Breakfast, time, and ‘Breakfast Time’: television, food and the household organisation of consumption

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ABSTRACT

Based on the premise that public time, sustained through broadcasting, is central to the social organisation of the home, this article focuses on two components of domestic consumption. Evidence of broadcasting’s embeddedness in domestic organisation suggests that it can provide a framework for sequencing and sustaining household routines. How this is so remains to be fully understood. Being exclusive and extensive, the household presents special difficulties for study. Able to draw on two different but complementary studies that were initiated quite separately from each other, this article illustrates the utility of an ethnographic attitude in the investigation of domestic interiors. The first study was primarily concerned with the study of household television use; the second with the range of forces shaping young people’s conceptions of food and eating. Drawing on empirical material from both these studies, the article takes as its case example the meal known in the West as ‘breakfast’.
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‘[W]hat is occurring in practice worldwide, under the aegis of postmodern capitalism, is the increasing colonization of the times and spaces of people’s everyday lives for the purposes of media audiencehood. But this process shouldn’t be mistaken, in theory, as encompassing our ‘whole way of life’, not even in the postmodern world. Unless we succumb to the fallacy of conceiving modernity as a one-dimensional, totalized reality, then, we must remain sensitive to those spatio-temporal instances when/where the social exceeds the topography of consumption, where/when people enter into modes of interaction (still) not appropriated by, or which cannot be properly understood from the perspective of, their subject position(ing)s as media audiences’. (Ang, 1996: 15).

Introduction

In the preface to their book, Popular culture and everyday life, Miller and McHoul (1998) remark upon the fact that what they call 'mainstream speculative cultural studies' has tended to ignore the everyday. Cultural studies should, they believe, 'go and look at the everyday in its historical particularity and in its utterly mundane character.' (1998: x; emphasis in original). In order to rescue the routine and mundane for analysis Miller and McHoul offer an approach to the study of culture which entails, in part, the empirical observation and analysis of everyday events and activities - such as eating, sport, and using self-help books – in an effort to understand how people go about their lives and make sense of them. Miller and McHoul argue for a study of the ‘pragmatics of everyday life’ that focuses on the ‘templates of techniques that exist, that people know, for doing very ordinary things’ (1998: 31).

For a number of years somewhat similar concerns have registered among those working in specialist areas of the sociology of culture. For obvious reasons, the particular site of empirical interest has been the household. Those working in the sociology of food and eating, and others studying media audiences, for example, have
pointed to the need for research which can chart the everyday of domestic social processes. Beardsworth and Keil (1997), for instance, suggest that changes in the domestic organisation of eating are now key topics for sociological study. The continuing increase in the use of convenience foods and the perceived decline in the culinary skills required for conventional forms of food preparation, they argue, invite us to examine daily domestic life at closer quarters. An understanding of routine patterns of food use in the home can thus help to illuminate the underlying social relationships that shape everyday experience.

Silverstone, in his earlier work on information and communication technologies in the home (Silverstone et al, 1992) showed how revealing a study of domestic relations could be for our understanding of the media’s significance in everyday life. In his recent manifesto for the study of the media, Silverstone, making reference to Berlin (1997), argues strongly that the media should be studied as part of ‘the general texture of experience’ (Silverstone, 1999: 2) and goes on to emphasise the importance of the domestic sphere as a site for such study.

This article\textsuperscript{1} is about the ways in which different components of domestic consumption are organised, intersect and co-exist in everyday life. Strictly speaking, the article is about only two different components of domestic consumption – the mass media and food. These two\textsuperscript{2} however – be they looking at newspapers, listening to the radio or turning on the television on the one hand, and eating, cooking and preparing meals or clearing up afterwards on the other – have a crucial constellation of features in common. Such features revolve around time, scheduling, high frequency, and a degree of regularity, in a manner still deserving to be established empirically. Further, these features entail some relation between ‘private’ and ‘public’ time which thereby becomes implicated in the social organisation of the home.
Our starting-point, then, is an acknowledgement that mundane and everyday consumption has, until quite recently, been neglected empirically. It is also a response to the curious and surprising fact, given its centrality to daily life, that this is especially so in the case of the household.

Several authors (Paterson, 1980; Moores, 1988; Scannell, 1988; 1996) have drawn attention to the way in which broadcasting, of the public world, has become embedded in daily life by being used to help structure and sustain household routines, of the private. Correspondingly, others have discussed the mutual effect of patterns of activity outside the home (notably paid employment and compulsory attendance at school) and the timing and significance of meals inside it (Rotenberg 1981, Murcott 1983).

It is with the question of scheduling and time in mind that we have taken breakfast as our case example – trading, unabashed, on other people’s puns. ‘Breakfast time’ has multiple connotations: a particular time when a meal called breakfast is to begin; a period of time during which it is commonly recognised that this meal may be taken; a part of the day that (in industrialised contexts at least) is still typically spent at home but which is commonly understood can be a prelude to going out; and for many years, the title of a morning BBC television programme (now renamed Breakfast News). In these various senses, breakfast time epitomises the convergence of our theoretical and empirical concerns.

