

# Hearth and Hotmail

## The Domestic Sphere as Commodity and Community in Cyberspace

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- [Respond to this Article](#)

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## Introduction

<sup>1</sup> It has frequently been noted that ICTs and social networking applications have blurred the once-clear boundary between work, leisure and entertainment, just as they have collapsed the distinction between public and private space. While each individual has a sense of what "home" means, both in terms of personal experience and more conceptually, the following three examples of online interaction (based on participants' interest, or involvement, in activities traditionally associated with the home: pet care, craft and cooking) suggest that the utilisation of online communication technologies can lead to refined and extended definitions of what "home" is.

<sup>2</sup> These examples show how online communication can assist in meeting the basic human needs for love, companionship, shelter and food – needs traditionally supplied by the home environment. They also provide individuals with a considerably expanded range of opportunities for personal expression and emotional connection, as well as creative and commercial production, than that provided by the purely physical (and, no doubt, sometimes isolated and isolating) domestic environment. In this way, these case studies demonstrate the interplay and melding of physical and virtual "home" as domestic practices leach from the most private spaces of the physical home into the public space of the Internet (for discussion, see Gorman-Murray, Moss, and Rose). At the same time, online interaction can assert an influence on activity within the physical space of the home, through the sharing of advice about, and modeling of, domestic practices and processes.

## A Dog's (Virtual) Life

<sup>3</sup> The first case study primarily explores the role of online communities in the formation and expression of affective values and personal identity – as traditionally happens in the domestic environment. Garber described the 1990s as "the decade of the dog" (20), citing a spate of "new anthropomorphic" (22) dog books, Internet "dog chat" sites, remakes of popular classics such as *Lassie Come Home*, dog friendly urban amenities, and the meteoric rise of services for pampered pets (28-9). Loving pets has become a lifestyle and culture, witnessed and commodified in Pet Superstores as well as in dog collectables and antiques boutiques, and in publications like *The Bark* ("the New Yorker of Dog Magazines") and *Clean Run*, the international agility magazine, Website, online book store and information gateway for agility products and services. Available online resources for dog lovers have similarly increased rapidly during the decade since Garber's book was published, with the virtual world now catering for serious hobby trainers, exhibitors and professionals as well as the home-based pet lover.

<sup>4</sup> At a recent survey, Yahoo Groups – a personal communication portal that facilitates social networking, in this case enabling users to set up electronic mailing lists and Internet forums – boasted just over 9,600 groups servicing dog fanciers and enthusiasts. The list *Dogtalk* is now an announcement only mailing list, but was a vigorous discussion forum until mid-2006. Members of *Dogtalk* were Australian-based "clicker-trainers", serious hobbyist dog trainers, many of whom operated micro-businesses providing dog training or other pet-related services. They shared an online community, but could also engage in "flesh-meets" at seminars, conferences and competitive dog sport meets. An author of this paper (Rutherford) joined this group two years ago because of her interest in clicker training.

<sup>5</sup> Clicker training is based on an application of animal learning theory, particularly psychologist E. F. Skinner's operant conditioning, so called because of the trademark use of a distinctive "click" sound to mark a desired behaviour that is then rewarded. Clicker trainers tend to dismiss anthropomorphic pack theory that positions the human animal as fundamentally opposed to non-human animals and, thus, foster a partnership (rather than a dominator) mode

of social and learning relationships. Partnership and nurturance are common themes within the clicker community (as well as in more traditional "home" locations); as is recognising and valuing the specific otherness of other species. Typically, members regard their pets as affective equals or near-equals to the human animals that are recognised members of their kinship networks. A significant function of the episodic biographical narratives and responses posted to this list was thus to affirm and legitimate this intra-specific kinship as part of normative social relationship – a perspective that is not usually validated in the general population.

6 One of the more interesting nexus that evolved within *Dogtalk* links the narrativisation of the pet in the domestic sphere with the pictorial genre of the family album. Emergent technologies, such as digital cameras together with Web-based image manipulation software and hosting (as provided by portals like Photobucket and Flickr ) democratise high quality image creation and facilitate the sharing of these images. Increasingly, the *Dogtalk* list linked to images uploaded to free online galleries, discussed digital image composition and aesthetics, and shared technical information about cameras and online image distribution. Much of this cultural production and circulation was concerned with digitally inscribing particular relationships with individual animals into cultural memory: a form of family group biography (for a discussion of the family photograph as a display of extended domestic space, see Rose).

