

# Putting new media in its place: the Edinburgh experience

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## INTRODUCTION: A STRUCTURAL APPROACH

The Household Information Systems (HIS) project in Queen Margaret College was funded to explore the use of new media in a group of Edinburgh households (Davenport & Higgins, 1995). One of the motivations of the HIS 'programme' was to find a suitable theoretical and/or exploratory framework, which takes account of multiple aspects of behaviour surrounding technologies, and thus avoids assumptions about their role in information-seeking or other isolated activities. A focus on single activities would occlude knowledge of other motivations: bonding, killing time, defining boundaries. In Phase One, 'information management' rather than 'information seeking' was used as a conceptual framework, embracing work on the 'life cycle' of ICTs as illustrated by Kopytoff's 'biography of things' approach (1986), Johnson's cultural circuit (1986), research on households as micro-organisations by McCrone and his colleagues (1994), and work by Silverstone and others on ICTs in the home as tools for internal and external adaptation (Silverstone, 1994, Silverstone et al 1994). The 'management' framework has been productive - Phase One allowed us to identify patterns of ICT acquisition and deployment in the home, and, more interestingly, structures of appropriation which reflect rules, roles and responsibilities in individual households. These constitute what may be called a 'reproduction lattice' (adapting terminology used by Kling (1987) in his analysis of the 'web of computing' in organisations), a structure which captures the political and cultural economy of a household. Phase One's findings are consistent with those of other researchers working in the area of domestic consumption of ICTs but a major limitation of the work is the homogeneous nature of the respondents. Among our Edinburgh 'household managers', internal culture was a more compelling explanation for use than technical functionality. Though disputes about content and use of disposable time were described, these,

according to our adult respondents, are more often than not solved by negotiation, and 'heedful interaction' (Weick & Roberts 1993) is more manifest than competition among household members when possibilities arise for conflict over access to ICTs.

Phase Two of the HIS project, involving questionnaires administered to 69 adolescents in a neighbourhood Catholic high school, was partly undertaken to further explore the validity of this dual notion of use as cultural compromise, and to establish the views of those who are 'managed' in the domestic environment: children under 16 living in the parental home. Information was gathered off-site, in the presence of peers. Unsurprisingly, the contexts for and the nature of adolescents' interactions with ICTs at home, preclude organised strategies planned to maximise efficiency or effectiveness. Such intention is largely the domain of their parents. If they are not, using McCrone's term for strategic effectiveness, 'making out' with ICTs, they are certainly 'getting by', using tactics skilfully to fulfil short-term objectives. Phase Two revealed that:

*'Respondents' habits are diverse, flexible and proactive, rather than routine and incidental...respondents make considered decisions about viewing partner, location and type of viewing experience'. (Green & Higgins, 1997, 133)*

The home is a primary site of ICT consumption. Findings from Phase Two in two areas warranted further exploration: first, the presence of sub-cultures in the home, manifest in different configurations of siblings and friends, which rest more or less recursively in the interstices of the household lattice; second, the appropriateness of the label 'new' when coupled with ICTs; new media were defined in the original project as cable, video, computer, fax, but in many ways this definition did not maintain any currency in terms of the 'real life' uses and associations made by adolescents in Phase Two. The researchers involved with Phase Two concluded that the most striking feature of the information obtained in the questionnaires was the volume and variety of interactions with ICTs. Any attempt to foreground one aspect of these interactions as more important or significant than any other is misplaced on the grounds that the context of the household is more important in shaping activities and consumption than the specifications and potential of the technology itself. A series of follow-up interviews was arranged to explore the texture of family life and the relative status of ICTs within this fabric.

The interviews for Phase Three were carried out with ten mixed and/or single sex pairs of adolescents aged between 13-16 years, recruited from the same EH12 school as used in Phase Two. (Contact the authors for a details of the interviewee profiles.) Access was gained via a teacher who had been interviewed for Phase One and had a particular interest in new media technologies. Interviewees came from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds, with parental employment ranging from lecturer, policeman, window cleaner, footballer, and management consultant to nurse. As a Roman Catholic school, the catchment

area is wide and pupils are recruited from diverse geographical areas, which in most cases accounted for the balance of media use in relation to the availability of alternative local amenities. Interviews were informally structured, using a guiding framework of questions designed to encourage discussion around the themes of ownership, use, sociability and attitudes, in relation to television, computers and computer games, the radio, CDs, the telephone and reading. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and subsequently analysed into a grid system which detailed the collective responses of interviewees under each media device. Particular reference was made to the themes: location of devices, where use takes place and why, particular habits, attitudes to different media, relationships, leisure and interests.