Our purpose in this article is modest, but our wherewithal unexpectedly novel. We locate a sociological consideration of everyday consumption in some of the more recent thinking about mass media use in the home, and offer empirical material illustrating the virtue of what has sometimes been called the ‘ethnographic turn’ in studies of audiences’ reception of mass media output. Arising out of our case
example, we present three substantive aspects to our illustration. The first confirms a portrait of everyday domestic life as fluid, with activities blended together and overlapping. The second reports that household members present themselves as active agents in blending activities, including those to do with mass media outputs or with food, in a fashion that can be independent of any intentions by their manufacturers and purveyors. And the third demonstrates that household members’ descriptions contain evidence of self-conscious, if often semi-explicit, trade-offs between activities within and between different periods of the day.

Our discussion is novel in that we are able to draw on two studies conducted in England only one of which was designed to investigate the domestic use of the mass media, yet – and this is what was unexpected – both of which exemplify and, we propose, confirm, the value of an ethnographic attitude in audience research. The first study concentrated on the household consumption of images and the second was designed to examine the home-based interplay of influences on adolescents’ conceptions of food, eating and dietary attitudes. (We describe both studies in more detail later). As has been argued elsewhere (e.g. Dickinson, 1998), parallels can be seen between the regulation of mass media use in the home and the regulation of household food consumption. If we are seeking to understand the way consumption is organised domestically, it seems to us that the focus on the consumption of a single class of commodities is unduly limiting. Instead we need to examine the extent to which forms of consumption are, or are not, linked and investigate the extent to which modes of household regulation are the same or different for all of them. The present analysis cannot proceed that far, but we anticipate it may provide for future work along such lines.

We should be clear at the outset about our interest in ‘consumption’, as well as our usage of the word. First, our emphasis here is not solely on consumption in the abstract, but on consuming activities in practice. Second, our juxtaposition of the
mass media and food serves as a useful, and overdue, reminder that too often discussions of consumption conflate the literal and the metaphoric. Third, we suggest it is remarkably un-sociological to adopt uncritically what is primarily an economic and/or marketing designation of human activity. In this respect, Alan Warde’s comments on the need to understand the practice of consumption in context are timely. Concluding his book on food, eating and social change he proposes, in effect, that such an understanding provides for processes of social transformation which are over and above ‘mere’ economic activity:

…consumption cannot be reduced to the act of purchase, for much work is involved in adapting commodities for use. Much of the time routine domestic labour turns something not immediately edible or normatively acceptable into something that is socially appropriate … Consumption should not be reduced to shopping.’ (Warde, 1997: 204).

Warde ends his book by calling for greater attention to the ‘situational logic’ of selection – by which he means including in the analysis, the circumstances, setting, and associated social actions – thereby helping move towards more securely sociological understandings.

It is with the ‘situational logic’ of everyday consumption that we are concerned in this article. We see domestic consumption as the active engagement by household members with both items and meanings that are literally and metaphorically manufactured and generated in the world outside the home. Several authors have described how this involves their incorporation and redefinition according to household members’ own values and interests (see, for example, Miller, 1988; Silverstone et al 1992). By bringing a particular time of day and a particular, but everyday, set of consumption practices into focus, our choice of breakfast-time offers, we suggest, the scope for an illuminating analysis of a small but significant part of the ‘situational logic’ of consumption to which Warde refers.
What follows is divided into four. The first two sections locate our research by reviewing, briefly, recent literature on domestic television use in relation to the social and temporal organisation of the household. Then, after a short section describing each study, the central part of the paper presents our three substantive observations via empirical material deriving from both.

**Television and the household**

One of the starting points for the ‘New Audience Research’ in the field of media, communications and culture (see Moores, 1997 for a commentary) can be found in David Morley’s (1986) assertion of the need for audience researchers to separate the study of the ‘what’ of television viewing – the ways in which television content is interpreted and responded to – from the study of the ‘how’ of television viewing – the practice of viewing itself. Effecting this separation, Morley argued, would bring the latter into sharper focus. Attention to the way television is used and how it is viewed would then, in turn, help to provide a framework for an improved understanding of audience responses to different types of television content. To some considerable extent, the tradition is now fairly well charted (for recent reviews see: Seiter, 1999; Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998), Morley’s call for a re-focusing of the research effort on audiences has been taken up and some useful work has now been done on the routines and politics of viewing, highlighting, among other things, the gender and generational dynamics of the home as forces influencing the patterns of domestic viewing (e.g. Geraghty (1990) on women and soap opera; Gray (1992) on women’s use of the domestic video recorder; Gillespie (1995) on television and other media use in a British Sikh community; and Moores (1988; 1996) on the early use of radio and on satellite television).

