(Re-)Thinking Domestication: Introduction: Sonia Livingstone (LSE, UK)

"It is in the notion (and the practices) of domestication that we think the two debates (about the future of the family and the future/impact of technology) meet: in the sphere of domestic consumption about which we know so very little." (Silverstone, Morley, Dahlberg and Livingstone, 1989, p.4).

Written over three decades ago, the intersection of family, technology and future remains a preoccupation in academic, policy and public debate. The nature of both 'the family' and 'technology' have evolved through the vicissitudes of late modernity, and certainly, now we know much more about them. Over this period, domestication research has broadened to encompass spheres beyond the moral economy of the family and home, in some respects merging with other fields - media and communication studies, cultural studies, consumption studies, science and technology studies, digital anthropology and more. Common across these fields is a concern to recognise the actions of the everyday public within larger processes of power – not to celebrate or exaggerate their effects but, as an intellectual and critical commitment, to acknowledge and document the nature and creative or resistant potential of these actions while simultaneously uncovering how they are socially shaped given political-economic interests and constraints.

Domestication refers to a set of processes positioned between the past and the future, for the very meaning of change is articulated by looking back to how things were (for, at least, the past is known, insofar as it is remembered) and forward to what they might become (which, the future being unknown and unknowable, attract often-impossible hopes and fears). Decades after the original formulation, I heard again from families I interviewed for 'Parenting for a Digital Future' (Livingstone, 2020) how society's heightened attention to digital technologies tends to channel and crystalise popular understanding of change itself. Whether through nostalgia for lost traditions or sci-fi imaginaries of things to come or in other ways, people mobilise symbolic, emotional and material resources about the past and future to face the ever-changing demands of their present circumstances. In so doing, they make and remake the meaning of 'family' and 'technology,' as the six chapters in this section explore, while also taking domestication theory in new directions, as befits our fractured and challenging times.

Acknowledging the traditional definition of domestication as the transformative process whereby information and communication technologies gain meaning and value by being appropriated within the moral economy of the household, Hirsch attends to the complementary process by which people are transformed through the relations they form with technologies. The nexus of relationships we are all embedded in now includes relationships with and, I suggest, through technologies. Recalling the history of the domestication of plants and livestock, Hirsch reminds us of the dynamic that holds people meaningfully within their domestic contexts: not only do we try to 'tame' our environment to suit our needs and interests, but we also dance to its (animate or inanimate) tune. In domesticating technology, we too are domesticated; thus, our personhood – our social,

relational, embedded self - is transformed. He illustrates his argument by noting how text messaging was initially feared by parents for embedding their children in unknown relationships yet, later, encouraged by parents to ensure their children adapt and fit in with the social group: "it was not that the technology needed domesticating, rather the children needed to be 'domesticated' in relation to using the technology" – and thus their personhood is rendered normative.

Once technologies are domesticated and taken for granted in everyday life, Berker argues, collectively, they become or contribute to infrastructures – in our homes and in society. The past three or four decades have witnessed the transition from domesticating wild technologies entering our homes to living with (or, as Deuze, 2012 would say, in) media. Today's digital infrastructures are not only taken for granted, but they blur home and work (as highlighted in remote working practices during the Covid-19 pandemic); they are increasingly personalised (now mediated by the actions of algorithms in response to dynamically-produced micro-segmentations of the population); they have become ubiquitous (to the point where the public has had to give up on its beloved panic about screen time, and where researchers can no longer count hours of digital activity as indicative of anything).

Infrastructures necessitate a new kind of 'work,' Berker argues. From their users, this work involves maintaining, repairing and micro-managing the socio-technological infrastructures that underpin our lives. For domestication researchers, too, the work is not over, for we must make these infrastructures visible, re-wilding them to recognise and critique their 'imagined' or 'inscribed users' and trace their social consequences for actual users. Berker here highlights a tension in the analysis of domestication in everyday life (or, in Habermas' terms, the lifeworld) between Marx's productive and estranged forms of labour, the latter being exploited by the system world. This raises questions about other parts of the circuit of culture - the domination of digital platforms in the most valuable global companies, for example, or the through-going mediation (and platformisation) not only of everyday life but also of democracy, commerce and international relations.

