

The place of internet gambling: Presence, vice, and domestic space
FINAL DRAFT

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Since the introduction of the telephone and the phonograph into the home in the late nineteenth century, electrical media technologies have met with resistance when crossing the divide into domestic space. In earlier centuries, the home had been an important site of production, but industrialization largely removed explicit processes of production from the home. As home and work were separated from each other, the home came to be seen as a feminized realm and a retreat from the masculine world of work and public life (Spigel, 1992; Cowan, 1983). But home has also become, as David Morley observes, a place heavily “connected” to elsewhere through communication technologies like the telephone and Internet, and may “no longer function for [many people] as a haven of peace and tranquility” (2000, p. 57).

The movement of communication technologies into the home raises questions about the uses and gendering of the domestic sphere, and how its meanings have been discursively contested in recent decades. The arrival of practical home Internet connectivity in the late 1980s in the United States would eventually make a number of activities once undertaken primarily in public, an arena traditionally gendered as masculine, part of domestic life. One such activity is gambling. Although Internet gambling accounts for a substantial percentage of all online financial transactions, it has been at best a marginal research topic in Internet studies, even though online gambling’s direct antecedents – betting via telegraph and telephone – are rich and important communication history topics.

Internet gambling today is a huge business, although because of the multitude of illegal online gambling sites, it is impossible know how much money is being bet online. There are, however, expert estimates and projections. Christiansen Capital Advisors, a gambling consulting firm, estimates that almost \$23 billion in Internet gambling revenue will be generated worldwide in 2009 and over \$24 billion in 2010. A late 2008 *Washington Post* feature on online poker cites a smaller but still very large number, noting that Internet gambling revenue has “more than tripl[ed] over five years, to \$18 billion annually, including about \$4 billion from virtual poker” (Gaul, 2008a).

An examination of the ways in which this major global industry enables and influences cultural and ideological understandings has much to offer the studies of both new media and communication history. By focusing on online betting and the discourses that surround and construct it, this chapter looks at how interactive media technologies have changed both the spaces and understandings of gambling and associated social rituals from public space to private space, and to spaces in between. Thus, this chapter also examines the shifting notions of what takes place in the masculinely identified public sphere and what is allowed in the feminized sphere of the home.

The Problem of Domestic Space

The ease of gambling from home has created anxiety among various groups and individuals in American society, in part because Victorian notions of the middle-class home as a haven from the stresses of modern life persist and have shaped much of the discourse about domestic communication technologies for more than one hundred years. While larger European and North American houses prior to the eighteenth century included semi-public spaces, by the nineteenth century these houses were increasingly divided into specialized rooms, culminating in designs that featured a more public front room for entertaining, with the rest of the house primarily private space (Frohlich and Kraut, 2002, pp. 4-5). Indeed, the Victorian home, as Lynn Spigel has noted, because of the division of space, embodied “the conflicting urge for family unity and division”; Victorians were able “to experience private, familial, and social life within conventionalized and highly formalized settings” (1992, p. 16). Adding more rigor to Victorian conventions of household design was the emergence of interior decorating and

a profession in the late nineteenth century. Elsie De Wolfe, one of the first female professional decorators, argued for the importance of temperance in decorating. In her 1913 book *The House in Good Taste*, she wrote: “My business is to preach to you the beauty of suitability. Suitability! SUITABILITY! SUITABILITY!” In decorating the domestic haven, women were expected to practice visual, if not financial, restraint, and to adhere to conventional ideas (Lynes, 1985, pp. 70, 346-347).

By the early-to-mid-twentieth century, popular discourses posited the home as a place of family unity (see Spigel, 1992), and houses were designed to include communal areas – the kitchen, the living room, the dining room – that opened onto each other and encouraged family togetherness. In the quest for in-home unity, media technologies were often touted as means for bringing people together. For example, early twentieth-century phonograph advertisements imagined families and friends gathering together around phonographs (Kruse, 1993). Radio too, after overcoming obstacles to its acceptance in homes – including the large battery that leaked acid onto living rooms floors and the lack of a loudspeaker – had by the late 1920s become a technology that the whole family could enjoy together (Spigel, 1992, pp. 28-29). Likewise, the advent of television prompted discussions in popular media of the ways in which families could grow closer around the new technology: discussions that were concurrent with the appearance of the “family room” as a center of household activity, and thus as a place where family members could easily come together in front of the television set (Spigel, 1992).