On several occasions studies of media consumption have brought attention to the parallel that can be drawn between the social relations that characterise food provisioning in the home and those that seem to be a common feature of television
viewing. Moores (1993, 1996, 1997) in his discussions of qualitative audience research makes explicit reference to the work of Charles and Kerr (1988) and their account of the determining influence of gender on the composition and timing of the evening meal. It was a parallel drawn by Goodman (1983) ten years before in her discussion of television and family interaction and a point picked up by Morley (1986) in his study of family viewing. The parallel has interested media sociologists because it seems to offer a way of thinking about the role of the media at the consumption end of the chain of communication which addresses the topic in a way which gives some weight to the idea that media consumption can be thought of as an activity (i.e. that audiences are active rather than passive) and that this activity is shaped by the relations between individuals in the home. It also lends further support to the argument that audience activity is best understood in context (i.e. where it takes place and how it fits in), the assumption being that if we understand more of this then we will know much more about the wider significance of the media in modern life (and ultimately the exercise of their ideological and definitional power).

All well and good, but what can we make of the observation that media consumption is like food consumption? We want to suggest that by looking at both forms of consumption and the way they are organised (or rather, as we propose later, *un-*organised) together in the home we can perhaps begin to gain some further understanding of the sociology of domestic life. One way to do this is to look at the linkages between meal times and viewing times and the way people as members of households respond to them, and interact and negotiate with each other about them, as having some regulatory role in domestic life. This is based on the view that it is helpful to think of media technologies such as television as playing a mediating role between the private world of the home and the public world outside.

One of the most fully realised pieces of research taking up Morley’s suggestion to focus on the ‘how’ of television viewing (and one which involved Morley himself)
was that led by Roger Silverstone at Brunel University (Morley and Silverstone, 1990; Silverstone, 1991; Silverstone et al, 1991). The Brunel project on the domestic consumption of communication and information technologies was trying not only to explore the television audience in the home but also to take into account the broader communication environment of the home created by the ‘new’ communication and information technologies. This was because these technologies – the home computer, the video recorder, the video game – these authors argued, threatened to transform ‘the social and cultural environment in which television is received and appropriated’ (Silverstone, 1991: 136). The resulting research examined in some depth the daily practices of communication and information technology use and began to provide an account of the ‘embeddedness’ of media use in everyday life. Advances in the way ‘audiences’ are approached theoretically and empirically were effected in the process. But it might also be argued that, precisely because media use was their main preoccupation, in taking up the call to focus on the practice of media use the Brunel study and the others just mentioned have been unable to link their work fully with an exploration of the wider context of household routines and practices into which media use has become embedded.

**Media use, the moral economy of the household, and time**

Silverstone et al’s work is relevant in the present context because of its recognition of the importance of, and its attempt to build a theoretical framework for understanding the ‘social and economic order of the household’ (Silverstone et al, 1992: 15). The authors argue that the significance of communication technologies lies in their role in providing links between and within households and between households and the outside world. They propose the concept of the ‘moral economy of the household’ as an ‘integrative frame’ for thinking about household practices and relations and the consumption and use of information and communications technologies.
Silverstone *et al* argue that ‘to become functional, a technology has to find a place within the moral economy of the household, specifically in terms of its incorporation into the routines of daily life’ (1992: 20) They also suggest that once incorporated, a technology may facilitate ‘control’ over time - it may enable some times to be ‘better spent’; as they put it:

‘Television provides a framework both for the household’s involvement in the sequencing of public time…and for the sustaining of domestic routines through the broadcast schedules’ (1992: 24).

A focus on breakfast we propose is strategic in understanding the interrelations between different fields of consumption. As we shall see, these work through the moral economy of the household in varied, complex, and surprising ways.

Silverstone and his colleagues implicitly build on their earlier work (Morley & Silverstone 1990) where they sought to arrive at an understanding of the way in which television is integrated into the domestic flow of everyday life. Domestic flows were the explicit object of analysis in more recent work by Petrie and Willis (1995) designed to track the viewing behaviour of a sample of the British television audience. The intention was, in part, to find out ‘how viewing is located in space and time, both physical and social’ (Petrie and Willis 1995:4), something which in turn entails an understanding of how television is ‘embedded in the multiplicity of activities and encounters which constitutes daily routine’ (1995:5).

Frequently in this and similar work cited above reference is made to the television schedule’s role as a structuring force in the routines and patterns of daily life. The patterning of media use according to time is a clear illustration of the way in which domestic media consumption is articulated with the wider social context. This was most famously elaborated in Bausinger’s (1984) description of the Meier family and their media-related social interaction. Bausinger’s point was that the media can be thought of as a link between domestic routines and the organisation of the schedule of
daily life. Some authors have discussed this in relation to the media’s role in the sequencing of domestic duties that help to give shape to daily life. In fact Morley suggests that this should be made an explicit focus of media research:

‘the concern within media studies with questions of broadcasting’s representational or ideological role should be supplemented by a parallel concern with broadcasting’s role in the social organisation of time’.

(Morley, 1992: 266)

He goes on to acknowledge that the scheduling of time according to the needs of industrial production influences the organisation of broadcasting at the same time as broadcasting itself influences the organisation of time.

