ICTs, domestication and language-games: a Wittgensteinian approach to media uses

JO HELLE-VALLE
SIFO (National Institute for Consumer Research), Norway

DAG SLETTEMEÅS
SIFO (National Institute for Consumer Research), Norway

Abstract:
This article acknowledges the vital role that the Domestication Research-perspective has in media research, but criticizes it for being analytically ambiguous in its use of the central term ‘domestication’. By way of a contrastive set of data from an ongoing research project, we argue for a dislocation of ‘domestication’ from the domestic and the private. Instead, we wish to retain the meaning and use of the term to acts of domesticating, i.e. processes of ‘taming the wild’. By connecting our arguments to Wittgenstein’s concept of the ‘language-game’, we emphasize the practical aspect of language and meaning, and how ICTs become meaningful only as parts of practical-communicative contexts. We argue that this steering towards ‘domestication’ as contextualization highlights the universal and fundamental process of enculturation. Such a turn frees the perspective from historical and cultural specificities and thereby accentuates its analytical potential in a post-national, globalized world.
INTRODUCTION
Roger Silverstone, David Morley, Eric Hirsch and Leslie Haddon have been central in developing what is commonly referred to as the Domestication Research perspective on the uses of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) through their work in the 1990s. At the core of this perspective lies the contention that in order to understand and analyze media use, we need to develop an analytical framework that takes as its starting point the fact that ICTs are not merely functional technologies but applied media and objects that need to be meaningfully integrated by their users into the socio-cultural settings in which they are used. And since the most important setting for such uses is the home, it is crucial to understand what the home, as a communicative context, is. Therefore they have developed an analytical framework in which the terms ‘home’, ‘the moral economy of the household’, ‘family’ and ‘domestication’ are central.

In our opinion, the analytical developments that this perspective represents are formidable and it has already proved its worth through various academic applications during the last 15 years. However, we contend that there are certain weaknesses in this framework that need to be addressed so that the full analytical potential can be realized. Our main concern is with ‘domestication’. We hold this concept to be the analytical hub of their perspective because it refers to the myriad of processes that unfold in making technologies known and acceptable, while the other three terms are specifically bound to aspects of the domestic and the private. On the other hand, we claim that ‘domestication’ is used in ambiguous ways by its authors and that this ambiguity is unfortunate from an analytical point of view. The academic term at times refers to the act of bringing objects into the domestic sphere (into homes and hence into the realm of the private), and sometimes it refers to the act of domesticating (i.e. ‘taming’) the wild. Our suggestion – which this article aims to substantiate – is to argue for a purification of ‘domestication’ in the sense that it should be analytically dissociated from the private and the domestic, and exclusively associated with acts of taming, which we argue refers to the fundamental and necessary process of contextualization.

Our arguments are analytical but our reasons are pragmatic; we claim that such an understanding gives the concept more analytical power because it will be useful for analyzing a wider variety of data – including non-domestic and non-Western settings. We will lean heavily on Wittgenstein’s later
perspectives on the relationship between language and practice. In his spirit we argue that ‘domestication’ is best understood as processes attempting to fit ICTs to the language-games they are linked to, thus capturing the fundamental quality of enculturation. Whether such processes take place within or outside the home, or if the home is relevant as context, is of secondary analytical importance.

But first, the question must be asked – is in fact ‘domestication’ analytically ambiguous? In the groundbreaking and much-cited book *Consuming Technologies* (Silverstone et al., 1992) ‘domestication’ is not a central concept. Rather, ‘the moral economy of the household’ is the key term. Nevertheless, it plays a vital role in that it designates the processes that link ICTs as commodities to the home. Given this focus on the home, it is no wonder that domestication is closely linked to the public/private dichotomy, which the authors assert is a fundamental division in Western modernity. Thus, it is stated that in modern, Western capitalist economies, households are routinely engaged in procuring commodities produced in a public sphere, and that this ‘engagement involves the appropriation of these commodities into domestic culture – they are domesticated’ (Silverstone et al., 1992: 16). In Silverstone’s later book *Television and Everyday Life*, the term has become more central and the analytical ambiguity more exposed. For instance, he states that domestication:

‘does, perhaps literally, involve bringing objects in from the wild: from the public places. The transition, which is also a translation, of objects across the boundary that separates public and private spaces is at the heart of what I mean by domestication.’ (1994: 98).

But the term is not solely associated with the home and the private sphere. Later in the book, he writes that domestication:

is a process both of taming the wild and cultivating the tame. It is where nature becomes culture. One can think of domestication too, as both a process by which we make things our own, subject to our control, imprinted by, and expressive of, our identities; and as a principle of mass consumption in which products are prepared in the public fora of the marked. (1994: 174)

The citations clearly reveal the ambiguous content of the term. They refer to the private and the home but also to the general process of ‘taming the wild’, of conquering objects in ways that makes them ‘our own’ and hence conceptually and morally acceptable.¹

We maintain that bringing out ambiguous aspects of the realities we study is crucially important; being analytically ambiguous is a weakness. From an analytical point of view, we do not need the concept’s link to the private and the home. Through such a disconnection ‘domestication’ becomes a truly analytical concept in that it is not restricted to certain historical and cultural traditions but acquires universal relevance. By defining the concept solely in
terms of enculturation: (i) it can be applied anywhere and anytime; and (ii) it will not bring us into analytical trouble when we analyze media uses that are either not well defined in relation to the private-public divide or perhaps are irrelevant to that divide. Thus, what we criticize is the authors’ theoretical treatment of ‘domestication’ – not their actual analyzes – and we maintain that this is an important task precisely because we believe that their contribution to the development of media-use research is so significant.