7 The other major non-training thread of the community involves the sharing and witnessing of the trauma suffered due to the illness and loss of pets. While mourning for human family members is supported in the off-line world – with social infrastructure, such as compassionate leave and/or bereavement counselling, part of professional entitlements – public mourning for pets is not similarly supported. Yet, both cultural studies (in its emphasis on cultural memory) and trauma theory have highlighted the importance of social witnessing, whereby traumatic memories must be narratively integrated into memory and legitimised by the presence of a witness in order to loosen their debilitating hold (Felman and Laub 57). Postings on the progress of a beloved animal's illness or other misfortune and death were thus witnessed and affirmed by other *Dogtalk* list members – the sick or deceased pet becoming, in the process, a feature of community memory, not simply an individual loss.

8 In terms of such biographical narratives, memory and history are not identical: "Any memories capable of being formed, retained or articulated by an individual are always a function of socially constituted forms, narratives and relations ... Memory is always subject to active social manipulation and revision" (Halbwachs qtd. in Crewe 75). In this way, emergent technologies and social software provide sites, akin to that of physical homes, for family members to process individual memories into cultural memory. *Dogqonline*, the Australian Gateway site for purebred dog enthusiasts, has a forum entitled "Rainbow Bridge" devoted to textual and pictorial memorialisation of deceased pet dogs. *Dogster* hosts the *For the Love of Dogs* Weblog, in which images and tributes can be posted, and also provides links to other dog oriented Weblogs and Websites. An interesting combination of both therapeutic narrative and the commodification of affect is found in *Lightning Strike Pet Loss Support* which, while a memorial and support site, also provides links to the emerging profession of pet bereavement counselling and to suppliers of monuments and tributary urns for home or other use.

## ***loobyly* and Narratives of Everyday Life**

9 The second case study focuses on online interactions between craft enthusiasts who are committed to the production of distinctive objects to decorate and provide comfort in the home, often using traditional methods. In the case of some popular craft Weblogs, online conversations about craft are interspersed with, or become secondary to, the narration of details of family life, the exploration of important life events or the recording of personal histories. As in the previous examples, the offering of advice and encouragement, and expressions of empathy and support, often characterise these interactions.

10 The *loobyly* Weblog was launched in 2001 by illustrator and domestic crafts enthusiast *Claire Robertson*. Robertson is a toy maker and illustrator based in Melbourne, Australia, whose clients have included prominent publishing houses, magazines and the New York Public Library (Robertson "Recent Client List" online). She has achieved a measure of public recognition: her *loobyly* Weblog has won awards and been favourably commented upon in the Australian press (see Robertson "Press for loobyly" online). In 2005, an article in *The Age* placed Robertson in the context of a contemporary "craft revolution", reporting her view that this "revolution" is in "reaction to mass consumerism" (Atkinson online). The hand-made craft objects featured in Robertson's Weblogs certainly do suggest engagement with labour-intensive pursuits and the construction of unique objects that reject processes of mass production and consumption. In this context, *loobyly* is a vehicle for the display and promotion of Robertson's work as an illustrator and as a craft practitioner. While skills-based, it also, however, promotes

a family-centred lifestyle; it advocates the construction by hand of objects designed to enhance the appearance of the family home and the comfort of its inhabitants. Its specific subject matter extends to related aspects of home and family as, in addition to instructions, ideas and patterns for craft, the Weblog features information on commercially available products for home and family, recipes, child rearing advice and links to 27 other craft and other sites (including Nigella Lawson's, discussed below). The primary member of its target community is clearly the traditional homemaker – the mother – as well as those who may aspire to this role.

<sup>11</sup> Robertson does not have the "celebrity" status of Lawson and Jamie Oliver (discussed below), nor has she achieved their market saturation. Indeed, Robertson's online presence suggests a modest level of engagement that is placed firmly behind other commitments: in February 2007, she announced an indefinite suspension of her blog postings so that she could spend more time with her family (Robertson *loobyly* 17 February 2007). Yet, like Lawson and Oliver, Robertson has exploited forms of domestic competence traditionally associated with women and the home, and the non-traditional medium of the Internet has been central to her endeavours.

