

Identity formation and the construction of home in diasporic households; the impact of media technologies

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we report findings from an empirical study of immigrant households' appropriation and use of media technologies. The paper purports that the domestication theory needs to be revised and supplemented to encompass the complexities of ethnic minority engagement with such technologies. The analysis finds interesting variations in media use; it is used both strategically in relation to seeking ontological security in a foreign cultural environment, but also for regular information and entertainment purposes. A general feature is that the engagement is 'communication intensive'. In some instances, in relation to diasporic media use, we can claim that media technologies are not only domesticated in a given home (based on a moral economy), but that the technologies themselves are used in a process of taming and *producing* locality, and thus being crucial in the process of forming a diasporic identity and of *domesticating home*.

Author Keywords

Media technologies, ethnicity, Diaspora, home, locality domestication, ethnography.

INTRODUCTION

There has been relatively little research on media use among ethnic minorities in Norway and Scandinavia [13]. A recent quantitative study from Norway (TNS Gallup 2005, restricted document) gives certain insights into the variations in media use among ethnic minorities. The weakness of such studies is their lacking understanding of the motives and mechanisms that surround the detected patterns. More specifically, surveys and large numbers do not easily reveal the dynamics of how the interplay of own backgrounds and interests in a new cultural and socio-political setting affects media use. And conversely, how the technologies themselves impact the diasporic families in

their construction of home, locality and a sense of security and belonging in a new cultural setting.

In this paper we attempt to open this 'black box' by analysing ethnographic data from eight households with non-western backgrounds. We have analysed data from a housing cooperative located in a suburb of the capital city Oslo. This area is considered to be the most heterogeneous and culturally diverse in Norway. It does still not represent a ghetto in a classical sense (homogenous ethnic population) since there are households from a variety of nations and ethnicities living jointly with ethnic Norwegian households. In addition, for the sake of comparison, we draw on 23 in-depth interviews with ethnic Norwegian households. When referring to technology engagement we mean all media technologies available to the household (TV, Internet, phones, radio, game consoles, DVD, etc). These data have been gathered as part of the project *Consuming Digital Adventure-Oriented Media in Everyday Life* (www.sifo.no/digiadvent).

The questions we raise are: Is technology and mediated content used actively to 'produce locality' and to construct or uphold a sense of 'home identity' among diasporic households? Are there interesting variations in the appropriation and use of media technologies in diasporic households relative to Norwegian households?

DOMESTICATION OF MEDIA TECHNOLOGIES AND THE PRODUCTION OF LOCALITY

Theoretically we embed this analysis in the *domestication theory* tradition, drawing on the works of Silverstone (and others) [10, 11] for the purpose of understanding the contextualised consumption of media technologies (both as artefacts and as mediated content) in everyday life. We seek, through our approach and our data, to complement the domestication principle of households 'taming the wild' (meaning; taming technology to make it fit with everyday routines and rituals) to also include ethnic minority households using technology to 'tame their locality' or to 'tame anxiety and unfamiliarity' (neighbourhood, western culture). For this purpose we expand on the domestication concept to include Appadurai's notion of 'producing locality' [1]. On the basis of these theories we postulate that media technologies help bring physically and symbolically remote 'homeness' to physically near, but unfamiliar, locations. This whole process, where technologies play a

central part, we refer to as the process of *domesticating home*.

The idea of 'home' is infested with everyday interpretations and is analytically difficult to use. However, for the purpose of this paper (in relation to immigrant families), we use Morley's definition [8:425]:

'When I speak of home I mean both the physical place – the domestic household – and the symbolic ideas of *Heimat* – the 'spaces of belonging' (and identity) at different geographical scales – the local, national or transnational communities in which people think of themselves as being 'at home'.

In general, globalisation, migrancy and mobility call for the development of new understandings of 'home' as traditional forms of place-based identity are being challenged. Cultures are no longer only rooted in space with stable patterns of interaction [8:428].

The concept of 'Diaspora' used in this paper was originally linked to the dispersal of the Jews from Palestine in the first century after Christ, but has more recently been used by researchers in the analysis of migration and population movements in general [12:251]. A key element has been to stress the marginality of the diasporic groups and their strong sentimental links to homeland and home culture, while being physically situated in a 'foreign' cultural or ethnic setting.

When introducing the concept of 'locality production' we draw on Tufte [13] and Appadurai [1, 2]. Tufte defines this concept as 'the process of social agency whereby people produce a sense of belonging' [13:183]. He claims that Danish ethnic minorities, in addition to being Danish citizens, also belong to diasporic communities that operate within very different social-spatial and cultural-geographical coordinates or frames compared to their fellow majority citizens. This results in a highly complex production of locality. In Appadurai's words the process of producing locality occurs by articulating and forming relations between the sense of social immediacy, the technologies of interactivity and the relativity of contexts [2:178, 13:188]. Appadurai is mainly concerned with the future of the nation-state and what 'locality' will mean in a state of transnational destabilization. With this background he views locality as 'relational and contextual rather than as scalar or spatial' [1:204]. The contrasting term is 'neighbourhood' which refers to 'actually existing social forms in which locality, as a dimension or value, is variably realized'.

