ICTS AND THE SHAPING OF FAMILY LIFE: METHODOLOGY TO CAPTURE THE RICH INTERPLAY (AND HOW WE GAIN ENTRY TO EXPLORE EVERYDAY ICTS’ USE)

YVONNE GORA

RMIT University/Smart Services Cooperative Research Centre
GPO Box 2476
Melbourne 3001
yvonne.gora@rmit.edu.au

Abstract

What do we know about the way families interact and socialise with each other in the ‘postmodern’ information age? Despite all the valuable research in the field, it has been argued that we still know very little about the context of ICTs use — at home, at work, or elsewhere. Media has become part of the rich interplay in family life and, as the material context of the home becomes more complex, this complexity requires new understandings of the way the family makes sense of the world.

Research has highlighted some of the difficulties and challenges in undertaking media research in households due to the very nature of households being private spaces unique to each family. There is little research on the earliest phase of data collection in qualitative research on families: recruitment and engagement. This paper provides a brief review of literature on families and their everyday interactions with ICTs. The focus is on the methodological issue of gaining access to families in qualitative research, making links with practical experiences gained in a current research project. The question addressed is: how do we get families to agree to be researched in the family domain to explore everyday interactions with ICTs?

Mum is watching the end of a DVD (Letters to Juliet — a romantic ‘chick flick’) with her 13-year-old daughter Angeline, who is lying on the couch. Mum (Bethany,¹ 48 years) is sorting the laundered clothes while viewing the film, and attending to her iphone, checking emails from work, and updating her Facebook status. Angeline is discovering what her brand new touchscreen smartphone can do as the film is moving towards its climax, and she sends her twin brother, Adam, a text message: ‘Hi ☺ to which he replies within an instant ‘OMG!’ He is upstairs in his bedroom tapping away at his desktop computer, instant chatting via Facebook with up to 10 friends that are currently online, whilst streaming music by Mike Posner, Eminem and Sean Kingston through his headphones, and the TV on in the corner of his bedroom. Dad (Patrick, 53 years) walks in the front door, putting his Blackberry down on the kitchen bench, says hello to his family where he receives two grunts of acknowledgement from his wife and daughter. As he comes into the lounge area to properly greet the females in his family he is told, ‘Shhh … the movie is almost finished … I have to take the DVD back later tonight.’ Suddenly the landline phone rings, Adam picks it up from upstairs (as he has a handset in his bedroom), and comes down to inform Mum that Grandma is on the phone (calling from the U.K.). Bethany’s mobile then rings and she passes the landline to her husband (with his mother-in-law on the other end) and takes the other call, quickly asking Angeline to make a salad in preparation for dinner. The mobile call ends (with a note to self to look up a website after dinner), and Bethany goes into the kitchen to make dinner. Meanwhile the landline (with Grandma still on the line) moves from one family member to the next, until it finally makes it to Bethany who continues talking whilst getting dinner ready. Adam is asked to clear the dining table (which has a laptop and a variety of papers and folded laundry atop of it). When his required task is accomplished (clearing the table), he quickly swoops upstairs to go back to Facebook, and Patrick completes setting the table mumbling under his breath about ‘that boy

¹ All the names of family members are pseudonyms.
ICTs and the shaping of family life

The home has become a busy communication hub, with continuing technological advances making new technology affordable and available, and families adapt and transform these technologies to meet their own purposes. Email, the Internet, mobile phone, social networking sites, Instant Messaging (IM) and Short Message Service (SMS) texting are just a few of the possibilities that information and communication technologies (ICTs) provide as a means of family members maintaining a sense of ‘connectedness’ with each other. Households also have televisions, digital music playing devices, DVD players, game consoles, computers, and laptops, just to name a few of the possible ICTs that provide entertainment with, or distractions from, other family members. Add to this mix the fact that these devices inhabit numerous sites in the home, in multiple quantities,2 and the perception is overwhelmingly busy. It feels like technology is pervading every nook in the domestic realm. The scenario of the family presented at the introduction of this paper depicts what is a busy moment prior to dinner. A lot goes on in the everyday lives of families that requires multi-tasking, juggling of activities, family members and ICTs. This is the context for which investigators are conducting research, adding to the already busy flurry of activities. Participating in research projects adds another layer of activities in an already intensely busy family environment. This paper provides a view in to the place of ICTs in everyday family life with a focus on developing new understandings, specifically drawing on issues of family recruitment and research engagement. One of the earliest phases of data collection in qualitative research with families is recruitment. I will illustrate some of the challenges experienced in gaining access and engagement with families for research purposes (of a current research project), and examine the literature on the qualitative data collection practices that have developed to explore family interactions and ICTs use.

