Media Layer and Information Thresholds

Sarah Pennington, Interaction Design Research Studio, RCA. 2002

Media Layer and Information Thresholds

This is an inspiration document written for the RCA Equator team. It stems from initial research on the domestic environment undertaken in the first year of the Equator project. I have updated this research with design issues for further development and a number of design concepts and fictions.

As an extension of this document, the main product of this work will be a set of colour photographs. Made in the domestic environment, the photographs will show "evidence"[1] of how home lives have been altered with the influx and transfer of information.

DESIGN APPROACH

Creating evidence is a process-driven design practice. It has an important purpose in that it creates and examines the peripheral experiences created by products, and generates possible new 'products' as a result.

For a piece of evidence to be successful, its aesthetic has to be appropriate, believable and convincing. For example, if a newspaper article is required as evidence of a products existence, then the aesthetic employed might consider which newspaper, which page, where the newspaper is found, etc., and portray this as convincingly as possible.

This document comprises photographs, web-pages and other documentation that are pieces of evidence of information thresholds in an 'alternative now'.

The following evidence has been both created and found, and any distinctions between the created and found are left purposely ambiguous. Photographs of design proposals are given the same weight as a found image. This blurring of the line between what is real and what is fiction is necessary for the reader to suspend their notion of disbelief about what they are viewing. As a result, design concepts can be viewed as familiar or as real as the found images, and found images become as surreal as the design concepts.

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1 Evidencing is a design approach that has been developed in conjunction with Live|work Studio, London. Live|work use evidencing as a way to protoype the experience of future services. For more information see www.liveworkstudio.co.uk

ABSTRACT AND DESIGN ISSUES

In our 'impenetrable' homes exist a multitude of openings, cracks and fissures. Although we might believe that we live enclosed lives, the openings and intrusions at the physical and virtual boundaries of the home enable information to pass through.

How can design respond to the influx and output of information into the domestic environment? And how can design react to the disguise of this information? Can we design new products and services that block, edit, invite or amplify the push and pull of information over the threshold? What new media are created by these products and services?

..."And then you spot a leak. Either in the armour of your home, or in the channels, you notice some dirt seeping through, or the eye of an unexpected passer-by peering in. At this moment, the idea that these components would perform their functions flawlessly has become absurd. Armour and channels behave haphazardly, not infallibly. "Something always leaks" Gilles Deleuze said (in his case, with regard to large bureaucratic structures). All systems, even the most hi-tech ones, are in the end porous"...[2]

The home is often perceived as a place of sanctuary and as a place of one's own, but this concept of a capsule habitat is unrealistic. In reality how difficult would it be to be completely private at home? As soon as you arrive home and switch a light on, this presence is recorded by the electricity company. To the passer-by in the street it may appear that you are out, but to BT you are clearly at home as told from the network activity coming from your home phone number.

Our 'impenetrable' homes are peppered with openings, cracks and fissures.

| THRESHOLD	DATA LEAKED IN AND OUT
Bins	waste material
Pipes, cables	water, gas, elecricity;communication
Aerials	radio, tv, satellite channels
Front door	junk mail(local & national)
	newspapers & subscriptions
	letters & parcels
	catalogues and salesmen
	services (binman, milkman, gas meter, etc)
	people
Windows	light, sound, vision
TV	news, entertainment, education, advertising
	viewing data
Radio	news, entertainment, education, advertising
Telephones	real-time communication, crossed lines
	messaging storage, 1471, caller id
Internet	email; shopping and browsing data

[3]

The letterbox, the cat-flap, doors and windows, aerials and a variety of pipes and cables for telephone, gas, electricity and water; even the food and clothes that we bring into the home in our bags and luggage are all examples of chinks in the home's armour. Media penetrates the home via an array of spectra. Television, radio, the telephone, home PC, newspaper, catalogues, can all be considered as 'spectroscopes', making visible the channels that pervade our homes.

