

You Can't Smell Roses Online

Intruding Media and Reverse Domestication

Faltin Karlsen & Trine Syvertsen

Abstract

There is an emerging range of self-help guides advising users on how to minimise their interaction with media. The aim is to create a lifestyle and identity that is less media-centred and more grounded in “real life”. This article discusses media self-help in the light of theories of media domestication, highlighting processes where the aim is to reduce the importance of, rather than to incorporate, media and communication technology into users' lives. Based on a sample of 30 guides from the self-help site *Wikihow* dealing with how to handle television, games and social media respectively, the article discusses media self-help strategies in relation to key concepts of domestication theory: appropriation, objectification, incorporation and conversion. In conclusion, the article argues that strategies of withdrawal and resistance should receive more attention in media studies, and point to the concept of *reverse domestication* as one way of highlighting such strategies.

Keywords: domestication, reverse domestication, self-help, television, games, social media, Wikihow

Introduction

There is an emerging range of self-help books and websites aiding individuals and families in making their lives less media-centred and more anchored in “real life”. Although users appreciate new media and continue to appreciate established media such as television, the proliferation of self-help texts illustrates that people have problems with media ubiquity (Lomborg & Bechmann 2015). In books, blogs, and other media, users report on how the media-saturation of their lives and households prevents them from living the life that they want (see for example Maushart 2010; Bratsberg & Moen 2015; Ravatn 2014). Studies of active media resistance and abstention have also emerged, showing that staying away from media may be a meaningful strategy for individuals and households (e.g. Kermar 2009; Portwood-Stacer 2012; Woodstock 2014; Syvertsen forthcoming). There are also more nuanced studies of why some people, not least among the elderly, do not go online (see for example Helsper & Reisdorff 2013; van Deursen & Helsper 2015). An important question in the latter studies is whether forced exclusion or deliberate choice is the reason for withdrawal: are non-users marginalised “have-nots” or conscious “want-nots”? (Helsper & Reisdorff 2013:94). In the cases where a

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conscious choice is made not to be online or to withdraw from using certain media, it may be interesting to look at the tools and strategies employed in order to withstand pressure and temptation.

In a broader perspective, the phenomenon of self-help strategies for handling media is part of a trend where both companies and individual users are expected to exercise various forms of self-governance. In her historical study of the self-help genre, McGee (2005) argues that the frequent portrayal of self-help as a form of “narcissistic self-involvement” (24) is inadequate. Rather, self-help should be seen as a necessary mental, social, and emotional labour in a situation of decreasing stability of employment and family relations; if you do not self-improve you run the risk of being neither marriageable nor employable (12). Illouz (2008:243) argues that self-help works because it offers tools for handling the problems modern men and women experience in “a culture ridden with contradictory normative imperatives”. Self-help is often seen as American, but is also part of the strategy for renewing the welfare state; official policies increasingly include plans for empowerment and self-management (Madsen 2014:16-20).

In media policy studies, the term self-regulation usually describes the trend whereby media companies increasingly regulate themselves, rather than being regulated by the state (Campbell 1999). However, the term can also describe a development whereby users increasingly have to regulate their own consumption. With less direct state regulation and increasingly ubiquitous media and communication services, it is increasingly up to each individual and household to employ strategies to ensure that the media do not become too invasive. Self-help tips to deal with invasive media come in many versions and are found on many platforms. The most established tradition is self-help books featuring titles such as *Get a Life!* by Burke and Lotus (1998) and *Unfriend Yourself: Three Days to Discern, Detox and Decide about Social Media* (Tennant 2012, see also Green 2014, Zane 2014). There are also an increasing number of online sites dedicated to aiding users who experience media as invasive and disturbing (e.g. netaddiction.com, olganon.com, video-game-addiction.org, screenfree.org and tvturnoff.net).

