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At Home in the Field: From objects to lifecycles

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In this paper, we explore how biographies of domestic objects are intertwined with the personal biographies of their owners and caretakers, narratives of household formation, and the life cycle of the family, and how we position the value of this work to business planners and engineers at Intel Corporation. By being curious and interested in objects in people's homes and listening carefully to the narratives people tell about them, we create moving pictures of culturally-inflected constructions of individuals' and groups' lifecycles which in turn demonstrates how 'objects' are not 'objective', but always constituted and given meaning through relationships with and among people. At Intel Corporation, understanding life cycle transitions mediated by domestic objects deepens our knowledge both of technology in domestic spaces and of our current and potential customers and is an integral part of the development of technologies that enable experiences people will value.

Biographies of Objects and Biographical Objects

Old theories are often good ones. While the idea that social lives, lifecycles and biographies are not limited to human actors is 'old' theory in the social sciences, it is not moribund. In this paper, we explore the ways in which we are successfully crafting a new life for the "social life of things" in an unexpected setting: Intel Corporation. Through examples from a current research project on a mundane and ubiquitous, yet often highly symbolically charged domestic object — the television — we explore how the biographies of domestic objects are intertwined with the personal biographies of their owners and caretakers, narratives of household formation (and dissolution) and the life cycle of the family. By being curious and interested in objects in people's homes and listening carefully to the narratives people tell about them, we create moving pictures of culturally-inflected constructions of individuals' and groups' lifecycles which in turn demonstrates how 'objects' are not 'objective', but always constituted and given meaning through relationships with and among people. At Intel, understanding the life cycle transitions mediated by domestic objects deepens our knowledge both of technology in domestic spaces and of our current and potential customers. Understanding how people live, how they want to live, what matters to them, how technologies are used, understood, and imagined in their homes around the world is an integral part of the development of technologies that enable experiences people will, and do, value.

Our argument draws on interviews, home tours, and photo diaries collected during a recently completed ethnographic research project addressing television as a social and

cultural object and practice in China, India, the US and UK. The research was sponsored by Domestic Designs & Technologies Research, a small, interdisciplinary team of ethnographic researchers (anthropologists, designer researchers and a documentary film maker) in Intel Corporation's Digital Home Group. We are interested in understanding practices of domesticity around the world and how technologies are embedded in the diversity of global homes. The research framework for this project was informed by anthropological models of exchange, consumption and material culture, (Appadurai 1986; Campell 1995; Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981; Douglas & Isherwood 1979; Kopytoff 1986). Anthropologists have long been interested in how the objects that inhabit people's daily lives not only accomplish practical ends, but express status and identity of their stewards and relationships among people, by giving physical form to cultural categories and social structure. As Kopytoff's concept of the 'cultural biography of things' (1986) suggests, such meanings are not fixed, but can change over time as objects are traded, exchanged, bought, sold, used and age. In this project, we focused explicitly on understanding the domestication and life cycle of televisions in urban, middle-class homes, employing Silverstone, Hirsch & Morley's tripartite model of the appropriation, integration and conversion of ICTS into domestic settings (1992). As one of the goals of the project was to understand how televisions, the content they run and dependent devices are appropriated and integrated into homes, we were interested in transition points in the life cycle of technologies.

In our interviews, we found the lifecycle of these objects were used to organize and mark transitions in the lifecycles of the individuals who used them and the families and households to which they belonged. We were reminded of Hoskin's work on biographical objects, domestic objects that "tell the stories of people's lives" (1998: 2). Our questioning about objects such as televisions lead to the unintentional collection of participants' autobiographies, assemblages of transitions in their lives they deemed interesting and significant to share with us filtered through the lens of the lifecycles of domestic technologies. As Hoskins suggests, such life narratives are not 'discovered', but co-created during the course of the ethnographic interview, shaped by the nature of the interaction and the types of questions asked by the researcher (1998: 1).

From Objects to Life Cycles

We were first clued into the elision from the lifecycles of TVs to those of individuals, families and households when we noticed how people referred to televisions in their homes when there was more than one present. In China, we met a 5 television family, several of which were named for life cycle, family and household formation events that necessitated their purchases: there was the set bought for the home when it was originally built 20 years ago; the set bought for the son when he reach adulthood; and the set bought for the son and daughter-in-law for their marriage. In the UK, we met a woman who was quite attached to what she called "my pink telly", a small, salmon-colored set she'd had since the 1970s and that had survived 3 children, a divorce, and competition from the introduction of new sets into the house. A 51-year- old woman in the US spoke of her "graduation TV"

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and her husband's "bachelor TV", in addition to their "new" TV and the TV she won in a contest. Names like "bachelor TV" do more than indicate ownership or remind people of earlier periods in their lives; they mark transitions in people's lives, signaling what events are important in the construction of life narratives, what they want to remember and commemorate; in this case, marriage and the transition from bachelor to husband. Other events in an individual's life are best forgotten, so TVs may not be named with reference to them even when their biographies are closely linked. The only reference to a former marriage made by another study participant, 45-year-old Eliza[1], was to mention that the television in her living room was "inherited in a divorce" — which, in fact, meant *her* divorce. For her, a door had closed to a chapter in her life, the marriage deceased, and its material remnants bequeathed.

The lifecycle transitions most often experienced by televisions in the homes we visited included:

- Changes in their physical location; entering the home, moving within a room, across rooms, and — only occasionally — leaving homes.
- Changes in functionality; moving from a single purpose to multi-purpose devices or, more often as televisions age, vice versa.
- Renaming in response to: changes in physical location or functionality; the introduction of other televisions

These transitions were often closely tied to transitions in the lifecycles of individuals, families and households.