Similar hopes were raised with the introduction of the personal computer into the home in the late 1970s and the 1980s, illustrated by advertisements for brands like Commodore that showed family members (although interestingly and tellingly, usually not mothers) gathered at the computer. Not surprisingly however, as with previous communication technologies the incursion of the computer into domestic space led to worries about the effects of the medium on users’ morals, on social interaction, and on family structure.

The personal computer became a multifunctional device in the 1980s, sold and discussed as a machine to be used to play games, do office work, prepare household budgets, word process, and keep grocery lists. With this limited range of perceived functions and the introduction of easy-to-use personal computers like the Apple

Macintosh in 1984, by the mid-1980s the popular press was announcing that all those who wanted or needed personal computers had them and thus that the market for PCs was “dead.” Clearly reports of the death of the PC were greatly exaggerated. In addition, from 1980 forward there was great concern in the popular media about where in the home to put the home or personal computer, how such computers fit into the décor, and whether one needed to create a separate space in the home for the computer. One architect affirmed in a 1985 *Washington Post* column that “most of family life takes place in the kitchen or living room, [so] a few families have wondered how to socialize the computer,” adding that “It is not like adding a microwave oven to a crowded kitchen counter or a television set to a family room bookcase” (Ridley, 1985). The computer needed its own space at the center of home life, and the architect explained to readers how he was able to create a suitable space. Such discourse certainly mirrors the concerns expressed thirty years earlier about where in the home to put the early television set, and why.

Computer placement was indeed important, because research conducted by David Frohlich and Robert Kraut in the early 2000s as part of the groundbreaking Carnegie Mellon University HomeNet internet use project indicates that much family computer activity is social in nature. Computers needed to be in places where all family members could use them. In Frohlich and Kraut's study of families in the Pittsburgh area with computers, only one-quarter of computers could be found in the very private space of a parent's or a child's bedroom. More often computers were located in places like the family room. Frohlich and Kraut argued that, at least in these families, computers (which were most often used for checking email) brought families together and therefore had a sociopetal effect. A significant number of participants in the study reported that they engaged in joint computer use with members of their families, sometimes when playing computer games. Joint use also happened when one family member was using the computer and another family member was observing and gaining knowledge to be actively used in the near future. In particular, "Family members may enter into true collaborations with each other to operate a PC programme or Internet service together" (2002, p. 30). Such copresence is clearly facilitated when PCs are placed in a less private room in a house.

More recent research indicates that in families at least, copresence at a home computer is not unusual. In their ethnographic study of youth and gaming, Stevens, Satwicz, and McCarthy (2008), described several situations in which kids play games at the same computer at the same time in living rooms or family rooms, often collaborating to figure out how best to play games. Similarly, in her study of Silicon Valley families, Heather Horst (2009) found families that embraced playing online games together as way of bonding over an activity in which all members had an interest. Others got together around the computer to build websites, make videos, and edit photographs (p. 167). The 2008 Pew Internet and American Life Project report "Networked Families," reported that among internet users who cohabit with a spouse and at least one child, 54% go online at the same computer with someone else a few times a week (Kennedy et al., p. 16).

But as mentioned earlier, and as with previous communication technologies, the incursion of the computer into the private sphere caused and continues to cause trepidation. In her discussion of television's increasing centrality in family life in the United States in the 1950s, Lynn Spigel linked fears that television would become a "man-made monster" inhabiting American living rooms to a history of alarmist discourse about new technologies' potential to grow out of control (1990, pp. 81-82). In the case of computers and the Internet, for instance, although Frohlich and Kraut found significant sociopetal effects in their study of family computer use, parents in the sample noted a tendency for their children to isolate themselves when using computers, and they also noted this tendency in themselves. One would expect that this tendency would only have become more widespread and intense in the past decade, with the proliferation of mobile personal information and communication technologies (ICTs) like smart phones and wi-fi equipped laptop computers, and the trend in middle-class families for family members to have their own media technologies, like televisions, in their personal household spaces. Indeed, Horst (2009) writes, "In many homes, the arrival of relatively affordable and portable media has solidified the importance of the bedroom as a space where one can use new media in these endeavors and assume individual control over one's own media world" (p. 156).