### CHALLENGES TO THE STRUCTURAL APPROACH

As we indicate above, Phase One revealed the presence of rules and repertoires which reinforce cultural and political norms within the household. In Phase Three, the 'reproduction lattice' is most evident in accounts of sibling subcultures, where patterns of interaction can mimic those of parent and child: males dominate females; older siblings dominate younger ones. In this context, a persistent genre in the tactical repertory is the use of ICTs as a territorial marker, and the shifting of devices from room to room to reflect whoever has the upper hand at a given moment. CA, for example, describes how her sister places computer games in her room because they cramp her own room (even though CA's room is smaller), and how, in riposte, CA will sometimes move the video from her sister's room to her room. 'Downstairs' is largely parental territory - in SU's home censorship is applied to the TV when watched downstairs, but not upstairs - in this way, the location of devices is deliberately used by the family to avoid embarrassing scenarios. This spacial dynamic introduces an additional dimension to the discipline and rules governing media use.

However, other domestic priorities impinge on the use of technology as much as physical factors and the construction of spaces and territories. For instance, even where siblings each have their own TV, arguments arise as part of a wider pattern of 'battles and squabbles' over what to watch. The TV is caught up in the usual (inter)teenage and parental conflicts. The technology is the flexible factor in these scenarios. SC explains how "I don't have the greatest relationship with my mum and dad, or at least I didn't used to.... You know, we'd start off a fight about he telly and then go onto something else. I mean I would just go upstairs and leave it". The TV facilitates rows but also diffuses them, indicating the ways in which ICTs and their use, is deeply embedded into the wider power struggles of the household. In contrast DA has a very different relationship with his mother, "I don't get on with her like a mum, I get on with

her like a friend ... I always watch movies with my mum, all the time. I don't mind sitting with my mum to watch TV". It is evident that devices fit into established behavioural patterns and relationships, adapting to and animating the social undercurrents of the household. Girls extensive use of the telephone to facilitate school based relationships is an example of the ways in which devices also extend the terms of this function beyond the immediate geography of the household.

Several respondents mentioned parental (usually maternal) attempts to control media consumption, which corroborated stories told in Phase One of the HIS project. In one case, where a father wanted cable, the mother resisted as she considered the family's viewing capacity as limitless, and could not trust their ability to resist the seductive plethora of channels which cable would offer. Two interviewees were puzzled by their mother's attitude to their cultural welfare. They themselves were "happy to survive" without cable, as they thought "it was pretty rubbish".

The family meal is a key locus for parental interventions, and ICTs can be perceived as part of a wider ritual, which involves dispensations, excommunications and more pragmatic resource considerations. In AN's household, the family "don't watch TV downstairs" if they are to have TV dinners "because of the carpet"; in another home, "It isn't ok to eat and watch", so TV is only allowed "after everything's tidied up". One sibling reports that there are different standards for different members of the family in her household: her little brother is allowed to go and watch Star Trek during dinner and everyone else has to stay at table. In one house, a daughter regularly has tea while watching *Home and Away* but is not allowed to watch "any more" until homework is done: if there is a good film on, however, the mother will ask her to hurry up with the homework.

Media use is characterised by compromise and inconsistency as much as it is framed within regularised patterns, as KA's attempts to create the right reading environment confirms: "If you read downstairs and you want to lie on the floor and relax and read your book, you get the dog licking your face and jumping on you so there is no point". Compromise can involve positive adjustments such as when a mother reads the paper for her daughter who is not "very good at reading", but as TE testifies, it can frequently make the difference between best intentions in the long run and giving in to short term weaknesses such as knowing soap operas are "trashy but I watch them anyway". The taking up of any activity involves adjustments in relation to the whole network of potential options. The connection between factors is clear, and levels of media use have ramifications for other areas of interviewees lives: "I'm usually thinking - 'oh I had to do this but I'll watch this first' and then by the time it's finished, I forget about what I'm supposed to be doing". Media use is often a tactic to avoid other

things, as well as a means of filling in aimless time when there is nothing else to do.

