"I don't watch TV to *like* learn anything": The leisure use of TV and the Internet

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1 Introduction

This article is the second in a series of articles examining the use of ICT in the home (see Ling and Thrane 2001). The article is based on 15 in-home interviews with families in the Oslo area. Building on this material we find that ICTs, and in particular the TV and the PC/Internet, have a changing role vis-à-vis leisure activities.

Looking across the various types of leisure activities respondents indicate that these range from passive use of technologies, to extremely intense use, as seen for example in the use of video game devices. Another dimension that arises out of the material is the degree to which the ICT is a social device. In some cases, one uses it in a solitary way. In-house sociability is the next level and this is followed by sociability in the broader society. Obviously, the TV and the PC/Internet have very different profiles here.

Finally, the material examined here indicates that there are intergeneration differences in the approach to technology. While older respondents generally have a more crystallized understanding of the placement and use of, in particular, the TV and the PC/Internet, younger interviewees seems more willing to blur the boundary between the two. In particular, we note that the PC can be used to provide audio (MP3) and visual (DVD films) entertainment.

After a discussion of the methods and the background for the analysis, we will turn to the examination of the TV and the PC/Internet in the leisure activities of the home.

2 Method and Background

2.1 Method

The material presented in this paper was collected during 15 in-home interviews with families living in the Oslo area in 2000. Since we were interested in active ICT users, we included only homes with teen-aged children present. The analysis employs qualitative research methods and the focus is on the 15 families' own descriptions of their daily life concerning electronic media.

The teenagers are between 12 and 16 years old and they have a central role in the project. Young people are quick to adopt and they are active in lobbying for domestic adoption of new technology. As we will also see, the teenagers also make frequent use of information and communication technology (ICT) for entertainment purposes. Thus, it was useful to observe their role in context of ICT in the domestic sphere.

We purposefully chose a variety of housing styles, ranging from smaller apartments in apartment complexes to larger detached single-family homes. The point was to examine differences in income, housing and educational levels among the 15 families. As far as we

can see this did not influence the families' attitude towards electronic media in the domestic sphere, but it does influence their ownership of multiple devices.

2.2 Home, ICT and leisure activities

This paper is an attempt to locate the TV and the PC, and by extension the Internet, within the social structure of the home and in particular to locate their meaning vis-à-vis leisure. Taking a couple of steps back, the TV and the PC are both objects that have a particular profile, that is they are embedded in a context and their specific meaning is the result of ongoing negotiations among household members.

The meaning of the TV and the PC/Internet are dynamic and ambiguous depending on the age and perspective of the person who is commenting or viewing the mode of use and even the time of day. They reflect the ability of one to manipulate and arrange significant symbols in the presentation of self (Goffman 1959; Gullestad 1984; 1992). These ICTs, and in particular the TV, can be defined as artifacts of beauty and importance around which other furniture and indeed whole rooms are organized (Silverstone 1993). At the other extreme, the TV and the PC can be seen as vulgar reminders of the mundane life and banished to the functional parts of the home (Ling Nilsen and Granhaug 1999). The simple placement of the TV becomes an issue of importance, particularly given the fact that many homes were constructed before the widespread ownership of the TV (Guttu, Jørgensen and Nørve 1985, 49; Lindloff et al. 1988; see also Morley 1986). In effect, the device has colonized portions of the home and periods of the day. More recently, the placement of the PC has also given rise to similar discussions (Ling and Thrane 2001).

Beyond their visual value, and beyond their value as simply artifacts, they are also communication media. That which differentiates the TV and the PC/Internet from other objects in the home is their ability to create real connections with others beyond the home (Meyrowitz 1985). Their use can be seen as cultivating and culturally enhancing, or as inducing slovenliness and vulgarity. Perhaps because of this dynamic and somewhat controversial identity, these ICTs have often engendered a set of well-proscribed rules regarding its use. Selberg has suggested that these are a type of modern ritual (Selberg 1993; 1995; see also Lull 1980, 202; Boullier 1993).

The physical as well as the "moral" placement within the context of the family is what Silverstone has called domestication (1992; 1994). That is, the process by which one takes an artifact from the commercial world into their home, by which one locates it physically, temporally and morally in their world, and finally by which one integrates it into a portion of the way they are seen by others. In a sense, it is a way that these artifacts become a part of their extended costume. Thus the TV, but also tellingly for the PC/Internet are doubly articulated. That is they function "both as an object (the machine in itself) and as a medium"(1994, 83).