Lastly, a short comment on the structure of our article. We start off with a case from our own data, and show that it fits well with the ‘domestication’ perspective. Then we introduce another case, one that accentuates the problem with the ambiguous definition of ‘domestication’. The analytical challenges we thereby raise are then used as a starting point for reflections on some ontological themes, which then lead to arguments about the importance of understanding ‘domestication’ as processes that have to do with the practical tasks of accommodating ICTs to language-games. After having gone through these theoretical steps, we return to our empirical cases in order to re-interpret them in light of our previous arguments. We then, to round up the article, draw some further analytical and empirical consequences from our attempt to redefine ‘domestication’.

CASE 1: ‘HOME’, ‘HOUSEHOLD’ AND ‘FAMILY’
As a part of a research project investigating uses of digital ICTs in Norwegian homes, we invited four nuclear families in 2002 to a Future House in the Oslo area. The purpose was to provide the interviewees with a semi-realistic context for state of the art ICT consumption. The families were to test two pilots made for PCs and interactive TVs. The pilot they tested for TV-use was designed by Norsk Tipping, Norway’s major betting company. The basic idea in this pilot is that if the user is registered with Norsk Tipping and has an account from which they can draw money, a menu will appear at the bottom of the TV-screen. As long as there is money in the account and the player keeps the time limits for betting, they can bet on various aspects of the game watched, such as the end result of the game, the result at half-time, the outcome of a penalty kick, etc. Information on the screen keeps the viewer-player informed about the details of the betting (money available on the account, betting odds, wins and losses, etc.). The idea behind the pilot was to combine the comforts of home with the thrill of watching a sport event and the excitement of perhaps becoming very rich.

These assumptions were only partly correct for our test families. The verbal and bodily actions and reactions of the viewers of the pilot left no doubt that this was an enticing product. Although the pilot was not really interactive – what they saw was a demo-video of how it would function if the service was operative – our viewers all expressed an opinion that the product was captivating. However, among the adults, this captivation was unequivocally
paired with a fundamental scepticism. In short, they expressed a deep concern for the moral and social consequences of the pilot. One concern was that they might be seduced; the combination of immediate returns on bets and the excitement of watching the game might well lead to a loss of control and hence economic ruin. Another line of argument – used in combination with the first – was that this was not appropriate entertainment for the children. In fact, most of the adults felt that they had experienced something immoral. Thus, all added a moral dimension to their evaluation of the pilot – a moral evaluation that varied from ‘concerned’ to ‘appalled’ (Helle-Valle, 2003). In other words, the adult viewers felt that this was a type of entertainment that was clearly inappropriate in a family setting – a point most parents said in so many words. In short, the reactions of the adults can be described as ambivalent; the pilot was considered enticing but literally out of context. The children, on the other hand, in general lacked this moral reaction.

The attitudes of the family members interviewed are not hard to explain. And in our view their reactions fit as hand in glove with the Domestication Research-perspective. A basic argument in this perspective is that in order to understand the various how and whys of media-use, it is necessary to assume not a simple subject-object relationship but to include a significant third factor, namely the social setting in which the subject relates to the object. The most important setting for media consumption is the home, hence the centrality of the terms ‘home’, ‘family’, ‘the moral economy of the household’ and ‘domestication’. The main task is providing ‘an integrative frame for the consideration of household practices and relations and the consumption and use of information and communication technologies’ (Silverstone et al., 1992: 16). The home is posed as a contrast to the public sphere in the sense that as a private sphere it constitutes a different social and cultural context – i.e. containing specific values and perspectives – than the public sphere that surrounds it. Therefore, since technologies that are potentially ‘useful’ to the household are produced in, and associated with, the public sphere, the acquisition of such commodities requires a ‘translation’; they need to undergo a transformation that implies that they are given a meaningful place in the home and become morally acceptable. ‘This engagement involves the appropriation of these commodities into domestic culture – they are domesticated – and through that appropriation they are incorporated and redefined in different terms, in accordance with the household’s own values and interests’ (Silverstone et al., 1992: 16).

The translation of the media product seems in our case to have worked badly; the pilot fits poorly with core values that are associated with typical western homes. Now, to avoid reifying and essentializing, Silverstone and his colleagues purposely do not dwell much on the ideological aspect of the home (that, for them, is ‘the family’ (Silverstone, 1994: 24)). However, as our informants obviously reacted to the pilot on moral grounds, it is important to
identify the values that are challenged here. And we believe that given the
definition of ‘home’ as belonging to the private, and hence as the ‘significant
other’ of the public sphere, it should be possible to identify a set of values that
constitute the prototypical home. In short, the home is that which harbours
the family, and the family is built on (the idea of) romantic love. Love, in the
wide sense of the word, celebrates the intimate and emotional – that which is
said to concern our selves and essential qualities as individuals (Shorter, 1975;
Luhmann, 1986; Giddens, 1992; Borchgrevink and Holter, 1995; Morley, 2000).
The family, as the prototypical framework for, and result of intimate feelings,
stands forth as every action’s reason; it is what gives, at least discursively, life
meaning (Sørhaug, 1995). In popular conceptions, the home – representing
trust and security – is the haven in which the individual can find refuge from
the cold hostility and mercilessness of the public arena.

