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Design and Domestication

Introduction

This paper explains how I have used the notion of “domestication” to build a small research program in design research. This is a report from an ongoing work, and does not aim to provide answers. My aims are more limited. I only try to open up thinking behind a research project currently underway in Helsinki. Why we started to study domestication was that design research typically focuses on either finished objects or production, but not really to use, even though use forms the longest, environmentally important phase of the “life cycle” of any product.

When Roger Silverstone introduced the notion of “domestication” almost 20 years ago, they gave us an intriguing, exciting metaphor that could perhaps be used in understanding even design. What Silverstone etc. did with this concept was that to understand technology, we need to pay attention to several processes through which people take (or do not take) technology to ordinary life. These processes are moral, not based on economic thinking. Silverstone et al. initially distinguished appropriation from incorporation, objectification, and. This list of concepts has changed from one paper to another; what remains is the metaphor of “domestication,” and a necessity to understand it as something that takes place over a long period of time in real-life circumstances.

This concept has its benefits. It shows that to understand how technology is used, it should be understood primarily in process terms. It also opens exciting vistas for designers, makes a call for anthropology and sociology, and provides an useful alternative to conceptually challenging macro-level perspectives in sociology of science and technology, including SCOT, ANT, STS, et al. Also, this perspective almost forces us to develop an empirical research agenda. However, it has its share of problems as well. Curiously, although the term appears in dozens of research papers worldwide, it has been followed only in a few empirical studies. The reasons for this are probably:

- /Conceptual problems/. First, it is difficult to make sense of notions like “appropriation” or “objectification.” Secondly, the set of concepts developed in this research tradition probably “correlate” with each other: in particular, what is the status of the notion of “appropriation” in contrast to, say, incorporation?

- /Theory/. Is “domestication” a theory? After all, it lacks dynamics. Which things drive domestication?

- /Who are the people in this framework/? A successful framework in design has to give systematic tools for researchers/designers to observe people. The domestication framework opens interesting questions, but does far worse in this regard. For example, is domestication a social process, or just individual?

- /Design/. Finally, what is the role of “design” in this framework?

Again, this question opens at least two questions. First, Obviously, someone designs and manufactures objects, technology, whatever, with some users and uses in mind, but this is about the only thing the framework says. Perhaps it is a question of a two-stage process of scripting and de-scripting? Perhaps we are dealing with indexicality in Garfinkel’s sense, or immutable mobiles? in Latour? Secondly, designers work with future in mind. How can we study the future with the metaphor of domestication?

The bottom line so far is that the metaphor is useful, but the framework needs adjustment to work in design research. This presentation explores ways in which this notion can be made useful for design researchers.