Negotiating Time and Space for Every-day Pleasure

An Exploration of Technologies for Home-based Leisure

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Abstract: Research into the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) has been centred upon the workplace or educational context. Little research has been done on women's leisure use of ICTs [8]. We know that adults and children use an increasing variety of ICTs for leisure and work in the home, but little about negotiations around such use, including possible gender dimensions and impact upon public/private space. This paper re-visits feminist debates about 'flexible', home-based leisure for women, exploring the potential impact of domestic ICT use upon women's 'uncommitted' time. It also considers the time politics involved in women facilitating the leisure of other family members in relation to being able to pursue their own leisure.

1. INTRODUCTION

Recent research on technology and social exclusion confirms that rather than assuming that the new electronic technologies, or ICTs, will substitute for existing activities and types of communication, we should be looking instead at the ways in which ICTs might augment activities and social interaction. ICTs will only enhance our quality of life if they can be customised in ways that mesh with rather than disrupt, social relations and activities which we value and prioritise. Rather than focusing upon the spectacular achievements of technology, we need to understand how everyday life is being transformed by technologies. To this end, much can be learned from perspectives which examine the relationship between the process of technological innovation and the ways in which various ICTs are consumed and become domesticated. This involves researching the ways in which consumers appropriate specific technologies and make them acceptable or familiar [26].

Users are not just technical users [9], they are individuals and groups located within diverse social and cultural contexts, who assign diverse meanings to such technological artefacts. The final meaning and significance of particular technologies is not predetermined or prescribed, but the result of complex processes of negotiation. For an object or technology to be accepted, it has to be found a space and assume a function. ICTs have to be fitted into patterns of household use and into the use or appropriation of domestic time - time which is shaped by the gendered politics of the household.

The meaning and significance of specific technologies is related to the social relations of particular households, which become defined in relation to the 'moral economies' of households [27]. The domestication process is subject to the politics of the household, which include, age and gender based dimensions which affect access, control and the meanings assigned to them. We need to turn to feminist approaches which place gender centre stage to grasp the concept of technology as social relations, or what is referred to as 'the circuit of technology' [3]. A central aim of this paper is to bring together literature that will enable an exploration of the ways in which gender relations impact upon the use of ICTs for leisure within the domestic sphere. A sub theme running through the paper concerns the gendered politics of time. I argue that a close analysis of gendered time use, may assist in an illumination of both the consumption and domestication of particular ICTs.

2. ICTS AND HOME-BASED LEISURE

Current debates about 'virtual leisure' would be enriched by a close analysis of the gender dimensions. Existing research has tended to compartmentalise the issues, confining considerations of the impact of globalization and ICTs upon leisure to postmodernist debates on the margins of leisure studies [14, 24] whilst studies of ICT development and use have mostly centred around the workplace or educational context. Notable exceptions to this can be found in research that addresses the impact of ICT consumption upon the household, but apart from the work of Haddon [11, 12] leisure has rarely been a focus for such studies. Moreover, the gender dimensions have remained largely undeveloped, apart from Scandinavian research in the area of technology and everyday life [27].

In order to unravel the complexity of the electronic leisure experience in the home, we need to consider the cultural geography of home-based leisure. Individual users may belong to the same 'family' or household but their leisure experiences and the meanings that they attach to them are likely to vary considerably. Statistics on domestic ownership and use of leisure goods

[18, 19] paint in some of the picture, but we need more qualitative research around seemingly mundane questions: 'who uses particular artefacts, in which rooms and under what conditions'?

3. TIME AND LEISURE AS GENDERED RESOURCES

Numerous studies of the household, and the relationship between paid employment and leisure have shown that most women spend substantially more time on household and caring tasks than their male partners [1]. This clearly has implications for the amount of time they have which is potentially available for leisure. Empirical research conducted by feminists [30] continues to demonstrate that women's 'free' or 'uncommitted' time is frequently conflated with household time and perceived as a family resource. The meaning and values attached to time are heavily gendered and vary among household members depending upon household position.