The general consensus of researchers is that the use of technology in interpersonal and mass communication has become an integral part of everyday family life (Anderson & Tracey 2001; Bell, Blythe & Sengers 2005; Chesley 2005; Christensen 2009; Dalsgaard, Skov, Stougaard & Thomassen 2006; Haddon 2004; Holloway 2004; Livingstone 2009; Silverstone 2005; Tutt 2008). The complexity of family interactions and the increasing number of ICTs involved in those interactions requires new understandings of the way families make sense of the world. Sanger, Hamill, Lasen & Diaper (2005) claimed that ‘adoption by society of new technological devices is a relationship of mutual shaping, where technology accommodates, but also transforms, existing social practices’ (p. 30). That even use of the humble telephone is similar to the use of other ICTs: ‘a constructed complex of habits, beliefs and procedures embedded in elaborate cultural codes of communication’ (ibid). We are currently living at a time where mobile devices provide multi-functionality in a wireless environment (and we are now connecting to the internet more via mobile phones);3 access to information (and the outside world) is only a click away. ICTs firms are actively pursuing strategies to have their technology take residence in our living room.4 Companies such as Microsoft (Heath & Bell 2006) support continued research and employ social scientists to discover more about their customers to develop their products and markets. Industry-sponsored studies are also being conducted with universities or consultants (Haddon 2004) where they have a vested interest in certain outcomes in terms of the breadth and depth of potential consumer research.

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2 Australian family households are reported as containing three or more televisions, three or more mobile phones, a personal computer, and access to an Internet connection (ACMA 2009).
4 Hewlett Packard have designed a printer to go in the living room, to enable consumers to dock their ipods and iPhones directly to the device without logging into a computer [http://seekingalpha.com/article/226090-hp-big-printer-plan-targets-living-room](http://seekingalpha.com/article/226090-hp-big-printer-plan-targets-living-room).
Capturing the increasing ambivalence in the socio-technological environment

I am in the early stages of my research, but it is apparent in the pilot family that the parents feel a lack of control over the regulation of ICTs in their home, and ambivalence towards the technology, which supports the findings of previous studies (Livingstone 2007; Sarkisian 2006).

‘I want the kids to be familiar with technology and software so that they can use it to their advantage. So, it is great that Bethany has taught Angeline how to use Photoshop, but at the same time, I want the kids to do things away from their computers, like, drawing with actual pencils and paper …’ (Father: Patrick, 21 Sept 2010)

‘I want my kids to be connected, as long as I can monitor what they are doing on Facebook — so they have no choice but to be my friend if they want to be on Facebook. But I don’t want Adam to only use Facebook to communicate to his friends — it’s important that he has face-to-face time, or even proper phone calls!’ (Mother: Bethany, 14 September 2010)

This parental ‘push and pull’ or sense of ‘imbalance’ (as it was labelled by the family) has not necessarily been fully captured in past research — as homes have not been as embedded with technology as they are at this current time. Research on the contextualisation of ICTs in the family is still in the early stages. Many authors highlight the difficulties and challenges in undertaking media research in households due to the very nature of households being private spaces unique to each family (Ess 2010; Mesch 2006; Rettie 2009). Surveys and self-report measures can be unreliable when it comes to reporting on television viewing and Internet activities. Parent and child reports of activities (such as time spent viewing television, or on the Internet) and parental monitoring behaviours present conflicting results (Clark 2009; Gross 2004; Mendoza 2009).