The struggle over placement of computers and other new media in the home is illustrated in the 2008 television documentary "Growing Up Online," in which the

mother who insisted that her children use the internet at home only in the semi-public space of the kitchen area appears anomalous, including to her children. Yet Horst finds that many parents still opt to place family computers and other new media systems in the more public, less private spaces of their homes, often with the intent of monitoring their children's media use (2009, pp. 154-155). At the turn of the 21st century, parents in Frohlich and Kraut's study expressed fears that their children would encounter inappropriate material if left on their own to browse the Internet. Several parents saw allowing a child unsupervised World Wide Web access to be the equivalent of leaving a child alone in a public place (2002, p. 25). Those fears were still widespread by the end of the decade, as illustrated by this parent's statement about youth internet use in "Growing Up Online":

The scariest, worst part for me is stalkers, is somebody becoming obsessed with one of my children. I have two very attractive daughters. You know, some guy that all of a sudden decides that, really, my daughter was meant for him- that kind of stuff scares me. Kids think, "I'm in my home. How could anything bad happen to me?" They don't realize that when they're sharing on that keyboard, it's, like, let 'em on in baby, because they're right here. (Dretzin and Maggio, 2008)

The dangers of masculine public space were invading the idealized, middle-class, domestic haven. Although fears of online predators were particularly prominent in the early 21st century, the media and individuals espoused concerns about the infiltration of various forms of online vice into private space.

The Rise of Online Gambling: Poker, the Home, and Technopanics in the United States

Although perhaps less than online pornography, and because of the ways that online gambling traverses the public and the private in, to many, a troubling and transgressive way, Internet gambling has become a particular site of struggle. In the past fifteen years, gambling has become an increasingly popular Internet application. Casino games, poker, sports betting, and lotteries are now major moneymakers on the Internet, sometimes legally, but often illegally. Using illegal gambling sites, wagering through legal sites but from jurisdictions where certain kinds of Internet betting are not legal,

betting when under the age of 21, and failing to report winnings to the IRS are all "profane" forms of home Internet use (and they are uses that invite severe disciplinary incursions by the state into the "sacred" domestic sphere).

The act of betting in itself is viewed by many as morally debased and dangerous, even when it is legal, and bringing it into the home challenges the dominant tropes of domesticity. At the same time, many Americans engage in online shopping and other online financial transactions from the privacy of their homes in a relatively unproblematic way. So perhaps it is no surprise then that a familiar gambling card game, poker, was fairly widely accepted online when it gained popularity in the early-to-mid-2000s. Betting online on poker really got underway in 1998, with the launch of the Planet Poker, which tried replicate on the Internet the in-person experience of playing poker in a casino (Matthews and Zamora, 2008). Online poker became very popular very fast. Most casinos were, and are, located offshore in the Caribbean and Central America to avoid being shut down by American authorities (Gaul, 2008b). Initially, many casinos accepted credit card bets, but actions by the United States Department of Justice discouraged casinos from offering that option, and credit card fraud had also become a problem. Many online casinos switched to forms of "e-money," accepting money transferred from users' accounts at sites like Neteller (Heffernan, 2009; Matthews and Zamora, 2008). Despite these obstacles, Internet poker continued to grow exponentially in popularity during the 2000s, and now brings in an estimated \$4 billion a year to its providers (Gaul, 2008a).