This article discusses media self-help in the light of theories of media domestication, based on a sample of 30 guides from the self-help site *Wikihow*. After this introduction we present theories of media domestication and discuss them in relation to self-help, pointing to similarities and relevance. Then we present the empirical material, before turning to the main analysis: a discussion of self-help strategies under four headings related to dimensions described in domestication theory: appropriation, objectification, incorporation and conversion (Silverstone & Hirsch 1992:19). The main research question explored in the article is: What kind of strategies are recommended to individuals and families who want to reduce the importance of media in their lives, and how can these be understood in the light of theories of media domestication? In conclusion we argue that strategies of withdrawal and resistance should be granted more attention in media studies, and point to the concept of *reverse domestication* as one way of highlighting such strategies. Reverse domestication is not seen as the opposite of domestication, rather it covers aspects of domestication that are less studied and where the aim is withdrawal and reduction rather than acceptance and incorporation.

Media domestication and media self-help

The theory of media domestication was first developed in the early 1990s, most prominently by Silverstone and Hirsch (1992). Domestication represented a shift both from earlier audience studies and earlier theories about dissemination of technology (cf. Rogers 1995), toward a broader focus on social and cultural contexts of the media user. The main tendency within media and technology studies has always been to celebrate the active users who adapt and integrate media and communication technology into their lives and routines; most profoundly seen in diffusion studies (for an overview, see Carey & Elton 2010), and in studies on the digital divide (see van Dijk & Hacker 2003).

Media domestication theory and studies also primarily emphasise how media and communication technologies are becoming increasingly interwoven in users' lives, but this process is not described as linear in the same way as in diffusion theory. In principle, the approach recognises the possibility that adoption may fail and technologies may be rejected. However, it is acknowledged within the literature that too little attention has been paid to domestication processes that are “problematic, reversed, stopped altogether, or influenced by factors such as the availability of resources” (Hynes & Rommes 2006: 125). As such, analyses of concrete strategies of withdrawal and resistance may enrich the tradition of domestication studies.

The reason why we chose to theorise self-help using concepts from domestication theory is the important similarities between the two. Both emphasise the practical and mental strategies that are necessary for people to successfully handle – or cope with – media, including the identity work this involves. Both domestication theory and self-help literature also focus on individuals in context. The household is the prime object of domestication studies (Silverstone & Hirsch 1992), while self-help texts encourage readers to use family, friends and co-workers as resources in the quest to obtain better life control.

There are also some apparent differences, particularly in the language and terms used. The self-help tradition has drawn inspiration from positive psychological and treatment practices oriented toward empowerment, which focuses on regaining control of your life and escaping various forms of addictive behavior (Madsen 2010, 2014, Illouz 2008, Young 1998). Domestication theory, on the other hand, rarely speaks about addiction or excessive use. In Silverstone and Hirsch (1992), for instance, the term addiction is only sporadically mentioned and only in relation to computers, which, at the time, were thought to exert a qualitatively new “holding power” over users compared with earlier forms of technology (77f). The reason for this omission is probably that domestication studies primarily focus on the phase around or shortly after the appropriation of media technology (Haddon 2006).

Traditionally, the term addiction was associated with substances like alcohol and narcotics, but during the 1960s and 1970s psychologists like Weil (1972) advanced the idea that certain behaviours could also be addictive (Milkman & Sunderwirth 2010). This paved the way for concepts like “shopaholic” and “workaholic”, as well as media and Internet addiction (Kuss et al. 2014). Concepts like online game addiction and Internet addiction have been criticised for being too narrowly defined and neglecting social and cultural context (Karlsen 2013: 3; Turkle 2011: 294). Furthermore, neither have been recognised as an official diagnosis (DSM-V), but some guides in our sample still refer to it in this capacity, as in *How to Stop Internet Addiction* (SM8), which presumes that

the condition may require professional help. However, within our guides, as well as in other self-help literature, the term addiction is rarely used in a pathological sense; instead addiction is used to describe almost any type of everyday activity that one may do too much of, including eating, gambling, shopping, working, and having sex (Chou et al. 2005). As many as 20 out of our sample of 30 guides have “addiction” or “addicted” in the title, but the concept is used mainly to describe relatively innocent pursuits, as in “reality television has become an emerging addiction that has some viewers in its grips and won’t let go” (TV3). Whether the addiction is described as pathological or an everyday type of problem has few implications for the type of advice suggested; in neither case are you allowed to think of yourself as a victim without responsibility for your condition, and the strategies suggested are familiar from general studies of the management of self in modern society (Giddens 1991).