ICTs, as objects and media, bring public life into the domestic sphere and
hence threaten to break down the moral borders that surround, and thus help
to define, the family. This makes them ‘dangerous things’ (Douglas, 1966), but
at their best, ICTs can promote family sociality by functioning as
objects/media that gather the family. If the media content is ‘good’, or at least
acceptable, media use can be instrumental in creating positive family sociality
by giving its members time together and providing them with a focus, hence
building the family as a unit. However, the daily experience of parents might
be one of concern and worry – that family members use ICTs too much
and/or that they use it on their own. This constitutes a threat to the ideal of
spending ‘quality time’ together. Likewise, media content might be of the
wrong type, mediating or promoting attitudes, morals or information of types
that fit badly with what is considered appropriate within the family context.
The potential both for ‘good’ family sociality, entertainment and rest, as well
as family fragmentation, over-use and immoral media content illustrates the
consistent ambivalence prevalent among all parents in our material.

In this light it is easy to see that the main objections the nuclear families
had with watching the Norsk Tipping–pilot is linked to the pilot’s implicit
moral content. In short, gambling is detrimental to most core qualities of the
typical moral economy of households; it counters the idea of an economy of
affection (i.e. a gift economy), of security and a protestant ethic linking
reward to work (see Mauss, 1969; Sahlins, 1974; Bourdieu, 1977; Weber, 1985;
Parry and Bloch, 1989; Silverstone, 1994). Hence, the contradiction is
contextual; gambling is not necessarily considered to be immoral in itself, but
it is in the family setting – especially if the family consists of children.
Children, seen as not yet grown-ups (James et al., 1998), must be perpetually
inculcated with the right moral attitudes by their parents. The pilot was thus
not a bad idea in itself; the problem was that it was literally out of context.

In our opinion, the analytical framework of domestication and the moral
economy of the household fit very well with the data we have presented so
far. Domestication Research’s focus on media consumption as contextualized and its description of the home as perhaps the most important context is crucial for understanding how people relate to ICTs. The framework explains the ambivalence expressed by the adult household members and shows clearly the complicated processes involving moral evaluations, negotiations and compromises included in seemingly simple adaptation processes of ICTs in homes. However, the perspective presented rests on assumptions that need to be problematized. In short, we contend that there are some ambiguities contained in the analytical perspective that need to be sorted out. The best way to do this is to present another set of data from our project.

CASE 2: PROBLEMATISING DOMESTICATION AS DOMESTIC

In 2003 we had another session at Telenor’s Future House. This time we demonstrated the same Norsk Tipping pilot but to a different audience. At the time of our interview three adults (two women, one man) had lived in the house almost full time for two weeks in relation to another research project. The three were in their forties, two were married with children, one was single. All were salaried middle class people who knew each other through work. During the two weeks they had developed close and good relations and stated that they felt as if they constituted a living commune.

What was striking in comparison with the nuclear families was that these adults’ initial reaction to the pilot lacked the moral dimension. It was obvious from observing them while they watched the pilot that they were just as captivated, if not more, by the pilot as the nuclear families were. In the unstructured group interview conducted afterwards they fully confirmed our observations. They stated that they could clearly imagine that as a real interactive service this would be something that they would want to use, and they wanted to know if and when this service would be available for the public. We were consciously avoiding any leading questions in this first phase of the interview and could not detect any moral reservations to the pilot. However, since this dimension had been so obvious in the first set of interviews, we cautiously tried to direct the conversation towards possible negative reactions on their part by asking if they had any objections against it. Interestingly enough their response limited itself to various user-related themes: the menu was perhaps too big and dominating, would they be able to fill up their online-account in time to keep on betting if they lost their initial money, etc. Even after repeated attempts to peter out some kind of moral evaluation, we got none of the sort. Thus, after more than an hour of conversation we asked outright if they had any moral reservations against the pilot: did they see any possible negative consequences of having such a service in their own, real homes?

This question led to an instant communicative reframing. After having ‘recapitulated’ themselves they welled over with moral reservations of the same type as the parents in the first set of interviews: the pilot was unfit for
family life, that encourages people to risk hard-earned money, that children could get access to the player account, etc. This hesitant, but eventually very strong moral reaction is open for various interpretations. One might be that although they had stated that they resembled a living commune, the fact that three adult persons were brought together for some weeks suggests that the setting in which they watched the gambling pilot was not sufficiently realistic as an ‘at home’ context. Thus, their mind frame was fundamentally different from that of the nuclear families. The latter, being actual nuclear families watching the pilot together, brought with them what was crucial for having a ‘family framing’ of the pilot’s content – namely their real family sociality. The former, on the other hand, saw their situation as constituting a living commune more as a playful, as if-situation that was insufficiently realistic for them to frame their initial interpretation of the pilot into a ‘domestic mode’. Alternatively, we can interpret their conduct as attempts to domesticate the pilot to a domestic but without the typical family mores.

Both interpretations expose, we contend, ambiguities in the Domestication Research’s analytical apparatus. The first interpretation implies that our laboratory setting involved no as-if framing from the participants, and begs the question as to how we should relate to processes of taming ‘wild’ technologies outside the home setting. Can we talk of domestication in non-domestic environments (Lie and Sørensen, 1996; Noble & Lupton, 1998; Pierson, 2006)? If we say yes, we are left with ‘domestication’ as a central term, but ‘home’, ‘family’ and ‘household’ become obsolete. The alternative interpretation, on the other hand, draws attention to the content of ‘home’, ‘family’ and ‘household’ – and their relationships: A stable living commune might be called a home and a household, but certainly not a family. And what about a newly composed household consisting of wife and husband – are they a home from day one? And what about singles’ households and persons living in dormitories? Moreover, given class, ethnic and regional differences in contemporary society, do we talk of one moral economy of the household or several? A newly arrived refugee family in Norway might have different ideas about what good family sociality is than the ethnic Norwegian family. But what about the family of a second-generation immigrant, not to mention households in non-Western cultures? And to extend the line of questions beyond our data, are all ICT-uses taking place in homes related to the mores of the home?

