

**An Ethnographic Study of  
Internet Consumption  
in Ireland:  
Between Domesticity and  
the Public Participation**

**Key Deliverable  
The European Media and Technology in  
Everyday Life Network, 2000-2003**

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## **Executive Summary**

### **Aims, Objectives and Research Questions**

The aim of the Dublin-based project is to examine the relationship between domestic Internet use in the household and participation in public life. The project aims to explore a number of dichotomous relationships between the public and private spheres; the local and global contexts and “new” and “old” media. This ethnographic research has been carried out between February 2001 and April 2002 in a localised setting: “Coastal Town”<sup>1</sup>, North County Dublin. The objectives and research questions are divided into the following two areas:

- Old/new media<sup>2</sup> consumption within the home
- The relationship between domestic Internet consumption in the home and participation within public forums.

The first area refers to the way in which the Internet is used in relation to existing media in the household and seeks:

- To examine how participants are using the Internet in the domestic setting along existing broadcast or ‘old’ media

The second area relates to the relationship between the Internet and the public sphere, and examines the dynamics of the public and private spheres. Thus, the purpose is:

- To investigate whether domestic Internet users are engaging with web based content as a means of generating new forms of content and/or connectivity within Coastal Town.

Following the objectives, the research questions are also divided into two sections:

#### **Old/new media:**

- How have participants integrated the Internet into the household or ‘home’ culture?
- How is the Internet, as ‘new media’ used with existing or ‘old media’ and communication technology in the household?
- Has the Internet replaced or transformed the use patterns, routines and rules of old/other media and communication technology?

**Private/public:**

- To what extent does the domestic use of the Internet allow the construction of new processes of public communication in Coastal Town?

**Empirical Findings and Theoretical Implications**

Ethnographic work was carried within the homes of participants and within local organisations. The empirical findings can be divided into the following themes:

**Appropriation and Use**

The majority of participants invested in an Internet enabled computer because they felt that it would be beneficial for work or education. Many, and particularly those with children, indicated that they had felt pressurised into having an Internet connection; participants thought that their children's education would suffer if they failed to provide a computer, Internet media and relevant software. Adult users also experienced this type of 'ideological pressure', and it was suggested that 'Internet illiteracy' excluded them from participating fully in cultural life.

Once appropriated use was structured, with users consuming content from specific sites, such as The Irish Times, which were on their favourites list. Participants avoided 'surfing' as they felt this activity to be time consuming and unproductive.

**Domestication**

Home-based Internet consumers all attempted to integrate the technology into the existing routines of the household. A variety of integration strategies were used such as the development of a set of rules surrounding use, the creation of spatial and temporal boundaries to control the intrusion of the technology, and the construction of meanings to define the function, use and status of the various media in the household. However, it was also apparent that some participants had to make changes to their existing domestic spatial organisation to accommodate the intrusion of the Internet, or manage its perceived threats. Those who worked at home or had children or young teenagers gave considerable attention to the spatial and temporal routines surrounding Internet media to ensure minimal disruption to domestic and family life.

**Participation in public life**

The domestic Internet users indicated that they rarely looked at 'local' web based content as they felt that traditional modes of communication for participation in local public life were favourable. Information was disseminated via the print media and public meetings operated

at a face-to-face level. Admittedly, some local organisations and campaigns had developed websites, but these were largely used to advertise their causes rather than as forums for interaction. Thus, rather than the Internet, at a local level, facilitating new forms of connectivity, it seemed that local websites were used to supplement existing and traditional methods of communication.

A case study focusing on one of the local primary schools indicated that teachers were making wide use of web-based content for teaching purposes. The school's website also provided information for parents, but, as with other local websites, did not facilitate new forms of connectivity and interaction. Rather, the website supplemented existing information resources and methods of communication, as parents continued to maintain face-to-face contact as the dominant form of communication.

Some participants did, however, use the Internet for communication about public issues, but these tended to be concerns, which extended beyond Coastal Town. Some participants indicated that they would use the Internet to participate in national or global political movements, suggesting that there is a move towards the creation of new forms of connectivity beyond the immediate locale<sup>3</sup>.

### **Implications for Policy**

(i) Parental fears and perceived threats to children:

There is a demand from parents, with children and young teenagers, for public information and coherent and accessible policy concerning:

- Potential dangers
- Methods to protect children
- Steps to be taken in creating a safe domestic environment on Internet safety; and could be embraced by government task forces at a national and European level as a means to communicate public information.

Parents indicate that they gain the relevant information from 'old' media resources. The broadcast media could play a significant role in providing information and advice. However, this is not to say that such public information is desirable or even necessary, but it seems that the parents in the case study wanted a resource that provided a safety mechanism that they perceived as dependable. This suggests that more research could be carried out relating to the provision of information.

(ii) It seems that locality continues to remain important to people suggesting that European and national policy must incorporate the significance of the local. The findings seems to suggest that:

- National and European policies on public communication and participation must be tailored to meet local needs
- The print and other older media must be acknowledged as continuing to play a key role facilitating public communication, implying that the role of all media must be considered when thinking about and formulating policy relating to public communication
- If it desirable to increase participation via the Internet and inclusion in the information society national and European policy needs to consider increasing access to terminals, subsidising costs of equipment and call charges and increasing connection speeds.