Although the impact of such differences is well documented in relation to its impact upon women's leisure opportunities and activities outside the home [33] less well researched are the domestic processes of negotiation which are implicated in such leisure patterns. Such processes have the potential to illuminate similar negotiations around the use and domestication of new ICTs in household settings. Feminist leisure research has revealed that uncommitted time is a scarce resource for many women, most of whom are more likely to take responsibility for servicing or enabling the leisure of other household members [4, 10]. Findings corroborated by a study [12] of home computing as leisure which demonstrated that male 'hobbyists' negotiated substantial time and economic resources for computer related leisure, whereas women respondents prioritised family and relationship time above that for personal use of PCs. Despite the rapid influx of ICTs for leisure purposes into contemporary households, and post modernist scepticism, recent UK survey data suggests a similarly gendered appropriation by household members in the late 1990s [17].

Innovative ICTs have the capacity to alter traditional gendered divisions of labour within the home, but the domestication process and the politics of the household impact heavily upon the use and meanings assigned to them. The entry of increasingly complex domestic technologies may actually decrease the amount of uncommitted time available to women if it implicates them in parental responsibilities for policing the use level and quality of such. Early research [25] on technology and everyday life is useful here. The placing of artefacts such as television and PCs create and reinforce spatial

and temporal boundaries, which are defended and contested with reference to different household 'moral economies'.

4. CHANGES IN THE USE OF DOMESTIC SPACE

Smaller household are fast becoming the norm and family life is depicted as time-pressured [22]. Households are increasingly suffused by ICTs. Traditional TVs, VCRs and PCs will be joined by WebTV, machines designed just for Internet access and telephones with Internet built in. With the decline of permanent, full-time jobs, and the proliferation of part-time, 'flexible' work [29], the distinction between work and leisure time has become blurred. As a result of such changes, it may be that domestic space will become subject to increased contention as individuals appropriate it for an expanding array of work, education and leisure purposes. How will spaces and time for leisure fare in this scenario?

Current UK statistics remind us that watching TV is still one of the most popular leisure activities. Women watch TV and listen to radio more frequently than men [2]. What quantitative data cannot reveal are the meanings attached to such leisure pursuits. It is to qualitative research that we must turn in search of explanations for leisure behaviour. Feminist leisure theorists have consistently argued that women's home-based leisure must be analysed in relation to gendered social relations and women being cited as primarily mothers and carers [9, 33]. The majority of women facilitate the leisure pursuits of others, in addition to regularly combining work and leisure (e.g. watching TV and ironing whilst caring for children). In other words, they engage in flexible leisure which can be tailored to the occasion. Parallel studies of gendered TV consumption, and VCR and PC use confirm these findings, demonstrating that we need to contextualise the development and use of ICTs in the domestic arena. Are women consumers of new multimedia for leisure, or are they enabling its use by other family members as part of domestic caring roles?

If we trace the history of ICT's entry into the home, we uncover a complex debate that converges around the study of domestic consumption. Contributions come from family studies, cultural and media studies, the sociology of technology and more recently the sociology of consumption. However, the limitations of each research tradition typically led to a failure to make the connections necessary to provide an in depth analysis of the broader picture [15]. Existing studies of the social uses of television [20] are being joined by as yet small scale studies of VCR and PC use [7, 32] enabling a long overdue glimpse of the ways in which the everyday context

in which ICTs are located, influences what use we make of it and the meaning of different technologies.

Unsurprisingly, these studies pinpoint the significance of the relationship between individual choice, negotiation and power and control of time and resources, within the household context. What is surprising is the failure to develop a gender perspective within recent theoretical accounts. As Deem argues [4] this may be accounted for by the failure to cross fertilise ideas and perspectives across cultural studies, the sociology of consumption and leisure studies, and the invisibility of feminist work on gender and leisure; but the failure to follow up the ground breaking work on gender and everyday life by Scandinavian researchers like Sorensen and Berg [27] is disappointing. It also leaves a sizeable gap in the domestic ICT picture.

