# Gender and the Household Internet

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## INTRODUCTION

Internet research has reached a point where a detailed analysis of household Internet use is necessary. Given that the household is a contested terrain for feminist theorists (Hochschild, 1989; Luxton, 1980), it is often a site of struggle between household members and a place where unequal divisions of domestic labour situate women as bearing the load of housework and caregiving (Cockburn & Furst-Dilic, 1997). How should researchers examine Internet use in the household?

There are two particular areas that need to be considered in order to contextualize household Internet use. The first is household roles: the interactions and relationships shaped by societal expectations and social roles (gender, class, and race). The second is the domestic division of labour: Who is responsible for domestic tasks and how does this influence household Internet use?

## BACKGROUND

Previous research has begun to address notions of computers or the Internet in the home (Bakardjieva & Smith, 2001; Cumming & Kraut, 2001; Dryburgh, 2001; Habib & Cornford, 2001; Haythornwaite & Kazmer, 2002). However, they often do not examine everyday lived household experiences and their implications on the relationships between men and women, social roles, the division of labour, social interaction, and relationships in the household. Often, researchers do not connect these contexts to broader social relations such as race, class, and gender, and the relations of power inherent within the household.

The introduction of computers in the home in the 1980s (Frohlich & Kraut, 2002; Lally, 2002) notes the changing nature of computer use in the household context. In the 1980s, the few home computers that existed were used for word processing, telework, bringing work home, and children's games (Venkatesh, 1996). However, in the 1990s, it is evident that the nature of computer use changed and adapted to the household as it became domesticated; education, family communication, family recreation and travel, shopping, and domestic finances were common computer uses (Venkatesh).

Literature concerning the Internet in the home is often framed around how it has become domesticated, though this term seems to mean different things to different researchers and through different processes. What does it really mean? Domesticating something (an animal or person) denotes discipline, taming or civilizing, or making something fit for life in the home or able to participate in society (Habib & Cornford, 2001). Domestication can be conceptualized as shaping the use of technology in order to fit the household so that the technology eventually becomes embedded and almost invisible (Rommes, 2002). It is the way technology influences the user, and the user influences technology (Rommes). Information and communication technologies are often domesticated to serve people's own values and interests (Dutton, 1999). This indicates that the domestication of the Internet can vary from household to household, and the household is a continual site of cultural struggle over the meaning of the technology and what it should be used for (Murdock, Hartmann, & Gray, 1995). There is a need to better understand the process of domestication, which situates technology in diverse ways within the household (Silverstone, 1993).

## MAIN THRUST OF THE ARTICLE

### Household Roles

What must first be understood about household Internet use are the roles or the expectations that people have of one another in the household. Roles within the home are gendered and reflect race and

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class, and are often reinforced and strengthened through social interaction between people (West & Zimmerman, 1987). For example, there are existing social arrangements, cultural conditions, and practices that surround household technologies (Ribak, 2001), and the Internet in the household must be examined with this in mind. Examining how the household Internet is becoming domesticated should also address how a technology shapes and becomes a part of one's gender identity, and how women and men often relate to stereotypical images of gender identity (such as men being technologically competent; Rommes, 2002).

Women and men use the Internet differently and in different amounts because of social expectations guided by gender roles. Women utilize the Internet in ways that reflect their everyday gendered household roles (Shade, 2004); they are the communicators and networkers, and spend considerable time e-mailing family and friends more so than men (Kennedy, Wellman, & Klement, 2003). In contrast, men's use of the Internet is often less social as they spend more time searching for information and pursuing more isolated recreational activities.

Relations of power are important both in instances between parents, and parents and children, but also between those who have better Internet skills and those who do not. For example, it is often stated that women are less comfortable with technology than men (Ribak, 2001; Singh, 2001; Wajcman, 1991), thus they leave technological "fix-its" to others or use the technology less. As well, children's knowledge of the Internet often surpasses their parents'. In cases in which a household has only one computer, relations of power, based on skill or comfort, have an impact on the amount of time household members might spend on the Internet and who feels they are entitled to use it more. While there might be a power relationship between parents regulating children's use, the power is reversed when children are able to maintain and modify the household computer (Frohlich & Kraut, 2002).

As well, competition and struggle (Ribak, 2001) over the household Internet needs to be considered. Hierarchies of access and time available for household members will ultimately affect its use. Issues such as who can get on the Internet, at what time, and for how long are just as significant as what they

do once they are online (Frohlich & Kraut, 2002). The question becomes what type of use by various household members is most important. Is this contingent on household roles? Internet use based on work or school becomes prioritized over leisure, with many households accepting this hierarchy (Ribak, 2001). How are these practices established? How are they negotiated or how do they change over time? Are households with one computer scheduling Internet time? If so, what is this process and who is responsible? The coordination and scheduling of Internet use is rather fuzzy; is there a daily routine or is it unpredictable (Frohlich & Kraut)? As well, how prevalent is the existence of multiple computers with Internet access in the home? Can multiple computers with Internet access address issues of contention among household members? Does this promote more individual use rather than collective household use?

Parental roles are also important. The presence of children in the household adds to the responsibility of parents in terms of Internet use. Perceptions of the Internet shapes parental concern over what children may be doing online, and how much time they are allowed to spend playing games, surfing, or chatting becomes an issue for many parents. There is little detail on who is responsible for children's Internet use within the household. One could speculate that women may be more responsible because they are the primary caregivers. However, it can also be said that men might be responsible for governing household technology such as the Internet (as technology is said to be masculine). It is difficult to say as there is little research on whether one parent is solely responsible; studies generally discuss the parents collectively (Frohlich & Kraut, 2002).

## The Domestic Division of Labour

Household roles encompass not only gender roles, but also the roles of parents and children, and these roles are also framed by domestic labour. The word domestic is often associated with unpaid work in the household or homemaking, which is divided by the different jobs that women and men do (Habib & Cornford, 2001). Domestic labour (unpaid work) involves such tasks as cooking, cleaning, washing,

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