Methods, material and analysis

The empirical material consists of 30 self-help guides drawn from *wikihow.com*, a site founded in 2005 where anyone can create, edit and improve how-to guides on almost any subject. As of December 2015, *Wikihow* comprised more than 190,000 articles, close to 1.3 million registered users, and “several million visitors” each month (*wikihow.com*). The sample of 30 guides, 10 for each of the three media types: television, social media and online games, are read by many people and have involved many co-authors. As of June 2016, the most sought-after guide in the sample is *How to Quit Facebook* with almost 2.1 million hits and 111 co-authors. In the two other categories, games and television, the most popular guides are *How to Break a World of Warcraft Addiction* (97 co-authors, 720 000 hits), and *How to Quit Watching TV* (46 co-authors, 230 000 hits).

The reason for using *Wikihow* is the versatility of the site; it provides full-scale guides and not just single posts, and the guides are dealing with problems with different media and of varying gravity. Like other wikis, *Wikihow* uses tools for collaborative editing, and follows a set of guiding principles to ensure stringency and quality (Myers 2010: 12). Although there are variations, inspiration seems to be the twelve-step recovery programme originally developed by Alcoholics Anonymous, a programme later adapted to behavioural addictions such as gambling, overeating, sexual addiction, online gaming etc. (Young 1998, 109). All of the *Wikihow* guides follow a fixed pattern with steps, tips, warnings and sometimes methods. The most read guide in our sample, *How to Quit Facebook*, can serve as an example. The guide has 11 steps and two methods: the first method being “Reflect on your Facebook Use” and the second being “Take Action”. The guides are illustrated and interspersed with advertisements, and many are translated; this particular guide is available in eight languages in addition to English.

The 30 guides constitute a strategic sample for qualitative analysis. The reason for involving guides pertaining to three different media: television, games and social media/Internet, is that these fill different roles in the household and are domesticated differently. Media producers also employ different techniques in obtaining loyalty from users. A cross-media sample is useful for identifying types of advice for each medium and for discussing whether there are systematic differences. In addition, the material can be used to identify types of strategies that are common across media, and thereby to say something more general about the discursive and generic characteristics of media self-help guides.

In order to select the sample we searched the site generically on “television”, “TV”, “computer games”, “video games”, “social media” and “social networking”, combining these with service terms such as “Reality-TV”, “Facebook”, “Twitter” and “World of Warcraft”, and “problem terms” such as “problems”, “addiction”, “quit” and “stop”. There was great overlap between the guides identified in each round, but each search also added new guides to the potential sample. Although we have included the most popular guides in each media category, we have substituted some guides with more hits for guides with fewer hits if they point to a subject matter not covered by others, and we have also omitted very short guides (see appendix).

In the analysis, each guide was first read thoroughly in order to understand the main problem definition and discursive and generic characteristics. Then different types of strategies were identified and aggregated into more overarching topics. In the third round the material was categorised according to the dimensions of media domestication. The analytical ambition has been to describe and investigate the different types of advice provided, pointing to differences in guides addressing different media, and to generate a textual sample that can be used to theorise processes of media distancing and withdrawal.

***Wikipedia* strategies as reverse domestication**

We turn now to the discussion of the specific strategies in the *Wikipedia* guides in light of the four dimensions of domestication. The main focus in domestication studies is to show how media and communication technology change from being external to becoming incorporated into the household, sometimes reaching a state of being taken for granted. The overall aim of the self-help guides analysed here is different; the imperative being that strategies should be employed to reduce the importance of the media and the degree to which they are taken for granted.

Domestication, in the traditional sense, refers to the taming of a wild animal, and we fully recognise that once you have been domesticated you cannot again be wild. As Sørensen expresses it, “Domestication may end in the sense that the artefact is forgotten or thrown out, but the process is irreversible in the sense that its traces cannot be completely removed” (Sørensen 2006: 48). Consequently, when we use the term reverse domestication, it is not about making the media completely external, but a reflection on the cognitive and practical strategies for distancing and withdrawal.

