

## **Broadband Internet Access – Product or Service?**

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### **Abstract**

There is a mismatch between product providers' market strategies and consumers' demands and concerns related to broadband in Norway. Providers of broadband internet access focus heavily on price and technical descriptions, like bandwidth, in their market communication, while consumers have great expectations to time efficiency and content availability. One might suggest that they view the purchase differently, where the consumer consider broadband internet access to be foremost a "service" as opposed to the provider who consider it a "commodity". This discrepancy causes frustration – probably on both parties. This paper focuses on the consumer side of this issue, and argues that the mismatch can be fruitfully understood in light of two factors: *competence* and *time*. Required technological competence can be seen as an important factor related to the domestication of broadband internet access, and as time is scarce in modern households it is subordinated to the moral economy of the households (hence the focus on functionality).

### **1 Introduction**

In Norway broadband Internet access prices are constantly dropping while bandwidth increases. Access supplies refer to this decrease in price and the increase of bandwidth as important arguments for marketing their products. By accentuating these arguments in the marketing strategy suppliers rely on an idea of "perfect customers" - that is; consumers who act and react according to the model of rational choice. In this line of thinking people are expected to make their choices in the market based on a qualified calculus of price, quality of product and level of personal competence, hence the need for support would be small as fully informed consumers would make choices that match their education about the product. The consumers in the broadband market appear not, however, to act and react as such "perfect customers". Data suggest they have product expectations concerning time efficiency and content availability with strong demands and concerns regarding support related to installation and use after the act of purchase. Suppliers and consumers thus seem to view the purchase differently; - suppliers present broadband internet access as a product mainly consisting of the access service and the necessary devices – whereas consumers need seem dependent on considerable support included in the product to enjoy functional use. This discrepancy causes frustration – probably on both parties. Focussing on the consumer side of this issue, this paper

presents data that point to this discrepancy and argue that the mismatch can be fruitfully understood in light of two factors: *competence* and *time*. Required technological competence can be seen as an important factor related to the domestication of broadband internet access, and as time is scarce in modern households it is subordinated to the moral economy of the households (hence the focus on functionality).

### **1.1 Background, data and definitions of terms**

The discussion in this paper build on data from the SIFO survey 2007<sup>1</sup>, reports from the Consumer Ombudsman and the Consumer Council, figures from Statistics Norway<sup>2</sup> and elements that has been highlighted in the public debate in Norway.

The term “broadband” is in this paper understood as a to-way-communication of high capacity for digital transmission of information (e.g. television, phone, radio, pictures, video and music). In Norway it is common to categorise all kinds of access with higher capacity than ISDN as broadband (ADSL, cable, wireless or fibre)<sup>3</sup>. Some suppliers use their own infrastructure and networks to access the households, while others rely on existing phone lines or TV cables. As a product, broadband is highly complex with strong interdependency between component parts that include material commodities and immaterial services, relying heavily on a complex and varied infrastructure.

When speaking of “suppliers” we think of the telecommunication companies which market and sell broadband to consumers. In the case of Norway more than 150 companies supply broadband. The biggest companies are Telenor, NextGenTel, Ventelo, Tele2 og UPC<sup>4</sup>.

The concept of “consumers”, is a name often used on the persons or actors that ‘consume’. In the 1990s one often spoke about the consumer as a role. In a definition of consumption restricted to acts of purchases (Campbell 1987), a person could be placed in a role as a consumer when he or she bought products and services instead of producing them. In a modern society this definition would define most of us as consumers some of the time. Yet none of us would in this definition be consumers all of the time. At present this situation-specific definition of being a consumer becomes more problematic and unclear as most consumer theories tend to construct consumption as something that also involves “use” (after purchase). Consumption is seen as a cultural phenomenon where influences (use, experience etc) on the consumer and the product before and after the purchase are considered important (Campbell 1987; McCracken 1988; Simmel 1990). The consumer then is constructed in terms of “types” or “profiles” with specific characteristics: i.e. the victim (the manipulated or need driven), the stratege (the rational/use maximizer who want to stand out) or the stagesetter (the meaning seeking communicator, the adaptive, the enjoyer or identity seeker (Lien 1994). With this in mind we use the term “consumers” to imply a person that can be or is constructed as one, in some respects by others, i.e. in the market or as a complaining customer or as a person

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<sup>1</sup> The 2007 SIFO survey focuses on consumers orientations in the market and on what their choices are based upon. Questions have elaborated on consumer competence, consumer economy, political consumption, advertising, consumption of families with children, climate problems and telephone sales. This paper focuses on data from the consumer competence section of the survey. The data material was conducted through CATI survey methods, and this section consists of 1000 respondents, aged 18-80. The data was collected within the period of 5<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> of February 2007 by Norstat. The results are weighted by sex, age and region.