Childhood socialization: independence or safety

Childhood milestones are one of the most commonly referenced types of life cycle transitions tied to changes in the social status of televisions. Sometimes these were related to academic milestones, such as finishing high school or starting college, though usually they were much more vague, described as becoming 'old enough' or 'big enough' to warrant particular freedoms or responsibilities. Milestones of independence and maturity were often tied to the movement of television into children's bedrooms. For the Wang family in China, moving house from Mr. Wang's parents' apartment to a separate residence happened to coincide with his son reaching an age milestone (6 years old); the combination of both the household and individual life cycle transitions resulted in his son moving to his own bedroom, and receiving his own television. While in some homes, the appropriation and movement of televisions became markers of the transition children made from dependence to independence, other parents spoke of the appropriation of televisions as a means of preventing independence. In the US, the Philips dreamt of outfitting a basement level room

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[1] All study participant names are pseudonyms.

with a home cinema system to keep their soon-to-be teenage sons safe at home, "rather than have them hang out at the mall".

Formation and Dissolution of Unions

In our interviews, televisions and other consumer electronics were frequently mentioned as wedding gifts, and as problematic objects to be divested of at the dissolution of marriages or other stable relationships. In addition to the aforementioned 'bequeathed' television, two stories stand out from interviews.

In the UK, thirty-year-old Karina owned her own home and shared the space with a lodger. Almost every home electronic device in her home was tied to her relationship with Martin, her ex-boyfriend who recently moved out. Rather than describing her possessions as hers, she instead called them "Martin's", forefronting the transition in his life and in his relationships to Karina. In the division of household goods following the break-up, Martin took the 'best' (i.e. newest and most expensive) television, stereo, DVD player and computer, leaving Karina with multiples of older TVs and stereos and an old PC. The end of their relationship resulted in a change in her household structure and dramatic changes in the amount and average age of ICTs in her home. In India, twenty-five year old Shruti has recently received a portable MP3 music player as a gift from her fiancée in the United States. Though given to her as an acknowledgement of her love of music, in the photo exercise we left for the family to complete after our first visit, her 21-year-old brother, Vasa, regales us with the details of the music player's functions and a picture of himself holding it. His page-long description lovingly detailed the uses 'we' (Shruti and Vasa) had for the device. Though gifted to Shruti, the music player is not in the custody of an individual — 'she' —but of a group — 'we'. Once Shruti marries and joins her husband, it still won't be hers alone; it was chosen by her fiancée as something that would come back to his household after the wedding and be shared by them.

Household formation

Across all of our fieldsites, televisions and dependent devices figured prominently in the list of objects needed to properly outfit a home. Moving home, setting up a first home, or the addition of household members were all transitions in household life cycles that we learned about through asking about the lifecycles of technologies. In China, Mrs. Lu explained how having her parents join her and her husband and daughter in their 800 sq. ft. flat necessitated buying a new television to replace a 6-year-old TV. The new television was placed in her parents' bedroom, along with a new air conditioner "because it is important that old people live a better life" than was possible when they were younger. Respect was paid to the elder generation by placing the TV in their space, though they were then expected to curtail their own use of this area to accommodate the needs of their daughter and granddaughter to watch their preferred programming. In the UK, 48-year-old William Brown, a self-described "hoarder" housed 11 televisions in his 1200 square foot semi-detached home. With the exception of a single set, all televisions were bought second-hand or gifted from extended family that had bought new sets and wanted to dispose of older

ones. William's reasoning for taking in these televisions hinged on the need his youngest daughter Sarah, who had recently bought her own home, might have for a television. Williams explained, "a lot of things we tended to collect because Sarah might want this. Sarah might want that. So, they were being thrown away, we might as well . . . and we had, I think, four offers for TVs for Sarah. And you don't like to turn around and say, "no", so we took them."

Courting "Disappointment", Inspiring Innovation

Having gathered rich data about transitions in the lives of objects and people, we must make the value of this data clear to our employers. Ethnographic research affords various opportunities to collect data that are potentially easily deemed 'superfluous', or (worst of all) "interesting" but not "useful" from the point of view of our industry stakeholders. We've recently sat in a meeting in which a stakeholder to an external ethnographic research project he was co-sponsoring announced (in measured tones for extra emphasis) that it would be a "disappointment" to have findings that did not directly address a very narrowly defined research question that could be adequately answered through other qualitative research methods such as focus group discussions. Convincing our stakeholders that the 'superfluous' should not be deemed disappointing but useful — in fact, vitally important for making sense of answers to their narrowly defined questions — is an ongoing challenge, particularly when there is the misconception sometimes even within the company that the type of knowledge we produce leads ***directly*** to product ideas, rather than ***indirectly***, through combination with intelligence about markets, industry, and technology.

If ethnographic data does not stand on its own, but rather is part of a process for developing technologies that enable valued and desired experiences in homes, what do we gain from understanding how biographies of domestic objects are intertwined with the personal biographies of their owners, narratives of household formation and the life cycle of the family? Simply put, a deep understanding of context that we can't get through quantitative data or surveys, that helps Intel understand television not as just a screen for streaming digital content, but as an object and set of practices imbued with meanings, and embedded in complicated domestic spaces and sets of relationships among household members. We learn that you can't set up house without a TV; that TVs are embattled objects in household dissolution; that they punctuate the life cycle; that TVs are considered useful and collectible objects, thought of as dependable and good to have around 'just in case'; that TVs are embedded in household politics, practices of filial piety in ways that belie a facile definition as simply an entertainment device; and that definitions of 'personal' vs. 'social' technologies are not universal. Some of these findings may seem pedestrian from the viewpoint of an individual consumer, but fill a needed void in business settings; understanding how technologies are used, understood and imagined in the diversity of homes around the world.

Acknowledgments

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