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2 Noortje Maares, Themepark Magazine 'Home', Anatomy of a Contemporary Capsule Habitat.
3 Table shows thresholds of the home and the type of data that passes through these thresholds.

Although we might believe that we live enclosed, the openings and intrusions at the boundary of the home enable information to pass through. Data is pushed and pulled over 'information thresholds' between home and the outside world.
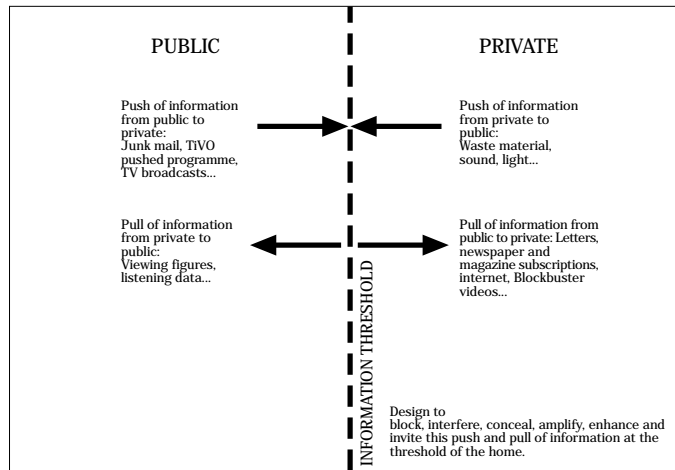
[4]

This push and pull movement may be intentional - we want to recieve letters and get online; but it may also be accidental - a leak of data such as a crossed line, a passerby looking in; or invasive, such as interactive TV pushed programming.
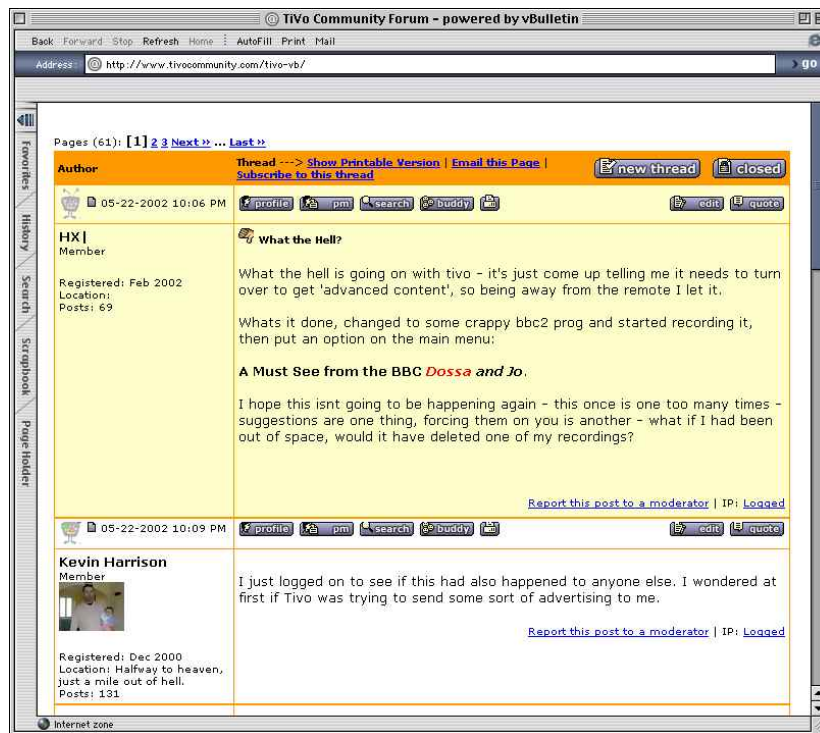
[5]

So how do we respond to this influx and output of media and information?

Blocking this information is possible; for example, there are web sites that help you to stop the flow of junk mail through your letterbox. But by creating an impermeable cocoon, home becomes more a space of confinement rather than security.

[6]

A reaction (from industry) to this wall strengthening has been to camouflage both technology and media through disguise or metaphor. Think of the TV or radio concealed as furniture, content that is infomerical, edutainment and advertorial.