<sup>2</sup> Mainly drawing on the annual Mediabarometer of 2006, available at <http://www.ssb.no/emner/07/02/30/medie/>

<sup>3</sup> Definition by <http://www.telepriser.no/forbrukerinfo>, downloaded August 10<sup>th</sup> 2007.

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.bredbandsguiden.no/privat/bredband/verd\\_a\\_vite](http://www.bredbandsguiden.no/privat/bredband/verd_a_vite)

who has purchased something that does or does not work. The point being that any person in question, as he or she struggle to make a purchase useable within the home, might not necessarily see him or herself that way,- i.e. as a consumer. This open analytical conception of the consumer allow us to acknowledge that what we refer to as “consumers” not only are constructed differently in different situations by different people, but also refer to actual people who might act and think differently from our preconceptions of them.

## 1.2 Broadband in Norway

Norwegian households’ access to broadband has developed rapidly since 2000, the point in time when distribution started to increase. The Norwegian government has set out a national goal of reaching 100% broadband access ability, by the end of 2007. This goal now seems within reach. According to a recent research report<sup>5</sup>, broadband coverage is currently up to 98.3 % and is expected to reach an acceptable 99 % by the end of the year. These figures include mobile broadband ability, while 95.3 % currently can access broadband by some kind of wire.

Results from the 2007 SIFO consumer survey shows that 72 percent of Norwegian households subscribe some kind of broadband Internet access. This is an increase from 63% in 2006 and 51% in 2005, according to figures from Statistics Norway. When combining these data materials, the rapid growth of broadband in Norwegian households is evident. The number has more than doubled over the last three years. Households with children are more likely to have broadband (ca. 75%) than are households without (ca. 50%), according to Statistics Norway.

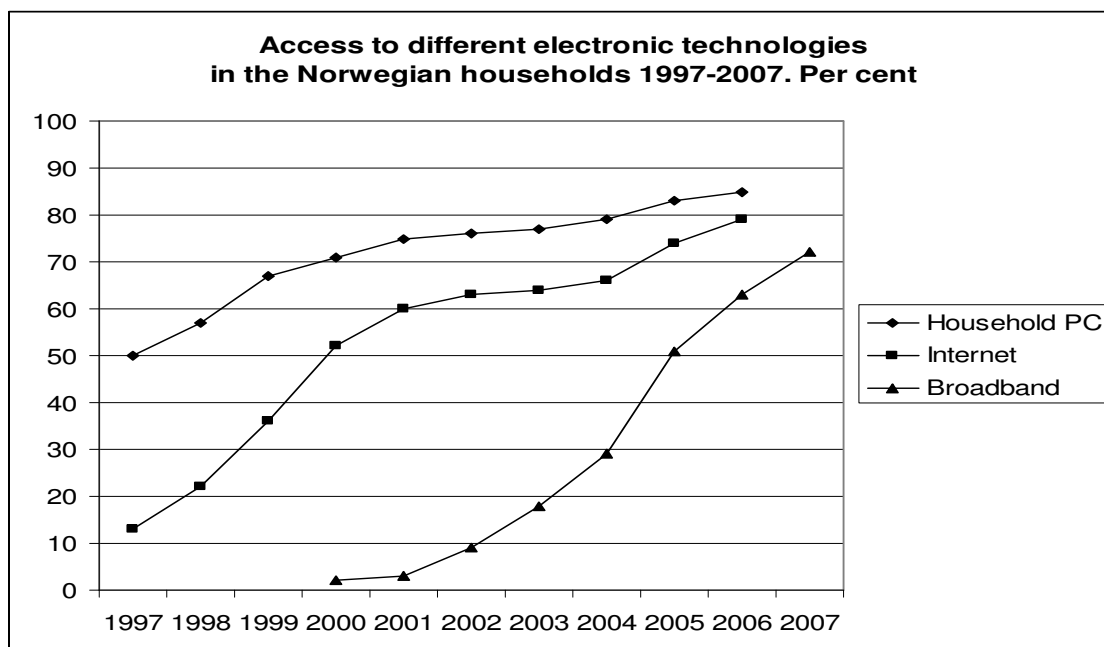


Figure 1 Access to different electronic technologies in the Norwegian households. 1997-2006 figures by Norwegian Statistics, 2007 figure of broadband access by SIFO. Per cent.