It is recognised within domestication studies that the domestication process is seldom complete and that media habits may also change after having reached a “taken-for-granted” status (Lie & Sørensen 1996). Haddon states that the general focus on the time of appropriation and the period shortly after, and the very metaphor of “taming the wild”, could give the misleading view that “domestication was a one-off set of processes leading to an end-state in which the ICT is finally domesticated” (Haddon 2006: 117). Through concepts like “redomestication” and “dis-domestication” (Sørensen 1994) it is recognised that media usage may also undergo dramatic changes after the conversion is reached, but there are few studies where this is the main focus. One study addressing redomestication is Russo Lemor (2006), which shows that establishing new households after divorce instigates new discussions and new opportunities for negotiating rules regarding media consumption.

The focus here is not households where media use is altered due to non-media factors, but rather on discourses addressing the media itself as the problem. The *Wikihow* guides are aimed at people who wish to minimise the significance of media technology in their lives, sometimes even to completely do without certain media or services. The premise is that the medium in question is already fully integrated into the life of the user, to an extent that he or she needs a mental awakening to change its position.

The analysis is structured according to the four dimensions of domestication theory: appropriation, objectification, incorporation and conversion (Silverstone et al. 1992: 19). The concept of *appropriation* in domestication theory describes the phase of moving a medium or technology – often termed an “artefact” – from the outside and into the household. In the vocabulary of domestication studies, the household constitutes a “moral economy” where norms, values and everyday practices are shared or negotiated (Hartmann 2006). Whether the artefact is a material object like a TV set or immaterial objects like TV programmes, computer games or social media services, they are ascribed meaning to and made familiar and important in the household setting (Silverstone & Hirsch 1992: 23). The second concept, *incorporation*, describes more practical aspects of the domestication process, more specifically the incorporation of media “into the routines of daily life” (Silverstone & Hirsch 1992: 24). Incorporation concerns different forms of time-management, routines and rituals that surround the media in the home; for instance, how people routinely gather to watch certain TV programmes (Morley 1992). The third concept, *objectification*, concerns how the media artefact is placed physically inside the household; whether it is placed in private, shared or contested areas of the home (Silverstone & Hirsch 1992: 23). The media may also be objectified in the conversations of the household, for instance in the ways soap opera characters provide a basis for identification and self-representation (Silverstone & Hirsch 1992: 24). The fourth and final concept, *conversion*, describes what happens when a media artefact has reached a “taken-for-granted” status and become part of the identity of the household (Hynes & Rommes 2006).

Reverse appropriation: Getting rid of media or just changing their meaning?

In its most concrete sense, appropriation is about acquiring a media artefact and ascribing meaning to it; appropriation literally means “make one’s own”, according to the Oxford English Dictionary. If the aim is reduction of or withdrawal from media, one possible means of self-regulation would be to get rid of the media artefact again, either physically by giving it away or removing apps or programs, or cognitively by using personal distancing strategies. The dilemma of whether quitting is the right thing to do when media are experienced as invasive is debated in many guides. Some guides, like *How to Quit Facebook* (SM7), *How to Defeat a Twitter Addiction* (SM6), *How to Decide against Owning a TV* (TV9) and *How to Overcome an MMORPG Addiction* (CG6), suggest quitting, at least to the extent of terminating a certain service or genre. However, most guides imply that going cold turkey might be too drastic, and that the user may not necessarily have the willpower to carry it through. Although 12 of 30 guides use the term “cold turkey”, and discuss whether quitting is the right thing, more space, and faith, is given to less drastic means. This is the recommended strategy in *How to Quit Facebook*:

Just like smoking, quitting cold turkey will be the hardest approach. Instead, try quitting Facebook for a day or two, and then work your way up to quitting it for a week. (SM7)

What is described here is a form of “detox” or “media fasting”, a method increasingly mentioned in media confessional literature as a way of obtaining more distance and control (see, for example, Maushart 2010; Bratsberg & Moen 2015). The vocabulary here, as in many other types of self-help, is borrowed from dieting and treatment of alcohol and nicotine abuse, but in this case complete cut-off is presented as something to turn to only in “a moment of desperation” (SM7). In place of quitting, the *Wikihow* guides contain a range of distancing strategies, many of which are discussed under the three headings below. However, the guides do acknowledge that initiating distancing strategies may require negotiations and conflict resolution. Domestication studies describe how appropriation of a media artefact may require discussions and strategies to overcome resistance in the household, for instance, when children want media technology the parents are reluctant to bring into the home (Russo Lemor 2006). In the same way as bringing a media artefact into a household implies that family members ascribe meaning to it, convincing others to move it out again, or reducing its importance, requires strategic behaviour.