The value of the concept of infrastructure is that it encompasses all of this and more, crucially recognising that behind the devices, networks and apps that the public engages with as end-user is a complex global ecosystem of cables, cloud services, data brokers, standards bodies, digital business-to-business services and so forth. I am reminded of the parallel debate in audience studies over whether to recognise the audience's work in making media meaningful as agency (Katz, 1996) or alienated (Andrejevitch, 2002). There is no neat answer to be had: as Silverstone et al. (1989, p.96) concluded in that original statement about domestication, written by way of preparation for the empirical work on 'The Household Uses of Information and Communication Technologies' project, consumption is inherently political, for "the commodity, its circulation and its consumption, is the focus for a struggle over its meaning, a struggle which is the expression of the different interests of those who are engaged in the consumption process." But the outcome of the struggle varies according to the context and its defining influences.

Moreover, we need to grasp the wider circuit of culture to understand, for instance, Hirsch's argument that technologies "are person-like in many ways: they summon interaction and communication." How can technologies 'summon' responses from their users, domesticating them to suit the technology, using rather than being used by them? To answer this, we need to examine not only user practices and the cultural contexts in which they are embedded but also technological affordances and the economic contexts that shape the work of businesses, designers, developers, marketers, regulators and more (Mansell and Silverstone, 1996). Consider the example of notifications. For users, these generate a form of sociality that embeds them in a network of obligations. Yet, for businesses, they contribute to a marketing strategy that deploys dark patterns to monetise user attention. Such considerations lead Morley to critique the concept of consumer choice, which, he contends, explicitly or implicitly leads some empirical research on domestication to overstate an individualised notion of user agency. Here it is helpful to recall Bakardjieva's (2005) nuanced framing of user agency within critical and cultural theories of power.

Andersen and Vistisen pursue the question of domestication theory's relation to power in exploring what they call the 'dark side' of domestication, referring to people's hyperfocus on technology and fear of missing out. Returning our attention to users' everyday experiences, they highlight the existence of a liminal space between the public and private sphere, which they describe as an emergent space of reflexivity regarding the very process of domesticating technology. This is driven by the tensions within the household that impede any consensus in 'household' domestication, often centred on generational differences or even conflicts, though gendered tensions have long mattered too. In what Andersen and Vistisen see as a historical reversal, social media initially developed to promote social belonging have come to undermine it, resulting in a degree of everyday discomfort which drives 'reflexive domestication' towards, for example, digital detox strategies, or a heightened awareness of the risks of social media visibility. The result, they argue, is not only caution and anxiety but also a reflexive awareness that the moral economy of the household has its limits.

The notion of re-domestication is helpful here, as set out by Peil and Röser, who observe that technology may first be domesticated in one way (or at one time or context) and then differently. We could think of re-domestication as a process driven by biographical developments– think of a student taking the TV set from their bedroom in the family home to their student residence and then, later perhaps, to a house shared with friends: at each point, the TV set changes its meaning, and is (re)positioned within different social practices. Peil and Röser explore the transition to parenthood – an interesting moment not only in the family's life but in the re-domestication of domestic technologies to suit new times and enable new possibilities. Looking beyond individual or family biographies to the history of technologies, one can imagine other forms of re-domestication.

Consider the example of text messaging. This was first appropriated by early adopter adults, proud possessors of expensive mobile technology. It was then taken up by (Western) youth *en masse* for peer-to-peer chat. Then it was reappropriated by the world's poor (in the West and the global South) for low-bandwidth communication. Now it is used primarily by

companies for marketing and business-to-consumer messaging, while young and old have moved for their 'real' communication to social media. Each of these moments of domestication has rightly been analysed for its distinctive motives, meanings and history. What the question of re-domestication adds, as I understand it, is the question of whether and how each moment bears a relation to the other, perhaps even incorporating and extending what went before.

Again, it seems crucial to interrogate the relation between domestication and innovation in the circuit of culture. For instance, in their first case study, Peil and Röser document the domestic history of the internet from when it was first given a special place in the household – I recall interviewing children using a connected computer in the niche under the staircase. Then, they suggest, the internet was re-domesticated as not distinct from but now embedded in the household's everyday life – perhaps on a laptop in the kitchen or the desktop perched at the end of the dining table. Most recently, the internet has once again been re-domesticated as mobile, personalised, and omnipresent. This history certainly captures the feel of many domestication studies, inviting analysis of household tensions (recall when the computer was placed in the smallest room, newly dubbed 'the office' and coded 'male' or 'adult'; Livingstone, 1992). How shall we determine whether socio-cultural shifts drive these processes of re-domestication or, rather, technological and business innovation (for example, in the development of wireless routers and laptop computers)?