More qualitative data which tells us how new ICTs are interpreted and used within the domestic space, would also reveal more about the active nature of that process and the crucial interface between design and use, which is the key to the successful adoption of specific artefacts. Although feminist work in the area of gender and technology within the workplace [9, 28, 31] and that associated with domestic labour [3] is well established, similar perspectives on ICTs in the home tend to be clustered around empirical studies of specific artefacts or products. They provide the underpinnings of a more robust theorisation of the gendered use of ICTs within the domestic arena, but more research needs to be done. As Mackay [19, 20] argues, there is surprisingly little work that focuses upon the full life cycle of a technology.

5. OWNERSHIP AND USE OF 'FAMILY' I.C.T.S

Recent evidence reveals a consistent relationship between patterns of ICT ownership and a household's income and class position. Although ownership of consumer durables is steadily rising in the UK the class dimension remains stable. Professional households are more than twice as likely to own ICTs than those headed by unskilled, manual workers (OPCS, 1997). The same source tells us that only 35% of households containing one adult aged 65+ had a VCR compared to 70% of lone householders aged 16-59, no information is available about gender differences. Turning to ownership of PCs, in 1997 only 29% of UK households had a computer and only 15-20% of these had Internet access. Although levels of Internet access are difficult to establish, UK data suggests that this percentage is rapidly expanding. A recent UK, ICM opinion poll indicates that the number of adults online in Britain rose from 29% to 37% between January and December 1999 [5] and Mintel Leisure Intelligence suggests that by the year 2000 the UK is will

have 4-5 million households on-line [22]. Young, male professionals still outnumber other user groups, which may be due to work-related access to the Internet and the prioritising of time for such activities. Lack of time, followed by financial resources appears to be the biggest barrier for women.

Recent studies of children's use of computer games reveal the frequency of conflict over use and location, with boys more likely to own or have first access to PCs and games than girls. A UK study [17] demonstrates that 22% of boys compared to only 9% of girls have the only PC in the family in their bedroom. These figures also re-enforce the finding that boys' leisure use is dominated by game playing [17, p.40].

Such studies emphasise the fact that significant gender differences exist for almost all media activities, with young people's choices in the leisure arena mirroring those of adults. Although many girls play computer games, survey data demonstrates that girls prefer more communicative mediums. When girls do choose computer work, they prefer software that facilitates creative, collaborative activities [13]. Women's choice of friendships, especially talk, as leisure [6] links their use of ICTs with gendered leisure pursuits and most importantly in this context, re-inforces the relational aspects of communication.

This finding meshes with research which documents the popularity of 'talk' as leisure for girls [17]. This is a customising of domestic technology to everyday routines and priorities. Women's use of ICTs for leisure purposes is likely to be limited and heavily dependent on combining such activities with the work of childminding or housework. It is also well established that women use ICTs for maintaining sociability whether it is for personal or family purposes. Research on telephone use [21] shows that women have always been heavy users, whether engaged in the 'gender work' of maintaining family and neighbourhood networks or communicating with women friends. New 'space adjusting' cellular phones have enabled them to continue such activities whilst adding what [23] refer to as 'remote mothering', managing domestic responsibilities from a distance while they juggle home and work.

Looking at women's use of ICTs for home entertainment, TV scores over PC use because it can facilitate background viewing while housework or 'family' duties are performed. As one of the respondents in Morley's study of family television viewing suggests: "I can't think of anything I'll totally watch. I don't just sit and watch. I'll probably sew - maybe knit. I very rarely just sit - that's just not me." [20, p151]. What is being performed here is 'emotion work' [16] where women and girls take responsibility for generating or maintaining the emotional well being of friends, relatives and household members.

6. CONCLUSION: TAKING TIME OUT

The thesis that women are major facilitators of the emotional well-being of others, builds upon data from studies of women's leisure conducted over the last two decades [4, 9, 30] which reported women's experiences of a blurring between work and leisure time activities, with very little uncommitted time for themselves. Building upon such findings, qualitative studies of ICT use also provide data on the complex negotiations entered into by the majority of women with male partners and the prioritisation by mothers of children's leisure at the expense of their own. Central to any analysis of the gendered meaning and use of ICTs in the household or home, is an awareness of the complex politics of the household, the relationships between adults, adults and children and groups of children, and the persistence of gendered social relations of the household.

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