<sup>12</sup> The content of the *loobyly* blog is, unsurprisingly, embedded in, or an accessory to, a unifying running commentary on Robertson's domestic life as a parent. Miles, who has described Weblogs as "distributed documentaries of the everyday" (66) sums this up neatly: "the weblogs' governing discursive quality is the manner in which it is embodied within the life world of its author" (67). Landmark family events are narrated on *loobyly* and some attract deluges of responses: the 19 June 2006 posting announcing the birth of Robertson's daughter Lily, for example, drew 478 responses; five days later, one describing the difficult circumstances of her birth drew 232 comments. All of these comments are pithy, with many being simple empathetic expressions or brief autobiographically based commentaries on these events. Robertson's news of her temporary retirement from her blog elicited 176 comments that both supported her decision and also expressed a sense of loss. Frequent exclamation marks attest visually to the emotional intensity of the responses.

<sup>13</sup> By narrating aspects of major life events to which the target audience can relate, the postings represent a form of affective mass production and consumption: they are triggers for a collective outpouring of largely homogeneous emotional reaction (joy, in the case of Lily's birth). As collections of texts, they can be read as auto/biographic records, arranged thematically, that operate at both the individual and the community levels. Readers of the family narratives and the affirming responses to them engage in a form of mass affirmation and consumerism of domestic experience that is easy, immediate, attractive and free of charge.

<sup>14</sup> These personal discourses blend fluidly with those of a commercial nature. Some three weeks after *loobyly* announced the birth of her daughter, Robertson shared on her Weblog news of her mastitis, Lily's first smile and the family's favourite television programs at the time, information that many of us would consider to be quite private details of family life. Three days later, she posted a photograph of a sleeping baby with a caption that skilfully (and negatively) links it to her daughter: "Firstly – I should mention that this is *not* a photo of Lily". The accompanying text points out that it is a photo of a baby with the "Zaky Infant Sleeping Pillow" and provides a link to the online [pregnancystore.com](http://pregnancystore.com), from which it can be purchased. A quotation from the manufacturer describing the merits of the pillow follows. Robertson then makes a light-hearted comment on her experiences of baby-induced sleep-deprivation, and the possible consequences of possessing the pillow. Comments from readers also similarly alternate between the personal (sharing of experiences) to the commercial (comments on the product itself).

<sup>15</sup> One offshoot of *loobyly* suggests that the original community grew to an extent that it could support specialised groups within its boundaries. *A Month of Softies* began in November 2004, describing itself as "a group craft project which takes place every month" and an activity that "might give you a sense of community and kinship with other similar minded crafty types across the Internet and around the world" (Robertson *A Month of Softies* online). Robertson gave each month a particular theme, and readers were invited to upload a photograph of a craft object they had made that fitted the theme, with a caption. These were then included in the site's gallery, in the order in which they were received. Added to the majority of captions was also a link to the site (often a business) of the creator of the object; another linking of the personal and the commercial in the home-based "cottage industry" sense. From July 2005, *A Month of Softies* operated through a Flickr site. Participants continued to submit photos of their craft objects (with captions), but also had access to a group photograph pool and public discussion board. This extension simulates (albeit in an entirely visual way) the often home-based physical meetings of craft enthusiasts that in contemporary Australia take the form of knitting, quilting, weaving or other groups.

## Chatting with, and about, Celebrity Chefs

<sup>16</sup> The previous studies have shown how the Internet has broken down many barriers between what could be understood as the separate spheres of emotional (that is, home-based private) and commercial (public) life. The online environment similarly enables the formation and development of fan communities by facilitating communication between those fans and, sometimes, between fans and the objects of their admiration. The term "fan" is used here in the broadest sense, referring to "a person with enduring involvement with some subject or object, often a celebrity, a sport, TV show, etc." (Thorne and Bruner 52) rather than focusing on the more obsessive and, indeed, more "fanatical" aspects of such involvement, behaviour which is, increasingly understood as a subculture of more variously constituted fandoms (Jenson 9-29). Our specific interest in fandom in relation to this discussion is how, while marketers and consumer behaviourists study online fan communities for clues on how to more successfully market consumer goods and services to these groups (see, for example, Kozinets, "I Want to Believe" 470-5; "Utopian Enterprise" 67-88; Algesheimer et al. 19-34), fans regularly subvert the efforts of those urging consumer consumption to utilise even the most profit-driven Websites for non-commercial home-based and personal activities.