One good example of how the need for such negotiations is acknowledged is the guide *How to Convince Your Family to Turn Off the Television* (TV10). The emphasis in this guide is on the family scaling down its television usage, but at the same time the guide is adamant that the only way of achieving this is to avoid a moral tirade and instead negotiate a solution. The guide suggests calling a meeting: “Set aside a time when all family members come together around the kitchen table, or some other comfortable spot, away from the TV”. The guide warns that you must “realize that some members of your family may approach the family talk with unhappiness, or they may feel threatened that they are ‘under scrutiny’”. In order to set them at ease, the strategy suggested is to serve “some favorite nibbles or snack” before you start, and to have “some facts and statistics on hand to back up your concerns”. The guide also stresses: “It is very important that the TV is not on during the family discussion!”.

This piece of advice clearly reflects the role of television in the household; television is still to some degree a collective medium. The wording further reflects concern that an intervention of this sort may be seen as moralistic; alluding to a view of television resisters as luddites who “drive a horse and buggy or dress all in black” (Krcmar 2009:59). A similar warning against alienating the user is found in the guide *How to Handle a Spouse's Social Media Addiction* which suggests a “gaming intervention” where you invite your spouse “to a quiet dinner at home” and a “frank discussion about the game” (CG10). This guide also warns you that negotiations may be difficult and that moralising is not a good idea.

Domestication theory points out that appropriation normally starts before the artefact is acquired; there is usually a discussion within the household about the expectations for the new medium and what rules should apply to its use. The implementation of distancing strategies may mean opening these discussions all over again, only now with a different goal – that of minimising the medium’s importance.

Reverse incorporation: Changing routines and rituals

The domestication process implies the incorporation of media into routines and rituals of the household. Conversely, minimising and withdrawal implies a change in routines, rendering the medium in question less time consuming and less important in family rituals. In his study of the self as a reflexive project, Anthony Giddens points out that “Self-actualization implies the control of time” (1991: 77). Time management is also one of the dominant themes in the *Wikihow* guides, as it is in almost any project of self-control and self-regulation. A total of 25 guides advocate time management as a key remedy. The main advice is to create a schedule, or rather, a counter-schedule, designed to fight the power that media schedulers have over your life. The suggested schedules are often very detailed and elaborate. For example, *How To Defeat a Twitter Addiction* (SM6) suggests this schedule:

Allow yourself a set amount of time every day, reserved for Twitter. Some suggestions are: 15 minutes every 3 hours, or one single block of an hour a day when everything else is taken care of.

The suggestion to set aside specific time blocks for media use corresponds directly to the strategies used by media to create immersion and flow. Through a sophisticated range of techniques, media aim to make you stay “hooked” without noticing the time spent (Syvertsen 1997; Zickermann & Linder 2010). Techniques like television scheduling and gamification in social and online media are crucial in making consumers integrate media into their own schedule, and various forms of notifications – be they email alerts or beeps from your phone – are important instruments designed to interrupt users in their non-media pursuits. In the sample material discussed here, six guides, five of which concern social media/Internet, suggest “turn off notifications” as advice for distancing yourself, as in *How to Stop Internet Addiction*:

Turn off notifications. If your smartphone notifies you immediately every time someone emails you or likes something you’ve posted on social media, you’ll be forever fiddling around on the internet with your phone. (SM8)

It is no surprise that notifications are seen as problematic, particularly where Internet and social media are concerned, as the business strategy largely revolves around grabbing the attention of the user in short intervals. A different strategy, mentioned in five guides, is to activate parental control. Interestingly, only one of these concerns children’s use. The guide *How to Break a World of Warcraft Addiction*, for instance, explicitly suggests “Set up parental controls for yourself” and “Make it so your play-time is limited, and use a complicated password that you are sure to quickly forget” (CG2).

