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Methodological Considerations in the UK Research on the Domestication of ICTs

by

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In the methods literature on qualitative research it is now increasingly recognised that what emerges in interviews is not simply the truth about household life but an inter-

subjective construction negotiated during the research process (Alasuutari, 1995; Miller and Glassner, 1997; Holstein and Gubrium, 1997.). This involves many judgements on the part of those interviewed concerning the goals of interview, how they can create an account of their everyday lives. It involves the interviewer in the process of negotiating which parts of such accounts are relevant, from what perspective they might be approached and how the complex realities of everyday life may be characterised. And during this process we must take into account not only problems of memory or misperception but also how interviewees are consciously or unconsciously, individually or in collaboration, presenting themselves through these accounts.

Against such background consideration, this paper aims to consider the methodology of a recent three year research programme at Sussex University examining the domestication of information and communication technologies. It considers the three studies conducted within that programme, of teleworkers, lone parents and the young elderly (Haddon and Silverstone, 1993, 1995, 1996a), and for comparative purposes a subsequent study of the social class AB and cable TV (Silverstone and Haddon, 1996).

The various sections of the paper consider:

1. General processes of interaction during the interview
2. The types of data sought and generated and how we might evaluate the above social processes at work in their formulation
3. The production of research reports mobilising such data
4. Some external limitations on the research process

1. The interview relationship: Roles, rapport, control, and ownership

1.1 Roles

The general role offered to interviewees in this research was one of being invited to help in the research project, which meant not only explaining the goals and approach at the start but at times providing clues as to themes of interest to the researcher, very occasionally mentioning what the literature said about a particular topic or what other respondents had mentioned. Obviously within a framework which stresses the need for the interviewer to be somehow neutral, these moments in particular sound like leading questions. But the concept of the negotiated interview outlined above denies the possibility of the neutral interview. The aim of providing a fairly strong lead at times is to push the interviewees to engage with our frameworks, a process described as 'active interviewing' (Holstein and Gubrium, 1997: 123).

What then becomes crucial is how interview participants engage. If they simply agree or disagree with some observation made by the interviewer then this is an uninteresting response - they might well have taken the interviewer's suggestion just a convenient way of answering a difficult question. However, if they engage in terms of showing their assessment of the situation is more complex, perhaps modifying stereotypical claims, or even rejecting the suggested frameworks and providing

alternative ways of characterising experiences, this is potentially a more interesting response, showing a good deal more reflexivity. Here, and elsewhere in interviews which have been characterised as ‘long conversations’ (Silverstone et al, 1991), many of the questions or perspectives offered aim to act as a stimulus for such reflection, asking interviewees to elaborate their responses. This does not mean that such responses are naively regarded as the a ‘truth’, but they are material which provides more scope for thinking about, for example, accounting practices, about the evidence which they mobilise, and about the ambiguities which this may reflect.

As interviewing has become more and more commonplace in what has been called an ‘interview society’ this situation has become a more “naturally occurring” occasion for articulating experience (Holstein and Gubrium, 1997). We might add to this observation a further one that existing market research practices have to an extent created a problem of expectation. Especially in the study of cable TV following the main three year research programme some, at least, of the interviewees were more used to providing the short answers desired for quantitative research. There have been moments, and luckily only one in the cable study was really problematic, where interviewees tried to be helpful by getting through the meeting as quickly and efficiently as possible providing succinct answers. One factor in that study, conducted for a commercial company, was that the recruitment of participants had to be organised through an agency and so probably the interview felt more like traditional market research exercise. In this case payment had been mentioned in advance and so the interview relationship also felt more like a contract rather than the interviewees ‘helping out’ academics. However, even with in this study it was often possible to ‘convert’ the definition of the interview relationship to one where the interviews could elaborate more.

