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The unchallenged persuasions of mobile media technology: The pre-domestication of Google Glass in the Finnish press

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Abstract. In recent years, networked devices have taken an ever tighter hold of people's everyday lives. The tech companies are frantically competing to grab people's attention and secure a place in their daily routines. In this short paper, I elaborate further a key finding from an analysis of Finnish press coverage on Google Glass between 2012 and 2015. The concept of pre-domestication is used to discuss the ways in which we are invited and persuaded by the media discourse to integrate ourselves in the carefully orchestrated digital environment. It is shown how the news coverage deprives potential new users of digital technology a chance to evaluate the underpinnings of the device, the attachments to data harvesting, and the practices of hooking attention. In the paper, the implications of contemporary computational imaginaries as (re)produced and circulated in the mainstream media are reflected, thereby shedding light on and opening possibilities to criticize the politics of mediated pre-domestication.

Keywords: Technological Infrastructure, Big Data, Data Mining, Google Glass, Pre-domestication, Domestication Theory

By the end of 2010s, networked digital technologies have become fundamentally intertwined in people's everyday lives and interactions. Still, as recent studies have demonstrated, people lack understanding of their digital environment. For example, they are not aware of what data are harvested on them, with whom the data are shared, and how the data are used [1], [2], [3]. This lack of understanding is not a surprise as most of the applications and software we use share little information of their technical and data related operations [4].

In this paper, I use the concept of pre-domestication to discuss how technology becomes part of people's daily routines and environments. With pre-domestication I refer to the phase in technology adoption that takes place before people get to domesticate and appropriate new technology more concretely into their everyday. Studying appropriation of technology through media representations has been in the margins of domestication theory (e.g. [5], [6], [7]). My approach is grounded on the idea that people need to be attracted, invited, and interpellated to familiarize with new technology as its potential future users. The pre-domestication practices of the press are especially influential as media coverage is one of the main sources to get information on anything new.

Thus, I argue that mediated pre-domestication is worth studying more closely because of the potential to reveal something that escapes grasping once technology has become mundane and taken-for-granted.

I use as an example the mediated pre-domestication of Google Glass, a wearable miniature computer actively developed by Google 2012–2015. The paper presents and further elaborates the key finding from an extensive discursive narratological analysis¹ on the meaning making opportunities Finnish news readers were offered regarding the new device and the implicated technosocial order. In a previous publication [8], I present three dominant ways of meaning-making that pre-domesticated Google Glass through (1) its technical and social possibilities, (2) the anticipation of the affordable consumer product, and (3) expressions of discord. In this paper, I focus on what was disregarded in the press coverage. I argue that pre-domesticating technology in media discourse without addressing the question of the technological infrastructure of a new device denies people the chance to evaluate the underpinnings of their everyday digital environment. My contention is that this partly contributes to the above-mentioned unawareness as well as augments feelings of cynicism and powerlessness in relation to the digital environments (see e.g. [1], [9], [10]).

In the Finnish press, the leading role in the pre-domesticating saga of Google Glass was cast to Google itself together with the supporters of its techno-optimistic rhetoric. The only occasion when Google Glass was presented in terms of its technological infrastructure was when US Congress members approached Google to learn more about the privacy implications of the new product [11], [12]. The superficial and evasive reply was disappointing to the Congress members [13] but came as no surprise as Google is known for its reluctance to account for the obscurity of its technological system.

Besides these few news items, the Finnish press did not approach Project Glass as part of the technological infrastructure created by Google. Hence, in the pre-domestication of Google Glass it was disregarded that Google has become a taken-for-granted part of the everyday in a global scale, Google.com being the most visited website in the world [14], and approximately 60,000 Google searches taking place every second [15]. Nor did the news items place Project Glass within Google's ecosystem that includes search engines, browsers, operating systems, hardware, and services for web advertising, data analytics, content sharing and archiving, photo editing, navigation, translation, news following, and other communicative functions.