In addition to individual micro level time management, users are advised to change rituals involving media, such as browsing social media during breaks or gathering the family together for Saturday evening television. Domestication studies are concerned with how media become part of rituals, and this is also a topic in the *Wikihow* guides, where users are urged to create rituals that have more to do with real life, or rekindle pre-media family rituals. Four of the ten guides on reducing television use, for instance, mention board games as an alternative social activity. The list of possibilities is long:

Set aside one night a week in which all family members get together to do something together. It might be going out, playing sport, playing board or card games, talking, reading, or even planning a vacation together. Whatever it is, just ensure it's minus the TV and any other electronic devices. (TV10)

The moral imperative is to make the members of the household prioritise each other instead of media, a common theme in confessionals of media detox. For example, the author Susan Maushart (2010) describes how a gradual deterioration of family bonds led to a six-month ban: "Like other parents, I'd noticed that the more we seemed to communicate as individuals, the less we seemed to cohere as a family" (6). Creating new rituals and designing new ways of spending time together are measures used to rebuild communication and a sense of togetherness.

Reverse objectification: Changing the place of media

In domestication studies, objectification is closely related to incorporation, but instead of time management, it concerns management of space: where you place the media artefact and how central it should be in the house and rooms, or – on a more cognitive level – how much room it is allowed to take, for example, in conversations. As Bakardjieva explains: "People choose locations for their artefacts strategically depending on the extent to which they would like to encourage or discourage their use by certain inhabitants of the household and/or for certain purposes" (2006: 65). Obviously, strategies of media reduction and withdrawal also involve these kinds of discussions, but with the opposite intent: how can you reduce the physical importance of media artefacts in your home by changing their locations, and how can you cognitively limit the role of media by displacing them from family conversations and social life.

The media are "increasingly instantaneous, international and interactive", writes Tarlach McGonagle (2013, 191) in a description of today's media. To this list one could easily have added "invasive". Modern media terminals appear in many guises, and with mobility and ubiquity they tend to blend more and more with terminals that you may need for communication and work, such as the telephone (Lomborg & Bechmann 2015). The *Wikihow* guides mention many strategies for physical dislocation of media and communication technologies as part of a distancing and withdrawal project. Perhaps the easiest form of dislocation is when the media terminal has a fixed location, such as a television set, which can be physically moved out, as suggested by the guide *How to Quit Watching TV* (TV4):

If you do leave a TV in the house, at least put it in an uncomfortable place, like the garage, with no comfy couch to lounge in. (TV4)

The fact that just seeing the medium might make you want to use it is reflected in many other strategies. Several guides suggest covering up or hiding the screen: "when the computer is not looking at you, you are less likely to use it. If you have a desktop PC, try not to go near it or put something over it like a sheet" (SM1). If the media artefacts are separate entities you may also get members of the household to help you out, as suggested in *How to Avoid Video Game Addiction*: "Playing hide-and-go-seek with your parents (hiding your games) is an effective way to minimize gaming overall" (CG1).

Domestication theory acknowledges that media are also objectified in the conversations of the household, for instance, in the ways news events or soap opera characters provide a basis for identification and self-representation (Silverstone & Hirsch 1992: 24). Some guides dealing with television warn that you might have let objectification go too far, to the extent that what you are really experiencing is a form of para-social interaction (Horton & Wohl 1956):

If your family has started to talk about the Kardashians as though they were close family friends, it may be time to re-examine your interest in reality TV Stop yourself from referring to reality TV characters as though they are friends. Create a demarcation of “us” and “them” for your family. (TV3)

As well as physical and technological distancing, attempts to reverse domestication involve creating a mental distance from the media, including alienating yourself from fictional characters.

Reverse conversion: Changing identities, priorities and hierarchies

In theories of domestication, conversion means that the medium is not only incorporated into everyday life but has blended into it and obtained a “taken-for-granted” status; media technology has become part of the identity of the household, and part of what household members express to the outside world. In a sense, all the strategies discussed above are about distancing oneself from media or refusing further integration into one’s life. While much advice concerns practical measures, more permanent forms of media distancing and withdrawal entail a deeper introspection into your identity and how media has become part of who you are. Several guides urge you to transform yourself and your life so that media become a less important, even a negligible, part of your identity, and instead develop an identity which is more authentic and less media-related. In societies of abundance, people do not just express identities through what they like and enjoy, but also through dislike and restraint (Syvertsen 2010). In a seminal article on media resistance, Portwood-Stacer interprets refusal to be on Facebook as a form of “conspicuous non-consumption”, the alternative to the sociological concept of “conspicuous consumption” where wealthy people use luxury goods to signal who they are (2012).

