would simply be to put the internet at the centre of the equation, where TV used to stand. Such a move would merely replicate a very old technologically determinist problematic in a new guise. The issue is both to understand how new and old media accommodate each other and coexist in symbiotic forms and also to better grasp the ways in which we live with them.

Anthropological perspectives: fetishism and totemism

In trying to understand how we live and work with technologies, the last thing we should do is to make the mistake of imagining that media and communications technologies are desired, consumed and used simply for their functional purposes – increasingly marvellous as these may appear. Everything that the anthropology of material consumption tells us indicates that, beyond their practical uses, communications technologies often have symbolic meanings that make them also function as powerful totems and fetishes for their owners. This might be to speak of the TV set as the symbolic centrepiece of the 'family hearth' in the discourse of the 1950s; or, in the terms of 1990s discourse, to speak of the computer as a signifier that modernity has entered the house, thus saving its children

from the wrath of the god of unemployability (even if all they actually do is play games on it, rather than learning any more complex computer skills).

This, then, is to insist on the importance of the symbolic meanings, as much as the practical functions, of technology. Here we might do well to remember Ondina Leal's (1990) important work on the symbolic meaning of the TV set as a signifier of modernity in the Brazilian favelas or Alfred Gell's (1986) study of the Sri Lankan fishermen who buy TV sets that they cannot operate (for lack of electricity) to display as 'wealth signifiers' to their fellow villagers. From a different angle, we might recall the firm grasp of this point displayed by the Taliban government in Afghanistan when they hung TVs from the trees as a potent symbol of the unwanted westernization of their country.

This is by no means only a matter of strange cultural practices in 'exotic' places. In their studies of western owners of video collections, both Uma Dinsmore (1998) and Barbara Klinger (1998) demonstrate that these collections often have little to do with the opportunities they might be thought to provide for the rewatching of the tapes and rather more to do with the making of a domestic statement about their owner's self-image. Similarly, as I argue elsewhere (Morley, 1995), the purchase in the UK of one of the 'high definition' TV sets, advertised under the slogan 'the less you watch, the higher your standards', signifies to all who see it, whether or not it is ever switched on, key things about its owner as a person of discriminating tastes.

In the same way, the mobile phone's particular style (plain, silver, unadorned and businesslike, or with customized fascia and David Beckham pendant) already communicates the particular cultural identity that the owner has chosen for themself and by means of which they wish to distinguish themselves from others. This is well illustrated in the work of the photographer Martin Parr (2002) on how the mobile phone is used in different global contexts and also, graphically, in that of Larissa Hjorth (2003) in her study of the 'customized' decoration of mobile phones in Japan. Here we might also begin to open up a set of other themes, to which I will return later, concerning the mobile phone's symbolic role as a means of signifying its owner's degree of social 'connectedness'.[6]

There may also be more general statements that we can make about the specific type of technological objects that best symbolize the values of a particular time. Zygmunt Bauman argues that, in the current period of what he calls 'liquid modernity', we see a quite particular symbolic logic at play, in which portable or miniaturized technologies play a crucial role. As he puts it, 'fluidity is (now) the principal source of strength and invincibility . . . it is now the smaller, the lighter, the more portable that signifies improvement and "progress" ' (Bauman, 2000: 13–14, cited in Lull, 2002). His point is well exemplified by a British TV advert for the

latest generation of mobile phones, which features a phone of the older generation that can no longer be taken out, precisely because its clumsy appearance now makes it an embarrassment to its owner.

New times and new formats

Even if we need to avoid the dangers of any overly generalized nomadology of postmodern life, mobilities, of one sort or another, are clearly central to our analysis. In this context, the extended family has now sometimes to be seen as stretched out across the long distance phone wires, especially for migrants who often spend a high proportion of their wages on phone calls home. This, as Richard Rouse (1991: 13) puts it, allows them 'not just to "keep in touch", but to contribute to decision-making and participate in familial events from a distance'.[7]

All of this points to the ways in which people have adapted to the capacities that these new technologies offer to allow them to literally be in two places at once. What is more, as Kevin Robins and Asu Aksoy (2001) argue in their study of Turkish migrants in London, this ability to oscillate between places is now, for many migrants, no more than a banal fact of their everyday lives, as they routinely move backward and forward, at different points in the same day, between British and Turkish TV channels, local face-to-face conversations and long distance phone calls to distant relatives or friends. To this extent, twisting Raymond Williams's nostrum, Robins and Aksoy insist that, for many migrants, it is now transnational culture that is 'ordinary'.