Rules established by parents to regulate ICT consumption can be inconsistently applied especially in relation to certain TV programmes such as *The Simpsons* and *ER* when parents collude with pressure from their children and become 'partners in crime'. LA declares: "I think my mum's worse than me. If *ER* comes on and you speak to her, she goes mental, she really does get worked up". The interviewees seem to believe that parents use the TV to reconfirm the boundaries between themselves and their children in some instances, but that they also deliberately use it as a means through which to congregate the family together in a controlled manner. The 'naughty' exceptions to the rule which parents collude in are in some sense as significant in shaping actual patterns of use, and in this instance in fostering a shared experience, as deliberate acts of reinforcement such as hiring and watching a video together as a family. The 'reproduction lattice' is paradoxically maintained in the breach as well as the observance.

#### LEAVENING THE LATTICE

In our Phase One account of the appropriation of household ICTs, we describe a process of absorption into behavioural repertoires by which the 'new' is transformed into the familiar, (the 'domesticated' device) and cultural and political norms are maintained. The adolescent respondents in Phase Three describe a process of appropriation which is inconsistent with this pattern. Media appear to be distinguished on the basis of effort required in a given situation: thus we hear that 'the computer' and 'the Internet' are like reading - effortful, and, by implication, 'boring'. The TV is overwhelmingly referred to as a pacifying activity which offers a convenient distraction when there is "nothing else to do". As SJ says, "in my house they just watch it because it is there". Conversely the availability of TV is denounced as much as it is enjoyed for its passivity - "you don't have to do anything" - and status a giving medium, in comparison with the computer which is considered in more demanding and less affectionate terms.

Media use is highly affected by the availability of alternative activities, a factor which confirms the distinction made in Phase Two between 'undirected use' and 'goal oriented use'. The former is casualised and often motivated by boredom, and the latter, a more contrived activity designed to facilitate a particular function or task such as LA using the radio to help her get to sleep. As in Phase Two, gendered patterns also characterise approaches to devices, as AL for instance views the computer in educational and task oriented terms and she just uses it to "do our work on. Get nice copies like for a project or something, it

makes it look neat and tidy...". In contrast applied enjoyment characterises all interviewees social interactions with friends, which are deliberately targeted rather than incidentally occurring. Levels of boredom or engagement also vary across devices and through time, with many interviewees showing considerable 'world weariness' when discussing computer games which were initially interesting but rapidly became "boring". Devices are used to suit a variety of needs and have subtle and specific applications which are unique to the particular individual and their circumstances.

Watching, or listening, whilst juggling other tasks makes media use oscillate between being a primary or a secondary activity. The status of the media activity can change during the course of say a programme, and this status is also defined in relation to other things which are going on at the same time. For many interviewees, TV and music are the background of home life and as SE says "It is never silent in the house". Although there is constant media exposure, this is interrupted as it is partially intersected by other activities or complementary devices. AN explains that: "I listen to the radio when I'm getting up. It's on all around the house while I'm getting ready. Then I listen to it if I'm in the kitchen, as soon as I walk into the kitchen I put the radio on...". Dual or simultaneous use is common with many listening to the radio whilst having a shower or driving to school, reading whilst on the toilet or when watching TV, and bedrooms are frequently tidied whilst listening to music. SU criticises the constant music exposure her friends engage in:

"They just leave it on and go down and eat their tea, come back up and it will still be playing and they will just put the TV on, watch to TV with the music in the background which is usually annoying".

Certain activities complement particular devices, such as listening to music whilst dressing, and interviewees are adept at integrating their media pleasures into the wider framework of tasks, responsibilities and routines, such as doing homework with the radio on. Temporal conditions, along with alternative interests/distractions, possible tasks needing to be completed and the quality of programming are all factors which affect concentration levels. However, as AN confirms, there are certain programmes which can over-ride time and task considerations: "If it's something like *Eastenders*, you've just got to drop everything".

