

**COMPUTERS IN THE HOME:  
DOMESTIC TECHNOLOGY AND THE  
PROCESS OF DOMESTICATION**

**Laurence Habib**

The Norwegian Computing Center

**Tony Cornford**

Department of Information Systems, London School of Economics and Political Sciences

## **The notion of the domestic**

- Conveys ideas of peace, caring and respect
- ‘Domesticating’: involves disciplining, taming, bringing closer to a certain idea of civilisation
- ‘Domestic work’: associated with gender division of labour, patriarchy, oppression/liberation of women
- ‘Cult of domesticity’: seen as creating and developing an oppressive set of structures in accordance with patriarchal traditions
- Geographical confinement of women symbolic of their social devaluation

# Empirical investigation

- Seven families in the South of England
- Ethnographic approach:
  - extensive conversations with family members, alone and as a group
  - observation, diaries

# Computers in the domestic landscape

- The home computer as part of the 'domestic media ensemble'
- Aesthetic considerations
- Cold, impersonal, corporate aspects of computer technology
- Integration and non-integration into domestic routines

*My mum [...] didn't initially mind. But at some point, Tamim [my brother] started to get so much hooked on it he wasn't going to prayer any more. That's when she threatened to chuck it out of the window. [...] You're supposed to go to the mosque three times a day. [...] My father, Nasif and I, we went every day of the week, two to three times. And sometimes Tamim did not, so it caused a lot of tension. The thing is... when you play a game, you don't really get into it before, say, twenty minutes, half an hour and then it was too much of a distraction to stop the game and go to the Mosque... [Tamim] was spending his whole time on it [the computer]. ...it was taking over our lives.*

*Ehsan Ahmed, 20 years old*

# Magical properties of computer technology

- Baffling logic, opacity
- Appears robust and powerful but vulnerable to the effects of physical elements and viruses, may break down at the most unexpected moment
- Anthropomorphisation of the computer
- Changing perception of time

*The computer system she has at school is completely antiquated, it's like ten-twelve years old. I did speak to the headmaster and I told him: "You could get new computers!" but he says they wouldn't be compatible.*

*Duncan Crabtree, interview #1*

*The equipment that she has in her school is probably fifteen or twenty years old.*

*Duncan Crabtree, interview #2 (six months later)*

# Processes of domestication

- Engaging in rituals and ceremonials around the computer
- Enacting rules and developing norms
- Drawing on an extended network of friends and relations for skills and advice
- Embracing computer technology because it can help pursue social and domestic purposes

*I wouldn't mind a modem. Some of my classmates do their homework with stuff from the Internet. It's much easier... better information... A link leads to another, then to another, then... Before you know it, you've got your essay, I mean... all your information, you just download it and... that's it...it's all there... you just have to write it up.*

*Jeremiah O'Leary, 13 years old*

*I expected it would be difficult for them [my daughters] if they didn't have one [a computer]. I think it's important for them, I mean, in this day and age... I want them to have the best education possible. Then... then, they can choose what they do with it. But when you don't have an education, you have no choice... I had no choice... There are opportunities out there but you have to give yourself the chance to... to pick them up. And for that you need an education... and direction. [...] And the computer... the computer facilitates that. It won't do the work for you but it will facilitate it... it will make it easier, or more fun, or... It's a tool. But, in this day and age, I think it's a necessary tool.*

*Bernard Sharma, early 40's, father of Maia, 10 and Nicola, 9*

## **Domestication: a fluid concept**

- Preserving the enigmatic and powerful image of the computer, faith in the 'transformative' properties of the home computer, idealised interpretation of what a computer can or will do

or

- Breaking down the magic: developing an awareness of of the home computer's weaknesses and 'unpredictabilities' that makes it eventually acceptable, understandable, and 'domesticatable'