A number of methodological practices have emerged that enable deeper understandings of the way families interact with technology. Video ethnography has been used in a year-long study by Tutt (2008) to study ‘the minutiae of everyday life, the very interactions that structure the operation of the living room’ (p. 2333). Cultural probes have been used to stimulate participants’ self-observation and provide more insightful information on daily routines and technology use (Arnold 2004; Bernhaupt, Obrist, Weiss, Beck & Tscheligi 2008; Dalsgaard et al. 2006; Gaver 2002; Vetere et al. 2005). Photo ethnography has also developed as a way of capturing moments (Epstein, Stevens, McKeever & Baruchel 2006; Lovejoy & Steele 2004), and diary methods continue to be used in more updated ways using computers and mobile phones to capture information (Bolger, Davis & Rafaeli 2003; Carter & Mankoff 2005; Hess & Wulf 2009; Rönkä, Malinen, Kinnunen, Tolvanen & Lamsa 2009).

There is a need for research methods to fit with the natural domestic rhythms, the complex and conflicting demands within the family and to facilitate rich contextual understandings of everyday life. The current ICTs available in homes enable unlimited mobile connectivity inside and outside of the house. Activities that previously were available only within the home are now available anywhere and anytime. This creates a challenge for ‘in-situ’ observation, as researchers cannot physically be in multiple locations observing all family members. Ethnographic studies have been developed and continue to evolve as a way of overcoming some of these self-reporting problems, and an over-reliance on interviews (Brown & Durrheim 2009).

A brief history of everyday studies: the telephone and TV

A brief historical perspective on emerging technologies over the past fifty years, and studies in ‘everyday’ family practices provides the groundwork for developing a context for ongoing qualitative research. It is not within the scope of this paper to deliver that history, but suffice to say that the study of ‘everyday life’ has a long tradition. It is through Goffman’s work that we see the ways in which the management of mundane life takes on ritualised forms (Goffman 1967).

Investigating ICTs in everyday life is a more recent development. Historically research in the field had its origins with the telephone that had its place in the hallway in the 1960s and migrated to the
lounge room, kitchen and or bedroom by the 1990s (Lacohée & Anderson 2001). Moreover,
qualitative studies in the use of the telephone in the domestic context began to emerge using time-
use diary studies and semi-structured interviews of households to determine the significance of
communication in their everyday lives, and actual phone usage patterns (Anderson, McWilliam,
Lacohée, Clucas & Gershuny 1999; Moyal 1992). Studies in the social uses of television took this
further (Brody, Stoneman & Sanders 1980; Lull 1980; Morley 1986; Spigel 1992), but it was in the
1990s where scholarly work began to examine ICTs as new services and equipment became
available and the private consumer became the focus due to the domestication5 of the technology.

Further investigation is required to examine the value of the current approaches to research of the
ordinary everyday interactions with ICTs that have been developed for the purposes of gathering
data. Current research methods for gaining access to the family’s private realm need to be examined
in terms of what has been done and still works, and what areas need to be addressed in terms of the
challenges they present in achieving admission into the family realm.

Family, technology and everyday practice now

‘Working with households, working within the private worlds of those within one’s own culture,
and working with families in order to understand the nature of their relationship to communication
and information technologies, is an intensely problematic activity’ (Silverstone, Hirsch & Morley

A brief review of technology and the family over the past three decades provides insight into trends
that have shaped the current domestic environment and the way in which research is conducted.6
The most recent decade represents the application of developmental and domestication frameworks
on issues surrounding the intersection of technology and the family. Research acknowledges the bi-
directional interaction of family members changing ‘the meaning and impact of technologies and, in
turn, the process of culture and family interactions are changed’ (Blinn-Pike 2009, p. 571), but it is
not an easy phenomenon to investigate.

Parallels between TV and the Internet

Seiter (2003) suggested that researching computer communications (and all it encompasses)
requires an appreciation of the parallels between television and the Internet, and to include the
insights and methodologies ascertained from television audience studies. (Ethnography is
commended for offering rich contexts in understanding the motivations and disincentives for ICTs
use). An interesting point that Seiter makes is about the incidence of negative feelings associated
with television viewing (shame or defensiveness), and she argues that these feelings influence the
manner in which people will report how and what they view on television when being researched.

In my experience in this current research with the pilot family, there does not seem to be a problem
with apparent shame or defensiveness with respect to television viewing. This has demonstrated
itself in my visits to the home where the television is already on when I arrive (and it is not turned
off). The family members are open about their viewing — in fact they all contribute and are
witnesses to each other’s TV habits. There does not appear to be a problem with editing or
censoring themselves about their viewing habits — I have spent enough hours in their home to
know what they view (they have a penchant for Channel 10 programs, and the dad enjoys ‘anything

5 The concept of domestication evolved from anthropology, consumption and media studies to consider the
circumstances in which ICTs were experienced (Haddon 2006). The term is analogous with the domestication of
animals — inferring the ‘taming’ of technologies to aid human activities (Silverstone 1993).

