The domestication of online technologies by smaller businesses and the 'busy day'

Stephen A. Harwood *

The University of Edinburgh, Business School, 29 Buccleuch Place, Edinburgh, EH8 9JS, UK

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A B S T R A C T

Despite the institutional push for all businesses to embrace new forms of Information & Communication Technologies (ICTs) and 'get online', it is evident that take-up amongst businesses has been highly uneven, with some cautious in their adoption and others not adopting, with the possibilities offered not being exploited. To understand this, a multi-method approach has been used to provide different lenses through which to observe the online practices of a specific group of practitioners. Analysis was performed using a modified version of Silverstone's (1992) domestication framework. It is proposed that users embed (internalise) online technologies within their 'busy day' — which often requires much effort and involves configuration and learning (learning by trying). It is concluded that the apparently deterministic institutional view of the benefit of online technologies and the imperative that they are fully exploited to give competitive advantage, can be at odds with the locally contingent and diverse nature of online practices.

1. Introduction

In January 2007, a senior Scottish Government official involved with tourism asked the question:

> we would like to better understand… why do so few businesses adopt 'innovative online practices'… given that this is clearly the future for tourism. We would indeed like all businesses to have web sites and create/use as many channels as is consistent with their marketing objectives to promote themselves.
>
> (Scottish Government Official, 2007)

* Tel.: +44 131 651 5243.
  E-mail address: stephen.harwood@ed.ac.uk.

An important question, it suggests a view of online technologies that they are inevitable, predictable and beneficial. Further, it could be implied that there is something wrong with those who do not take up these new technologies: "non-use or lack of access is a deficiency to be remedied underlies much policy discussion about the Internet" (Wyatt, 2003: 68). However, as recognised by Wyatt, some people voluntarily reject technologies, which she illustrates with the example of car ownership.

This raises the question whether there is an alternative and equally valid view of the uptake of online technologies: that people make decisions, which might be apparently irrational to an observer, but make sense to the decision-maker and does lead to the uptake of technologies, but in a manner that is not inevitable or predictable. This is aside from any economic argument about whether benefits (tangible/intangible) outweigh costs (direct/indirect).

If this latter view is valid, then this raises the question how this view can be explained. Instead of assuming a homogenous approach to the uptake and use of online technologies, it is argued that users each develop their own idiosyncratic approaches to uptake and use, within the bounds of their situation, and that this denotes that they have a degree of ownership for how they take up and use online technologies. This invokes a process of acquisition and internalisation. Attention focuses upon the user, with the acquisition of the technology merely being the starting point in the useful life of the technology (Mclaughlin, Rosen, Skinner, & Webster, 1999). It is proposed that the concept of 'domestication' presented by Silverstone, Hirsch, & Morley (1992) and developed by others (e.g. Aune, 1996; Mclaughlin et al., 1999; Pierson, 2006; Sørensen, Aune, & Hatling, 2000; Ward, 2006) provides an explanatory framework which helps us to understand this process. In doing so, it helps to explain why technologies are not adopted in the manner expected by the senior Scottish Government official.

The aim of this paper is to study the exploitation of online technologies using the concept of 'domestication', focusing upon a specific group of smaller businesses that can be expected to benefit from online technologies by virtue of the increased contact they provide with their customers: serviced accommodation providers (the term 'hotelier' will be used to denote 'serviced accommodation provider' for the remainder of the paper). Smaller businesses are examined as it is assumed that larger organisations are both more likely to exploit online technologies to their fullest and will have the capability to do so. Attention focuses upon the mundane act of booking accommodation, since this appears to offer a lot of opportunity to engage with potential customers if exploited online. Indeed, the Scottish Executive claims that the provision of an online booking facility is increasingly required by visitors and, further, it will enable businesses to "work smarter" (Scottish Executive, 2006: 31). Nevertheless, only 9% of the serviced accommodation inventory (3,521 properties) on the national tourism website (visitscotland.com) used its online booking facilities (Harwood, 2007). This inconsistency invites investigation. Why is it that so few hoteliers used these online booking facilities? More generally, why is it that hoteliers tend to have limited uptake of online technologies. What is the process by which online technologies are domesticated and what are the specific challenges in fitting online booking facilities within existing practices?

The remainder of this paper is structured in five parts. The first part presents the concept of 'domestication' and how it has been viewed by analysts. The second presents an outline of the research methodology. There follows an analysis of interviews with hoteliers using the concept of domestication to frame the analysis. The discussion section examines how the concept of domestication and the notion of the 'busy' day has usefully framed observations of online practices. Consideration is given to whether online practices are a substitute for or supplementary to previous practices. The conclusion highlights the importance of understanding the heterogeneous nature of the user practices.

2. Conceptual framework

Whilst technology is a ubiquitous feature of everyday life, if people are asked to define it, they have difficulty and perhaps make reference to some object used to achieve some outcome. To many, it is a black box created in a laboratory, mass-produced in factories and rolled-out for people to use. Its uptake and use is inevitable, though variable, with some refusing to engage with it. Indeed, if it does not work the way expected, then there is something wrong with the technology. ICTs are perhaps a good example of this.

This view is perhaps widely held, including by those who engage in the analysis and conceptualisation of technology. Indeed, an examination of empirical research into the uptake of ICTs and online technologies reinforces the argument that this view is held: much attention focuses upon measuring levels and types of