SOME REFLECTIONS ON ONTOLOGY
We find variations in attitudes and practices in all societies, and there is no analytical framework that can easily accommodate all cases. All analytical approaches are forms of simplifications that are meant to provide insights and understandings. However, our point with raising these questions is that we contend that they reflect analytical ambiguities in the Domestication
Research perspective, not simply empirical borderlines. As a first step in substantiating this contention we will scrutinize what we consider to be the central concepts of Silverstone et al.’s model in order to reveal what analytical presuppositions and preconditions lie inherent in their model.

In our view, of the four central concepts – ‘domestication’, ‘home’, ‘family’ and ‘household’ – we consider the latter three to be closely related as they all, in various forms, point to the existence of an empirical reality. They refer to various aspects of the type of institution that usually organizes the primary social unit. In Silverstone et al.’s perspective, this all amounts to the phenomenological and material expressions of the private – as opposed to the public – sphere. It constitutes the domestic, it is domesticity: ‘Our domesticity is the product of a historically defined and constantly shifting relationship between public and private spaces and cultures . . . [it] is at once a phenomenological, a socio-cultural and an economic reality. . . . I will identify these different dimensions of our domesticity as home, family and household’ (Silverstone, 1994: 25. Our emphasis).

‘The home’ is, for Silverstone, characterized both as a construct (1994: 26) and as a phenomenological reality (1994: 32), which in our opinion point to its quality as a ‘conceptualized reality’ – i.e. it exists as a reality because it is present in people’s minds and hence manifests itself in various concrete manners. It is perpetually present as a guiding idea but not necessarily as a lived reality. As the citation above indicates, ‘household’ and ‘family’ are Silverstone’s terms to give ‘home’ content. ‘Household’ refers to the economic aspect of the social unit, and ‘family’ refers to the socio-cultural aspect. Together they provide the practical and conceptual frames that shape every unit’s attempts at forming a home. A major point for Silverstone is that as a household the home is bound by certain economic considerations – it needs to be economically viable and this concern affects the unit’s form and content in important ways, but at the same time hegemonic ideologies impress on the units not only ideals about what a home should be like, but also fundamentally form the ways it functions as an economic unit. Hence the importance of the term ‘the moral economy of the household’; it is a moral economy because it is an economic unit, and it is a moral economy because culturally formed notions about what a home should be make the household economy operate in ways that are significantly different from the market economy (see Silverstone et al., 1992: 18).

For our purpose we wish to stress a crucial quality that these terms have – namely that all three are part of what we, as social scientists, study. To see the importance of this it is necessary to recall some basic principles that should guide all social research. It is important to be aware of the simple, but yet often hidden, distinction between that which we study and our tools for studying a social reality. Simply put, we have to relate to three epistemological ‘types’: (i) the observable processes involving subjects and objects in our field
of study; (ii) the ideas and conceptualizations of those we study; and (iii) the concepts and perspectives we, as researchers, use in order to come to grips with our researched field. In practice, it is often not easy to make the distinctions, especially because many of the analytical terms we use are also in operation among those we study. ‘Home’ and ‘family’ are definitely such terms. Thus, Bourdieu’s advice (1977: 203, n. 49) is pertinent: ‘any scientific objectification ought to be preceded by a sign indicating “everything takes place as if . . . ”’, which, functioning in the same way as quantifiers in logic, would constantly remind us of the epistemological status of the constructed concepts of objective science’. There are homes and families in our material, and in various ways ‘home’ and ‘family’ operate as guiding ideas among those we study. However, as tools used by researchers, they acquire a different analytical status. In this respect, they appear as parts of an analytical apparatus, and hence ‘home’, ‘family’ and ‘household’ must be kept apart from the various homes, families and households that we encounter in the field.

Failing to acknowledge the difference easily leads us to mistakenly believe that academic means for understanding (simplification and systematization) are part of the reality we purport to say something about (see Wittgenstein, 1968: 107). This flaw becomes an analytical error if we then accord such invented (i.e. analytical) concepts explanatory force. This takes place by shifting between different uses of concepts in ways that imply invalid ontological statements. If a term like ‘home’ is meant to reflect an alleged reality, it is important to be conscious about what kind of reality we are referring to and what qualities this reality has. In our understanding of Silverstone’s works, ‘home’ refers primarily to the strong and widely shared idea among studied subjects – and that this is what he means by ‘the home’ being a phenomenological reality. If this is the case then it is extremely important to consider the qualities of popular ideas – so that our use of it as an analytical concept (‘home’) does not violate its qualities as an empirical cover term (informants’ actual ideas about homes). For this purpose we wish to make use of perspectives that can be associated with late-Wittgensteinan philosophy and (especially the early works of) Bourdieu.3

The first step in the argument is to problematize the distinction between langue and parole. This dichotomy is used to distinguish between language as a logical system and language as it is actually enacted. Structuralists gave precedence to langue, as it was seen as the ‘real’ code underlying all actual expressions of meaning. Wittgenstein and later Bourdieu argue that the focus on the langue-part leads our understanding of the social significance of language astray (Wittgenstein, 1968: 132; Bourdieu, 1977: chapter 1). From a purely logical standpoint, it can be argued that the competence contained in language stands in need of a different form of competence. Language is obviously regulated by (grammatical) rules, but this does not imply that the
rules explain language. Rules (understood as that which links structure to action) stand in need of interpretations. The problem is that if we were to spell out the coded representations that structure language with new coded representations we face an infinite regression. As Wittgenstein wrote,’... no course of action could be determined by a rule, because every course of action can be made out to accord with the rule’ (Wittgenstein, 1968: 201–02; see also Searle, 1980: 228; Taylor, 1993: 46). Therefore, there must be some other faculties that enable individuals to follow the rules inherent in language. This ‘Background’, as Searle calls this competence (1992: 193), must therefore be of a different kind. It must be skills that are not representational but directly tied to practice: ‘Our rules leave loop-holes open, and the practice has to speak for itself’ (Wittgenstein, 1979: 139). In other words, it is practice, not langue that explains parole.