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with sport’). Despite the fact that both children have TVs in their bedrooms, the TV in the public domain (the lounge room) tends to be the most watched. However, the way the family use computers and the Internet is less well known (to each other), and appears to be more of a private activity. This will be further investigated as the study progresses.

Studying families in their own homes

The study I am conducting looks at how Melbourne families interact with ICTs and each other using the Internet, mobile phones and television. It is seeking families with children between the ages of 12 to 17 years. I am looking for a range of family situations such as two-parent families, single parent families, blended or step-families that live in the Melbourne metropolitan area.

It is important to access teenagers in the family setting to explore their perceptions and feelings about family interactions around ICTs. It is from the age of 12 years and onwards that adolescents are developmentally able to reason at an abstract level, and think logically about concepts and hypothetical possibilities (Piaget 1964), as such, children that are younger than 12 years will be excluded from this research. Also single fathers will be excluded due to the potential comfort and safety issues regarding being alone in the home environment.

Families do not come in the combinations that are desired for the purposes of this research. I have had three families approach me to participate but their family combinations did not meet my criteria. I am possibly going to need to change my wish list and incorporate older teenagers (up to 20 years) if I am going to achieve my target of twelve families in a timely manner). My pilot family is a two-parent and 13-year-old twin set (boy and girl) and I am in the final weeks of my time with them. In the following sections I look at some of the main issues around recruitment and connecting with the family in a productive way. The first few weeks with the pilot family (the Allen’s) was mixed. Appointments were cancelled, they did not seem keen on any of the creative probing activities, and very little contact was made outside of me being in their home. I felt like an outsider, and this was exacerbated when the family forgot about me on one occasion, and cancelled five minutes prior to me arriving on another. It is a messy process, where the family has its own agenda, and as a researcher I need to fit in with them. The family has invited me to be able to forage in their territory, but perhaps there are unsaid rules that can get me uninvited? Feeling part of the family appears to be the goal in order to fit in and be as unobtrusive as possible. How do you know when you have been accepted?

My experience with the pilot family overall has been a very positive one, with some very productive times spent with parents and kids alike watching TV, sharing a meal, and even a Father’s Day afternoon. What has been problematic is the fact that I am spending more time with other people’s families than my own — and this is a negotiation I have to make with my partner and daughter. I have not seen anything in any research publications about this phenomenon.

Research on recruiting families

The recruitment of prospective family participants is a problem that has been encountered in early ethnographic studies. Elizabeth Bott (1955) in her early work exploring London families with the aim of advancing sociological and psychological understanding of families, stated that ‘much difficulty was encountered in contacting suitable families, although the effort to find them taught us a good deal about the way families are related to other people’ (p351). Bott goes into some detail about how twenty families were ‘eventually’ contacted through officials of various services such as doctors, hospitals, schools, and the families of friends of friends, although there is no indication of the length of time it took to find all twenty families. The most successful conduit for recruitment was via friends of the family, where the contact person was well known and trusted to the couple being approached for their family’s participation. Bott’s (1955) research used a team to conduct the work, with research staff obtaining initial agreement to set up an explanatory interview, and field
workers visiting the prospective families for their first meeting (it is not clear whether research staff were separate roles from field workers).

Silverstone, Hirsch and Morley (1991) also declare that ‘recruitment was not an easy process’ in their research (p209). Their first four families were engaged through a market research recruitment agency. For reasons that were not fully disclosed (apart from needing to control the process and expense of the project), this was not a satisfactory process, and families were subsequently recruited through schools. This meant that they relied on the judgments of teaching staff to identify appropriate families that were willing to participate, and that also met with set criteria. Silverstone, Hirsch and Morley’s study recruited twenty families after rejecting some, being rejected by others, and roughly meeting their criteria (with no expectation that families would be representative of the population). The authors did not reveal the time it took to recruit all the families for their research. Silverstone and his colleagues were funded by the Social and Economic Research Council (UK) under the Programme in Information and Communication Technologies (PICT). None of the published papers (Silverstone 1991 1993; Silverstone et al. 1991; Silverstone, Hirsch & Morley 1992) associated with this research alluded to any sample requirements or restrictions imposed by the funding organisations.