‘Broadcasting and other technologies of communication must be seen both as entering into already constructed, historically specific divisions of space and time, and also as transforming those pre-existing divisions’.


Just how this transformation takes place remains an empirical question – one that lies beyond the scope of the studies on which the present article is based. There is sufficient in what follows, however, to offer a suggestion of the benefits of such empirical work to our understanding of everyday experience.

The Studies

Studying the social dynamics of domestic interiors is notoriously difficult in westernised societies where the home is a geographical site for several types of activity and to which others can legitimately be denied entrance. Regarding the home as a type of sanctuary is bolstered by highly valued notions of privacy and claims to certain types of freedom and rights. It is one of the social settings that is particularly impervious to sociological or social anthropological observation. Examining the nature of the activities which take place within it together with uncovering the nature
of its social organisation, variations in the form, type or valuation of the social interaction among its members, has to rely on data collected at one or more remove from the occasions of its occurrence, and sometimes even from the setting itself. The character and quality of a great many social aspects of the household elude ready sociological investigation. As in the studies on which this paper draws, commonly there is no technical alternative to reliance on some form of interview data.

The studies were conducted almost contemporaneously in 1996-7 and 1997-8, in Leicester (a city in the East Midlands of England) and London respectively. Not part of the original design of either, the present collaboration arose fortuitously by virtue of shared membership of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food’s (MAFF) ‘Food Choice and Acceptability’ programme. Part of a larger project, the Leicester study comprised twelve households consisting of two adults (mother/stepmother, father/stepfather) and at least one child between the ages of 11 and 18 years. Most contained younger children as well. Each household was visited on three occasions. Interviews were unstructured but made use of an aide memoire so that a number of themes could be pursued in all cases. At the first interview, which involved parents only, the aim was to explain how the research would proceed and to obtain data about household eating habits, attitudes to food and eating, the household’s use of television and their daily patterns of viewing. The second and third interviews involved the whole household. The London study consisted primarily of forty unstructured interviews (conducted either in school or at home) with an opportunistic sample of young people aged between 12 and 17, and a further ten interviews with parents. Those included in both studies came from households across a wide income range. Interviews in both studies were audio-tape recorded, transcribed verbatim, and prepared for analysis using text searching computer software/word-processing software.
In approaching the analysis of our data, both research teams were struck by the manner in which those interviewed characterised this time of day. In this we concur fully with Hermes’s (1995) observations about research into ‘mundane’ media use and its apparent meaninglessness. Overall – i.e. not just in their reports about the mornings – it was rare, without directing questioning, for either set of interviewees to raise the topic of television use or of advertising in general, let alone any specifically food-related coverage or commercials. And even then, probing gently was insufficient to get them to expound on the topics. Thus, as we observe later, we are led to the same view as Hermes that either our interviewees regard such usage as comparatively unimportant and not especially noteworthy, or it is so commonplace that it merges into an unnoticed background of the daily round – which is not the same as saying it is insignificant. Interviewees’ portrayal of the early part of a typical day caught our attention, not least because in key respects it well illuminated the previously noted characterisation of domestic life as a flow in which the use of mass media outputs is embedded, and because it bears out the virtue of adopting an ethnographic attitude to the investigation of forces shaping dietary habits and attitudes. We present the analysis of our material from the point of view of interviewees’ portrayal, seeking to preserve the data in the terms in which they first struck us\(^4\). In this way, we aim to convey a sense of that very embeddedness, one of the features of everyday domestic life which, as noted above, is peculiarly elusive.

**Breakfast time: getting up and getting out**

‘I get up and go out’ (Mr D)

‘I’m straight up, shower, shave, out’ (Mr C)

It is highly likely that we (reader, authors, as well as those taking part in both studies) will reckon to have little difficulty making sense of these terse quotations from interviews with two fathers in the Leicester study. In a very few words indeed, each
man can be heard to be saying very many things. The first is their reference to a set of activities that each is almost bound to engage in. Just some of those things the two words ‘get up’ convey begin with climbing out of bed, perhaps donning some clothing and/or foot wear, walking across the room, opening the door, visiting the lavatory and/or bathroom for several purposes, at some stage probably removing all clothing that had been worn in bed and putting on a completely different set of clothes, some of which are likely to be unworn since they were last laundered. A laboured catalogue perhaps, but it reminds us not only of the sheer number of activities ‘get up’ stands in for, but also how familiar they are – so much so that it seems odd to write them out.