<sup>5</sup> Bredbånd – Dekningsanalyse 2007

[http://www.regjeringen.no/upload/FAD/Vedlegg/IKT-politikk/Bredband\\_2007\\_Teleplan.pdf](http://www.regjeringen.no/upload/FAD/Vedlegg/IKT-politikk/Bredband_2007_Teleplan.pdf)

Usage of the Internet is still increasing. The portion of daily users, aged 9-79 years, increased from 55 % in 2005 to 60 % in 2006. The rapid growth of broadband access in the households might explain the heavy use of the Internet, and vice versa the expectations to be online might explain the growth in broadband access in the homes.

The government's national goal of 100 % availability of broadband access is a clear indicator of how important it is considered that everyone is connected to the internet. It has become a national goal due to many reasons. It is an important part of the government's rural politics of course, but it has also been argued that everyone need to be connected in order to fulfil expectations related to work, school and other parts of life. Many companies expect their employees to be available at "all times" through home office solutions, most schools expect parents to log on to the schools portal in order to be up to date on all kinds off school related issues regarding their children. Indeed, the government's vision is *digital competence for everyone*, and education is intended to lift everyone to a certain level of basic competence. Digital competence is considered an important skill in line with reading and writing, regarding challenges met by adults in both the role of employment and citizenship. The governmental national goal of 100% coverage could also be seen as action taken to avoid further digital divide in the population.

The *Digital Divide* refers to; different ability to compete amongst companies and nations; to different quality of educational offers; to individual, local, national and global differences related to access and use of ICT's. In Norway digital divides most commonly are related to new forms of social, economic or regional differences<sup>6</sup>. In discussions of ICTs one often refer to the risk of "the creation of a two-tier society of have and have-nots, in which only a part of the population has access to the new technology" (Group of Prominent Persons 1994:8 i Mansell 1996:39). One could perhaps in this phase of implementing broadband ask whether the relevant question concerns not those who have and those who have-nots, as more and more households gain broadband internet access, but rather a society with a divide between those households who have a stable functional broadband and those who don't.

## **2 Broadband – product, service and support**

The broadband market in Norway has been described as unclear, rapidly changing and complex in ways that make it difficult for consumers to retain full information regarding possible choices. The expanding market of Internet access in the early years of 2000 introduced concepts and products of broadband new to consumers. The suppliers themselves were also new and inexperienced actors in the market. This, and the many misleading marketing campaigns targeting consumers in the private market, made the surveillance of different broadband subscriptions available in the market a top priority for the Consumer ombudsman (Slette-meås og Helle-Valle 2003).

The considerable infrastructural differences as to which broadband products are attainable in city and rural regions restrain and complicate broadband choices and possibilities (Slette-meås and Helle-Valle 2003:10). There is a multitude of different infrastructural variants of broadband internet access: optical fiber for the few, telephone line for the many, cable TV for some and mobile broadband for the very urban or the very rural. What considerations consumers have to make when purchasing broadband, can in practice imply a variety of

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<sup>6</sup> Definition by Statistics Norway. Information downloaded August 29<sup>th</sup> 2007 from <http://www.ssb.no/ikt/>

elements ranging from infrastructural factors to the many different technological components – both material and immaterial.

First of all, in order to make use of broadband as Internet access, you need to have an up to date computer with network card. In addition, you have to have a modem and some kind of cable or wireless connection through which the internet can access your home. If you also would like IP telephone you might need an adapter and if you'd like to use your computer throughout your home you will also need a router to distribute the signal. Also, you need a certain level of technical competence in order to read, understand and successfully install all necessary parts, cables and codes.

From the SIFO survey it is evident that 62 % of the broadband subscribers also have IP phone included in their broadband subscription, which again implies the need for at least an adapter in order to make it work (additional equipment if you'd like to make phone calls directly over the internet).

Support is an important and natural part of any purchase or use of a product or service to most consumers; this is especially the case the more complex the product becomes. New media technologies, such as broadband, are good examples of such complex products/services. According to Slette-meås (2007), one can say that the support component of purchases is constrained, within the information- and self-service society. Self-service does not match very well with complex error tracking within technical equipment or abstract networks. Consumers have great expectations to the technical support related to both the purchase and use of complex technology, whereas the companies might consider customer support mainly an extra cost or at best a means of attaining loyal customers (ibid.). In addition, the complexity of the technology implies a bundling of sub-suppliers which opens up for confusion regarding support responsibilities – both on the supplier side and the consumer side. This confusion might, and have, indeed result in a myriad of phone calls on the consumers' part, trying to trace down the responsible part.