However, new technologies are not only relevant to the lives of migrant families. Brockes's (2000) report on research by Jan English-Lueck and James Freeman (of San Jose State University in California) reveals a picture of a situation where the new modes of electronic communication have themselves become the very infrastructure of family life. This, they argue, is especially so among busy, middle-class 'dual career' families, living tightly scheduled lives, where parents have to balance the continually conflicting demands of work and family. In this situation, the issue of which parent is to pick up which child from which place at which time is negotiated daily by the participants, on the move, by mobile phone and email. When they get home, the children may reel off their activities for the next day while the parents dutifully enter them into their palm pilots, checking for problems with the scheduling of their other appointments as they go and promising their children to page them confirmation of their 'pick-up' point/time by mid-afternoon of the next day. This is a world in which virtual parenting now has to carry some part of the burden of child care and where being in electronic contact with a child (welcoming them home with a text message, hoping that they've 'had a good day') is what 'good parenting' is now about.

Clearly, family life is changing around us, as people adapt to new

technologies and find ways to deal with new structures of work and mobility, and, for all its continuing ideological centrality, the nuclear family household is declining rapidly in the West. It may not be possible (or even, ultimately, important) to work out which is the chicken and which is the egg in this respect, but we have to develop a mode of analysis that can articulate these changes in household demographics with the rapid growth of individual 'personalized media delivery systems'. Certainly, in the UK, the 'multiscreen' household is now the norm and this does affect household life in profound ways. Many commentators have also pointed towards evidence of the internal fragmentation of the home, for example the trend, in many households, towards the serial 'grazing' of microwave meals by individual family members at separate times, replacing the 'family meal'. One might also make an argument that a technology such as the Walkman, routinely used by many young people to create their own autonomous space both within the household and outside, is an intrinsically solipsistic technology – or, in Stephen Bayley's striking phrase, a 'sod-you machine' for switching off unwanted interaction with others (Bayley, 1990).

It may be that, in order to place these demographic and technological changes in household structures and technological forms in a broader theoretical framework, we also need to turn to Ulrich Beck's theories of 'individualization' (see Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Beck's overall claims about the demise of class structures may be overblown (so far as the UK is concerned, at least), but the central idea of the fragmentation – and indeed the 'individualization' – of both audiences and the media technologies that service them, is evidently pertinent here.

Domesticating the future

Questions of the future and of technology are, of course, inextricably intertwined with each other, not least because the future (and increasingly the present) is now defined so much in technological terms. If the future represents, for many people, a troublesome realm of constant change, much of this trouble comes to be symbolized by (and in) technological forms. The question, therefore, is how this problematic technological realm comes to be naturalized and domesticated so as to make it less threatening and more manageable for its inhabitants.

Many years ago, Bausinger (1984) argued that the everyday was coming to be characterized in the affluent West by what he called the 'inconspicuous omnipresence of the technical'. In the research on the domestic uses of information and communications technologies in which I have been involved (Silverstone and Hirsch, 1992), one of the most striking findings was how, in many households, people went to a great deal of trouble to disguise the presence of communications technologies in their homes, often hiding TV sets, computers and wiring in wooden

cabinets or behind soft furnishings. The point is that, if an increasing array of technologies has now become naturalized to the point of literal (or psychological) invisibility in the domestic sphere, we need to understand the process of how that has come about.

The other reason why a historical perspective on new media should be central to our approach to these issues is because the dynamic of making technologies consumer-friendly in practice often means inserting them into recognizable forms from previous eras. To this extent, technological innovation often goes along with a continuing drive to make the technofuture safe by incorporating it into familiar formats, icons and symbols.

To take but one example, an advert for one of the latest multifunctional home entertainment systems takes the form of an image of family life which shows the new system installed in just the kind of traditional wooden cabinet into which, as Spigel's (1992) research shows, early TVs themselves were incorporated, when they were introduced into the household in an earlier period. Moreover, the advert's imagery, in which everyone in the family group is shown smiling under the benign gaze of the father, could almost be derived directly from a Norman Rockwell portrait of suburban family life in the USA in the 1950s. The potentially problematic nature of the new technology is thus neutralized by being shown as happily incorporated into the reassuring symbolism of this most conventional of homes.