1.2 Rapport

This is obviously a classic theme of this type of qualitative research. The way this was handled in the Sussex study was to present the interviewer first and foremost as a researcher, but also as a person with a life outside of the research interview. This was managed in the time outside of the main interview, sometimes when making contact, before the main interview, or after a first interview - when there was a policy of referring in passing to, for example, interests or what else was also happening on that day. Usually within the interviews there would be one or more points where a similar experiences were noted. The purpose was always to enhance the ‘conversation like’ dimension of the interview by making the researcher someone they knew a little about, someone with whom they shared at least something in common.

But how much any empathy was emphasised depended on what was wanted from particular questions. On the one hand it was usually possible to demonstrate some familiarity with an interviewee’s experience by reference to existing literature or to what participants in other interviews had said (e.g. as regards some common female experience, or parental experiences of children). On the other hand it was sometimes

useful for the interviewer to respond to the point being raised as something that was unfamiliar in order to persuade interviewees to elaborate further¹.

1.3 Control

Obviously despite the fact that this is a long conversation it was one where the interviewer had a fair amount of control, working his way through a checklist of topics, asking for longer (or sometimes shorter) answers and to an extent providing feedback about what perspective he would like participants to consider. This role of 'active interviewer' 'sets the general parameters for responses, constraining as well as provoking answers that are germane to the researchers interests' (Holstein and Gubrium, 1997). However, this was not the same form of control as in, say, quantitative market research. The questions were often more open-ended, giving the respondents chance to develop their answers and mobilise evidence, perhaps providing supporting anecdotes. Moreover, whenever some issue was obviously very important to them and frequently faced, such as the problems of poverty faced by many lone parents or the isolation experienced by some older people living alone, then extra time was allotted to allow them to talk about those themes. In other words, some control over the interview was relinquished. If such problems were so salient they usually had repercussions for their relationship with ICTs.

Such moments also meant that the interviewer role changed, at least for a while (also discussed in Alasuutari, 1995:88). For example, one new role was that of 'sympathetic listener' who would be willing to hear their story. However this role could also be problematic, taken to its extreme in one interview with a lone parent who could not see the importance of discussing ICTs at all when there were clearly other far more important things in her life. The other problematic role, taken to an extreme in one interview in a teleworking household, was when quarrelling parents asked the interviewer to be the adjudicator between them. While it was undoubtedly useful to see the arguments they mounted and the interaction, this is a difficult role for a researcher to be offered.

1.4 Ownership

One problem that can arise is that the household member first approached regards the interview as their possession, even when it is explained that the research is supposed to cover the whole household. For example, this happened sometimes with the telework study when the whole rationale for choosing that household is often one member's teleworking practices. The other consequence is that this person's partner may not understand why they are being interviewed, especially if his or her partner made the interview arrangements and did not necessarily consult with him or her about this. In most interviews this was not too large a problem, but certainly one

¹Alasuutari cites the case of one female researcher who reported that 'even though her interviews with men were more formal and in a sense less pleasant situations the data she obtained was in fact better (for her purposes) than in her conversations with women. She had perhaps understood her female interviewees "too well"; and since she thought she knew the answers anyway, she had not gone to the trouble of asking follow-up questions'. Alasuutari, 1995)

household pulled out because of this tension. Sometimes the initial person contacted ended up providing far more information about the household than their partner.

There is a related issue with children, who were not included in our main three year project but were sometimes included in the cable research. While it can be useful to have the children present (more so if they are older and can engage with the research) they sometimes do not regard the interview as really involving them. They were often not consulted about the interview but simply told to attend. There was sometimes a problem that they became bored (which meant extra effort on the part of the interviewer to keep them involved) more so if only some of the questions could be made relevant to them. Therefore while some of their contributions were useful, as will be clear below, they often did not say as much as they could - this particular researcher's experience of interviewing teenagers in the past suggests that they can say far more (Haddon, 1988).