What these fathers can also be heard to be referring to is two further sets of activities, one which they are saying they definitely do not engage in, and a third about which they give no clue. The first is anything to do with eating, or food acquisition, preparation or clearing away. Both men, we take it, can be presumed to be declaring that they are omitting a stage, a stage that conventionally can be understood otherwise to come somewhere between waking up and leaving the house, a stage in which (putting it in somewhat dated or formal terms) people break their overnight fast, or (stated as more modern shorthand) in which people ‘have breakfast’. The other is a range of activities that could be undertaken between climbing out of bed and setting off for the day’s commitments out of the home, a range which, of course, includes watching television or a video, listening to the radio or a CD – and increasingly possible from home, even surfing the net – but could recognisably also include reading a child a story, doing some homework, putting rubbish out for collection, washing a floor, phoning an elderly relative or the plumber. What distinguished this other range of activities is that they are not, as conventionally understood, essential to the ‘getting out’ that succeeds the ‘getting up’.
There is yet more each man is saying. Anyone familiar with the history of industrialised societies that entailed the separation of home and work, is liable to interpret ‘go out’ not just as physically leaving the house, not just moving from one form of social organisation to quite another, from private time to public, but also, when following the phrase ‘getting up’, to be identifying a time period. Moreover, it is a time period in key respects not defined by the man himself, but by the imperatives of his employment, a matter of work discipline (Thompson, 1967). Neither man, however, is specifying how long that period is, though they can be taken to be hinting at something of the quality of their experience of that time period. Their judgement of the experience can also be traced to questions of work discipline, since it can be taken that failure to keep to time is sanctionable, or at least conventionally requires a plausible explanation. Further, each man can also be understood to be implying (as already indicated) that more than one set or type of activities is possible during that time period. And they are implying that there is a certain order involved. Getting up precedes going out. That the latter succeeds the former is in only in part, albeit an important if not inevitable part, temporal; it also implies something consequential that derives from a necessary sequence, even something causal in the relation between them.

In this central part of our article we concentrate on setting out our data elaborating such commonplace features of the morning. The data are presented as a composite picture, bringing together material from both studies. It needs to be remembered that neither study was designed to investigate breakfast, time or, come to that, breakfast-time. The London study used the device of inviting informants to ‘take me through yesterday’ largely to get the interviews going, yielding reasonable, though varying, amounts of material about the early part of the day. The Leicester study asked about mealtimes and the patterns of daily viewing. It is possible that, between them, these investigative strategies have had the effect of over-emphasising the temporal and processual. Equally, though, an emphasis on time and timetables is plausibly a feature
of the common experience of this period of the day, and a stress on timing is plausibly a convenient mode of reporting it. In any case, it is likely that what happens between getting up and getting out is such a commonplace to both those being interviewed and those undertaking the interviews, that as much may have been taken for granted and left unsaid than was spelled out or asked about.

Our purpose in presenting these data is to show how they expose and illuminate three features of domestic life which prominently emerge from both studies’ material. The first is its nature as a flow, with activities as likely to overlap and blend into one another; the next that household members themselves are liable to blend in both television or other mass media outputs and food as part of that flow, making use of them rather than being dictated to in some fashion by them or some putative need for them; and third, that there are quite complex decisions being made, trading-off possible sets of activities within and between various periods of the day, decisions that are often left half-stated or treated as self-evident.

Breakfast time defined
The quality, the nature of informants’ experience of the period between getting up and getting out is that it is hurried, pressured, even frantic. There is a series of tasks to be accomplished in a set time period, with either not quite enough time for them all easily to be achieved, or the sense that there is no time to intersperse them with a pause or with doing anything else than that deemed necessary to getting up and getting out.

(W)e’re just so busy charging around trying to get ready to go to work… it’s a blaze of activity for an hour until ten to eight and then it’s out the door…” (Family R).

In addition to such references to the manner in which they experience it, informants quite explicitly defined this period of the day in terms of time. Some, of course, mentioned clock time:
'my husband… has his breakfast at about half past six… I get up at about quarter to seven, and I cook breakfast for Carol who has to be out of the house before seven thirty…’ (O)

and another defined it with reference to weekly periodicities:

during the week… usually has it (breakfast) separately… and at weekends we’re more likely to have breakfast together, or we sometimes go out for breakfast at the weekend. (M)

In other words, weekdays differ from weekends, and also from holidays, in terms of timing and, it should be noted also in terms of meals and menus – described with relish, ‘fry-ups’ are a weekend or holiday indulgence – and in terms of who is present and/or gets actually to sit down at the table.

This is not to say, though, that weekdays are uniformly the same. Apart from oversleeping which starts the period later than intended, and shiftwork which varies its end, secondary school start-times can alter from day to day:

‘(I)t’s different every day. Cos on Monday I don’t have to be in till the second lesson, which means I’ll leave at about twenty past nine. And on Tuesday I leave at ten to ten. And Wednesday I’ll leave at half past eight cos I have to be at the other school. And on Friday it’ll be ten past nine cos I don’t have to be there until twenty past nine so it’s always changing. (S)

A further way of defining the period is by itemising the (predictable) range of activities actually mentioned by those we interviewed: turning off the alarm clock, getting out of bed, washing/showering and dressing, cooking/preparing food (either for immediate or later consumption), eating, turning on the television, reading the newspaper, listening to the radio, as well as going for a run, ironing, catching up with paperwork, chivvying and/or providing for (eg dinner money, packed lunch) children. Only the first few are self-evidently peculiar to the beginning part of a typical day.
In all, it is in these terms which our studies confirm a common understanding that defines breakfast time less as a single hour of the clock and more as a period of time that stretches between what might be called the marker points of getting out of bed and going out of the house. We now turn to consider the scheduling of activities between that pair of markers.