The rise of 'stealth media', of taking one form of media and pretending it is another, may inspire products that re-code, instead of de-code.

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6 People already tune their homes through ingenious and often 'Heath Robinsonesque' methods as this North London door shows.

Go to: Guardian Unlimited home ▾ Go

MediaGuardian.co.uk

Home | Advertising | Broadcast | Marketing & PR | Press & publishing | New media | City | Jobs
Monkey | This week | Services | Special reports | Trade round-up | TV overnights | Talk | Quiz

Banana skin

Search this site

[   ] Go
Advanced search

Volkswagen: the mailing campaign that bombed

Julia Day
Wednesday August 8, 2001

The day after the Ealing Broadway bomb, police were called out by an elderly widow to investigate an envelope bearing the words "suspicious package". The boys in blue were none too chuffed to discover the envelope was a direct marketing mailer from Volkswagen, "promoting" its Sharan model.

The Ealing bomb exploded late on Thursday night. The 130,000 mailers were still sent out the following day. Customers were still receiving them on Tuesday. VW claimed there was nothing it could do to stop the mailing system.

VW gained a heap of negative exposure as an irresponsible, cynical and sinister advertiser in its attempt to appear "intriguing".

It should have known better
Last October, in a blaze of publicity, the ASA upheld complaints about Sony PlayStation's tactic of sending envelopes that looked like medical cards marked "Test Results" to 500,000 houses where many sick people were awaiting genuine medical results.
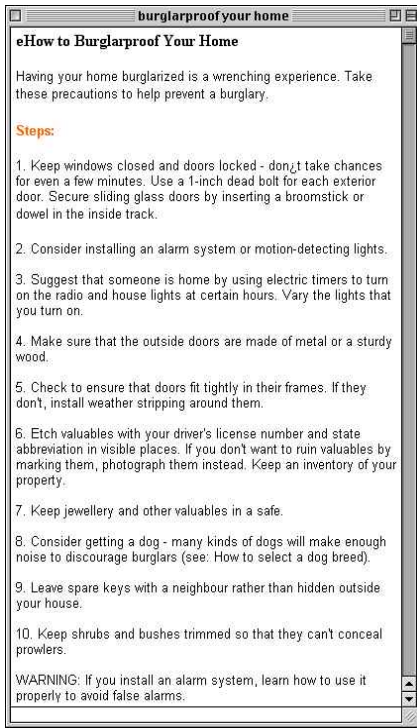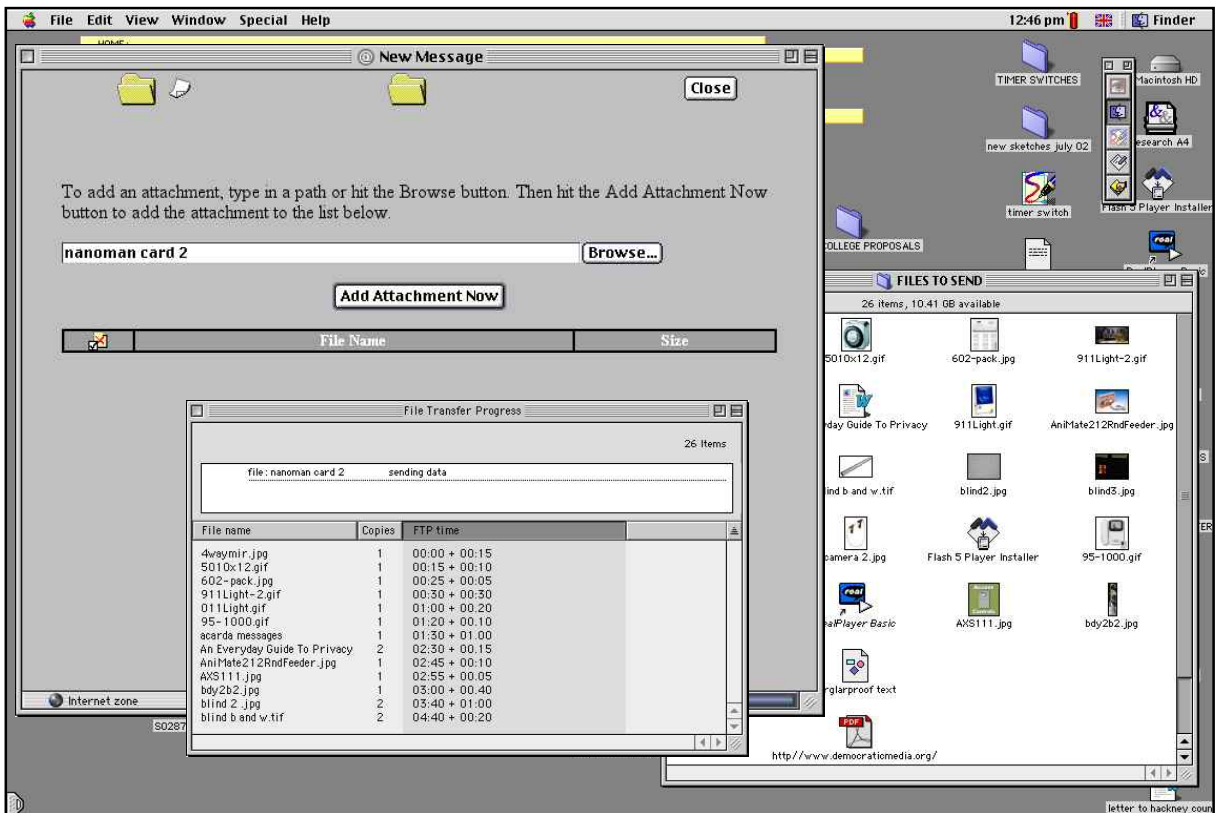
[7]