The place of a given device within the reproduction lattice will often depend on the parental view of the benefits it confers. Though children will defer to parental judgment, they can act subversively. The debate about whether computers and TV are constructive or sociable is a case in point: this is framed in terms of natural and authentic forms of face-to-face communication such as conversation, versus the corrosive effects of mediated communication. In ANA's household when her mother tries to explicitly contrive "conversation time", it is seen to disrupt the natural flow, and is resisted. The interview with AN and LA

covered this theme in some detail. AN offers a brief narrative by way of illustration:

"I know that at my cousins', they moved the television from the living to the spare room to encourage chat and it didn't work at all, because nobody went into the living room, they all just went into their own rooms or into the spare room to watch television".

In reply, LA says: "We don't really encourage chat, it's just natural". AN replies, "but it's natural just to walk into the living room just to put the telly on: the room is known as the TV room because you do nothing but watch telly in it apart from we might just talk there". LA reinforces this position by saying that "I don't think it interferes with our family life or anything", and AN agrees: "I think it's part of it now actually". On the one hand, this is a debate about the authenticity of different forms of communication and the relative value attached to them, but it is also revealing of the extent to which different media have or have not become integrated or naturalised into the domestic setting. Both AN and LA appear to be comfortable with the TV as an integral part of their households, and would regard its sanction as 'unnatural'. AN is however aware that her cousins do attempt to resist what they perceived to be its encroachment into the living room, and the integrity of the forms of conversational interaction which occur within this space. The television and its relative status in comparison to other forms of communication continues to be contested, as do issues such as which space it should occupy and when and how often it should be watched.

Attitudes towards particular devices vary according to the ways in which they are seen to be used as much as the relative status they are apportioned in relation to other media. The computer is not consistently regarded by KE's mum as a good thing, and as he testifies, it has to be used in particular ways in order to be considered of positive benefit:

"I don't think she (his mother) likes me sitting in front of the computer as much as I do...it depends what sort of things I'm doing...see I've got a PC but I don't think I use it like what I should use it for. The amount of money that's spent on that like, when I only play football games on it, and I think she thinks that...I should be either getting a book out or using something that could help me on the computer".

As we suggest above, the continuing conflict in everyday practice between ideal and actual use is frequently framed in terms of whether the activity fosters 'real' communication, is of educational benefit and is sociable, or whether it is distracting the user from more meaningful tasks into a private, unproductive or even decadent pursuit. The young people themselves are very aware of this discourse which is manifest within a wider public rhetoric about the use and abuse of technology as well as within parental observations, and subsequently insinuates itself within the pull and flow of factors which drive and shape how they use their own technology. In many ways, they may be seen to embody this

tension between the resolve to use the media in 'constructive' ways and the temptation to do other things with them. Use is often mood driven, rather than systematic or principled. As FE observes: "...when I use the computer is just chance. If I wanted to do a nice good essay I would do it on the computer, but if I can't be bothered I would just write it". Just as media use is often erratically motivated, the intended function of the technology itself does not necessarily lead to predictable outcomes. There was no evidence of a direct causal relationship between high creative capacity of a device resulting in a more complex engagement with it. Computers with sophisticated specifications were generally used in simple ways, whereas the radio, a relatively primitive device, was used in an extremely diverse and flexible manner.

### AN INTERPRETATIVE SHIFT

As we indicate above, the initial content analysis 'cut' the Phase Three interview material in different ways - by location, by medium, by type of use. This allowed us to pick up two important themes in relation to the 'information management' or 'micro-organisational' model - namely, the importance of subcultures and the misapplication of the blanket label 'new' to media, some of which ('computers', 'Internet') are indeed used differently from other technologies in the home (they require attention and disengagement from context) but are likened by users to the well established medium of the printed page. The immense diversity and inconsistency of ICT use within and across households makes it difficult however, to provide a robust model, or theory of appropriation on the basis of Phase Three interview material; our respondents conform with those described by Radway (1988) as 'nomadic subjects' - with mobile interests and habits which cannot be taken for granted. In our most recent discussions of what to make of our findings, we have explored a framework which takes account of contingency and volatility - Actor Network Theory - originally developed by Latour, Callon and Law, and modified by subsequent analysts.