According to statistics from the Consumer Council, number of complaints regarding broadband suppliers increased immensely up to 2007. They received 1.600 complaints under the first half of 2006, and the newly established *Brukerklagenemnda*, User-complaint-committee,<sup>7</sup> received 379 cases (63% of all cases). The latest statistics for the first time reveals a reduction in complaints regarding broadband given to the Consumer Council, by 40%<sup>8</sup>.

### **3 Some reported consumer problems**

The SIFO report, *Consumers and development of broadband in Norway – from citizen to customer?* (Slette-meås and Helle-Valle 2003:31), point out different consumer relevant problem areas related to broadband. These are:

- “Too narrow bandwidth (lower speed than promised)
- Price and service bundling (complex contracts and long term bindings)

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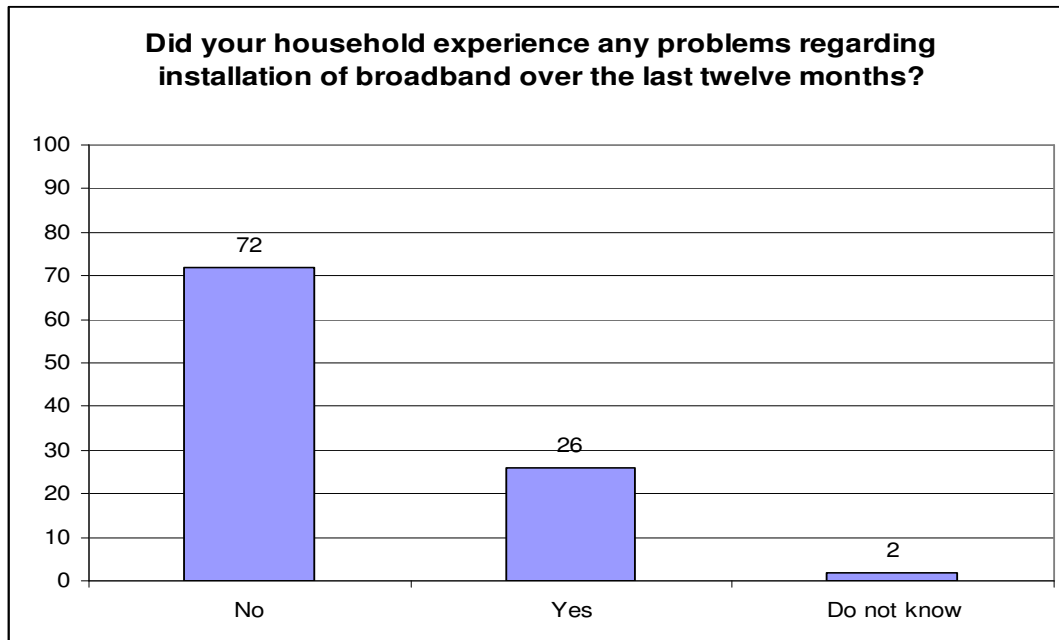
<sup>7</sup> The User-complaint-committee, *Brukerklagenemnda*, only deals with cases regarding concrete complaints on electronic communication services – such as quality, lacking service and compensation.

<sup>8</sup> Statistics and information downloaded from the Consumer Council

[http://forbrukerportalen.no/Artikler/2007/forbrukerstatistikken\\_mindre\\_pepper\\_for\\_darlig\\_bredband](http://forbrukerportalen.no/Artikler/2007/forbrukerstatistikken_mindre_pepper_for_darlig_bredband)

- Installation and use (difficult installation and unclear support-contacts)
- Problems related to switching supplier (poor cooperation and routines for handling)
- Extensive need for firewalls (continuously online mode makes the consumer more vulnerable to hacking)”

According to the SIFO survey statistics 72% of all broadband subscribers experienced problems regarding installation of their broadband. In addition 45% of the Norwegian broadband subscribers had problems related to their internet connection, during the past twelve months. The survey further shows that 20% have experienced problems related to service/support regarding their broadband subscription.



**Figure 2** Did your household experience any problems regarding installation of broadband over the last twelve months? Per cent, among those who subscribe (N 724).