2. Types of data

There are, in fact, various types of data that can be collected within one qualitative interview. We can appreciate this if we consider the goals of this particular Domestication project. The aim was to examine the acquisition, usage and other social processes around ICTs in the light of the emerging literature on 'consumption' and trends specifically within media studies towards considering the context of media viewing (Silverstone, Hirsch and Morley, 1992). The related distinguishing feature of this research is the focus on processes within households, which decentralises the 'main' or 'end' user who is so often the subject of other research - it recognises the ways in which others in the household make some contribution to the consumption of ICTs. Individual use takes place in a context where household members have commitments, routines and in general demands on time and space that interact and in so doing shape consumption options.

Hence the type of data collected relate to:

- The household context in terms of the general history and the biography of its members (although this emerged more significantly as a theme later in the project, especially in the study of the young elderly);
- That context in terms of routines and practices of the household, members' use of time and space and how these patterns develop dynamically over time;
- The value systems, priorities, aspirations and motivations of household members - including the degree to which these are shared or in conflict and how they are negotiated and reconciled - or not;
- The process of, and issues surrounding, the acquisition of ICTs and their subsequent career;
- In the light of those issues, any strategies used to regulate the role of those ICTs and responses to those strategies.

Clearly some of these data involve interviewees producing accounts which are relatively descriptive of their everyday life. The degree of judgement and evaluation

involved varies, and some of the accounts of events, motivations and values may have been previously articulated while others have not.

But there is perhaps a more substantial difference in the nature of the data involved. We have those moments in the interview when the interviewee is treated more as an 'informant' reporting on everyday life outside of the interview situation (Alasuutari, 1995: 58). But while rejecting what has been called the 'radical social constructionist' view that we can know nothing about any reality outside of the interview through such reports (Miller, and Glassner, 1997), it is nevertheless important to take into account the processes first noted in their paper. In fact, the following sections indicate ways in which the interviewer could evaluate such reports as measures of everyday life.

Then there are the other moments when it is the interaction during the interview which is more interesting, as the interviews attempt to reflect on their actions, work out their values or, when the interview is a joint one, live out and negotiate their different perspectives during that interview itself.

2.1 Interviewees as 'informants' on events and routines

In some respects, the qualitative research of this project still required much the same type of background information as a quantitative survey might. This includes major life 'events' such as changes in work status (full-time work, part-time work, unemployment) and the arrival and departure of children, as well as inventories of household ICTs. Such questions were relatively more straightforward and quick to answer. Although there were occasionally some problems of memory (e.g. concerning when technologies were acquired) which meant that some of the fine detail might not be accurate the broad picture was good enough for the purposes of the research. In terms of the social process of research, the themes discussed using this type of data did not appear to be so contentious, and in joint interviews there were no major disagreements over the answers.

Getting these 'informants' to summarise behaviour, for example in describing their routines (in general and in relation to ICTs) involved more judgement, more time to stop and think, and more interaction between partners in joint interviews as they tried to work out what they did. Examples of these types of data include commitments outside the home, how time is organised on a daily, weekly and seasonal basis, and how they went about purchasing goods and services. Over and above the difficulties of making judgements, of assessing their everyday life, here there was more scope for the type of presentation of self discussed earlier - as evidenced by the disagreements that sometimes occurred between household members. For example, a particular area of life where there was regularly some difference in perspective was over the amount of domestic labour performed by males and by children. Another example of a particular contentious area would be the degree to which parents managed to control their children's TV viewing. Sometimes the parents might disagree over what really happened. In some of the cable interviews the parents put on a united front presenting themselves as 'good 'parents'', only to be contradicted by the children's account of what usually happened.

Clearly the above example shows how interviewing both parents or indeed the children as well, separately as well as together, helps to cast some light upon the claims being made about everyday life. This is where the household orientated research can actually provide more insight than the research focused on individuals. There were also a number of checks internal to the research process that enabled some reflection over what these 'informants' were reporting. One was the time budget or diary that participants wrote up prior to the interviews and which showed their daily activities over the period of a week. The other was the question where we asked them to describe something specific - for example their last major purchase - in addition to saying what they normally did.