At this point it is useful to turn to Latour's We have never been Modern (1993), which we will argue provides a theoretical framework which has the flexibility to adequately account for the complex operations which collectively make up these adolescents' interactions with their media environment. Latour maintains that rather than the world being held together by discrete systems or discourses, it exists through networks which like Ariadne's thread interweave together the mixture of 'things' through which we live and act. There is a shift in emphasis away from a focus on power and strategy as a source of action towards accentuating the connections between factors, and the ties which bind or facilitate movement. It is almost impossible for us, as academics, Latour states, to appreciate and view the world as if 'a delicate shuttle should have woven

together the heavens, industry, texts, souls and moral law - this remains uncannily unthinkable, unseemly' (1993, 5).

Latour argues that the ordering logic which creates separations has resulted in a world organised along exclusive lines, in which it is deemed critically possible to identify beginnings and endings, to mark cause and effect, to quantify action and inaction, to articulate power and powerlessness and so on. He states that it is this ordering logic which holds the key to what it means to be, or more specifically, to try to be modern. The modern world has never actually materialised as moderns have failed to make the world function according to the logic of its own official constitution. The world is in actuality characterised by seamlessness rather than separation. What is interesting from the point of view of the HIS project, is the proposal that modern society inadvertently creates integrated collectives, made up simultaneously of 'social' and 'physical' relations, which it neither acknowledges or conceptualises as such. Where social scientists have adopted and studied the world through the framework of modern dualisms, Latour implies we should be more inclusive in our approach by taking into account all those elements we have traditionally separated or made invisible to the research project. Within this approach, there are countless small divides rather than one great divide ('subject/object', or personal circumstance/technology) as advocated in universalist accounts, and differences accompany and rely on each other rather than oppose one another.

By exposing the points of continuity and discontinuity between apparently opposing categories it is possible to integrate elements together into the Latourian notion of hybrid states. The existence of partial effects is central to his thesis, and is a useful tool for appreciating the inconsistency of media practice we have referred to above. Latour would argue that the existence of hybrid states, in our case how the messy conditions of everyday life, shape and penetrate the coherence of any 'systematic' approach to media use, and should be acknowledged rather than denied by the researcher. The Latourian method does not allow for convenient bracketing off or the superimposing a priori of a system of thought (object/subject) onto the material at hand. Rather than separate off apparently different practices such as sibling rivalry, gender relations, the use of space, aesthetic preferences, lifestage and media use, Latour would argue that the work of hybridisation would address the links between these diverse factors and in such a way as to illuminate a new type of research practice. In practical terms such an investigation accommodates the randomness and temporality of decision making we have illustrated above, as well as investigating its apparently systematic intent.

Throughout our findings it is evident that attention must be paid to the multiple links between practices, the intersecting influences and disjunctions as well as the continuously negotiated character of mutual actions. For instance,

interviewee KE has an abiding interest in football which strongly directs how he approaches the various technologies at his disposal. He uses the media to facilitate a greater end, that of football, rather than as an end of itself. He listens to the radio in the coach on the way back from football games, watches TV for the football, only reads the back pages of the paper for the sports reports, takes the radio to football matches so he can hear the scores as they come out and only really uses the phone to arrange a knock around down the park with friends. KE's interest in football is central to understanding why he uses the media in the way he does. As researchers it is necessary to broaden our account of the different factors which affect media use.

### ACTOR NETWORK THEORY

Again it is useful to draw on Latour's work on Actor Network Theory (ANT), as a means through which to map the various factors which appeared to be significant within the interviewees' own mediated networks. ANT has been used by organisational analysts at the 'meso' level to interpret complex corporations (Bowker, 1992), and, at the micro level, to account for domestic technologies (Cowan, 1987). The theory takes the position that universality and order are not 'the rule but the exception' and therefore it is concerned with the irreducible, inconsistent and the local. Building on the Foucauldian account of micro-powers (1971), ANT maintains that rather than modern society functioning through 'levels, layers, territories, spheres, categories, structures and systems', it gains momentum by dissemination through diverse, inter-woven systems or networks (Latour, 1997, p.2). Latour presents ANT as an alternative to social constructionism by arguing it is:

... better equipped to deal with the non-social and the nonhuman - to integrate them into an analytic framework that attends to the mutual construction of the social and the non-social, the human and the nonhuman' (Michael, 1997, 51)