The guides offer a range of strategies for converting to an alternative identity. One guide, concerning the online game *RuneScape*, suggests making the transition to a life with less media into something resembling a rite of passage, where you can throw an in-game “leaving party” and ceremonially destroy your belongings or “disperse your items among your friends” (CG7). *How to Defeat a Social Networking Addiction* (SM5) says: “Think about the satisfaction you will get by not being an addict to social networking.” And, as several guides emphasise, once you have revealed your new identity publicly, you better stick with your new public image: “The good thing about telling your Facebook friends that you won’t be on for a bit is that you’ve just burned a bridge that will cause you to ‘lose face’ if you do sneak on” (SM4). This also illustrates a difference between media, as cutting down or removing the TV may be done in the privacy of the household, while turning one’s back on online games and social media will inevitably be visible in public.

Three strategies stand out across the guides. One is to go through a process of adjusted conversion, a re-domestication where the user switches to media or media genres which require more of the user or are placed higher up in the cultural hierarchy (cf. Alasuutari 1996), for instance, by switching to more educational television genres, more beneficial online activities or more sophisticated games. This also involves transferring attention to older media forms, such as educational television, or, most importantly, print media. A majority of guides urge users to read more instead of turning habitually to mass, social or online media. Typical is the advice in *How to Break a World of Warcraft Addiction*:

Read. Novels have just as much excitement and adventure as WoW, but you can expand other skills – such as critical thinking and vocabulary – in addition to those that interactive storytelling and game play will build. (CG3)

Reading is stressed most explicitly in guides targeting children and young people. In *How to Stop a TV-Addiction (for Kids)*, parents are advised to “Go to the library with your child and read books over there. Read as many books as possible to stay away from TV as much as possible.” (TV2). The advice reflects the opposition between print culture and screen culture, and between online and offline activities, themes that are common in media resistance literature and criticism (e.g. Postman 2005, Carr 2010).

The second strong recommendation is to prioritise “real life” by rekindling other interests or previously active parts of the user’s identity that have been displaced by media. Madsen notes that much self-help literature is conservative and takes a position that is critical of modernity (Madsen 2010, 89). We also see this in the *Wikihow* guides, where it is suggested to use board games instead of computer games, telephone instead of Facebook etc. Still, much of the advice concerns simple and everyday activities, such as exercise, being outdoors, playing with your dog and relaxing under a tree.

Equally represented in the guides concerning television, social media or games, is the suggestion that users should join clubs or commit to activities that must be performed regularly to be successful. Ritualising alternative activities is a way of securing that the conversion is not just temporary. Activities such as jogging, starting a band, knitting, learning a language or taking up gardening are time consuming and will fill up the spare hours. In addition, they come with their own schedule, regularity and “notifications”; for example, if you do gardening, you cannot just do it once as the garden will “tell” you that it needs care when you pass by.

Finally, an underlying theme is that one should try to become a more authentic human being. Media are increasingly associated with a constructed, or even completely fake, reality and in order to build trust and strengthen community one must reject the “mediated authenticity” of games, television and social media (Enli 2014). As one of the guides dealing with social media proclaims:

Stop and smell the roses. You can't smell roses online, well not yet anyway, and even if you could, it wouldn't be authentic. Real life should always come first because this is from where you draw your inspiration, energy and vibrancy. And it's important to get balance so that your IRL (in real life) experiences continue to be your principal form of interacting with others. (SM9)

Conclusion: A case of “reverse domestication”?

This article has studied self-help guides that give advice to users who feel overwhelmed by media. Based on 30 guides from the online site *Wikihow*, the article has discussed how the problems with media are framed and contextualised. The starting point for the discussion was two main research questions: What kind of strategies are recommended to individuals and families who want to reduce the importance of media in their lives? and, how can these be understood in the light of theories of media domestication?