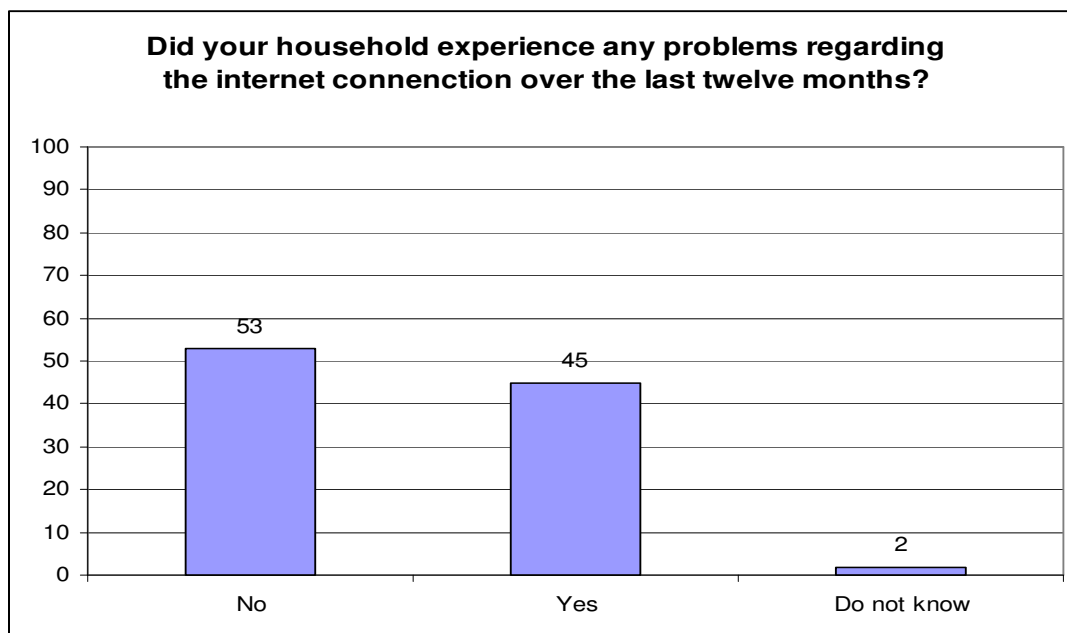


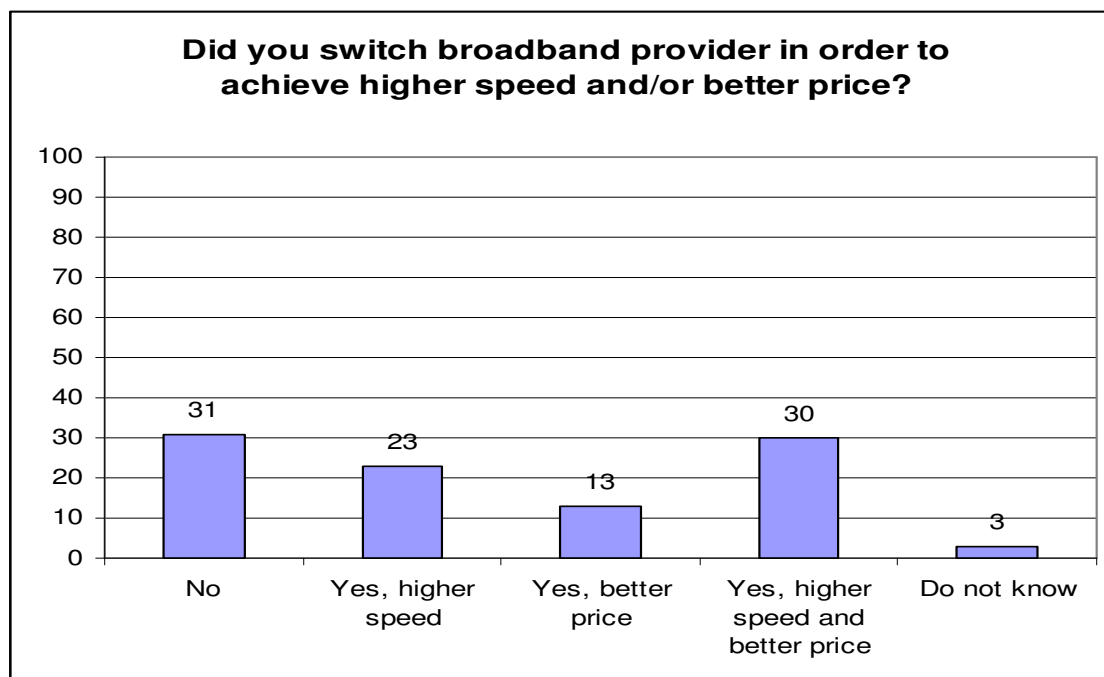
Figure 3 Did your household experience any problems regarding the internet connection over the last twelve months? Per cent, among those who subscribe (N 724).