Mackay and Ivey (2004) also highlight the difficulties and challenges in undertaking media research in households. Their study investigated media use in Welsh households, and given that a number of media organisations sponsored the project, the authors needed to include criteria requirements as prescribed by them. Ten diverse households were investigated ethnographically, including childless adults, single parents, families with children, and empty nesters. A pragmatic sampling method was employed, that is, ‘friends of friends’ of the researchers were contacted, but these friends had not met the investigators, thus providing some professional distance and an important personal recommendation (that acts as a vouchsafe). This recruitment strategy was lauded as successful albeit ‘not easy — especially to meet the sampling requirements within the available time-span’ (Mackay & Ivey 2004, p. 161). The authors also acknowledge that their association with The Open University added value and helped facilitate the opening of doors in the recruitment process. I am also associated with a well-known, respected university at RMIT.

In Australia, the Connected Homes Research Project conducted by The University of Melbourne (Arnold 2004; Arnold, Shepherd, Gibbs & Mecoles 2006; Davis, Gibbs, Arnold & Nansen 2008; Nansen, Arnold, Gibbs & Davis 2009; Shepherd, Arnold, Bellamy & Gibbs 2007; Shepherd, Arnold & Gibbs 2006) investigated how ICTs are used in the home, and how these technologies connect the home to the outside world. This project recruited twelve families in and around the city of Melbourne over a three-year period. The recruitment strategies employed in this project included some pragmatic sampling, and specific targeting of participants via a housing estate developer that was offering access to ‘state of the art’ technology providing high speed, reliable Internet and Intranet services.7 The Connected Homes Research Project began recruiting families in 2003, and the authors were looking for families that were more high-end ICT users, who had broadband, networked computers, laptops, and mobile phones. Their resultant research publications make no mention of any difficulties or challenges experienced in recruiting prospective families.

Based on the research reviewed, and on the search for literature specific to recruitment in qualitative studies, there appears to be little written on the difficulties of recruiting families for research purposes. Recruiting for any study is a challenging task, and though it is acknowledged as not being easy by some of the authors, there is little or no literature on the messy and lengthy process that it can be.

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7 Some of this information was obtained in a meeting with Mike Arnold on 6 October 2009, and via email communications with him and Martin Gibbs on a few occasions, in addition to reading their publications (which do not necessarily specify recruitment strategies in-depth).
The recruiting experience in this study

I am at the beginning of the recruitment process in my research, and when I speak to friends, strangers, colleagues and most especially parents, I perceive a sense of urgency on their part regarding any potential results that might illuminate profound and useful knowledge for parents (about their children’s use of ICTs). In casual conversations, parents want to know what best practice is when it comes to regulating their children’s ICTs use at home. ‘What should we do?’ ‘How do we manage it?’ ‘How much time should our kids spend on the computer/internet/gaming device/Facebook?’ Stories are relayed about the ‘good, the bad and the ugly’ of the impact that technology seems to have on family life in general. There appears to be genuine interest in the research topic, as demonstrated by the many stories (and concerns) shared outside of the research context. Given this level of resonance and engagement with the topic, I believed that recruiting families for my research would be relatively easy. The first step was to find a family to participate in the pilot study.