Another striking advert, produced in the USA by Applied Materials in their 'Information for Everyone' TV campaign, shows a large group of trendily dressed middle-class children, whose particular nationality is unmarked, dismounting rowdily from a school bus at the end of the day and jostling their way, in a relaxed and friendly manner, into an empty house that is replete with technology. As they enter the house, the first child (who looks about nine years old) nonchalantly punches in the code to disable the burglar alarm in the hallway, while chatting to his pals and without paying any visible attention to the quite complex technical task that he is performing. As the children spread themselves throughout the house, they variously kick off their shoes, switch on their computers and throw themselves onto the sofa, grabbing snacks with one hand, while dialling on their mobiles or fighting for the remote control with the other. In the end, we do not know where the children's home is geographically, but the one thing we do know, metaphorically, is that they are all completely 'at home' with a highly sophisticated range of technologies; indeed, their pleasure in returning home at the end of the school day seems largely to be in 'coming home' to technology.[8]

Moreover, the process of the domestication of the media goes further than this. It is not just a question of how people come to feel 'at home' with the technologies in their houses. In the case of the Californians I referred to earlier, I argued that the technologies they used to coordinate their lives had, in effect, become the infrastructure of their families.

With the advent of the electronic 'dreamhouse' – whether in the earlier versions that Spigel (2001b) describes in the 1950s and 1960s or nowadays in Bill Gates's own 'fully-wired' domestic paradise, as analysed by Allon (2000) – we arrive at a new situation. Here, rather than electronic technologies being domesticated, as in the case of the 'smart house', the domestic realm itself is mediated and made fully electronic. In this vision of the household, the technologies are no longer merely supplementary to, but constitutive of, what the home itself now is.

All this leads us back to a new version of Raymond Williams's vision of 'mobile privatization' in so far as the technologies that can be used to engage in the new 'virtual' forms of in-home 'travel' are now far more powerful than Williams ever imagined. However, it is necessary to remember that the houses that were built in 'Levittown' in the postwar USA also had, as one of the key defining characteristics of their desirability, TVs built into their sitting room walls. The electronic home itself has a history, which we would do well to remember, as we puzzle over its future (Hayden, 2002). Moreover, to return to the issue of the domestication of 'futuristic' forms of technology, as Allon (2000) points out, even Bill Gates represents the form of family life that he envisages conducting in his fully-wired 'dreamhouse' in the most conventional suburban terms possible – which just goes to show the extent to which futurology is almost always as much 'backward' as it is 'forward looking'.

And now? De-domesticated/ing media?

Thus far, in my narrative, I have traced the long story of the gradual domestication of a range of media, most particularly TV, and have taken the 'smart house' as the culmination or 'end point' of this story, where the home itself becomes a fully technologized/wired place and comes to be defined by the technologies that constitute it.[9] However, it could be argued that we now face the beginning of a quite different story, where the narrative drive runs in the opposite direction, towards the de-domestication of the media and the radical dislocation of domesticity itself. In many countries, TV began as a public medium, watched collectively in public places, and only gradually moved into the home and then into its further interstices (a story that Yoshimi [1999] traces out, to telling effect, in the history of this medium in Japan). However, it is evident that, having thoroughly colonized the home, TV has now re-escaped from its confines. Nowadays, we find TV everywhere, in the public spaces of bars, in restaurants, laundrettes, shops and airports, as Anna McCarthy (2001) documents in her study of what she calls 'ambient TV' in the USA.[10]

These developments also need to be understood in the broader theoretical context of debates about the ongoing transformation of the relationships between the public and private spheres. In this regard,

Mattelart (1995) rightly argues that, for many years now, public space has been gradually transformed by the increasing presence of advertising. Public space is now replete with commercial messages, visually – whether on large-scale billboards in the street or on the back of bus tickets – or aurally – as in the message on the UK telephone service that tells you that time itself is now 'sponsored by Accurist'. Thus, Abercrombie and Longhurst (1999) argue that, given the ubiquity of media of all forms in the contemporary world, the old distinction between those who are part of the media audience and those who are not is now quite outmoded for the simple reason that we are all now, in effect, audiences to some kind of media almost everywhere and all of the time.