### 3.1 What consumers do when they encounter problems

*“Three times I tried to get online with the equipment from NextGenTel without any luck. I almost sent it back right away, but figured I should try some more. I didn’t know I would receive a do-it-yourself building set. They didn’t tell me that. They just said thanks for the order. After three weeks I returned the equipment to NextGenTel, along with a letter explaining that I would like to cancel the purchase due to violation of the contract”... Half a year later and after hours waiting and trying to get in contact with their customer support, the woman was still trying to get out of the contract – and online.<sup>9</sup>*

Only ten per cent of the broadband subscribers switched Internet access supplier during the last twelve months, according to the SIFO survey. Two third of these subscribers switched in order to achieve a better price and/or higher bandwidth, while an additional reason for changing supplier were poor service and support (reported by 42 per cent of those who switched). This indicates that switching supplier might not be the obvious answer to consumers experiencing problems with their broadband access, they might consider the switching costs too high. One reason why this is a plausible explanation is the amount of effort already put into the relation with the supplier and acquisition of necessary equipment to gain access. Consumers might consider it even more troublesome switching supplier than trying to sort out the problems with their current (although not fulfilling) supplier, as switching supplier in itself could turn out to be a lot of work and trouble, due to e.g. long term complex (might include supply of phone line, cable TV, e-mail address, homepages etc.) and binding contracts, new technological equipment and so on.

<sup>9</sup> Marianne Aas interviewed in Aftenposten 15.11.2005. Article retrieved 09.08.2007 at: <http://forbruker.no/pengenedine/dinerettigheter/article1157402.ece?service=print>



**Figure 4** Did you switch to achieve higher speed and/or better price? Per cent, among those who did switch broadband supplier (N 81).

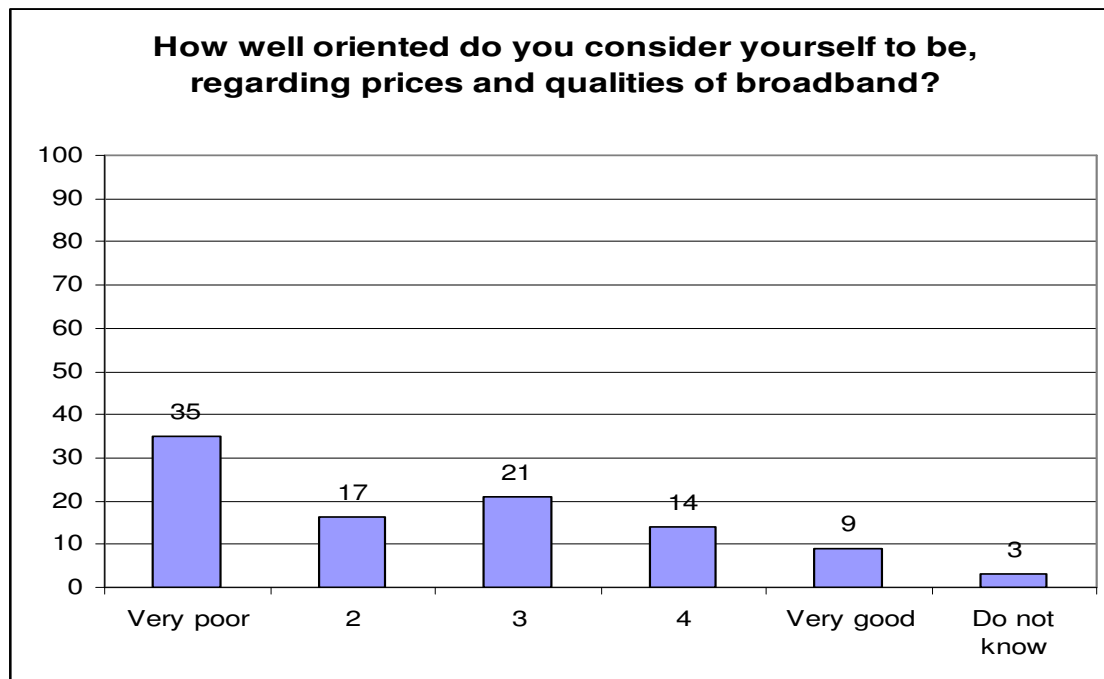
Great bandwidth should secure fast loading of pages, online broadcastings and films. The problem of attaining these advantages of broadband is the dependency of closeness to the suppliers signal central, which is often not accounted for in the suppliers marketing. According to Ole Asbjørn Lie, at the Norwegian Consumer Council, the suppliers are well aware of this problem – but the consumers are not. Their contract often says speed “up-to”, but many consumers don’t receive the expected maximum broadband capacity. The biggest broadband supplier in Norway, Telenor, use the term “up-to” in their marketing of broadband speed according to CMO Arild Johannessen. He underlines that many factors influence the speed of each clients Internet access; the capacity of the computer, modems, the wireless routers and general online traffic/use<sup>10</sup>

