

Chapter XXVII

What Use is Domestication Theory to Information Systems Research?

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ABSTRACT

This chapter introduces and discusses domestication theory—essentially about giving technology a place in everyday life—and its relevance and importance to information systems (IS) research. The authors discuss domestication within the context of the social shaping of technology and critique use and adoption theories more widely found in IS studies. The authors illustrate how domestication theory underpins studies of how Irish households find ways of using computers (or not) in their everyday life and research into the use of ICTs in UK gendered households. In conclusion they outline how developments in domestication theory can contribute to future IS research.

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter we discuss domestication theory, its origin in the reference discipline of sociology and potential/undiscovered importance to Information Systems (IS) research. The relationship between

technology and everyday life (and implicit in this construction is the prevalence of users) is a matter of increasing concern for many academics in a wide range of disciplines. Disciplines like IS may claim *ownership* for the study and treatment of the end-users of computer systems, for example

terming the field *Human Factors of Computing* or *Human Computer Interaction*. Yet, although examining the interaction between people and the technological artefact and the systems running on it, little attention is often paid to the social constructs in which computer use actually takes place, and how if at all, this influences how computers are acquired, used and made sense of.

Domestication, essentially, is about giving technology a place in everyday life. The concept catches the practical, temporal, spatial place, but most importantly, it underlines how this is mixed with the cultural as an expression of lifestyles and values.

According to Haddon (2006), the very first outlines of the Domestication framework emerged in the early 1990s. Two major strands of domestication literature can be detected – the UK strand (for example Silverstone *et al.*, 1989, 1992, 1994) and the Norwegian strand (for example Sørensen *et al.* 1996). Silverstone and his collaborators focused their version of domestication within the household setting and on media technologies, while Sørensen and his collaborators widened their interest in domestication to contexts outside of the home and on other technologies, such as the car and ‘smart-houses’.

In the IS field, it is crucial to understand domestication theory as IS research begins to engage with the concept of ubiquitous computing in everyday life beyond engineering or design issues and the organisational setting for system implementation. In this chapter we therefore aim to showcase significant studies that illustrate domestication theory as an approach and discuss research strategies in the method adopted. The majority of IS research focus on computer usage in settings other than the household (and indeed the construct of everyday life). Organisational, educational, institutional contexts are and have been prioritized over the household setting or the realm of everyday life. IS has not been solely guilty of this obvious neglect but so too the fields of media studies, audience studies, computer

studies and so on, that is until the 1990s with the emergence of the Domestication concept set within a social shaping of technology framework. It is first important to define and discuss this theoretical framework before we can fully appreciate the value of Domestication as a concept.

The chapter will proceed by placing the concept of Domestication in the context of the development of theory related to the social shaping of technology. Then we critically analyze other approaches to the study of adoption and use of technology more widely used in IS research. We explain how Domestication theory is an important alternative to our understanding of technology in everyday life and we illustrate our arguments with examples of how IS researchers have utilized Domestication theory in their research. Finally we draw conclusions and suggest the likely future developments of Domestication theory.

DOMESTICATION THEORY IN CONTEXT

In this section we focus on theories that underpin domestication of ICTs and that help to understand technologies in everyday life. These theories are discussed under the umbrella term – the social shaping of technology.

Social Shaping of Technology

Social research, studies of technological use and ways of thinking about technology have tended to focus on the effects of technology on society: its impact, its implications, and so on. A ‘social shaping’ or ‘constructivist’ approach to technology means to locate the technology as something social, or a product of social interaction. Wajcman (2004) explains that technology must be understood as part of the social fabric that holds society together; it is never merely technical or social. Rather, technology is always a socio-material product, ‘a seamless web or network combining

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