**Breakfast time and scheduling: coordinated as a ‘flow’**

Certainly, of their nature, some breakfast-time activities are bound to precede others\(^6\) and physiological imperatives are just that, imperatives with their own schedule that require attention no matter what else is happening or is of interest at the time. Beyond that, the order in which people carry out the many activities they mentioned is a matter governed by social convention; so too is the question of whether or not people dispense with some tasks or activities altogether – social convention itself may cater for the relaxation of more strongly prescribed conventions of other eras. Overall, our data confirm that these conventions are liable to be informal rather than formal, and that social organisational features of the household allow for the solitary as well as the concerted, even though creating the possibility of the solitary is provided for by a concerted underpinning. And the sense of time that our data convey of the period between getting up and going out, is one of fluidity rather than more rigid structure.

The informal and the solitary are illustrated by when and where people say they eat, underscored by a felt need for speed which is to be achieved by dint of ‘multi-tasking’ – all contributing to the sense of fluid rather than rigid organisation. Women \(^7\) eat standing up in between preparing others’ food, be it their breakfast or packed lunches. Children eat up in their rooms while getting themselves ready. Adults and children carry toast, tea or cereal through to the living room to watch TV; one son will get dressed ‘and everything’ before coming down, but the other will ‘come down and tuck into his breakfast and watch the telly first’ (Mrs H).
Jeremy, a 13 year old boy, provided an especially vivid picture of the ingenious way he interweaves his morning activities:

I wake up, set the alarm clock for - quarter to seven. Then turn the TV on. Crawl into my bed, cos the TV's in my bedroom. Crawl into my bed, and I stay in bed, like, getting the TV to wake me up. Then at… seven-o'clock I'd like, go downstairs, run the shower, get in the shower...Go back upstairs, get dry, like still watching TV. Then at ten past, I'm like, I've got a few clothes on. Go downstairs, cos like, the, the kitchen is directly below my bedroom, so I go downstairs… get some cereal, go back upstairs. Kind of watch the TV. Go downstairs, like, and just go off to school about - quarter to eight, something like that. (U)

Jeremy lives in a two-person household with his father. Although there is a good deal of contact between them in their ordinary daily round, he is able to organise his own weekday early mornings, since his father is up late at night and so, in Jeremy’s words ‘usually sleeps in the morning.’

One of those who conveys a comparatively strong sense of structured routine to his weekday mornings is Tim, a boy who, at 17 is rather older than most of the other teenagers in either study:

…usually up at around 8 o’clock, and I’d have breakfast almost straight away, when I get up. And I usually have quite a lot… in contrast to most other people my age I know… I always have the basic sort of cereal… I also have like fruit, I always have orange juice, I always have tea and I always have something cooked after that as well… I don’t think a lot of people from what I know, will eat breakfast. They’ll usually be up later, in order to get that extra 20 minutes… in bed… and then just shoot straight (out). I don’t think there’s any fixed routine for those kind of people (my age). (R)

It is not so much that he draws quite detailed attention to what he says he eats for breakfast that makes Tim’s comments noteworthy. It is his readiness to recite what he typically does in the mornings, and that it is reported and experienced as structured i.e. deliberately and purposefully scheduled, and, moreover, that he considers his own
differs somewhat, and is perhaps even superior to, other types of arrangement, which makes this case stand out.

Whether this is indeed unusual cannot be judged, at least from our studies neither of whose research designs are appropriate to that type of question. In any case, it is possible to argue that truncating the number of activities or doing them in varying orders from one day to the next is not automatically tantamount to the absence of fixed routine. The routine itself may consist in being flexible. So saying is just as plausible an interpretation of the manner in which others described this period of the morning. It is, then, important not to assume that the informality and fluidity of breakfast-time automatically signifies a carelessness, or even the absence of routine. Rather, we suggest, there are elements in the data which suggest that informality as we have called it here, is consciously adopted as the most suitable means of successfully achieving getting-up-and-out for the whole household.

Taken overall, the picture that emerges from the data is of an underlying sense of the concerted and co-operative amongst household members which provides for, indeed even at selected times during the breakfast time period requires, solitary activity. This serves as a means of co-ordinating the smooth scheduling in finite spaces (one kitchen, or, notably, one bathroom per dwelling unit) and set period of time. Mr G in Leicester explained that breakfast is not a family event:

…(O)ne bathroom… and there are six people and if you were to try and actually co-ordinate it, one person sat around for an hour waiting for breakfast, they’re all capable of knowing where the cereals are kept and the toaster is and they tend to make that themselves. Sarah will get through two or three bowls of cereal if she’s that way inclined in a morning. Jonathan, if you throw it at him as he’s going out the door, he’ll cope with that. Chris is fairly good, he’ll come and do his own thing… in the morning.