"Smart homes of the future will help us to lie" [8]. Some people interfere with the output and appearance of their home. They orchestrate the everyday events that happen in their homes to make it appear that they are in when they are not. Domestic events are choreographed. Lights and radios are linked to timer switches. Friends collect mail to stop a build up by the front door. Services could exist to support this 'I am in' mentality in the virtual world. Your telephone may make random calls to lonely phone boxes where no one picks up just to show network activity.

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7 Examples of stealth media from Volkswagen and Sony advertising campaigns.
8 Tony Dunne and Fiona Raby, Design Noir.

burglarproof your home

eHow to Burglarproof Your Home

Having your home burglarized is a wrenching experience. Take these precautions to help prevent a burglary.

Steps:

1. Keep windows closed and doors locked - don¿t take chances for even a few minutes. Use a 1-inch dead bolt for each exterior door. Secure sliding glass doors by inserting a broomstick or dowel in the inside track.

2. Consider installing an alarm system or motion-detecting lights.

3. Suggest that someone is home by using electric timers to turn on the radio and house lights at certain hours. Vary the lights that you turn on.

4. Make sure that the outside doors are made of metal or a sturdy wood.

5. Check to ensure that doors fit tightly in their frames. If they don't, install weather stripping around them.

6. Etch valuables with your driver's license number and state abbreviation in visible places. If you don't want to ruin valuables by marking them, photograph them instead. Keep an inventory of your property.

7. Keep jewellery and other valuables in a safe.

8. Consider getting a dog - many kinds of dogs will make enough noise to discourage burglars (see: How to select a dog breed).

9. Leave spare keys with a neighbour rather than hidden outside your house.

10. Keep shrubs and bushes trimmed so that they can't conceal prowlers.

WARNING: If you install an alarm system, learn how to use it properly to avoid false alarms.

[9]

[10]

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9 Tips on how to burglar-proof your home include using electric timers to choreograph the impression of domestic activities. Timers could be linked to kits such as a 'noisy neighbour kit' where the sound effects of glass breaking and doors slamming are linked to a timer. Other timer kits include a curtain twitcher and a post mover.