The focus of this paper is the use of the TV and the PC/Internet in the leisure activities of the household. The analysis suggests two dimensions with which to place the ownership and use of these ICTs. These are 1) the degree of engagement in the TV or PC/Internet and 2) the degree of sociability.

Looking first at the degree of one's engagement in the use of an ICT, this is admittedly a difficult dimension to capture. Thus, we approach this dimension with some humility. This said, our respondents provided insight into various types of engagement. The data suggests that it stretches from passive background use to the level of absorption that one might say borders on addiction. The major stations on this continuum include: 1) the use of ICTs as a

form of background or ambiance; 2) the passive use, where one is basically filling in the activity between other more demanding actions; 3) relaxing, i.e. the use of the technology to withdraw from more stressful activities such as work in order to "get a breather" in the words of an informant; 4) engaging use of ICTs such as their employment in hobbies or their use in gaming (that parents sometimes see as addictive) or their use in the support of social networking. Beyond these leisure-based activities, there is the functional maintenance of the home. This includes things such as paying bills via the Internet, ordering of vacation travel and finally home based work activities. As noted above, these are merely stations on a continuum. It is clear that the transition from one to the other includes a gray zone where the characteristics of one station slowly give way to those of the next.

Looking at the social dimension, we were able distinguish three points. The first is the use of the TV or the PC/Internet by the individual. At the next level we looked at use that included interaction with others who were physically collocated in the home, i.e. internal sociability and finally we distinguished what we called external sociability. This latter category is generally Internet related in that its interactivity permits various types of social interaction, i.e. e-mail and chat. However, there is also a sense in which the TV provides a sector of society with the simultaneous albeit vicarious sense of participation in a common event. Thus, in an indirect sense one participating in an extended sociability.

3 The leisure use of the TV and the Internet in everyday life

3.1 TV

3.1.1 Modes of entertainment via the TV

The material from the interviews underscores that while the TV is more ingrained into the culture and the routines of the home (Ling and Thrane 2001) that it is more limited in its scope, i.e. in terms of interactivity. Where the Internet has a clearly functional dimension via its connection to work, school, information gathering and various household maintenance tasks (banking, travel planning, etc), the television has only vague potentials in this direction, i.e. providing a common sense of nationalism, informing the populace etc. In addition, as we shall see where the PC/Internet is a dynamic technology where new possibilities such as DVD and "streaming" present new potentials; the television was not seen in this light.

Putting the TV into the dimension of leisure activities discussed above, it was, in its most basic form, seen as a type of background noise. Its function in this mode sees to be the generation of an ambiance. In some of the families the TV was as a type of radio and thus it was easily available for a few minutes attention and a way to cover over the noise generated by other activities. Its use in this capacity, however, was not completely accepted by everyone since some felt that it was a disturbance.

Beyond being a backdrop, the TV was perhaps most often seen as an entertainment medium. It had a complex identity when used in this mode. Its use moves along an axis ranging from passivity, to escape and entertainment, and finally to – in the best of cases – a type of engagement.

Description of the TV as a pacifying element is old news (Lull 1980; Meyrowitz 1985; Silverstone 1994). None-the-less, this gloss was obvious in the data. A mother, for example noted: "You need a conscious relationship to the use of the TV." If one is not careful, the TV determines one's level of activity. The respondents seemed unsure about the boundary between entertainment and relaxation on the one hand and passivity on the other. For

example, this teen-aged daughter describes the use of the TV as a form of entertainment in the following sequence.

Interviewer: When you watch TV, is it most for entertainment do you think or for useful things?

Bente (4): I don't watch TV to like learn anything. I don't sit there and watch nature programs. It is to have fun.

Interviewer: Do you usually just sit down and watch TV or do you plan that you will…

Bente: I [watch] *Hotel Caesar* every day. I know what is on TV. Planning, no, I don't think so, I just know what it is on.

Bente describes a style of use that is the polar opposite of the "enlightened engagement" approach to TV management. The point is to enjoy TV. At the first level, there is a strong egotistical dimension associated with the desire to "have fun". On the other hand, her determination to watch a specific soap opera indicates that there is a certain social currency, perhaps among her peers, in being able to follow the ebb and flow of the series. We will return to this point below. The other thing here is the detailed knowledge of what is on at any particular time. This speaks to a routinized knowledge of what is offered on TV. Many people have ritualized ideas regarding their use of TV (Selberg 1991, Selberg 1993, Selberg 1995). In a broader sense, however, Bente seems to indicate membership in a broader social grouping through her comments.