<sup>17</sup> While it is obvious that celebrities use the media to promote themselves, a number of contemporary celebrity chefs employ the media to construct and market widely recognisable personas based on their own, often domestically based, life stories. As examples, Jamie Oliver and Nigella Lawson's printed books and mass periodical articles, television series and other performances across a range of media continuously draw on, elaborate upon, and ultimately construct their own lives as the major theme of these works. In this, these – as many other – celebrity chefs draw upon this revelation of their private lives to lend authenticity to their cooking, to the point where their work (whether cookbook, television show, advertisement or live chat room session with their fans) could be described as "memoir-illustrated-with-recipes" (Brien and Williamson). This generic tendency influences these celebrities' communities, to the point where a number of Websites devoted to marketing celebrity chefs as product brands also enable their fans to share their own life stories with large readerships.

<sup>18</sup> Oliver and Lawson's official Websites confirm the privileging of autobiographical and biographical information, but vary in tone and approach. Each is, for instance, deliberately gendered (see Hollows' articles for a rich exploration of gender, Oliver and Lawson). [Oliver's hip, boyish, friendly, almost frantic site](#) includes the what are purported-to-be self-revelatory "Diary" and "About me" sections, a selection of captioned photographs of the chef, his family, friends, co-workers and sponsors, and his Weblog as well as footage streamed "live from Jamie's phone". This self-revelation – which includes significant details about Oliver's childhood and his domestic life with his "lovely girls, Jools [wife Juliette Norton], Poppy and Daisy" – completely blurs the line between private life and the "Jamie Oliver" brand. While such revelation has been normalised in contemporary culture, this practice stands in great contrast to that of renowned chefs and food writers such as Elizabeth David, Julia Child, James Beard and Margaret Fulton, whose work across various media has largely concentrated on food, cooking and writing about cooking. The difference here is because Oliver's (supposedly private) life is the brand, used to sell "Jamie Oliver restaurant owner and chef", "Jamie Oliver cookbook author and TV star", "Jamie Oliver advertising spokesperson for Sainsbury's supermarket" (from which he earns an estimated £1.2 million annually) (Meller online) and "Jamie Oliver social activist" (made MBE in 2003 after his first Fifteen restaurant initiative, Oliver was named "Most inspiring political figure" in the 2006 Channel 4 Political Awards for his intervention into the provision of nutritious British school lunches) (see biographies by Hildred and Ewbank, and Smith).

<sup>19</sup> [Lawson's site](#) has a more refined, feminine appearance and layout and is more mature in presentation and tone, featuring updates on her (private and public) "News" and forthcoming public appearances, a glamorous selection of photographs of herself from the past 20 years, and a series of print and audio interviews. Although Lawson's children have featured in some of her television programs and her personal misfortunes are well known and regularly commented upon by both herself and journalists (her mother, sister and husband died of cancer) discussions of these tragedies, and other widely known aspects of her private life such as her second marriage to advertising mogul Charles Saatchi, is not as overt as on Oliver's site, and the user must delve to find it. The use of Lawson's personal memoir, as sales tool, is thus both present and controlled. This is in keeping with Lawson's professional experience prior to becoming the "domestic goddess" (Lawson 2000) as an Oxford graduated journalist on the *Spectator* and deputy literary editor of the *Sunday Times*.

<sup>20</sup> Both Lawson's and Oliver's Websites offer readers various ways to interact with them "personally". Visitors to Oliver's site can ask him questions and can access a frequently

asked question area, while Lawson holds (once monthly, now irregularly) a question and answer forum. In contrast to this information about, and access to, Oliver and Lawson's lives, neither of their Websites includes many recipes or other food and cooking focussed information – although there is detailed information profiling their significant number of bestselling cookbooks (Oliver has published 8 cookbooks since 1998, Lawson 5 since 1999), DVDs and videos of their television series and one-off programs, and their name branded product lines of domestic kitchenware (Oliver and Lawson) and foodstuffs (Oliver). Instruction on how to purchase these items is also featured.