The true boom in online poker began in 2003 when the appropriately named Chris Moneymaker won \$2.5 million for his first place finish in the World Series of Poker after having prepared for the tournament by playing only Internet poker (Matthews and Zamora, 2008). The tournament aired on ESPN, and Moneymaker's win is credited with drawing thousands of players worldwide to online poker and creating a plethora of e-betting poker websites based in countries like Malta, the Isle of Man, Antigua, and Costa Rica (Gaul, 2008a). Today the Internet poker business is dominated by a few huge offshore sites like PokerStars and Full Tilt Poker (Heffernan, 2009). Offshore only, because in late 2006 President Bush signed into law a ban on using most kinds financial transfers to fund one's online bets. This in effect put out of business most online poker

casinos that had located in the United States in hopes that the ambiguity of existing law would allow them to operate. Internet gambling opponent Robert Goodlatte, a Republican congressman from Virginia, contended:

Virtual betting parlors have attempted to avoid the application of the United States law by locating themselves offshore and out of jurisdictional reach... These offshore, fly-by-night Internet gambling operators are unlicensed, untaxed, un-regulatable and are sucking billions of dollars out of the United States. (Quoted in Gaul, 2008b)

Offshore casinos are also likely to be open to cheating and fraud because of the lack of regulatory oversight. In a *Washington Post* series on Internet poker, reporter Gilbert Gaul notes of betting using offshore sites:

Millions of the bets originate in the United States, where online poker and gambling sites are banned, forcing players to reach out across the Internet like modern-day bootleggers. Yet players have little way of knowing who is watching their bets or where their money is going. Often, owners hide behind multiple layers of limited partnerships, making it difficult to determine who controls the sites or to lodge complaints about cheating. (Gaul, 2008a)

Honest players can therefore find themselves losing large amounts of money to cheaters, with little recourse, although companies interested in maintaining customer loyalty have acted to compensate players who are the victims of cheaters. Gaul cites a case in which AbsolutePoker's software was hacked, and the company refunded \$1.6 million dollars to players who had lost money to the hackers.

The perceived shadiness of the business of Internet gambling; the availability of the Internet and online gambling in the United States; the ease with which money can be spent through a Web interface; the morally questionable status of even legal gambling; the proliferation of home entertainment and information media; the fragmentation, specialization, and privatization of domestic space; and the presumed vulnerability of teens were all likely contributors to the increase in concern expressed in popular media in the mid-2000s over young people and online gambling.

To draw on Alice Marwick's (2008) work on cyberporn and online predators, discourses that raise significant concerns about teens, college students, and Internet betting qualify as "technopanics." The idea of a technopanic is rooted in Stanley Cohen's (1972) notion of the moral panic, in which incidents of deviance – primarily youth deviance – become the focus of media coverage and public campaigns against a particular evil. Cohen argues that media responses to these incidents tend to present them as indicative of a far greater social danger than the public believes them to be (pp. 65-66). He also notes that the problematic behaviors are expressions of deeper structural problems that remain unaddressed (p. 204).

In a technopanic, the focus is on new technologies, including new media, and there is particular unease over the behavior of young people, which is pathologized. In the case of panics over the Internet, the purported facility of young people with computer technologies that baffle their elders contributes to the panic. Marwick argues:

The trope of the teenager who possesses more technological knowledge than her adult counterpart and can program a VCR or set up a home computer is a powerful one. This image is furthered by movies from *Wargames* [sic] to *Hackers* to *Jurassic Park*, celebrations of young techno-entrepreneurs like Shawn Fanning and the wunderkinds of YouTube, and descriptions of the cultural competency demonstrated by teens as they blog, post digital pictures, talk to each other through instant messaging and interact through Facebook. (2008)

Troubling behaviors on the part of young people need to be stopped, and worrisome content restricted or banned, according to the logic of the technopanic (Marwick, 2008).

While there are often valid concerns at the root of a technopanic, such panics frequently exaggerate the extent of the problem, or suggest solutions that are more far-reaching than is justified by the reality of the problem. Still, it is important to keep in mind that the harms to victims of problematic behaviors are very real, and I do not want to diminish that. What I want to emphasize is the degree to which narratives of problematic Internet gambling by teens point to the struggle over meaning, and particularly in this case, over meanings of the private and the public. The protection of

the family and private space is an important trope in dominant narratives of online gambling, even in early popular clinical discourses. A 2002 article in the American Psychological Association's *Psychiatric News* asserted a connection between Internet use among the young and online gambling, even without evidence presented of a specific causal link: "Adolescents use the Internet more than any other age group, and recent studies have found that about 3 percent of adolescents and 8 percent of college students have gambled on the Internet, according to the National Council on Problem Gambling" (Lehmann, 2002). In fact, the APA had flagged accessibility to young people in the home as a primary contributor to Internet gambling, emphasizing that lack of regulation meant that "there is no control on the hours of availability [or] age of participants," and that gambling sites would target children, who were most likely using computers within the confines their homes, with offers of discounts and free items on sports, adventure, and action figure websites (2002).