This implies that from a sociological point of view the important aspect of language is parole, i.e. the practical enactment of language skills. Such enactments are – one can claim from the arguments above – hinged on how they fit into concrete and practical settings; the meaning of a text depends on the con-text. And since two practical situations are never alike, there is always an ad hoc-quality to the meanings that accompany practice. This is the background for Wittgenstein’s term family resemblance: meanings of a term constitute ‘a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities in detail’. They are like ‘various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc. etc. overlap and criss-cross’ (Wittgenstein, 1968: 66–7). In other words, there is no single set of essential elements of meaning that define a word; different practical situations affect meanings in ways that make meanings resemble each other without it having an essential core.

This perspective is reflected also in later empirical research (see Bloch, 1991; Strauss and Quinn, 1997) and is echoed in the focus on prototypes. Due to the family resemblance quality of meaning our concepts are:

vague and provisional ‘prototypes’ which anchor loosely-formed ‘families’ of specific instances. For example, the concept of a house is not a list of essential features ... [Rather,] we consider something as ‘a house’ by comparing it to a loosely associated group of ‘house like’ features, no one of which is essential, but which are linked by a general idea of what a typical house is. (Bloch, 1991: 185; see also Needham, 1975; Lakoff, 1987)

This is the reasoning behind Bourdieu’s point about the ‘fuzzy logic of practice’ (1977: 163). The meaning of a word in practice ‘presupposes a loss of rigour for the sake of greater simplicity and generality ... no more logic is mobilised than is required by the needs of practice’ (Bourdieu, 1977: 110). Thus, the ‘imperfect’ quality of practice requires an approximate logic that fits to the situations in which language is put to use.
The relevance of this line of argument is that it highlights the importance of a theory of practice. The Domestication Research perspective emphasizes the everyday life ICTs are part of, and this requires a theoretical approach that takes people’s practices seriously. And more specifically to the terms we discuss here, if Silverstone’s terms ‘home’, ‘family’ and ‘household’ reflect popular prototypes among those we study, we must treat them as such. As popular prototypes they are fuzzy, approximate and sometimes contradictory in their uses, and hence there is no warranted ground for making them precise as analytical concepts. And Silverstone and adversaries in fact never try to provide unequivocal content to these terms, which in our opinion is the right path to follow since the terms are meant to reflect prototypical ideas held by those we study.

DOMESTICATION, LANGUAGE-GAME AND SOCIAL CONTEXT

The issues and challenges surrounding the concept of domestication are of a different sort. The problem, as we see it, is that if one ties ‘domestication’ to the home and to the (alleged) fundamental distinction between the private and the public, we run into difficulties when we are faced with media in situations which are not easily defined as being within or outside the home, and/or as a ‘private’ or ‘public’ setting. Was the living commune (of sorts) described earlier really a home? And the use of a mobile phone in nuclear families – is it a matter of and for the family (Haddon, 2006: 107)?

As a first step in trying to resolve the problems that arise, we need to look more closely into the term itself in light of the issues raised in relation to ‘home’, ‘family’ and ‘household’. Does ‘domestication’ purport to point to an empirical reality that we study – does it refer to objects or ideas held by our informants?

In our opinion the answer is clearly no. ‘Domestication’ is not meant to refer to any tangible reality or to a popular, prototypical idea – its relevance lies in it being a ‘cover’ term for the myriad of processes that take place in connection with making objects and subjects fit into a given communicative setting. Or, more precisely, this is what we believe the term should denote. But the main point here is that ‘domestication’ is an analytical term in the sense that it is an invention that researchers apply to a field of study – it is meant to be a tool for us to identify, describe and analyze the processes we consider to be of importance in the meeting of objects and subjects. In relation to studies of media-uses, ‘domestication’ is a tool that shall help us to see how such technologies are tamed by those who use them.

What does this imply in terms of the uses we can put the term to? To answer this we need to return to some of the points we brought up in the previous section. As pointed out, the meaning of concepts and actions lies in their uses. This is not to say that ‘anything goes’ in terms of interpretations. Handling of meaning is a practical task and in order to give actors...
predictability and communicative order it is the focus on practice – i.e. the practical totality the terms/actions are parts of – that provide the contextual cues that limit the range of possible meanings subjects can accord such statements/utterances: ‘the real source of “life” in a word or sentence is provided, not by the individual mind, but by society. They are animated with meaning because of the social practices of which they are an integral part’ (Bloor, 1983: 18–19). Although two practical settings are never alike, there is nevertheless regularity in everyday practice. These regularities are upheld by powerful conventions and institutions. And being a competent member of society involves recognizing a given practical situation as belonging to this or that institutionalized setting. Such a recognition is a precondition for ‘knowing how to go on’ (Wittgenstein, 1968: 179), i.e. acting in appropriate ways.

Such practical communicative frameworks are called language-games by Wittgenstein: ‘the term “language-game” is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or a form of life’ (1968: 23). It is his change of focus from studies of an imagined perfect language to language as it is actually used that provide the radical, Copernican turn in the study of philosophy of language. This turn enabled Wittgenstein to see how meaning does not originate from some inner, essential and transcendent source but is, plainly and simply, the sum of its uses (p. 197), and that these uses are anchored in ‘forms of life’ (pp. 23, 241).