Instead, it is deliberately co-ordinated in order to allow each person license to ‘make that themselves’ in the interests of speed and efficiency.
Thus the image is of each individual with their own trajectory passing alongside others, sometimes meeting for a bit (no doubt now and then colliding, literally) and sharing space, time and activity, though sometimes not meeting at all, between each person’s own ‘getting up and getting out’. A strong sense of such a mode of social organisation is conveyed for another of the Leicester households (Family A) where several life-course changes had highlighted shifts in how breakfast time was arranged. The most notable changes were from a period when all the children were still at school – the implication being that thereby their ‘getting out’ time was the same – and later the employment start time for one of the children was markedly out of line with the others’. Initially, as Mr A recalled:

At one time… it was a bit like a transport cafe. You used to sit down to this whacking great ongoing meal. They were big meals, really at breakfast.

Mrs A elaborated:

I think… with breakfast… circumstances change because everybody is up at different times. They were all at school then weren’t they? so they all got up together, um, but as they started work and things like that they were all going out and getting up at different times so then they started seeing to themselves really… we had the eldest son, he was a postman and he was getting up at half four in the morning and there was no way I was going to get up at half four in the morning to cook him breakfast…

From being a sit-down meal all together, breakfast had been transformed in that household to, as Mrs A described it, the one meal a day when ‘everyone sees to themselves’.

Breakfast time and scheduling: itself part of a flow

The flow of domestic life during the period between getting up and getting out illustrates not just a fluidity in the order in which people do things, or whether they get done at all, but also a sense of trading off some activities that are deemed less
desirable or inessential against those that are considered preferable or more pressing. By the same token, the sense of flow and trade-offs between activities is not, of course, confined to breakfast time and can extend either side of it. There is some relation between what happens during breakfast time and what happens before and after that period.

Very deliberately, one of the quotations – from the interview with Mr and Mrs C – placed at the head of this paper’s central section was shorn of significant elements of its context. The family’s enjoyment of a ‘fry up’ is under general discussion. Although bacon and egg is something of a favourite, it is not something they have very often, except sometimes on a Saturday. At which point, Mr C explains that he does not eat breakfast, not even toast and then goes on to make the ‘up and out’ remark already quoted. It is what comes next that illuminates the main point of the present section, namely that breakfast time itself must not taken out of the context of daily life. The next remark in the interview comes from Mrs C who immediately explains:

He eats his breakfast at work

followed directly by Mr C’s elaboration:

I probably have a drink about nine o’clock from a vending machine. If I make myself some sandwiches to take I have to leave them in the car or else I’ll eat them. So by nine o’clock I’ll have a drink and if I’ve got my sandwiches with me, then otherwise I have to go out to the corner shop and get a couple of cobs…

Entirely the opposite arrangement is also evident – illustrating the rationale for some people’s judging breakfast the most important meal of the day. Mr E goes for a run in the very early morning, describing himself as a ‘big breakfast eater’, unlike the rest of the family who eat ‘small breakfasts’. It might be expected that running several miles beforehand would be sufficient reason for a hearty breakfast. But later in the conversation, Mrs E adds that he doesn’t often have lunch. Mr E agrees:
Yes, I skip lunch either because I’m sort of working or you know I haven’t got time, so I have a big breakfast and it sort of lasts me through the day then.

Time and again, interviewees talked, virtually in passing, of several thoughtful calculations they seemed commonly to make about what happened during breakfast time in relation to what did happen or was to happen later in the day. To present only a few: a London parent observes that ‘I do find if I have breakfast I’m less ravenous at lunchtime’ (Mrs N). Another says of her son (Mrs P)

He doesn’t have breakfast, so he goes to school and I… usually make him a sandwich and he has a packet of crisps and something sweet. And he gets a pound.

and a 12 year old girl who usually makes her own packed lunch

… today I had school dinners, cos I got up too… a bit too late and I had to leave early so my mum gave me money for dinners (Q)

while a 14 year old girl explains

(W)ell, I wouldn’t have anything on the way to school. Most of the time – sometimes if I would um, might be cos I’d skipped breakfast by accident or something. You know…if I had woken up late or something (Y).

Though eating is one of the activities that can be and is traded off between breakfast time and a later part of the day, there are several smaller but telling additional factors those interviewed took into account. In the process, it was evident that on the basis of parental advice combined with their own practical experience, one or two of the adolescents were reporting they were working out for themselves quite how such trade-offs could best be accomplished. A florid example is provided by a 13 year old girl who explained that she only has breakfast at weekends, because eating in the morning on school days ‘makes me feel sick afterwards’ (W).
Contingencies of longer periodicities are evident too. Though another 12 year old girl sometimes skips breakfast if she ‘wakes up late’ and then just has to ‘rush out of the house’, she might ordinarily buy a packet of crisps at first break, but not at the moment now that she is saving for Christmas. At the same time, she finds little difficulty agreeing with her mother about breakfast’s being

the most important meal of the day… otherwise I could faint or something, if I ain’t eaten it… I just have breakfast if I can… cos I get hungry in the middle of the day… you might have to make it through the day and wait until the end of the day like, for something to eat (X).