But there is yet another dimension to this problem, which was first identified in studies of the cultural significance of the Walkman, as a technology that transformed the relations of the public and private, allowing its users to privatize public space by retreating into their own protective aural bubble of sound, setting their experience of public places to their own privatized soundtrack (Bull, 2000; Chambers, 1990; du Gay et al., 1997). If the Walkman is, in this sense, a privatizing technology, then, to pick up again my earlier comments on 'individualization', the mobile phone is perhaps the privatizing (or individualizing) technology of our age, par excellence.

Evidently, one of the things that the mobile phone does is to dislocate the idea of home, enabling its user, in the words of the Orange advertising campaign in the UK, to 'take your network with you, wherever you go'. Like the Walkman, it also insulates its users from the geographical place that they are actually in. Often the user is paying no attention to those who are physically close to them, while speaking to others who are far away. To that extent, it might also be argued not only that the mobile phone often functions as a psychic cocoon for its user, but even as a kind of mobile 'gated community' (Luke, forthcoming).

It is usually taken for granted that the mobile phone is principally a device for transcending spatial distance. But just as we know that a large percentage of the world's email is sent between people working in the same building, the mobile phone seems also often to be used in counter-intuitive ways. It is often used not so much to transcend distance as to establish parallel communications networks in the same space (i.e. text messaging by pupils in school) and, indeed, it turns out often to be used collectively, especially among groups of young people when they are together (Weilenmann and Larsson, 2002).

As we know, the mobile phone call also radically disrupts the physical space of the public sphere in a variety of ways, annoying others with its insistent demand for attention or imposing 'private' conversation on those near its user. It is also interesting to see the ways in which these developments have also given rise to a whole new set of debates, focused on this technology, about the etiquette of communications. However, there

is evidently more than a question of etiquette at stake here, fascinating as it is to see the speed at which new modes of regulation of the device have been developing, such as 'quiet carriages' on trains, notices in restaurants and ads in cinemas banning their use (Harris, 2003).

The mobile phone is often understood (and promoted) as a device for connecting us to those who are far away, thus overcoming distance – and perhaps geography itself. It has been described as enabling the emergence of an even more mobile descendent of the *flaneur*: the '*phoneur*' (Luke, forthcoming). However, just as I pointed to the continuing pertinence of the question 'where are you?' in internet chatroom conversations, the first question in many mobile phone conversations, as we all know, is often 'where are you?' (answer: 'I'm on the train/stuck in traffic/I'll be a bit late . . .'). It seems that geography is not, in fact, dead at all and that what the mobile phone allows is endless anxious commentary on our geographical locations and trajectories. Perhaps one might even say that the mobile phone is, among other things, a device for dealing with our anxieties about the problems of distance created by our newly mobile lifestyles and with the emotional 'disconnectedness' that this geographical distance symbolizes for us (Tomlinson, 2001).

George Myerson argues that 'the mobile is the object which most closely embodies the spirit of the changing environment. If you want to assure yourself that you belong to the new century, this is the object to have in your hand' (2001: 1). Linking back to my earlier comments on the symbolic significance of new technologies, Timo Kopomaa pushes the point further, arguing that the mobile phone has now acquired a particularly important symbolic role for many of its users – to the extent that it should be understood, he argues, as 'a portable magic charm', as the 'device that makes everything OK' (Kopomaa, 2001: 38).

One curious measure of the mobile phone's symbolic significance in contemporary British culture is the fact that it has now replaced the umbrella as the item most frequently left behind on London underground trains (Adams and Sangara, 1999). This is a particularly interesting phenomenon, as there is no effective network coverage on most of the underground, meaning that these phones were left behind by people who had felt compelled to have them to hand even when they could not use them for any practical purpose.

To pose matters a little more theoretically, the geographer Yi Fu Tuan (1996) distinguishes between 'conversation' (substantive talk about events and issues: a discourse of the public realm) and 'chatter' (the exchange of gossip principally designed to maintain solidarity between those involved in the exchange: what Tuan calls a 'discourse of the hearth'). Drawing on Tuan's distinction, John Tomlinson (2001) rightly argues that the discourse of most mobile phone use can be characterized as a form of phatic or gestural communication. In these terms, what the mobile phone does is to fill the space of the public sphere with the

chatter of the hearth, allowing us to take our homes with us, just as a tortoise stays in its shell wherever it travels. To this extent, Tomlinson argues, we would be mistaken to see these new technologies simply as tools for the extension of cultural horizons; rather, he claims, we should see them as 'imperfect instruments, by which people try . . . to maintain some sense of security and location' amidst a culture of flow and deterritorialization (2001: 17).

