Chapter IX
Beyond Safety Concerns:
On the Practical Applications of Urban Neighbourhood Video Cameras

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ABSTRACT

The practical use of information technology devices in domestic and residential contexts often results in radical changes from their envisioned raison d’être. This study focuses on the context of household safety and security, and presents results from the analysis of the usage of video cameras in the public areas of an urban neighbourhood in Tecámac, Mexico. Moving beyond the original envisioned purpose of safety, residents of the community engaged in a process of technology appropriation, finding novel applications for the security cameras. These uses included supporting coordination among family members, providing enhanced communication with distant friends and family, looking after minors while playing outside, and showing the household to friends and colleagues. Our results illustrate that success in information technologies is a dynamic phenomenon and that technology appropriation has to be understood as a phenomenon that occurs at the level of the application of the device, rather than at the level of the device itself.
INTRODUCTION

The presence of personal computers and Internet access in the home is becoming increasingly more common in Mexico. A recent study by the Mexican Internet Association\(^2\) reports a growth of 22.4% from the previous year in the number of computers connected to the Internet, totalling 4.78 million Mexican homes with Internet access as of May 2007 (Peña, 2007). This trend is in part due to lower prices of computer equipment and the availability of a number of credit schemes where Internet Service Providers (ISP) offer bundles in which computers are paid as part of the monthly service fee.

In addition, over the last few years, Mexico has experienced an unprecedented investment to build housing complexes that are affordable, particularly for the low and middle-income population. Through simplified mortgages schemes and minimum down payments, more people in Mexico have been able to afford their own house. In 2006, at the end of the previous administration, the Mexican federal government reported that 1.9 million new houses were built between 2002 and 2006, which represents 43% more than those built in the previous administration (Fox, 2006). This investment created a housing boom, in which fierce competition emerged between the main construction companies of the country, each trying to differentiate their products and add value in many different ways.

Among the many players in the Mexican housing development sector, one of them, Real Paraiso Residencial, pursued the idea of creating a novel house concept where Information Technology (IT) would not just play a central role, but would be part of the very definition of what constitutes a house. The vision included building a new generation of houses where computers and Internet access become a part of the basic infrastructure. Rather than following traditional paths leading to home automation, assisted living or smart homes, the aim was to support more ‘down to earth’ needs and concerns. One of those needs, and perhaps the most valuable in urban Mexican communities, is living in a safe and secure neighbourhood.

This chapter presents preliminary findings from our study conducted to understand the practicalities of implementing this particular vision of domestic computing in one of the housing developments of Real Paraiso Residencial: Real del Sol, in Tecámac, Mexico. In particular, we present findings regarding the efforts to create a safe and secure community using public video cameras that can be accessed by residents through a private intranet. Our analysis indicates that moving beyond the original purposes of the technology envisioned by developers, and in spite of an apparent failure to meet the original need residents of the community appropriated and domesticated the technology, finding novel and practical applications. We argue that our results are a good example of the importance of understanding the appropriation of information technologies as a phenomenon occurring at the level of the application of the device rather than at the level of the device itself as a whole, whether the device is a personal computer, a phone, or an e-mail tool (e.g. Microsoft Outlook) or, as in this particular case, the urban neighbourhood video camera.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE STUDY AND METHODOLOGY

In the city of Tecámac, Mexico, Real Paraiso Residencial, a housing company in partnership with Conectha, an Internet Service Provider, built a residential complex (Real del Sol) consisting of around 2,000 houses equipped with a personal computer and broadband Internet access. By the end of February 2006, with the support of the aforementioned companies, we started a three-year study with families living in or about to move in to Real del Sol. The general purpose of our study is to analyze the way that this particular vision