The validity of this line of argument is of course not restricted to the meaning of words and verbal utterances. Meanings are expressed in many forms – words, acts, objects, rituals, people – and because of the practical need to give meaning stability and visibility the more tangible forms are at least as important as the more fleeting verbal statements (see Bourdieu, 1977: 72; Connerton, 1989). And this is what lies implicit in Silverstone’s treatment of ICTs. They are objects as well as media and people’s interactions with them are meaningful; the time they spend watching television, what they see and where the object is placed are affected by and affect the communicative totality that television is part of.

And here we are at the main point in our article: as ICTs are vital parts of communicative totalities (language-games), it follows that the meaning loops they are part of affect the ways they are conceptualized, evaluated and used. They must, in various ways, be made to be significant in the language-game they at any time are parts of. Those who relate to them must ‘make them their own’, they must in some way fit the media use into routine, everyday practice. This is what ‘domestication’ is about; it points to the myriad of processes that ICTs must be part of. It is our contention that ‘domestication’ should refer to the most general quality of these processes – namely how ICTs fit into the language-games they are integral parts of. Although the home is perhaps the most common setting for ICT use, there is no analytical reason to restrict the uses of ‘domestication’ to the domestic and the private,
as opposed to the public. By linking ‘domestication’ solely to the practical act of contextualization – making ICTs familiar, not (necessarily) bringing them into the family – we free the term from certain historical and cultural specificities that add nothing to its analytical usefulness. Instead, we are free to pose as questions the extent and ways domestication of ICTs are congruent with the private realm, with homes and what kind of homes. As such, it falls into the wider theoretical field of culture, meaning and linguistics that takes as its most fundamental starting point that meanings are polysemic and that it is the setting in which meaningful expressions (of any kind) appear that determines their interpretations (Malinowski, 1974; Wittgenstein, 1979; Duranti and Goodwin, 1992).

The focus on the taming-aspect of ‘domestication’ can also be found in ‘the everyday’ as it is presented by Lie and Sørensen (1996; see also Bakardjieva, 2005). They suggest, ‘that domestication holds the promise of functioning as a key concept in the analysis of technology in everyday life’. But they have ‘disentangled it from its location in homogeneous and relatively stable, moral economies of households’ (Lie and Sørensen, 1996: 13). Instead, they wish to link the concept to ‘the everyday’ because technology ‘is always appropriated and re-embedded in a local context when it is put to use. Many, if not most, technologies acquire meaning only when they interact with everyday life’ (Lie and Sørensen, 1996: 16–17). Thus, for them, domestication ‘is the practical as well as the emotional adaptation to technologies’ (p. 16–17), not necessarily linked to the home and the private. As we interpret the authors arguments, their position is similar to the one we argue here. The main difference is our different theoretical anchoring: they focus on technologies and explore how their uses shape and are shaped by the social settings; we take the socio-cultural framework as our starting-point and investigate how technologies affect, and are affected by it. Moreover, our use of Wittgenstein points to practice theory while their uses of Schütz and ANT links them to phenomenology and ‘mentalism’ (Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, 2002).

‘THE PROOF OF THE PUDDING LIES IN ITS EATING’
We will now focus on the analytical implications of our re-definition, and we do it by returning to our empirical starting point – the two different showings of the Norsk Tipping-pilot. The intention with using the Future House was that it would provide a semi-realistic setting for testing out state of the art-technology. This means that the informants enter into an as-if situation. For the nuclear families, this framing was unproblematic; their reactions to the pilot clearly showed that (in this respect) they were in a family modus. The three adults comprising the ‘living commune’, on the other hand, were in a much more ambiguous situation in the Future House. We interpret their first, enthusiastic reaction to the pilot as being formed by their playful living commune framework. Within this language-game,
prototypical family mores were not in operation. Rather, their state of mind was more as three adult friends that happened to live together, without any obligation (or right) to act as moral guardians for each other. Their sudden reframing, triggered by our question about having this media service in their own homes, involved changing language-game to the prototypical family framework. Now the same moral objections that the nuclear families expressed were spilled out. If we understand ‘domestication’ as domestic, this should imply that they in an instant changed from being non-domestic to domestic. And the as-if quality of the Future House helps us to see the problem: since the reframing never involved spatial alterations (they were still in the Future House) the ‘domestication as domestic’ perspective will leave us at a loss as to whether or not the laboratory settings can be characterized as ‘home’ and how it can suddenly change from one to the other. A setting is relevant to us only as a culturally recognizable space, i.e. as place (Rodman, 1992; Appadurai, 1995), and this means that what is of importance here is how the participants interpret the setting, and thus contextualize their ‘texts’. In other words, this metamorphosis is only intelligible if it is understood as a change of language-game. Thus, instead of entering into futile speculations about whether the first framing was a home-framing or not, we can simply state that both language-games had household elements in them but one was a non-nuclear, childless household, the other was congruent with the prototypical family-home as it is perceived in contemporary Western culture. Both were imagined situations but with the proper cues they were evoked as necessary contexts for interpreting the pilot.