If one of the key historical roles of broadcasting technologies has been their transformation of the relations of the public and private spheres, then the questions that face us now concern what these new technologies do to those relations and how they, in turn, may be regulated and domesticated. We now find ourselves in a world where we are all audiences to one or another medium, almost all of the time, and where, after its long process of domestication, TV and other media have now escaped the home – to (re)colonize the public sphere. While the domestic home itself might now be said to have become a fully technological artefact, it also seems that domesticity itself has now been dislocated.

As we wander the public realm, protected by the carapaces of our Walkmans and mobile phones, it may be a good moment to repose Heidegger's (1971) question about what it means to live in a culture of 'distancelessness', where things are neither near nor far, but, as it were, 'without distance'. But as soon as we make this connection to these earlier debates, we have to recognize that the questions we face today, while undoubtedly urgent, are not in themselves new. Moreover, we have to recognize, with Spigel (2001a, b), that, if we are ever to get any critical perspective on the discourses of futurology that now surround us, we shall certainly need to put them into a fuller historical perspective than that which they recognize for themselves.

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Notes

1. This obsession is perhaps at its apogee in the UK. Consider the long-term higher rate of home ownership in the UK compared with other European countries, which has been exacerbated by the specific effects of Thatcherite 'boosterism' in relation to the idea of a 'homeowning democracy' over the last 20 years.
2. One might speculate that some part of the inspiration for *The Royle Family* derives from the videotapes of family groups watching TV that were generated by Peter Collet and his colleagues (1986) in their influential research project for the Independent Broadcasting Authority in the 1980s. Their tapes certainly offer a striking example of what family life looked like, filmed from the point of view of a camera within the TV set itself.

3. The web-based 'Cultstuds' email list recently featured an item on how, at the end of Gulf War number two, people of very different persuasions all believed that they'd won the propaganda war in cyberspace because they'd only listened to like-minded peers on the internet list they subscribed to.
4. John Hartley (1999) has also done valuable work on the fridge as the historical basis, in the 1950s in the UK, of the domestic lifestyle that 'produced' the TV audience. One might also note the spate of recent ads promoting the fridge as the 24-hour 'control centre' for the 'smart home'. For further examples of the symbolic significance of technological artefacts, see the highly variable symbolic meanings of satellite dishes in different contexts: as a symbol of taste poverty (Brunsdon, 1997 on the UK); as a symbol of high status forms of cosmopolitanism (in much of the contemporary Middle East); and as a symbol of 'cultural treason' on the part of migrants (see the recent debates in both France and Germany along these lines).
5. In this connection, we might also consider the burgeoning genre of writing about childhood as a thoroughly mediated experience; see Jeffries (2001) and White (1998). More generally, one might point to the whole slew of 'Generation X' autobiographical fiction in the USA, produced by writers such as Douglas Coupland, which would be largely incomprehensible to anyone who did not share in that particular litany of American popular TV situation comedies, soap operas and their stars.
6. At the top end of the social spectrum, one can also now observe the opposite phenomenon whereby not having a mobile phone becomes the ultimate sign of social status, signifying that one is so important as to be able to afford to be hard to get hold of and not to need to make oneself easily available to others.
7. A high street call centre in East London, where I live, advertises its cheap-rate calls to Ghana with an endearing photo of a middle-aged African woman, under which runs the slogan 'Call Mama'. To take another example of migrant uses of technologies originally designed for other purposes, some years ago now, Eliut Flores (1988) reported the use, by Puerto Rican migrant families living in the USA, of cheap-rate 'downtime' on business video conferencing facilities, as an alternative to actually flying the whole family back home for a visit.
8. I must thank James Lull for bringing this example to my attention. See also Rivka Ribak (2002) on the way in which, in a world of rapidly changing technologies, generational relations are transformed by the fact that children often have higher levels of competence with the new technologies than their parents, having used them all their lives. To that extent, Ribak argues, we are all 'like migrants' dependent on our children to 'translate' for us in this new and unfamiliar technological environment.
9. This is also increasingly true at a literal level, in real estate terms (especially in Southeast Asia), in so far as the value of the electrical wiring/capacity of a building is now a substantive part of what the buyer is paying for.
10. For a spectacular set of instances of the public life of TV, see the mass viewings of the World Cup in many cities across the world in the summer of 2002.

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