2.2 Aspirations, evaluations and motivations

Here we go beyond behaviour to consider on the one hand their outlooks, in various senses, and on the other hand how they account for the motivations behind behaviour - i.e. why (they claim) they did what they did. To take the latter first, a certain amount of the time, especially for events that occurred some considerable time in the past, interviewees would admit to being a little hazy as to some of their motivations. But where something was felt to a significant change in their lifestyle, like the acquisition of their first TV, this was less of a problem. As well shall see below in the section on 'interaction', there was also sometimes disagreement between partners over motivations - as when one claimed very rational motives for 'needing' certain new technologies, while the partner thought that this was a justification for making the purchase after the event.

Asking about aspirations for the future or evaluations of their current situation (for instance, of their economic situation) can still place them in the role of 'informant' to the extent that they are reporting what they regularly think, which can be a basis upon which they have acted. At other times, though, they have never had to consider an issue before and have to construct their perspective during the interview process, in part reflecting on evidence from their lives. Although many interviews do talk about problems and difficulties, there is always the concern that interviewees may be presenting themselves and their situation in a overly positive light. This was evidenced in the case of a few teleworkers who claimed that on the whole they managed working at home reasonably well and were in control - whereas their partners provided evidence of the crises they regularly faced, arguing that all did not run so smoothly.

But apart from using any differences in the accounts of partners as a means to reflect on the claims that they were making, the other parts of the interview also provided evidence in this process of evaluation. Basically, there is the criterion of internal consistency, especially over many hours of two interviews, and whether what they claim is plausible in the light of what they have said at many other points in the conversation. For example, a question for the researcher would be whether claims about their economic situation fitted in with claims about their priorities, their lifestyle, their spending behaviour, what they did during the week of the time budgets, and arguments about whether they can afford, for example, new ICTs.

2.3 Issues, problems and strategies

One particular dimension of household interaction that was of interest in this research was the issues or problems that emerged, especially in relation to the use of ICTs, and the strategies people used, with various degrees of success, to overcome these problems. For example, when teleworking was taken up but did not justify the acquisition of a second phone line dedicated for work purposes this meant that the existing domestic line now had to function as a work line as well. The issue, or problem, then was how to take this new role into account, for example in terms of answering calls appropriately or reducing background noise when work calls arrived so as to create the impression of a favourable working environment. Another issue might be of children running up the phone bill through their phone calls, when we find parents trying various strategies to control or reduce those calls.

Issues such as this exist and are articulated outside of the actual interview, and since the strategies are goal-oriented actions the household members concerned are aware of and can describe their motivations and choices, often also supplying anecdotal evidence. Accounts of how frequently such strategies are used or how successful they are can be more problematic to evaluate, as when children in the cable study questioned how much their parents enforced some of the rules about watching TV. On the other hand, many other interviewees were more willing to admit that their strategies were at best only partly successful.

2.4 Interaction during the Interview

At various points within joint interviews we have noted the disagreements that call into question the claims made by the interviewees as 'informants'. But at such points it is usually possible to move to another mode of analysis, focusing not on reports of reality outside the interview but on the interaction itself. Here we can often see that the participants have differing perspectives and maybe different values. We sometimes see the on-going tensions with the household, the arguments mobilised, the language used and the modes of negotiation.

Nor is it just conflicts that are of interest. One key interest in the research is what has been termed the 'moral economy', or the values of households. What the interaction in joint interviews can tell us is the extent to which such values are 'shared' or 'contested' or whether some household members seem to take a lead in stressing that such values are shared while other acquiesce.

3. Producing an account

Just as one cannot divorce the data sought from the goals of the research, at the writing-up stage those goals have a bearing on what material is chosen and mobilised into arguments, and what is left aside. In other words, such choices are theoretically informed and structure the data. The data are 'read' for the role they might have in

expanding existing analyses or in providing new pieces for the theoretical jigsaw puzzle. Clearly a researcher with a different agenda could conceivably produce a somewhat different account from the same material. But here too there is always the concern that an interpretation might be blind to some dimensions even within the goals of the research - as writers have noted in discussions of blindness to gender issues (Morgan, 1981).