Our position in this paper partly counters the prevailing domestication notion, which was constructed for western contexts and western knowledge conventions [10, 11]. We still draw on data from a western setting, but introduce the more complex relationships and everyday life situations facing ethnic minorities in a western cultural context. In a classical sense, media technologies (for the ethnic western

majority) were seen as mediating *alterity* [7], bringing the public world and the unfamiliar into the family households, as well as educating the masses into a national stereotype (through radio and TV). Hence the technologies challenge the implicit private/public divide that lies at the core of the domestication theory. In addition to being a threat the same technologies offer a range of opportunities for households and individuals: entertainment, communication, time skewing, time freeing, as well as a means to 'escape' (imaginatively) from geographical locations [7:150]. These attributes in media technologies create a constant *ambivalence* [5] for those who appropriate them. In our diasporic households we found that the media technologies did not create the same kind of ambivalence – and rather than being a means to 'escape', they provided a gateway to 'travel home' (to cultural roots), hence being crucial in the complex task of producing locality and a sense of home.

When discussing technology ambivalence we confer Miller and Slater's [6] example of the Trinidadians' Internet use. The authors claim that the Internet fitted the Trinidadians intensely diasporic personal relations. Being a Trinidadian family had long meant integrating over distances through any means of communication [6:2]. The Trinidadians' involvement with the Internet was thus defined as a 'natural, effortless domestication'. There was in other words little technophobia or negativity present. They had reached a point (through particularities in their cultural history) where there was only a focus on content and not on technology. In our data we also encountered less moral evaluations on the legitimacy of technologies among the immigrant families, but more on practical concerns such as affordability. There were certain similarities with ethnic Norwegian households in evaluating technology-use morally, but the ethnic minority families were stricter on content and less strict on excessive time use. This tendency could be seen in context with what Morley describes as the symbolic burden that the immigrant home must carry. The home becomes the key site for expressing a cultural aesthetic and is (often) the sole bulwark against a potential intrusion from the new host culture [7:52].

An ethnic Sri Lankan family also used game consoles strategically to keep their children inside. This praxis can be interpreted as a way of taming the parents' anxiety of perceived local dangers:

Interviewer: 'Do the children go to each other's houses and play...?'

Father: 'Usually we don't allow that. But sometimes we allow him [oldest son] to bring children home to play. We don't like very much him going out...So it is ok to have them at home, so he can play a little'.

Interviewer: 'So it is a good way to make the children...'

Father: '...to lure...lure them home.'

In our data we find that the significance of media technologies in the production of locality and in the

domestication of home varies. Some ethnic minority households are distinguished by 'diasporic networks'. This implies that they draw on a strong community of geographically dispersed kin and friends in Europe, USA, Canada, Russia and Asia. This was in particular reflected in our interviews with ethnic-Pakistani and ethnic-Kurdish households. Such diasporic networks are not restricted by physical location and demand an extensive use of all types of media technologies – often in creative combinations (Internet, web-cams, chat, SMS, diasporic web-sites, etc). In addition movies (VHS, DVD) and satellite channels from the home country (or in relevant languages) are used both for entertainment purposes and for 'cultural education' and updating. Both these activities can be included in Appadurai's notion of locality production. One ethnic-Pakistani father described how new technologies in general made it easier for the family to stay in a foreign cultural setting:

Interviewer: 'Does technology...in particular now with the Internet or access to updated news, as well as phone and TV, make it easier to stay here...?'

Father: 'Definitely. When I came to Norway in the 70'ies, and it was a very very long way to Pakistan, well it is just as far now, but there were no Pakistani newspapers, no Pakistani TV-channel to get here, no flights from Pakistan that came here, no Pakistani shops'.

In general, the diasporic families identified less with public service television and radio, but still expressed extensive use of Norwegian channels and web-sites, largely related to 'entertainment' content. Some of the minority households felt excluded from public service due to too little 'minority content' along with a too negative and homogenous portrayal of immigrants in the media. One middle-class Pakistani family differed slightly here as they were heavily engaged with national and regional (Norwegian) news and documentaries, along with countless international and Urdu-dominated channels. In addition the husband used foreign broadcasts to balance Norwegian and American-dominated news broadcasts, hence providing new perspectives in daily debates with ethnic-Norwegian colleagues. In a way the access to 'the world' via all kinds of technologies seemed to create a feeling of 'power' over the household's own situation. This self-confidence is vital for the ontological security and a source that potentially reduces the fear of being 'fooled by' or 'assimilated into' a new culture. Hence, this position can be interpreted as valuable in the production of locality and in negotiating a sense of identity and home.

This finding is in line with Christiansen [3], who claims that the use of transnational TV-channels not necessarily counteracts social, economic or cultural integration. It can just as well promote integration. Balanced information and cultural consciousness can be valued as an asset rather than a liability, potentially making diasporic households more open to and involved with host nation society and culture.