#### **4 Supplier - consumer discrepancy; explaining the what and why of problems**

One could argue that reasons for the problems consumers report are related to consumers lacking knowledge and/or it being due to the complexities in the product and the market being under communicated in the marketing of these products.

Are consumers to blame for lacking knowledge? The SIFO survey suggests that a very low percentage consider themselves to be well oriented regarding prices and qualities of broadband (9%). At the other end of the scale we find that a whole 35% considers themselves to be very poorly oriented. Although men in general rate their own orientation to prices and qualities of broadband a little higher than women, they overall state to be not that well oriented.

<sup>10</sup> Downloaded from <http://nrk.no/nyheter/okonomi/1.1035189>, August 10<sup>th</sup> 2007.



**Figur 5** How well oriented do you consider yourself to be, regarding prices and qualities of broadband? Per cent (N 1000).

It is not unusual to find that consumers report to be not well informed on various consumer areas and that men report to be a little more oriented on the economical aspects than women (Berg 2005: 10). Why then do consumers consider themselves to be poorly oriented? It was suggested above that discrepancy concerning conceptions of the product *broadband* could be due to considerable complexity concerning the product, infrastructure and the marketing of the product because they make it hard for consumers to orient themselves.

The advantages of broadband are marketed as; being online at all times, achieving high speed connections and hence “painless” surfing and non-stop video streaming, predictable costs and new services such as; video-on-demand, video telephone, virtual shopping malls etc.

According to the Norwegian Consumer Ombudsman, poor customer service is an increasing problem within the telecom business. Many consumers experience considerable problems when trying to get support either through telephone or e-mail, expensive service lines, extensive phone queues or inconvenient opening hours. These problems relates to the fact that the products and services offered get increasingly more complicated, both to install and use. Consumers are expected to be technological competent, regarding both hardware and software, and preferably able to detect and correct errors themselves.

*“I had problems with my e-mail account and searched for help correcting it. A window on my screen told me to contact my supplier. But which supplier? The supplier of my account? Of my software? Of the computer? I first tried Telenor (supplier of account), who acknowledged lack on necessary competence to correct the error. I was asked to contact another part of the companies support system at a 820-number costing 25.50 NOK per minute. They told me to contact Microsoft. At Microsoft they really wasn’t interested, and asked my to contact Compaq who had produced the computer. They told me to contact Elkjøp, who had distributed the computer to me. They were kind, but suggested that I’d contact the specific*

*store who sold me the machine. Was really a small retailer in a rural district at the west coast supposed to fix this? Actually, a pleasant man in this store solved my problem smooth and easy within a couple of minutes. For free”<sup>11</sup>.*

As this case illustrates many broadband suppliers does not offer the amount of support consumers need, and expect to receive. The Consumer Council often receive complaints from frustrated consumers who have spent hours in phone queues. The Consumer Council find the situation little satisfying, although number of complaints now seem to be dropping. Ole Asbjørn Lie at the Consumer Council points to the need for consumers to consider the level of support included in the product before signing the contract, and underlines that price differences might be of less interest if the product does not work. Due to all the complaints the Council started working in this area some time ago, aiming at suppliers obligations to illuminate the level of support included in their marketing and in the contracts<sup>12</sup>. The Consumer Council recommend all consumers to use their check list before signing contracts of broadband access, focussing on; consumers rights if delivery is delayed or not complete or disrupted; specific demands to quality of support; long term binding should give the consumers corresponding advantages; the supplier should alarm the consumer if unusual high costs occur; you should agree on a certain maximum level of costs.

In addition to these advices the Consumer Council, the Consumer Ombudsman and the suppliers (through their supplier organisation IKT Norway) agreed upon a *Good Conduct* list. Main points on this list are<sup>13</sup>:

- Price: The customer is not supposed to pay more than local fee to contact the suppliers support service.
- Price information regulations: Supplier should give the customer specific information on what the support service costs.
- Complaint cases: If the customer is given support/approval, the supplier should refund direct and necessary costs laid on the consumer in order to contact the support service.
- Time limits: The customer should on an average get in contact with support within maximum 5 minutes waiting on telephone. E-mails should be answered within 3 working days. Regular mail should be answered within 7 workdays.
- Competence: The supplier should secure that the one giving support is competent and able to give relevant advice to the customer.