<sup>21</sup> Both these sites, like Robertson's, provide various online discussion fora, allowing members to comment upon these chefs' lives and work, and also to connect with each other through posted texts and images. Oliver's discussion forum section notes "this is the place for you all to chat to each other, exchange recipe ideas and maybe even help each other out with any problems you might have in the kitchen area". Lawson's front page listing states: "You will also find a moderated discussion forum, called Your Page, where our registered members can swap ideas and interact with each other".

<sup>22</sup> The community participants around these celebrity chefs can be, as is the case with *loobylu*, divided into two groups. The first is "foodie (in Robertson's case, craft) fans" who appear to largely engage with these Websites to gain, and to share, food, cooking and craft-related information. Such fans on Oliver and Lawson's discussion lists most frequently discuss these chefs' television programs and books and the recipes presented therein. They test recipes at home and discuss the results achieved, any problems encountered and possible changes. They also post queries and share information about other recipes, ingredients, utensils, techniques, menus and a wide range of food and cookery-related matters. The second group consists of "celebrity fans" who are attracted to the chefs (as to Robertson as craft maker) as personalities. These fans seek and share biographical information about Oliver and Lawson, their activities and their families. These two areas of fan interest (food/cooking/craft and the personal) are not necessarily or always separated, and individuals can be active members of both types of fandoms.

<sup>23</sup> Less foodie-orientated users, however (like users of *Dogtalk* and *loobylu*), also frequently post their own auto/biographical narratives to these lists. These narratives, albeit often fragmented, may begin with recipes and cooking queries or issues, but veer off into personal stories that possess only minimal or no relationship to culinary matters. These members also return to the boards to discuss their own revealed life stories with others who have commented on these narratives. Although research into this aspect is in its early stages, it appears that the amount of public personal revelation either encouraged, or allowed, is in direct proportion to the "open" friendliness of these sites. More thus are located in Oliver's and less in Lawson's, and – as a kind of "control" in this case study, but not otherwise discussed – none in that of Australian chef Neil Perry, whose coolly sophisticated Website perfectly complements Perry's professional persona as the epitome of the refined, sophisticated and, importantly in this case, unapproachable, high-end restaurant chef. Moreover, non-cuisine related postings are made despite clear directions to the contrary – Lawson's site stating: "We ask that postings are restricted to topics relating to food, cooking, the kitchen and, of course, Nigella!" and Oliver making the plea, noted above, for participants to keep their discussions "in the kitchen area".

<sup>24</sup> Of course, all such contemporary celebrity chefs are supported by teams of media specialists who selectively construct the lives that these celebrities share with the public and the postings about others' lives that are allowed to remain on their discussion lists. The intersection of the findings reported above with the earlier case studies suggests, however, that even these most commercially-oriented sites can provide a fruitful data regarding their function as home-like spaces where domestic practices and processes can be refined, and emotional relationships formed and fostered.

## In Summary

<sup>25</sup> As convergence results in what Turow and Kavanaugh call "the wired homestead", our case studies show that physically home-based domestic interests and practices – what could be called "home truths" – are also contributing to a refiguration of the private/public interplay of domestic activities through online dialogue. In the case of *Dogtalk*, domestic space is reconstituted through virtual spaces to include new definitions of family and memory. In the case of *loobylu*, the virtual interaction facilitates a development of craft-based domestic practices within the physical space of the home, thus transforming domestic routines. Jamie Oliver's and Nigella Lawson's sites facilitate development of both skills and gendered identities by means of a bi-directional nexus between domestic practices, sites of home labour/identity production and public media spaces.

<sup>26</sup> As participants modify and redefine these online communities to best suit their own needs and desires, even if this is contrary to the stated purposes for which the community was instituted, online communities can be seen to be domesticated, but, equally, these modifications demonstrate that the activities and relationships that have traditionally defined the home are not limited to the physical space of the house. While virtual communities are "passage points for collections of common beliefs and practices that united people who were physically separated" (Stone qtd in Jones 19), these interactions can lead to shared beliefs, for example, through advice about pet-keeping, craft and cooking, that can significantly modify practices and routines in the physical home.

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