Initially families were approached that demonstrated an interest in participating in the research (in past casual conversations with families at my daughter’s school events), however, on being asked to actually commit to the process, I have not been inundated with offers. In using purposive sampling, the strategy relies on friends, family and colleagues contacting their friends, family and colleagues, to inform them of this research. There have been a few recommendations from families that could be interested, but upon making contact, these have not lead to agreed participation. Potential recruits claim they are keen, but then delay their participation for a variety of reasons, most often declaring being ‘too busy’ to engage in the process. Two families that showed interest in being the pilot study for this research cancelled appointments to initiate the first meetings, and were subsequently not heard from again. The recruitment process for the pilot family began in early to mid-July 2010. The first date for a first interview was achieved on 15 August 2010. This was not an easy process. The mother (Bethany) was very keen to submit her family as the pilot study, and emailed a number of her friends that she thought would also be interested as future participants (I have not heard from any of these friends as yet). I was delighted to have a family commit, but as the weeks started to tick by, I still had not managed to get a first interview to simply explain the study. Communication was conducted via email and mobile phone text messaging, and eventually a date and time was agreed upon. As Mackay and Ivey (2004) noted ‘making arrangements was time consuming and often disappointing. Holidays and other times when people were not available were a serious logistical problem’ (p. 161). They experienced five rejections at the stage of telephone calls to families attempting to initiate their first meetings. Two days prior to our scheduled meeting, Bethany emailed me that our appointment needed to be postponed to the week after due to her son’s sporting commitments. I was pleased that she had rescheduled, but as the next appointment drew closer, I was nervous about whether it would occur (and I had not managed to recruit another family as a back-up plan yet). Fortunately on August 22, I successfully met with all members of the Allen family, and all were happy to participate.

I have since cast the net a little wider, using networks at RMIT University and a research blog that was started as a means of recording the research process. I have recruited four more families to partake in my study, using the networks of friends and colleagues. I may need to access families via high schools if the current recruitment strategy fails to gain me another seven families to reach my goal of twelve in total.8

I could experience ongoing and further delays due to families’ reticence to committing to a project that may be considered intrusive and time consuming. I am trying to address this issue by approaching families that I am acquainted with (but do not have a social relationship with), by

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8 Accessing families via high schools would mean amending my original Ethics submission for approval to contact Victorian secondary schools.
being upfront about the process, and engaging them in a fun and insightful process. I am also looking at limiting their time commitment so it does not feel as intrusive or demanding. I am however, at the mercy of families’ perceived availability.

Connecting with family members: intensity and frequency of interaction

Ethnographic research in the more recent past advocates more intense and extended periods with participant families (Lassiter 2008; Tutt 2008). In the early 1990s, Silverstone and his colleagues, in their seminal research radically modified their methodology mid-research. Silverstone et al., (1991) changed the time spent with participating families to facilitate developing harmonious relationships, from an intense two-week involvement to one that stretched to a minimum of six months with each family — hence the ‘listening to a long conversation’ (Silverstone et al. 1991). The authors perceived a number of benefits including a more relaxed and less intrusive research process in connecting with the family members. They also were able to research a number of families concurrently, which enabled them to feed learnt information from one family to another, incorporating new ideas into their methodology. ‘Ethnographies are grounded in the realities of other people’s lives … Every ethnography is unique’ (p. 207). Silverstone and his colleagues learned that through a longer and more intense association with their participant families, the family story unfolded more naturally, and incorporated seasonal and other changes experienced. In the six months with each family, nine visits were made lasting between 2–6 hours. Mackay and Ivey (2004) set out to achieve 30 hours of fieldwork with each of their family participants (they averaged 26 hours per household over a ten month period). It was imperative to develop a relationship with each member of the household. The authors cited some of the ways in which ‘acceptance’ was achieved: for one family the pet dog acted as gatekeeper, in other households acceptance by the children was required before proceeding. Common ground, or mutual interests needed to be developed to establish a working rapport — in gaining acceptance and a level of trust, Mackay and Ivey found that the more relaxed the contact with participants, the richer the data received. The researcher’s presence was experienced as less intrusive, and perhaps more natural — in three of the ten households researched, the researcher was invited to stay the night (Mackay 2005).

In my own research it would seem imperative to progress from being visiting researcher to an accepted participant observer in order to achieve the most fruitful and rich data. Monahan and Fisher (2010) argue that the strength of ethnography is situated in developing close ties with participants, and dismiss the idea that valid data is best realised through remaining a distant observer. ‘It is the ethnographer’s close proximity to and interaction with informants, rather than distance and separation, that affords the transformation of observer effects from distasteful bias to serendipitous boon’ (p. 372).