Networks are conceived as bundles of associations and inter-relationships, sets of enabling conditions which are durable but potentially unreliable. Instability can result from a challenge to the roles and identities of one entity by another, and the essential heterogeneity of the network has consequences for movement between those negotiating the semiotic character of the network. Obligatory points of passage can also be monopolised by actors affording them pivotal status as they translate and distribute information to other actors in the network. For instance, control over the TV is highly territorialised, as indicated when SJ throws her brother out of her bedroom if he tries to challenge her monopoly by changing the channel. Her actions reveal how important space, social hierarchies and relationships are to media use. Actors must be regarded as multiplicitous with multiple membership and associations across networks, and whilst SJ's brother may be marginal to one network, he will also be central to

another, in control of his own TV. In this way the Latourian method challenges reductive accounts of inclusion and exclusion, and enables us to understand how use changes across space and time. This is particularly important for understanding how relationships of power affect the unfolding dynamic between use within apparently 'private' zones such as the bedroom and the more 'public' viewing areas such as the sitting room.

The Latourian view of power as practice, defined through action, based on associations, never wholly present or absent, seems to offer a flexibility which can on the one hand account for how powerful motivations operate as diverse structured arrangements as well as accommodating the degree of contingency which we have argued actually characterises the shifting balance of actions in relation to media use. The crisscrossing and conflicting pull of priorities between the different actors is complex, and consequently accounting for the relative power or influence of one actor in relation to another is impossible. At times media use seems to be subject to the same restrictions and factors which shape other aspects of interviewees' lives, such as KA who "started reading the papers because everyone tells you to" and she "has to for her modern studies course", or E who "hasn't used the computer at home yet" because "my dad was going to teach me a bit about it but he hasn't got round to it yet". It is possible to see how relationships, domestic conventions, objects, school courses, environments and technologies are integrated into the same network, part of the same collective as a living process. Not only does this kind of deep and broad account enable us to appreciate the number and variety of different factors, or actors which interlink within any given mediated network, it also has implications for vertical models of power by exposing decision making processes in their full complexity. In this way ANT can reconstruct 'social theory out of networks'.

### CONCLUSIONS

In terms of our own research it is possible to see how media analysis can oscillate between the pragmatic certainties of the structural account and the relativising tendencies of the postmodern response. We have used our interview material to illustrate ways in which Latour, admittedly in a somewhat tempered form, does potentially offer what may topically be termed a 'third way'. Through this we hope to illustrate how as researchers we can transcend the theoretical legacies of both modernity and postmodernity in order to develop a conceptual framework which more appropriately addresses the tricky complexity of mediated interaction.

It is evident from our research that patterns of media use are highly individualised and strongly context dependent and consequently defy systematic accountability. Behavioural decisions and instantaneous choices are often made

for erratic rather than consistent reasons, and there is not necessarily any lasting coherence to any one individual's media habits. Clear lines of cause and effect are difficult to detect and action cannot be easily posited through recourse to any 'rational' motivation theory. For instance, when asked about designing Internet pages, one interviewee replied, "I was going to, but when I got round to it I couldn't be bothered". It is also evident from our research that use is highly dependent on the particular dynamics of the household and specifically the relationships between the different members of the family. The links which bind factors are unpredictable, factors and actors are inter-dependent, with one person's actions affecting the way the other behaves. Some habits remain fairly constant, for instance the frequently cited routine of coming home from school and watching *Home and Away* and then doing homework, whilst other habits are short lived. Certain motivations seem more persistent than others and some change over time according to the individual's particular lifestage. Other factors alter with time in a linear fashion for instance being allowed to stay up watching TV later as you get older, whilst other factors alter in a cyclical fashion with many interviewees stating they watched a lot less TV in the summer as the weather is better.

In the course of this research it has become increasingly evident that media habits are messy, highly context specific and individualised, which makes them complicated and unpredictable from an analytic point of view. We can therefore merely ruefully attempt to plot some of the habits, inclinations and styles of use particular to these teenagers, with the full knowledge that the specificity of this enterprise negates any attempts to generalise about our findings. Paradoxically we deconstruct our own critical position as we construct it. (Geertz, 1983).

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