In another mode, the TV was seen as a legitimate form of relaxation if one needs to withdraw into a sphere away from daily stresses. A mother of three notes: "If we relax during a normal evening when you were at work and have done a lot, then it is good to have the TV". Others spoke of "watch[ing] TV and maybe drink[ing] a glass of soda or something. [...] Lay down in the sofa." In these comments, the informants focus on calming and recharging themselves via use of the TV. There is a different nuance here when compared to the entertainment comments provided by Bente in the previous citation. None-the-less the relaxation and the entertainment functions do not seem to dissimilar in that both provide a sense of escape from other thoughts and a distraction from other, more mundane parts of life.

In the previous section there was a discussion regarding the ability of an ICT to engage one, and further to carry out functional activities. We will examine the former mode of use vis-à-vis the television in the next section. With regards to the latter we were tellingly not able to find comments regarding the functional modes of use in our data material. This is, however is a theme that we will revisit in the discussion of the Internet.

3.1.2 The social functions of the TV

The discussion up to this point has focused largely on the individual and their relationship to the TV. In this section, we will consider the TV as a social device vis-à-vis the household and within one's broader social context. Looking at its social meaning within the home, the main TV was often placed in the living room and provided a place where the family could collect and share each other's company.

When compared with the PC, which has a shorter history in the home, one sees a much more embedded situation. In the case of the PC, as we will see, furniture needs to be readjusted to accommodate multiple users. This is usually not a problem with the TV since chairs and sofas are already positioned around the device. Food can be consumed at the same time that one uses the TV since it is not as interactive and since the furnishing of the room means that there are "coffee tables" that can be used for this activity one sits further away from the TV

itself. Indeed, in some cases viewing certain programs becomes a ritualized portion of the day (Selberg 1991). One of the mothers in the interviews called the TV the house-alter. Thus, it is easier to achieve local sociability with the traditional TV since routines for physically gathering around the device and sharing the time have been worked out beforehand. At the same time, it can be a divisive factor. It can be a source of friction, a way to underscore one's power in the home and mark one's territory (Ling and Thrane 2001).

Looking now at one's integration into broader social groupings, the comments of Bente in the previous section pointed to the idea that watching certain programs was not simply escape or entertainment, but was similar to other types of consumption in that it provided one with a link to a broader social group. Informants in other households also indicated that, in some situations, the TV seemed to provide an inordinate focus in one's daily life. When asked if they had special periods for TV viewing one family responded:

Joakim: Tuesdays!

Father: Yeah, there is, there is *Friends*. That is fixed and a couple of others *South Park* and *Friends* we have to see those. Otherwise, it is like you watch when you have the time, and of course, there are Soccer games and things like that.

While not overt, comments like this one place the use of the TV onto a type of social dimension albeit a non-interactive one, that extends beyond the home and family. One gets the sense that the fate of Manchester United, recent news or the fortunes of the various characters in the Soap Operas have a currency that the individual carries with them in their peer group interactions. It can become important to have seen, and to be able to talk about, the latest goal by one particular player, sensational news or to have insight as to why a soap opera character left his wife etc. The TV provides them with the content to be used in other contexts and in other discussions. This knowledge becomes a part of the glue holding the group together. Thus, at a secondary level, the TV provides a type of common cultural identity that is shared and which becomes part of the lore of the group and the society.

3.2 The Internet

The PC in the home often was seen as a school or a work related device. The sense that the PC and Internet were a part of one's working life was a common theme expressed by many of the parents in the interviews. The boundary was more or less absolute in the eyes of parents. Some parents tactfully described themselves as being "satisfied" after a long day in front of the PC.

Others were not so absolute, but focused on evocation of a "functional" imperative and broadened to include information retrieval. On the functional and quasi-functional uses of the PC and the Internet, one finds informants who described a set of various functional domestic uses. These include carrying out school assignments, participating in auctions, making travel arrangements, checking stock prices, etc. Indeed the polymorphous character of the Internet means that there are a broad range of functions and services available there which allow one to carry out a broad range of informational tasks (Mante-Meier et al 2001). A mother of two

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