Concluding comments: breakfast time, using the mass media

Our data, we propose, portray domestic life, at least at this strategically chosen time of day, as a ‘flow’ of events, of people moving around one another to accomplish a variety of activities that are interwoven and ‘embedded’ in the whole. Food related activity and mass media use are all referred to in matter-of-fact fashion, in passing, reported unselfconsciously as blended into household members’ particular style of ‘getting up and getting out’. Indeed, we strongly suspect that, as we ourselves have done, readers will recognise reflections of their own personal mornings in our interviewees’ portrayals of theirs – never mind recollecting Bausinger’s Meier household. While the details may vary, the ‘principles’ of domestic social organisation look remarkably familiar.

In like vein, though precise use of the mass media varies from household to household, familiar principles, including the moral economic, are evident in the snapshots of everyday life interviewees provided for us. The use of the media as source of extra-household information and its scheduling for structuring domestic time is threaded throughout the data of both studies. Interviewees report inventive, if well-known uses of one or other medium: as alternatives; serially, moving in their time not programming time from one to another; using more than one at the same
time; using only one to compensate for the slowness of using another – yielding in the process echoes of familiar compromises as to who selects which channel or which medium: ‘when Dad (who prefers BBC) goes out we have ITV on’ (Mrs A). And periodicities in defining breakfast time are echoed in a father’s explanation of his daughter’s not watching morning television during the week, but at weekends she might well ‘have breakfast in front of the TV’ – adding, as if an after thought, ‘if she’s having breakfast’; yet, as her mother interjected, on weekdays ‘she’s got [BBC] Radio One on in the morning, Chris Evans’.

Now and then there are indeed direct reports of public time being pressed into the service of private life: in, for instance, granting permission for younger children to watch cartoons as respite for adults: ‘she watches them when we want her to shut up and leave us alone (Family F). What also needs to be noted, though, is the variant in which household members are reported to be too engrossed in busily getting up and getting out to watch television at all. Mrs G was emphatic: ‘if the television was on in the mornings I would never get the four of them out of the door.’

All the while, though, we find the portrait of breakfast time contained in our data confirms that, along with the presence or absence of mass media use, is the interweaving of all manner of elements of the private realm of domestic life and their relation to other elements across the day in the world outside the home. Juggling with time, ‘multi-tasking’ and taking into account what preceded breakfast time and what is to come, is well illustrated by Mrs N who, explaining she avoids eating ‘on the hoof’ and is prepared for eating taking time, declares:

I can’t sit on my own and… just eat. So I have the radio on, and I’m reading a paper, and then… it takes me a long time. So I end up often not having it.
Further, deciding against committing that time was affected, on the day she was interviewed, by the fact that she had overslept, coupled with knowing that she was due to have lunch with her colleagues.

In presenting our material we have taken care, given that our collaboration arose after-the-event, to ensure that parallels between media use and food use are only lightly drawn. Future studies might usefully be intentionally designed to examine parallels in closer detail. For now, we have left that parallel in terms of the simple, if provocative, juxtaposition of the two, originally separate studies. Most particularly, that juxtaposition bears out the manner in which household members present themselves, not as passive consumers of either media output or foods but as active agents incorporating them on their terms into the mundane, fluidly and informally organised accomplishment of other imperatives and purposes both behind and beyond the front door.

References


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**Notes**

1. The first author took the lead on this paper as a whole, and on writing the second, third and fourth sections; the second undertook the analysis of the data, developed their interpretation and took the lead on writing the central section; the third and fourth authors undertook a large part of the data collection and data handling.

2. We anticipate that future work would cover others – eg clothing, ‘white goods’, information- and other domestic-technologies, furniture and furnishings, utilities, books – without, in broad terms, disturbing the contentions presented here.

3. We are grateful to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF) for funding both studies, as well as for facilitating the collaboration on which this article is based.

4. The need to observe word limits here means that we have compressed the presentation of the data by reducing the number of cases from which verbatim quotation is made. No attempt has been made to capture conversational features or other characteristics of interviewees’ talk, such as regional accent in
the presentation of our data. Each household has been uniquely referenced; those marked with a letter between A-L are in the Leicester study, those M-Z in London.

5. Less clear is whether this includes a sub-set of any activities to do with taking a drink. Given the physiological need for water which, in terms of frequency, has a greater urgency than the need for food, it is perhaps unlikely, though unknown, whether (m)any people embark on the daily round without quenching their thirst. So fundamental is this need that taking a drink of water is highly unlikely to be mentioned in responses to interviews or noticed – except by the most assiduous of participant observers – without its being a self-conscious topic of investigation.

6. It is hard to imagine someone in the ordinary way of things dressing for the day before they have removed items they specifically designate night-clothes.

7. Women are far and away more likely, in our data, to be reported to cook for others than any other household member.