10 An example of network activity being choreographed to produce the impression that you are 'at home'. Although we wouldn't leave the house and keep the front door open, with broadband in our homes the internet, and therefore access, is 'always on',always open. This screenshot of a desktop shows a user choreographing network activity. A timer is linked to the File Transfer Process process of sending and recieving files over the internet.
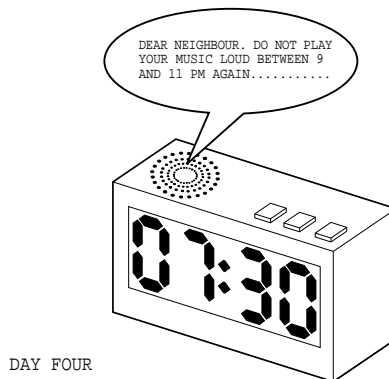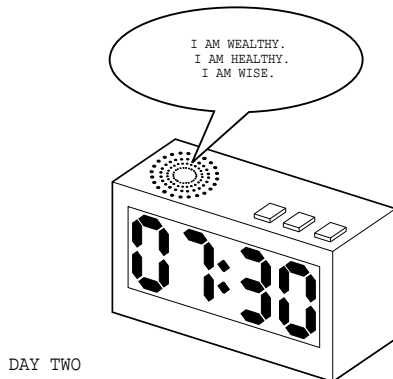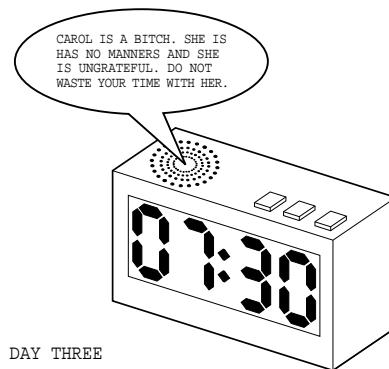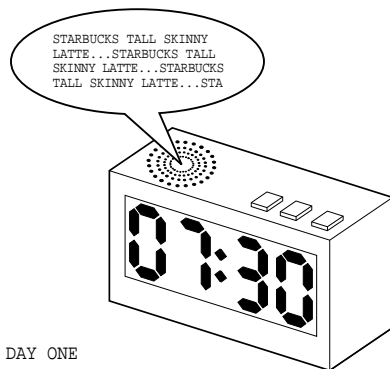
As well as blocking, we may also enhance, invite and amplify this information. How can we design new objects and devices that tune into these spectra in new and different ways? And what kind of new media might be created by objects that re-tune this mediascape?

[11]

11 Objects that invite information - this doormat in Shoreditch, East London.

STARBUCKS TALL SKINNY
LATTE...STARBUCKS TALL
SKINNY LATTE...STARBUCKS
TALL SKINNY LATTE...STA

DAY ONE

CAROL IS A BITCH. SHE IS
HAS NO MANNERS AND SHE
IS UNGRATEFUL. DO NOT
WASTE YOUR TIME WITH HER.

DAY THREE

I AM WEALTHY.
I AM HEALTHY.
I AM WISE.

DAY TWO

DEAR NEIGHBOUR. DO NOT PLAY
YOUR MUSIC LOUD BETWEEN 9
AND 11 PM AGAIN..........

DAY FOUR

[12]

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12 Instructions for an object that invites information: recieve subliminal morning messages using your radio alarm clock. "On
the way to work this morning I had to get off the bus and go to Starbucks. I had a real craving for a tall skinny latte"...