By the mid-2000s, with the explosion in online poker's popularity, anxieties about Internet gambling and teens were widely expressed in the news media, in stories replete with horrifying anecdotes, almost exclusively about young men. A 2006 ABC News story described how Greg Hogan, Jr., president of the sophomore class at Lehigh University and the son of a respected minister, found himself robbing a bank in Allentown, Pennsylvania as a result of his Internet poker losses. Hogan told *Good Morning, America*:

I started playing with about \$50... I would deposit money from my checking account with an account at [an] online gambling site, mostly at PokerStars.com or Sportsbetting.com. I tripled my money the first few times so it seemed like easy money, but then I lost \$300 and just felt this rage. Eventually, I spent it all.

Online gambling made a good kid go bad. The assistant chief of police of Allentown underscored this interpretation when he said "The fact that he's a college student going, coming from an affluent family –β he just does not fit your, your typical profile of, of someone robbing a bank" (ABC News, 2006).

The college press contributed to the spate of student gambling addiction stories. A 2005 feature in the California State University– Sacramento newspaper, for instance,

described instances of college students who stole to support their gambling habits, who dropped out of school because of gambling, who lost relationships, who even contemplated suicide. While the story featured the views of college students who gambled for fun and who claimed not to be addicted, it also cited a recovered compulsive gambler who was skeptical that their gambling would remain problem-free (Gesuele, 2005). He also pointed out that it “makes sense” that an estimated 15 to 20 percent of college students had bet online, “because many older people are not Internet savvy. Students are smart, intelligent and have a better understanding of how to use the Internet” (Gesuele, 2005). Interestingly, a subsequent survey funded by the National Institute of Mental Health found a correlation between non-student status and frequency of gambling, not student status and extent of gambling, undermining popular press assertions of a college gambling epidemic in the student population (Welte et al, 2008, p. 131).

Within the narrative that constituted the technopanics over Internet betting, college students were not the only tech-savvy young people at risk. High school students also fell prey to the allure of online betting. A Fox News report in 2006 asserted that gambling was on the rise not only among teenagers, but pre-teens as well, and claimed that “The trend can be attributed to a growing acceptance of gambling in American culture, an increase in accessibility because of the Internet and more betting shows on TV” (Donaldson-Evans, 2006). The story followed “Ross,” who started betting online while a high school sophomore, had a bookie by the time he was a senior, began selling marijuana to support his gambling habit, and ended up \$30,000 in debt before his parents learned of his problem and forced him into Gamblers Anonymous. Ross’s story illustrates that bad behaviors – like gambling and drug use – are often linked, and that parents are often clueless about dangerous activities in which their children engage from the privacy of their homes. Readers are warned:

Parents may miss the warning signs indicating the habit is getting out of hand because they could see gambling as a perfectly healthy way for children to spend their time.

“This looks very benign,” said [neuropsychiatrist Lawson F.] Bernstein. “They’re home playing cards with their friends, they’re

not drinking or doing drugs. It all looks very harmless. But the problem is for a certain number of kids, it's going to be the addictive equivalent of pot in that they're going to get in trouble with it." (Donaldson-Evans, 2006).

Teen gambling is indeed far from benign, another set of researchers found. In fact, that "adolescent-onset gambling is associated with more severe psychiatric problems, particularly substance use disorders, in adolescents and young adults" (Donaldson-Evans, 2006). Ironically, the Fox News story indicts the glamorization of poker as presented in televised tournaments, even as Fox Sports has long held the broadcast rights to the World Poker Tour (Cypra, 2009).