3.1 Goals of the Domestication Project

If these goals are important, let us first consider the aims of the domestication project that motivated this research. An attempt was made to provide an iterative elaboration and modification of the original framework in the light of empirical evidence, charting the complexities of those social processes that have a bearing on the consumption of ICTs. We wanted to see the different guises and forms those processes could take, understand the social logics of those processes and patterns that emerged and socially locate them - i.e. for whom and under what conditions did they apply.

To this end the material in the final report discussed such processes, often giving several examples from different households. It discussed the issues and strategies outlined above. And it tried to provide more sophisticated accounts of dimensions covered in the previous stage of this Domestication project² - for example, making what counts as the boundaries around households more complex.

3.2 Secondary goals: Particular projects

As noted earlier, in each of the three years we focused on a different group: teleworkers, lone parents and the young elderly. The reason for looking at these groups was to examine in more detail experiences that highlighted, respectively, the changing relationship to work, forms of household composition other than the nuclear family, and changes over the life course.

But of course, each of the groups we chose is already an object of study in its own right. There is a literature on each group (although less specifically on the young elderly as opposed to the elderly in general), there are public discourses about each group and there are interested parties lobbying on issues related to each group. Hence, our reports were taken up and read by others who do not particularly share our interest in ICTs but who wanted to see what we have to say about these groups in general. This was nowhere clearer than in our report on telework that was the most popular one by far ever published in the series from the Science Policy Research Unit. In the ensuing media attention, everyone wanted to know about telework but there were virtually no questions about ICTs.

Because these are also the audiences that we address, with their own concerns and agenda, when writing about each topic area it is inevitable that some material is

² A three year project at Brunel University preceded the Sussex study and set up much of its framework of analysis

chosen because it engages either with popular stereotypes or with claims made in the existing literature on these groups. So, to take the example of telework, it became important to stress, for example, how this was not a homogenous experience or how the trajectories people took into this way of working made a difference to the problems which they faced.

3.3 Using data, or not

The first important point to make, which is probably the experience of most researchers doing qualitative work, is that the majority of the (transcript) material will not be used. This may be because some of the points raised, while interesting for other reasons, could not be used within the logic of a particular report. An example would be an issue raised in the lone parent interviews, but which did not bear a particular relationship to the state of being a lone parent. Some areas of everyday were explored on the grounds that they might be interesting in relation to some theoretical theme - but it turned out that they were not. Finally, it may have taken interviewees a considerable time to explain some points which ultimately only played a small part in the argument being constructed and which therefore only appeared in a very summarised form.

In practice, reflecting on the reports we produced, a fair amount of use was made of the most straightforward, least problematic, data - with the interviewees acting as informants about non-controversial areas where judgements were easiest. An example might be charting changes in life circumstances and acquisition of ICTs. The difference from quantitative surveys which might try to show the same patterns is that the aim in our case is not to show just a correlation but to use the accompanying evidence, the explanations and observations of informants, to cast light upon why the pattern is as it is - and that might entail not just one but a variety of rationales. In terms of presentational strategy, this often entailed using the examples of a few households whose members were reflexive, whose accounts went beyond the guidance of any prompts and who best articulated points, showing any problems or ambiguities involved.

The above raises a more general point. Simple 'yes' or 'no' answers - so desired in quantitative work - tend to be the least interesting responses in qualitative analysis, over and above any problems of interpreting the social processes shaping such replies. Hence the data most used, largely because it was richer in content, were those where respondents explored grey areas, where they volunteered anecdotes to show complexity, where they had different perspectives from each other, where they talked of issues, where they discussed aspects of daily life which were difficult for them or problematic to control, where they reflected on strategies and their partial success - and where we can go beyond their role as informants to focus on the nature of the interaction and what this reveals. These were usually the highlights of the reports, and with a limited number of 'good' examples (according to the above criteria) it was possible to make a range of substantive observations.