Socialite/Hermit

"Invasions of the home, however home is defined, are experienced as threats to subjective identity...
Responses to invasion are: (a) Lying back and enjoying it --cyberpunk, etc. (b) Strengthening the walls
of the home --'cocooning', and (c) Letting the walls fall, but building new ones further out --the Modernist
project. Electronic utopianism, despite its nomadic rhetoric, follows strategy 'c'"[13]
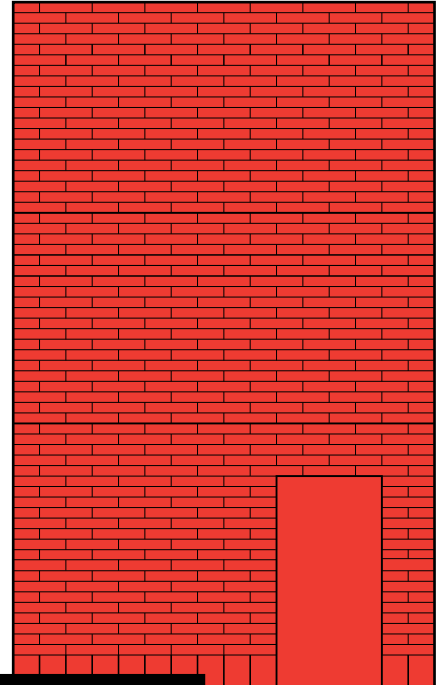
Through the keyhole...
We can enter the homes of two opposing fictional characters, the information socialite and the information
hermit, to see examples of how home lives may have been altered with the influx and transfer of media
and information.

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13 Phil Tabor, Striking Home: The Telematic Assault on Identity
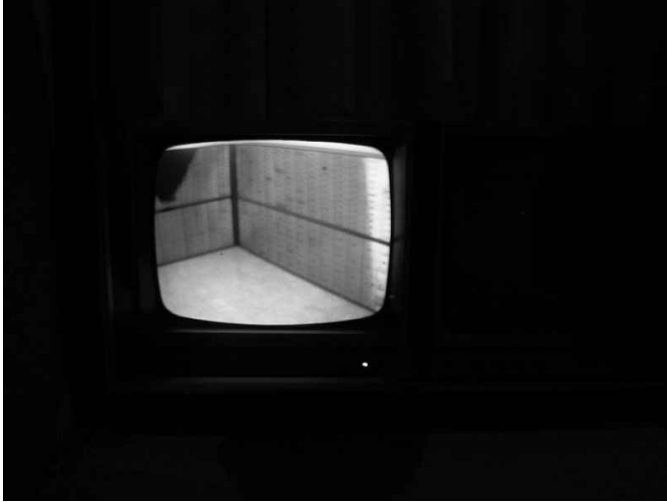
[14]

"Lie back and enjoy it"[15].The information socialite lives in what is effectively a glass house, whose every interior is exposed to the exterior world. Information socialites are broadcast, surrounded and over-available. They bask in this over-exposure and celebrate their removal from solitude as they invite and amplify the push and pull of data over the information threshold. The home of the information socialite is totally wired with technologies that capture, record, store, transmit and recieve. No space is private, for example, video cameras placed around the home are more concentrated in places where safety deposit boxes and luxury items are kept. Live images are then broadcast onto monitors in the street outside turning the passing public into security guards for the property.

14 This photograph shows a security monitor in a bank window in northern Italy. This image on the monitor is of the bank safe.
15 Phil Tabor, Striking Home: The Telematic Assault on Identity

NO CANVASSERS. NO JUNKMAIL. NO SALESPEOPLE. NO FREE NEWSPAPERS. NO FLYERS. NO TRICK OR TREATS. NO CALLERS.

NO CANVASSERS. NO JUNKMAIL. NO SALESPEOPLE. NO FREE NEWSPAPERS. NO FLYERS. NO TRICK OR TREATS. NO CALLERS. NO CANVASSERS. NO JUNKMAIL. NO SALESPEOPLE. NO FREE

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[16]