Discursively, the guides studied in this article place themselves in the self-help tradition. Problems concerning media are construed as something which the user as an individual has to deal with for him- or herself. The guides only to a limited degree blame the media industry, or other societal factors. Instead, they reflect the trend towards self-management where everyone is responsible for solving their own problems. The advice outlined in the guides includes both practical and mental strategies. Rearranging the physical placement of the media artefact, as well as reducing its temporal, mental and discursive space in the household, are important measures; disrupting existing media routines and rituals equally so. In order to create more substantial and sustainable changes, however, more profound cognitive strategies are needed. The guides advise users to change their identity by switching to more demanding and older media and genres, books in particular, switching to activities more associated with real life, and striving to become a more authentic human being by distancing themselves from the constructed world of media.

These strategies crosscut the three media types studied, but more media-specific and genre-specific strategies are also identified. The nature of television as a flow-medium and the industry’s elaborate scheduling strategies partly explain why it is integrated into daily routines of the household as well as family conversations and rituals. On the other hand, the more permanent placement of the TV set and the regularity that scheduling still provides (despite streaming and on-demand services) means that overuse, to some extent, can be physically and temporally circumvented. Smartphones, tablets and other small devices mean that the use of Internet and social media, and to some extent computer games, is more dispersed than television watching. Social media and online games are also more related to the outside world and private networks and may therefore disrupt the coherence of the family to a larger degree than television. While television may be tightly integrated into the conversations and identity of the household, Internet is more closely integrated into the overall life of the users. Accordingly, the guides focus on particular types of services and games, like Twitter and World of Warcraft, rather than the medium per se.

In the introduction we pointed to the concept of reverse domestication as a useful addition to the conceptual toolbox of domestication theory. We have two reasons in particular for suggesting this concept. The first is that we wish to argue for a greater emphasis on distancing processes and negotiations within the tradition of domestication studies, and we argue that the systematic study of processes of withdrawal would enrich this tradition. Theories and studies of media domestication recognise that individuals’ and families’ relationships with media may continue to change throughout life, as the terms redomestication and dis-domestication bear witness, but it is also acknowledged that such processes are not much studied.

The second reason is linked with the changes in the media situation. With increasingly invasive media, increasingly complex interrelations between old and new media,

as well as the multiplication of media platforms, there is a need for more studies of how users handle media complexity that also allow for strategies of rejection and resistance. The immense proliferation of self-help literature and online guides on how to handle invasive media, as well as the proliferation of testimonials and books on media fasting and abstention in the public domain, support the need for an expansion of research focus.

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Appendix: Sample of *Wikihow* guides

Television

- TV1: How to Overcome Television Addiction
- TV2: How to Stop a TV Addiction (for Kids)
- TV3: How to Break Your Family's Addiction to Reality TV
- TV4: How to Quit Watching TV
- TV5: How to Get Your Children away from TV
- TV6: How to Watch Less TV
- TV7: How to Curb Your Addiction to News
- TV8: How to Go Cold Turkey from Soaps
- TV9: How to Decide Against Owning a TV
- TV10: How to Convince Your Family to Turn Off the Television

Social media

- SM1: How to Avoid Internet Addiction
- SM2: How to Control a Wikihow Addiction
- SM3: How to deal with an Internet Forum Addiction
- SM4: How to Defeat a Facebook Addiction
- SM5: How to defeat a Social Networking Addiction
- SM6: How to Defeat a Twitter Addiction
- SM8: How to Quit Facebook
- SM9: How to Avoid Social Media Burnout
- SM10: How to Avoid Wasting Time on Facebook

Computer games

- CG1: How to Avoid Video Game Addiction
- CG2: How to Break a World of Warcraft Addiction
- CG3: How to Fight Computer Game Addiction
- CG4: How to Get Rid of Your Boyfriend's Game Addiction
- CG5: How to Get Rid of Your Maplestory Addiction
- CG6: How to Overcome an MMORPG Addiction
- CG7: How to Quit RuneScape
- CG8: How to Stop Being Addicted to Zynga Games
- CG9: How to End a Video Game Addiction
- CG10: How to Handle a Spouse's Social Media Gaming Addiction