How will the Internet influence family relations and change perceptions of home and community? The Wired Homestead, edited by Joseph Turow and Andrea L. Kavanaugh, is a compilation that aims to explore these issues. The book brings together 21 essays to represent what the authors claim as the current state of knowledge about the Internet and family. The result is a diverse set of articles for the purpose of provocation and future research. Turow & Kavanaugh acknowledge this research area is underrepresented in the overall discourse of Internet research, emphasizing that “the aim here is not so much to present definitive data but to present provocative ideas on topics of importance” (p. 18).

Why does the Internet’s influence on home and family represent a significant research area? In the book’s introductory chapter, Turow & Kavanaugh discuss how the Internet’s capacity for enhanced interaction, personalization, and information abundance creates several new issues for the family and home, calling into question the ideas of home and community, traditional distinctions between public and private, and several social issues involving gender, income, and crime.

The articles in this book are a combination of previously published works and new essays, organized into four sections. Part 1, “The New World in Context,” features five articles that examine conceptual frameworks and historical perspectives that could be applied to research on the Internet and family. Several articles acknowledge past media effects research, particularly in studies of television effects at home. But although research practices in television research can certainly be applied to studies on the Internet and home, the articles in this section seem content to discuss the similarities between television and the Internet, missing the opportunity to ask how Internet research can grow and expand from past research on television. An exception to this comment is Ellen Seiter’s article “Television and the Internet,” which makes an attempt to bridge television and Internet research, suggesting that ethnography may provide the context needed to understand the motivations and disincentives related to using computers.

The second part, “On Parents and Kids,” consists of a varied collection of essays that examine two different streams: parental issues with the Internet, and the integration of the Internet into traditional family relations. Maria Papadakis’ article, “Data on Family and the Internet,” emphasizes the need to critically examine any research findings on what the Internet may mean for family values, stating that these findings remain questionable, contradictory, and inconclusive. Amy B. Jordan puts forward family systems theory as a method to understand the Internet’s presence in the existing “media mix” already at home, arguing along the lines of Berger & Luckmann (1966) that “the reality of everyday life maintains itself by being embodied in routines” (p. 142). The aforementioned articles are combined with discussions of family media use and effects in Europe and issues often covered in the mainstream press (sex and pornography, addiction, cybercrime, information privacy).

Part 3, “The Wired Homestead and Online Life,” focuses on the implications of Internet use associated with people’s daily activities and the spatial dimensions of home. David Frohlich, Susan Dray, and Amy Silverman author the only article in the book that discusses user research and domestic computing. This perhaps is because such studies are rare. The authors still identify Csikszentmihalyi’s & Rochberg-Halton’s 1977 study (1981) of 82 families in Chicago as a pioneering study in the area of domestic user research. And while Catherine Burke and Lisa-Jane McGerty each emphasize that the issue of gender has not vanished in domestic computing spaces, their articles lack the depth needed to discuss the possible effects. What is evident throughout the entire section is the lack of research on
Internet use and the domestic environment. While efforts have been made (for example, see Lally, 2002), it is the research gaps identified in this section that are most valuable.

The final section of the book, “The Wired Homestead and Civic Life,” looks at community. Notions of public and private and research into the Internet’s role in community are key themes. In Jorge Reina Schement’s insightful article on the interplay between home, community, and new media, he comes to the ominous conclusion that “as Americans carve out home-centered, individualistic, information-heavy approaches to their personal lives, they are by-passing traditional community and the public sphere” (p. 418). This conclusion is countered by Kavanaugh’s study of the Blacksburg Electronic Village in Virginia, and Keith Hampton and Barry Wellman’s research at Toronto’s Netville, where early research results found that the Internet may support social community ties. Research on the Internet’s influence on community is inconclusive, but the final section of the book offers several theoretical and practical research directions for future exploration.

The Wired Homestead is one of the first of what should be several books on the Internet, family, and home. Although this research area is currently underrepresented, it is increasingly becoming a topic of interest in academic and industry circles. Our own research on the history of technology in the home has identified three pivotal phases in the transformation of domestic space: first, the introduction of physical privacy (walls); second, the adoption of lighting and especially electricity; and third, the widespread use of communication technologies in the home. While privacy and electricity allowed for divisions of space at home, the third phase marked the introduction of the outside world into the home, bypassing physical walls and doors. The “wired” home and its promise of being an always-on communications hub may have the potential to pierce these walls in the opposite direction, with the house reaching out into the community and wider world. This may very well result in another phase in domestic life.

This book represents a good multidisciplinary compilation that introduces the key debates and questions surrounding Internet research on the home. It is a useful starting point for researchers and undergraduate or graduate students, while also being lucid enough for the general reader. But technology continues to advance and influence domestic life. In addition to the issues covered in this book, the increasing popularity of wireless Internet technologies and the increasing mobility of individuals are creating new research questions related to the perceptions of home, family, and community.

References
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Simon Fraser University