"Strengthening the walls of the home, creating a cocoon"[17]. The information hermit is marooned at home, unavailable and offline. 'Not at home' in both physical and virtual contexts, the hermit places great importance on solitude and privacy. Dedicated to loneliness and committed to deception, the push and pull of information over the threshold to the home is blocked and concealed by the hermit. Data is shredded and sealed until the hermit becomes contained, reliant on leaks for external contact. On entering the home of the information hermit you will step over the 'small print' doormat that details the types of callers the hermit occupant does not want to recieve. Inside, the doors have rubber seals to prevent the doors closing properly, the tv is covered with a veil, and as the sun goes down the hermit draws the electroluminescent blinds to prevent their shadow being transmitted to the outside world.
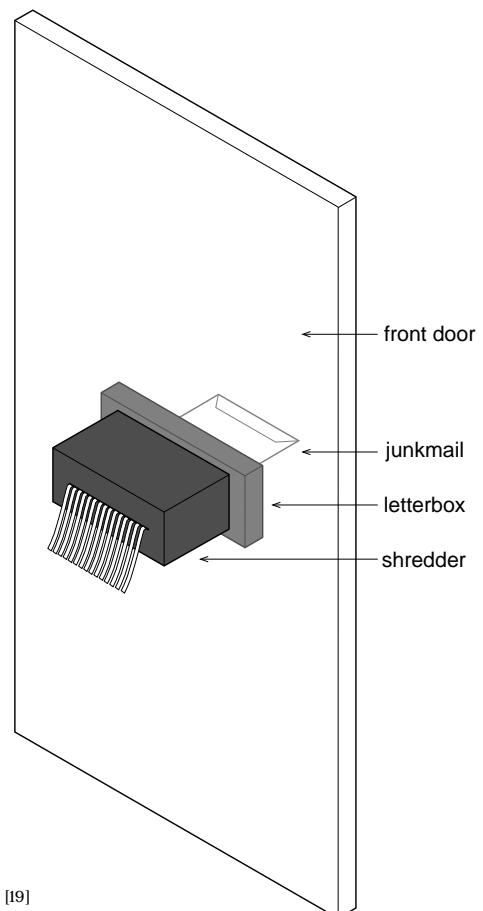
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16 'Small Print' doormat
17 Phil Tabor, Striking Home: The Telematic Assault on Identity

[18]

front door

junkmail

letterbox

shredder

[19]

18 This photograph shows evidence of the hermit from the exterior of his house. Rocks placed on dustbins block any person sorting though their waste information.
19 From the installation instructions for a 'home brew' shredder letterbox - use this device to interfere with information coming into the home.

[20]

[21]

20 Phone you can't pick up. Telecommunication darkness. Eventually the ringing becomes more about musical tones and less about communication...

21 ...and a side effect, or perversion - "Call me, I won't pick up" cards in phone boxes.

[22]

[23]

22 To conceal their physical presence from their immediate neighbours, information hermits use door slam protectors.
23 Evidence of use of an infrared light bulb that will jam remote controls preventing their use, enabling the hermit to have control of the media layer in their home.

THE SENSITIVE HOME

"The English phrase 'at home' means to be at ease with oneself, secure and enclosed. But the phrase also means to be ready to welcome visitors into the home. Home wards off agoraphobia but needs windows to ward off claustrophobia. Electronic windows might admit the light of the 'telematic sublime'"[26].

"Letting the walls fall, but building new ones further out"[27]. The owner of the "sensitive home"[28] has learnt to feel at home in a broader world. This home is a selectively permeable zone where filters are employed to assess, analyse and select information. Subjected to rigourous tests, any information that gets through the membrane has been considered - it is informed. Events outside can be selectively taken in and quietly digested. Similarily, responsive action taken within the home can be refrained from, or carefully targeted and timed.

Such filters and firewalls already exist, for example, the AOL Family Filter and Net Nanny[29] that edit out "harmful" sites such as those containing porn, hate, violence, illegal drugs and gambling. BT also provide services such as 1471 and Caller ID that enable the homeowner to make filtered decisions [30].

These filters enable censorship and efficiency. What would happen if these filters were unfriendly,generating a domestic disturbance? If all input reaches the sensitive home dweller via filter mechanisms that block, edit, select and time, what, then, can be called real?

24 Phil Tabor, Striking Home: The Telematic Assault on Identity
25 ibid
26 Marco Susani, The Sensible Home
27 http://www.netnanny.com/home/home.asp
28 http://www.bt.com