In some of the ethnographic studies that have guided my research (Arnold 2004; Dalsgaard et al. 2006; Rönkä et al. 2009; Silverstone et al. 1991; Slettemeås 2004; Van Rompaey & Abeele 2006), all refer to collaboration with research participants (Gil 2010). Building relationships is crucial to the successful completion of studies on families and interactions with ICTs in their home environment. It is important to develop techniques that engage the participants, and this requires a good rapport between participants and the researcher. This is especially vital when connecting with teenage research participants. The collaborative approach has been identified by researchers in the field of child studies as a means of reducing some of the power imbalance in the researcher/researched relationship (Coad & Evans 2008; Druin et al. 1998; Hill 2006). It also provides children greater control over the research process by using participatory methodologies, as both interviewee and interviewer are active participants in a social process (Dalsgaard et al. 2006; Holstein & Gubrium 1999; Peile 2004).
My pilot study: looking at the moral economy of the household

Silverstone’s research addressed the idea that ICTs are embedded in the social and cultural spaces of the domestic setting, and as such, attention needs to be focused on advancing our understanding of the household in which this technology is located (Silverstone 2006). Silverstone, Hirsch & Morley (1992) acknowledge the complexity associated with researching ICTs in households due to the dual role that they play. ICTs are doubly articulated into family life: as objects and technologies to be formed, and as media, which form as well as informs (ibid). Added to this complexity is the idea that households are conceived as part of a transactional system of economic and social relations — actively engaged with products and meanings of an individual based economy. The engagement involves appropriation of commodities into domestic culture, and is incorporated and redefined according to household values and interests — the moral economy of the household (Silverstone et al. 1992).

What happens when objects that enter the family domain are purchased as gifts? In the Allen household it was disclosed that it was not the parents that purchased the newer technologies that entered the home — but the kids’ maternal grandparents. David and Jill live in the U.K. and visit every Australian summer to spend time with their (now) Australian family. When the grandparents visit, they have been known to ‘spoil the kids’ by getting them expensive gifts. In the last two years the twins have each received mobile phones, Nintendo DS gaming devices, Ipods, and televisions in each of their bedrooms. The decisions for these ICTs entering the household did not originate from the private domain of the parents, and upon reflection, I wonder what impacts these technologies have on the behaviours and dynamics associated with the family’s moral economy. Moreover, if parents do not control all of the ICTs purchases, is there a sense of a loss of control, or do they accept the circumstances? When asked directly about how they felt about these items being in the house, Bethany exclaimed: ‘Oh well … I was thinking they would probably get mobile phones in a year or so, they just got them earlier than I thought they would.’ I asked about the cost of the phones and plans, and how they impacted the family budget, and Bethany replied, ‘Adam is on a larger plan, as he is much more social than Angeline … I think it’s about $49.95 a month … Angeline is on a $19.95 plan, but she hardly uses the phone.’ The background to this scenario is that Adam has a smart phone that enables Internet access, where Angeline has an older model ‘dumb’ phone. In the last 2 weeks, Angeline lost her mobile phone (and her loss was updated on her Facebook status). A brand new touchscreen smartphone was purchased within the week of losing it — and now her phone usage has suddenly increased.

Conclusion

The relationship between ICTs and family interactions is a complex and interdependent one: families are immersed in ICTs, where communication in interpersonal and family relationships is mediated increasingly by the available technology. Concurrently, transformation and advancement of technologies in daily life are influenced by the social structures and cultural contexts of households (the social shaping of technologies).9 This process not only transforms technologies, but also the families themselves and their everyday lives.

It is recognised in the qualitative research literature that investigation needs to continue in order to understand the nature and implications of ongoing technology developments in the family context. Research methods have evolved that enable gaining rich information via ICTs available in households, and to be captured by the participants in order to gain understanding of the dynamic nature of family interactions and their use of ICTs. The challenge is whether you get invited to enter the family domain, with no guarantee that you will not be asked to leave at any time. Much of the

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9 For discussions on the social shaping of technology, and the transforming influence technology has on families, see (Blinn-Pike 2009; Boudourides 2002; Røpke, Christensen & Jensen 2009; Venkatesh 2008).
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literature provides information about the number of families, the age range, and the length of time the research process takes — but only very few discuss the process of recruitment and issues of family engagement, and even those discussions are deficient in detail. This paper aimed at providing some of that missing detail in expounding the problem of data collection at a very early stage: recruitment. I am still left wondering how researchers get their invitation from participating families to agree to be researched, but look forward to the prospect of encouraging more exploration on the challenges of enlisting research participants, with a view to overcoming them.

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