Morley [8:434] describes a situation where a different interpretation to media access prevailed. In an immigrant-dominated district of Paris satellite dishes were banned from high-risers as they were considered hazardous, prone to blow off the walls and fall on people below. The hidden agenda behind the ban however came from the French National Front. The Front found the dishes threatening as the migrant population could access a world of 'Virtual Islam', constituting a sort of cultural treason to the French.

Silverstone [10] claims that the repetitive broadcasting schedules and the practical routines of domestic life create the framework within which the ontological security of households can be sustained [7:128]. For ethnic minorities this 'scheduling' is sometimes disrupted, in particular for those with strong diasporic networks. They regularly keep in touch over several time zones. Hence an asymmetric conception of time occurs that is not entirely consistent with host nation schedules or routines. In our middle-class Pakistani family we saw this tendency clearly. The family had a complex task of planning time-slots (usually via SMS) for chat, phone calls and web-camera transmissions with networked kin and friends.

The strongest variations in our data, for the ethnic minorities in general, appear on the generational level [8:435]. There are differences in how first and second generation immigrants perceive 'home', 'locality' and how they identify with various cultures. The generational dimension also seems to be significant in explaining the individuals' engagement with media technologies. The fact that the Kurdish extended family in our data lived a kind of 'nomadic' life, using different apartments at different times, also complicates the notion of a *collective household domestication* of media technologies, based on a given moral economy. The youngest brother (aged 20) of our interviewee family felt foreign in Turkey, while the parents somehow lived in a 'cultural bubble' in Norway, feeling alienated in the new culture. They didn't speak any Norwegian and the mother was illiterate. They moved constantly and stayed with various family members, and consumed only Turkish satellite channels. The interviewed core family was in an in-between position, trying both to make their own 'home' based on a hybrid of Turkish family traditions and Norwegian culture. The daughters underwent a 'Norwegian upbringing' while being taught Kurdish language and culture through movies and books. This underscores the need to supplement the domestication theory when introducing non-western realities in western contexts. Panagakos [9] refers to similar findings when looking at new media technologies in Greek-ethnic communities in Canada. There is however a difference in that the Greeks in the new host country 'formed communities [ghettos] by reproducing familiar institutions from the homeland in order to preserve their traditions and Greek culture' [9:202]. Hence this replication creates a structure that the Norwegian Diasporas do not have.

A striking similarity, with both Norwegian households and the immigrant households in our study, was the extensive engagement with global channels (CNN, BBC, Discovery, Cartoon Network, Fox, etc) and entertainment content (through TV, DVD/VHS, the Internet, game consoles etc.). This is in line with the findings of Tufte [13]. In relation to technology in general and media technologies specifically, Gandy [4] emphasizes that ethnic identity is only part of the complex of influences that shape the decision to consume. Data from other projects, according to Gandy, indicate that most of the time ethnic minorities use media in the same way as the ethnic majority [4:5]. The need to be entertained appears to be a universal feature, and creative entertainment solutions (using various media technologies) seem to be found in all cultures.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we have used a few examples to illustrate how immigrant households use media technologies in everyday life. The idea is to illuminate variations in use and how different life situations make the negotiation of identity, the production of locality and the construction of home a complex task for families forming homes in unfamiliar cultural settings. What we see from our data and analysis is that the domestication principle needs to be supplemented to encompass these complexities, and to get a richer understanding of ethnic minority engagement with media and communication technologies. The inclusion of Appadurai's *production of locality* gives a foothold to broaden the view on this issue, as it opens for households' active use of technologies in the *domestication of home*, not only focussing on the process of technologies being domesticated in a *given domestic environment*.

Thus, the process of domesticating home consists of a myriad of integrated and intertwined processes, where new technologies play a crucial role in bringing home culture closer while at the same time enabling 'taming' of the anxiety and unfamiliarity experienced in the local community. A part of the new approach to domestication theory, being in line with Miller and Slater's work [6], is to bring forth empirically that familiarity with technology (old or new) in some instances *comes prior to the construction of locality and home for diasporic households-to-be*. In such cases media technologies are in a sense already tamed and domesticated (or are inherently domesticated due to the trans-national traits of a given ethnic grouping) and are used to domesticate homes in Diaspora.

To conclude; we can say that media technologies in large part play a different role for diasporic households than for the dominant ethnicity in a nation-state. Various media technologies serve as a way to connect with home culture (creating a sense of ontological security that is non-localised) and in the construction of home, as several elements of belonging are contextualised into a diasporic sense of 'home'. There is consequently a tendency that much of the diasporic media engagement is

'communication intensive'. At the same time these differences must not be over-accentuated as media and technology engagement shows many similarities, regardless of ethnicity and cultural background.

The contextuality and variations of media appropriation is not only interesting, but also vital for the understanding and development of new technologies and content in a global, multiethnic world of new 'localities' and 'homes'.

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