The dangers of teen online gambling were spelled out in a personal way in a 2005 *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* column in which the mother of a former teenage gambler testified to the prevalence of teen betting, including online and in casinos, and complains about the lack of enforcement of existing gambling regulations. She described her efforts to bring attention to the problem, and explained her motivation:

I am one of those parents of a teenage boy who played poker in high school and thought it was harmless fun. Ten years later, Ben's gambling addiction had such a grip on him that he lost his biggest bet of all.

Poker, Internet gambling, and Black Jack became the sole beneficiaries of Ben's finances; maintaining his car was not a priority. The police report stated Ben died after losing control of his car due to mechanical failure. Actually Ben died after losing control of his life to gambling. It started as an innocent after-school poker game and ended with his car wrapped around a tree.

When Ben talked about his struggle with gambling he often said, "Kids don't realize they are not only gambling with money, they are gambling with their lives." (McCausland, 2005)

Were it not for gambling, including online gambling, Ben would have better maintained his car, and he would still be alive today.

In these accounts, the feminine domestic sphere is clearly under threat. Mothers are losing control of their families, even when their children are supposedly safe at home. The webpage of the Columbia University Medical Center Gambling Disorders Clinic warns that “easy access to computers and online gambling take away barriers to gambling in public. For teens, “online gambling is as close as their computer” (2009). Moreover, strangers, poker opponents who want to take teens' money, are imagined to be reaching through the computer into teens' home. Ill-meaning opponents are present in a disembodied way through the Internet, although the Internet is hardly the first technology to contribute to the disembodiment of presence. James Carey (1989) points out in his analysis of the electric telegraph that the device’s invention and adoption in the 1840s were particularly notable because for the first time in human history, communication was no longer dependent on transportation, on a physical form of transmission. Jeffrey Sconce (2000) in his book *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television*. points to “the miraculous ‘disembodying’ presence” evoked by the telegraph (p. 44).

The telegraph was not, however, a home communication technology. At the end of the nineteenth century and early in the twentieth century the telephone and the phonograph emerged as in-home technologies that allowed disembodied presences, both familiar and unfamiliar, to penetrate the domestic divide. And later media technologies also evoked the idea that communication devices could separate being from body; television was lauded in its early years for allowing viewers to be present “in two places at once” (Sconce, 2000, p. 129) – presumably in one’s home and, virtually, in the setting of the television show one was watching. Today wired and wireless devices allow users to simultaneously inhabit several spaces at once. One can be in one's home, as well as in the virtual space of the online poker game, and through the poker game into the homes, offices, and other locations of opposing players.

Conclusions

The middle-class American home is not, and never has been, the pristine separate sphere of civilizing feminine influence that dominant ideological constructions would

have us believe and work hard to keep alive. It is only in the past 150 to 200 years that the home has been transformed from a primary site of economic production to a site primarily devoted to commercial consumption. In that relatively short time, much ideological work has been done to maintain the symbolic boundary between the domestic sphere and the public sphere, and more to the point, domestic space and public space. The case of Internet gambling is an especially instructive example of this struggle. Unlike with previous communication and entertainment technologies, the popular metaphor applied to the Internet says that it too is a space. Media technologies can be domesticated – phonographs could be placed in beautiful period cabinets, radios could be virtual hearths around which families purportedly gathered, high definition televisions can be made thin and flat and hung on walls like vivid pieces of art, computers can be shrunk down or presented as sleek modern designs – but how can a technology that also constitutes a largely-masculinely-defined public space like the Internet be domesticated?

Traveling the Web means visiting sites, locations that exist in a public arena while one is within the physical confines of a feminized space, to a degree not afforded by other media technologies. Many of these places offer activities that were not easily accessible within the house, or even when away from home, like gambling. The dichotomies that have defined our understandings of what gendered space means, and what counts as private or public, are strained by phenomena as diverse as telecommuting and public breast-feeding, even as the contestation over activities, spaces, and meanings works largely to reinscribe traditional notions of what activities are appropriate for whom, and where. Online gambling is merely one phenomenon about which we can see active and even fervent symbolic work being done by popular discourse to maintain sense-making narratives in the face of a world in which boundaries between public and private are shifting and even disappearing, and forms of presence are multiplying.

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