This brings us back to the questions we posed earlier: which empirical cases fit with ‘home’, ‘family’ and ‘household’? A childless couple that has just moved together? A single-person household? A person living in a dormitory? Where do we draw the lines? The seemingly either/or-choices language puts us in create problems for researchers but are rarely the same challenge in everyday life. The reason for this is that the prototypes are regulative ‘guidelines’ that people use in everyday life – they are fuzzy ‘signposts’ that do not require strict dichotomies within a flawless logic but are used pragmatically for practical purposes (Wittgenstein, 1968: 100). Thus, a crucial part of living lives as social beings is the competence to identify prototypes and language-games and the freedom – and compulsion – to put this competence to use through contextualized interpretations. Thus, for the researcher who wants to operate with clear analytical distinctions the problem is where to draw the line between ‘home’ and ‘not home’ because we feel compelled to be analytical in our undertakings. However, if one acknowledges the epistemological status of ‘home’ – as a term referring to a popular prototype already existing ‘out there’ – we shouldn’t have to worry about drawing such lines (Wittgenstein, 1968: 68). People handle blurred borders and inconsistencies in practical ways and our duty as researchers is to
let such uses be reflected in our analyzes. Thus, whether a living commune will be labelled a home or not will of course vary – depending on social position, personal biographies, etc., and might be situational and relative. Such nuances and variations are important to grasp in our analyses because ‘home’ reflects ideas that are part of what we study – commonly held, but fuzzy, ideas. ‘Domestication’, on the other hand, is not part of what we study and there is therefore no reason to define it in an ambiguous way. Since the term is invented, and thus free to be defined in a manner that is analytically fertile, a definition of it in the way we argue will pose the issue of private vs. public, and drawing a line between what is home/household/family and what is not, as matters that need to be investigated and analysed inductively. Therefore, Hirsch’s fine analysis of the Simon family (1992) is a good example of how problematic the issue of private vs. public is. Their home in the city and their home in the countryside display very different attitudes to privacy and retreat from the public. We contend that his rich analysis is due to his open mind and qualities as a researcher, not to the analytical apparatus of the book that his chapter appears in. In fact, the story of the Simon family suggests that ‘private’ is a relative concept and that people act according to such distinctions in much more varied and nuanced ways than a coarse dichotomy will allow for.

These arguments enable us to re-examine the issue of popular prototypes and their relationship to language-games, as well as culture as a background factor. An underlying assumption in Silverstone’s perspective is that uses of ICTs are by necessity cultural practices: ‘culture’ denotes common ways of thinking, and the private/public-divide is a basic orientational principle in Western culture. The introduction of language-game and prototypes might give a more realistic model of how meaning is handled in everyday life. What ‘common culture’ should imply is not an assumption about people thinking in similar veins in all walks of life but a shared competence of which language-games are relevant in which situations. This competence also involves a (more or less) common knowledge and understanding of a large number of prototypes, and when and in what situations they are deemed relevant. Thus, the radically different reactions to the pilot we showed might lead to a conclusion about different cultural competences if we understand ‘culture’ as simply a common set of knowledge and attitudes. Our perspective, on the other hand, points to different cognitive frames, not different cultural backgrounds.

Moreover, the living commune’s ambiguity suggests that the evocative strength of prototypes varies as a result of the socio-communicative setting, and that some settings might be ‘hybrids’. Since our living commune deviated so much from the prototypical family there were no gut identifications with prototypical situations and hence they obviously borrowed from several known, social language-games. They chose one but relatively easily changed to another when the proper cues were provided.
CONCLUSION

Our task in this article has been to expose the ambiguity in the analytical apparatus and argue that ‘domestication’ should be the foremost analytical concept, and that we fare well with only its taming-connotation.

‘Domestication’ has been inextricably linked to ‘home’, ‘household’ (including its moral economy) and ‘family’. That is, we contend, unfortunate because it links the general process of making things our own with a specific social institution. By introducing language-games we free the term analytically from the domestic, we retain the taming metaphor in ‘domestication’ and render the other terms analytically secondary. Thus, what is central is contextualization and the processual incorporation of ICTs into the everyday, into our language-games. It is an empirical fact that most – or at least many – media uses are tied to the home, at least in Euro-American late modernity, but that is analytically irrelevant.

The linkage between home and taming is unfortunate for several reasons. For one, ‘domestication’ can be used also outside homes: for individuals, at workplaces, local communities, etc. Moreover, ‘the domestic’ is problematic in itself – as an entity, in its content and in relation to technologies.

Homes vary empirically, and not all homes are families, or even households. Moreover, even those households that consist of families and constitute homes vary significantly in their practices. Thus, even though Silverstone and adversaries have never essentialized ‘the home’ their linkage between the four central terms create an unnecessary analytical knot. The fact that these terms appear both as data and analytical terms exacerbates the problem; the fuzziness that is an inalienable quality in the former sense makes them difficult to handle in the latter sense.

Also, when we probe into the actual content of the units, we encounter problems when ‘taming’ and ‘homing’ are combined. Any home harbours a number of language games. Its members engage in various relationships – or networks – and hence also language games. Mothers and fathers are also spouses, and different mores are relevant in different communicative situations within the home. This of course affects media use; Disney films in the home’s DVD-collection reflect family sociality, but so might also erotic films. And here we might talk of degrees of privacy: we usually find the television, as well as family DVDs, in the living room, which might be termed the public privacy of the home. Erotic or violent films will be hidden away from view and belong to the private privacy of the home. But this does not mean that it is in a lesser degree a part of homely mores.

Variations of this type are also linked to various technologies. Televisions are usually linked to other language games and socialities than PCs or mobile phones, and are hence parts of different types of domestication processes. The 15-year old daughter who is sitting behind a closed door in her room talking
with a friend on her mobile phone obviously engages in different processes of taming than families watching television together do. And this last example also exemplifies another point: that even if an act of media consumption takes place in a home, it does not necessarily imply that we are dealing with a case of media domestication in the home. Or does it? The consumption of media technology always involves the meeting of two language games – that of the media, and the physical environment in which the person and the technological object are. In that sense the home is relevant; the very fact that the daughter closed the door to her room before talking to her friend is an indication of that. However, in the sense that her talk is affected by her home’s family mores it is probably not relevant – the closing of the door is a practical manifestation of denying the relevance of the physical context.