4. Constraints

This final section reflects on the constraints on research that follows from this three-year project at Sussex. That work was reasonably well resourced in the sense it seems to be a luxury today to have the time to deal with just one target group, full-time, for a whole year and with relatively few other distractions. Admittedly only one researcher carried out the interviews, when an additional researcher's presence - as in some German research in a related area - might have been helpful. It is not easy to keep all the considerations above in mind, to make mental cross-checks on the spur of the moment and to follow up instantly all points of theoretical interest. In this sense interviews are like stage performances: they are very tiring, and inevitably not all the points that could be followed through are.

However, at the analysis stage, two people were often involved - either looking at original transcripts or in reflecting on written-up case studies of households when preparing the final report. This was important, stimulating further elaboration of the data and helping to overcome any theoretical blindnesses referred to earlier. The question is whether this option declines, whether there are fewer chances to do this, as research has to be completed in shorter times spans with less resources. The study of cable, for example, provided relatively less time for such joint analysis of interview data.

Changing time pressures in the research also had other consequences. When moving to the cable TV study, it was clear that given the timescale on offer it was only possible to do one interview, rather than two. Apart from leading to a general scaling back in the depth of questions in the different areas covered by the checklist of questions it also meant that a choice had to be made as to whether to have separate or joint interviews, whereas both strategies had been followed in the three-year project. Both have their merits - for example, in separate interviews participants sometimes volunteer points that they would not make if their partners were present. But because of the value of seeing the interaction between partners - noted above - the joint interview was chosen for the cable study. The other advantage of having two interviews is that there is more time to reflect on the initial feedback from the household, which can help formulate questions. From the interviewer's perspective, the single interview is more intensive, more pressurised, when everything has to be covered and inter-related in one go.

The next main casualty of tighter time constraints is that the diary or time budget component had to be abandoned. Even in the original 3-year programme it had caused delays as people dropped out because of having to fill in a diary (and replacements had to be found) or more usually the participants simply took a long time - many weeks sometimes - before they got around to filling them in. But this means that in the cable study we lost a tool that helped to prepare for the interview and which provided a means of cross-checking some of the observations made by interviewees.

In the three-year project it had been possible to write up a certain number of case studies of households, providing the time to reflect in some depth on how the different aspects of household life fitted together. This luxury had to be dropped in the cable

study which effectively had between a quarter and a third of the time for field work and analysis compared to the studies within the three-year project. Therefore, the final report was generated from a direct analysis of the transcripts without the intermediary stage of producing case studies.

Finally, to cut down recruitment time, the cable study involved hiring an agency to recruit households, with some of the problems noted in the discussion of the interview relationship and roles.

In sum, the initial three-year project described in this paper was a learning experience. It sensitised the researchers to some of the issues in the research process and as result some aspects of that process can now probably be handled more efficiently and with more sensitivity. However, the move to commercially sponsored projects in shorter timescales threatens potentially to compromise some of the research stances and research procedures described above.

5. Summary

In the light of observations about the interview as a socially negotiated construct this paper first considered the general process of interaction during the interview, the stance taken in the particular research on the domestication of ICTs and the problems arising.

The paper then observed that there were in fact a variety of different types of data sought and generated in such interviews, some with an emphasis on the participants as informants, some with an emphasis on their interaction. The data sought could not be divorced from the goals of the project and various ways of assessing those different types of data were covered

Similarly, the goals of the project have a bearing upon the production of final reports, and here there are usually primary and secondary goals. The search for insights into processes relevant to those goals is central and has a bearing upon the selection of material. While relatively more descriptive material, where participants act as informants, has a role to play, the richest material is often of a more complex and nature, in part revealed in interaction during the interview.

In trying to apply these mode of analysis in subsequent research, with more limited financial, and especially time, resources some of the research positions and procedures outlined in this paper have been more difficult to implement.

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