In the news, the company's motivation to develop a head-mounted device was not discussed. There reigned a silence over Google's openly expressed ambition to push the boundaries as far as possible. As Google's ex-CEO Eric Schmidt put it back in 2010, company's policy is to get right up to the creepy line but not cross it. In other words, Finnish readers were not alerted to the fact that the company is interested in taking surveillance, control, and manipulation as far as the public and politicians will let it [16].

In addition, the new product was not linked as a continuation to Google's investments in recent years. As it is, the acquisitions and investments that include drones, robot cars, home smart devices, and machine learning [10], have given Google a tight hold on user data and the users' everyday life, providing the company an increasingly

firm position in the network of sensors and interconnected devices. Overall, it was ignored in the press coverage that Google Glass is based on a vast data mining machinery that enables making interpretations of the user and her environment and feeding selected data back to her accordingly [17], [18].

In the press coverage, Google was offered space to present how Glass solves problems of the everyday. The new device was promoted as a solution to the anti-sociality caused by extensive use of smartphones [19], and it was showcased as a technology that helps us to keep the moment without distractions from technology [20]. In the news, the ‘technological solutionism’ [21] by Google was reported to readers unchallenged and the idea of restricting screen-time with a head-mounted screen was accepted without hesitation. I argue that the rhetoric of liberation from technology was a red herring aimed at directing attention away from the fact that Project Glass was all about hooking people to their screens as long and as frequently as possible and controlling users’ sight at every awake second. In Google’s case, it cannot be ignored that the company has an undisputed dominant position regarding how we search for, organize, and understand information in the 2010’s [22], [23], and the access to people’s attention with a head-mounted screen would grant the company a domination in the race for attention.

My conclusion is that the way the Finnish press pre-domesticated Google Glass promoted the normalization of an ideology according to which corporations can hide both the technical specifics and the underlying political economy of their devices (see also [24]). The Finnish press eagerly portrayed the new device as a cool opportunity to use Google services instead of giving the readers a chance to reflect upon the implications of Google Glass for their daily practices. What we are talking about is that the press not only supports the policies of the corporations but forcefully recommends them to the readers.

In the process of digitalization, infrastructures of social life have become increasingly inconspicuous. Consequently, it is extremely difficult to perceive how power works with regard to technologically mediated connections, ownership, and everyday routines. The results of my analysis support this inconspicuousness and give reason to direct critical attention to the ways in which the mediated pre-domestication cultivates ‘infrastructural ignorance’. Indeed, I find it crucial to expose and contemplate the intertwinements of the structuring of our everyday by the digital, its simultaneously all-encompassing role and taken-for-grantedness in public discussion. My analysis demonstrated the importance of articulating the ideological aspects of mediated pre-domestication. It underlined the need to ask questions that are bypassed in public discourse in order to enable reflection on the persuasions of the digital.

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ⁱ My data consist of 283 news items on Google Glass published in 21 Finnish publications between 2012, ranging from the first news item on Google Glass published in Finland until January 2015 when Google announced that the development is stopped until further notice. Half of the publications are specialized in technology and electronics, and the other half consists of morning newspapers, tabloids, online news publications, and online news from television and radio channels. The majority (4/5) of news on Google Glass were published on technology and electronics publications. Publications and number of news items on Google Glass in the brackets: *3T* (2), *Aamulehti* (2), *Digitoday* (60), *Elektroniikkalehti* (2), *Helsingin Sanomat* (6), *Iltalehti* (5), *Iltta- Sanomat* (10), *It-viikko* (12), *Kaleva* (4), *MBnet* (5), *MikroPC* (15), *Mobiili.fi* (25), *MPC* (25), *MTV3* (13), *Taloussanomat* (4), *Tekniikka & Talous* (16), *Tietokone* (11), *Tietoviikko* (51), *Turun Sanomat* (1), *Uusi Suomi* (2), *Yle* (1) ja *YleX* (10).