Related to these mechanisms of variation is also the fact that households are perpetually changing: they are born, grow and die (Stenning, 1962), and each phase implies different domestication processes. It is the middle phase, with dependent children, that comes closest to the prototypical ‘home’ and that requires stricter morally formed media-use. In any case, the household’s dynamic, cyclical quality means that the domestication of ICTs involves several unending and changing processes.

Last, but not least, we contend that our re-definition will enhance the analytical value of the perspective in yet another way. The importance that originally was attached to the public-private divide, being a constitutive part of the analytical apparatus, indicates that the perspective is made in, by and for a Western late modernity. The assumption that sociality is anchored in a fundamental distinction between the private and the public, and that the home belongs to the former, is culturally and historically specific – and is hence not applicable in other cultural traditions and/or other times. In our global and post-nationalist era, it is extremely important to rid ‘domestication’ of culture-specific content – such as dissociating the concept from the home and the private – so that we can extend the relevance and applicability of the term, making it a universal tool for the study of technological uses. Our sole analytical premise should be that all consumption of ICTs requires processes of making them known and accepted elements in our language games. Whether this will take place within or outside homes, what mores affect domestication, and what the results of these processes are, should be results of our investigations, not premises.  

Thus, although a change in the definition of ‘domestication’ in the way we suggest – focusing on the necessary acts of contextualization – will not automatically provide answers to all the empirical variations that we find, nor illuminate all the aspects of making technologies our own, it will provide a more open approach to these variations and aspects we encounter as researchers. The practical consequence of emphasizing the fundamental importance of contextualizing meaning is that it requires more methodological labouring
and detailed ethnographic studies (see Ang, 1996; Schlecker & Hirsch, 2001; Hartmann, 2006) but the rewards might be better understandings and hence more realistic academic results.

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Notes

1 We claim that this ambiguity is consistently reappearing in various works by the mentioned authors. See Morley, 2003; Silverstone, 2004, 2006.

2 The data our arguments are based on are parts of a larger fieldwork that constitute the empirical basis for the research project Consuming Digital Adventure-Oriented Media in Everyday Life: Contents and Contexts (www.sifo.no/digiadvent), financed by the Norwegian Research Council (NFR). The research is conducted by SIFO, in collaboration with the research institute SNF and the telecom company Telenor, the national lottery company Norsk Tipping and the national broadcaster NRK.

In addition to the authors, Anita Borch (SIFO) is also part of the project. She has participated in some of the data collection referred to in the article. Altogether, 31 households have been interviewed for the project. The Future House, which was the arena for a handful of interviews, was built by Telenor on their premises at Fornebu (just outside Oslo) as a ‘laboratory’ and a site for developing and testing the latest developments within domestic ICTs. The house (which no longer exists) was equipped with the newest, most advanced digital TVs, computers, internal control and communication systems (for regulating temperature, humidity, access to the house), etc.

3 In our opinion, Bourdieu was fundamentally inspired by Wittgenstein’s late philosophy. Although references are sparse, they do appear. In our view, Bourdieu’s project – especially as it is presented in Outline of a Theory of Practice (1977) – can be understood as turning Wittgenstein’s work into sociology.

4 Attempts at sharpening these terms would only be a misplaced precision – an unwarranted accuracy that would comply with objectivistic science’s ideals but that would violate the empirical reality of those we purport to say something about. And since such terms are used as elements in a model of the reality one is attempting to describe, such concepts acquire explanatory force. If they are given precision as analytical concepts, while they as popular prototypes are fuzzy and polythetic, the explanation becomes logically flawed in the sense that the researcher is ‘sliding from the model of reality to the reality of the model’ (Bourdieu, 1990: 39).

5 It seems to us that Silverstone implicitly equates ‘private’ with ‘taming’ (making ICTs our own). In our opinion, this is not a fortunate equation because although ‘private’ is highly polythetic, it is habitually associated with a sphere, in opposition to the public sphere (see Habermas, 1989). From this point of view, the equation between private and taming would imply that things of the public couldn’t be culturally accepted and integrated.

6 Tanja Winther’s research in Zanzibar provides a good example of how uses of ICTs in homes reveal the relativity of the private. Her data show that neighbours and extended family constituted the majority of the television audiences in Zanzibari homes. On average, there were more than 10 viewers that did not belong to the household for every television in the village (2005: 142, 160).
References


JO HELLE-VALLE is senior researcher at the National Institute for Consumer Research, Oslo. He has a Dr. polit in anthropology from 1996 based on fieldwork in a local community in the Kalahari. He has also conducted fieldwork in Uganda and Ethiopia. For the last five years he has been working with digital media in Norway. He has published on a wide variety of topics, the latest and most relevant is “Language-games, individuals and media uses: What a practice perspective should imply for media studies”, in B. Bräuchler & J. Postill (eds.) Theorising Media and Practice. Oxford: Berghahn (2008). Address: SIFO (National Institute for Consumer Research), P.O. Box 4682 Nydalen, N-0405 Oslo, Norway. [email: jo.helle@vallesifo.no]

DAG SLETTEMEÅS is a research fellow at the National Institute for Consumer Research. His primary research focus is on issues related to digital media, the Internet, e-commerce and the telecom sector. Research in these areas has been pursued over the past seven years. He has previously worked in the Energy and Telecom department of the World Bank in Washington D.C. Address: SIFO (National Institute for Consumer Research), P.O. Box 4682 Nydalen, N-0405 Oslo, Norway. [email: dag.slettemeas@sifo.no]