I am reminded of the days when, in the late twentieth century, television was talked of as a 'push' technology (sometimes called a "sit back" technology by marketers) while the internet was a 'pull' (or "sit forward") technology, heralded for its potential to active users to make choices about what to see or who to reach out to. Today, of course, the situation is reversed, as television viewers face many choices among broadcast, catch-up and streaming services, while internet users – so it is said - scroll mindlessly through social media feeds algorithmically tailored to sustain their attention. However, domestication (and re-domestication) research complicates this historical shift, reminding us that even the audiences of old engaged with television's then-limited content offer in myriad ways according to their diverse needs and interests; furthermore, while today's television audience are indeed offered a cornucopia of content enabling a highly personalised experience, nonetheless many seek a common experience by accepting what is 'pushed' towards them (such as 'what's trending'). My point is that a critical analysis of the power dynamics between the technological offer and use cultures is vital to understanding the meanings and practices that shape our everyday lives.

Regarding this larger project, Martìnez & Tobias usefully argue that domestication research has taken unto itself the task of providing a critical corrective to the technological determinism endemic not only to theory but also to policy. For example, domestication research generally shows socio-technical change to be evolutionary rather than revolutionary. It excels at countering the hyperbole of techno-panics with solid evidence of moderate rather than catastrophic effects on everyday life, these also being diverse rather than monolithic precisely because they are significantly shaped by both user agency and the different

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structures and practices of everyday life. In short, domestication research has inserted a vital pause between innovation and intervention. When it comes to policymaking, the focus of their chapter, it must be acknowledged that if we don't know what an innovation means till we have researched how it is domesticated in context, policymakers must wait for the research findings (fund them, even!) before intervening.

They share three case studies of domestication research that found a policy audience, and it is interesting to consider what they have in common. Each sought to represent 'voices from below' to those in power – explaining to policymakers how encouragement to get connected was experienced as pressure by working-class families, explaining to school administration the missed opportunities of locking up students' mobile phones during class, explaining to government how grandchildren can indeed help their grandparents to gain digital skills but making this policy perpetuates inequalities also, as not all elderly people have willing grandchildren living nearby with time to commit. Since domestication research generally focuses on the quotidian, private practices in domestic spaces, and since it seeks out "ordinary" populations for study, attending to their diversity and differences, it is surely well-positioned to speak truth to power on behalf of those whose voices often go unheard. From my policy-relevant research with children, I have learned from the world of child rights that such work brings its ethical obligations: to co-design research with those being represented, to find ways to include their voices and their recommendations in policy briefings, and to feedback to them the response from policymakers, including news of beneficial (or other) outcomes.

It will be apparent that because domestication unfolds over years, even decades, there is welcome attention to history and theory in the chapters in this section. They insist on recognising the complex co-evolution of technologies and socio-economic forces shaping everyday life, mapping these in interesting ways onto the biographies and generational shifts of those we research. Concerned that much media research has become ahistorical, obsessed with the present and content to wave a hand at 'the past' without serious examination of either continuities or historical complexities, Morley welcomes domestication research's attention to history. In interrogating the different histories we tell, he explores how we find ourselves – as we must – also adopting a non-media-centric approach to domestication. Although researchers focus their immediate gaze on domestic practices around technologies, both the explanations and the social consequences of such practices often lie elsewhere, in the tensions and struggles in the wider culture. Morley's conversation with Hartmann encompasses a range of social consequences of domestication, spanning the home (including the design of sofas for shared viewing, the loss of privacy from ubiquitous surveillance, and the impact of home working during the pandemic) and the globe (where globalisation demands our attention not only to satellite networks but also to the flows of container shipping vital to long-distance supply chains).

Their discussion also troubles domestication theory's somewhat "cosy" focus on the domestic by drawing attention to those who have no home – Hartman has researched the homeless (or the "roofless" as she terms them, for some can find a 'home' in places that lack a

conventional roof) and Morley discusses immigrants who live between homes or divorced from their home of origin or making efforts to establish a new home. In short, people create opportunities for ontological security in both likely and unlikely places while facing its limits, often due to circumstances not of their making. Once again, we find ourselves debating the extent to which people's actions (whether at home, outside the home or without a home) alter or disrupt established power at key points of articulation (representation, consumption, identity) in the circuit of culture.

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