## **5 Supplier and consumer conceptions of product, service and support**

The “good conduct” rules, survey data and reported cases point to a striking mismatch between broadband providers’ market strategies and conceptions of consumers and consumers’ demands, concerns and conceptions of the service. Providers of broadband internet access focus heavily on price and technical descriptions, like bandwidth, in their market communication. Many private households and consumers have expectations to time efficiency and content availability when purchasing broadband to their private household, but end up experiencing problems related to installation and use of internet broadband products. One might suggest that suppliers and consumers view the purchase of broadband differently. The consumers consider broadband internet access to be a “service” as opposed to the

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<sup>11</sup> VG, October 31th 2006, p.38. “An inconvenient e-mail!”

<sup>12</sup> Downloaded from <http://forbrukerportalen.no/Artikler/2006/1147696225.81>, August 10<sup>th</sup> 2007.

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.ikt-norge.no/upload/God%20skikk%20reglene%20-%20endelig%20versjon.pdf>

provider who considers it a “product”. This discrepancy causes frustration – probably on both parties. The “good practice” rules may have helped suppliers and consumers solve some of the problems related to “support”. Through the “good practice” rules suppliers, in the present market, seem to have acknowledged the need to take some aspects of the support part of broadband product and services seriously.

The market has unquestionably changed dramatically since the introduction of broadband in the early 2000. In the first phase of introducing this new technology, the market was characterized by lack of experience both on the supplier and consumer side. There was no leading market actor, competition between suppliers in order to capture customers was harsh (e.g. through long-term binding subscriptions up to three years), and both suppliers and consumers experienced and reported severe problems. In the next phase governmental actions in terms of surveillance, regulation and control ensured some rights on behalf of consumers and how the market could compete and tie customers to their products (e.g. through restricting binding subscriptions to no longer than 12 months). At present, the market seem to have moved into yet another phase as dominant market suppliers now acknowledge that support is vital in keeping customers loyal to their broadband product and service. This does not, however, necessarily imply that suppliers support to consumers has improved much. Whether the decrease in complaints is due to suppliers’ course of action through the introduction of “good practice” rules is questionable. The decline might not be a result of better service and/or promises to provide security on the customer side. One alternative explanation is that the support has not become better but that customers competition has. An increasing percentage of the consumers, that is those who have purchased broadband products and services over the last seven years, has gained experience in this period and with that probably increased their competence. Once they have managed to reach a functional level in everyday use of broadband they do not care much to change supplier in order to gain better technical quality. That is at least what our data indicates. On the supplier side in the market, offering broadband support may present a possible challenge in terms of costs connected to keeping old and reaching new customers. In the previous market phase, seen from the suppliers point of view, reaching new customers may have been more expensive than to keep old ones. In the present market situation this might be changing. This might also explain why at present time several broadband suppliers have launched market strategies in which they offer concrete services in terms of installation to new costumers. By this they are making it easier for customers not only to buy broadband services for the first time but also for experienced customers, who have achieved functionality, to change supplier. As long as the content and quality in the support remains undefined one might expect that the decline in complaints from consumers may thus only illustrate a decline with respect to certain aspects of the problem.

The “good practice” rules illustrate that suppliers do not yet see service to be an integrated part of the product they are providing; e.g. consumers must pay to receive support. We need further more qualitative research to addresses the content of suppliers and consumers conceptions of “customer service”. The data we have discussed here point at the diversity and complexities involved both on the product side and the consumer side. With respect to the latter one must acknowledge that consumers differ, as do the products they have purchased. The problems consumers experience are therefore manifold, their actions to handle them likewise. Their conceptions and needs for “support” are consequently also diverse. In terms of future developments one needs to pay attention to some common feature in logics and processes that might be involved at the consumer side.

## 6 Domestication of broadband internet access in homes

In order to shed light on logics and process involved in the consumer side we must consider how broadband is domesticated by consumers in different settings. Our argument is that the mismatch between product providers' market strategies and consumers' demands and concerns can be fruitfully understood in light of *competence* and *time*. These two factors point to how the domestication of broadband in homes and families are different from the domestication of broadband in work environments, and to what might be vital in consumer conceptions of "customer service."

Basic to the domestication research perspective is the idea that technologies must be 'tamed' in order to be accepted in a given setting (Silverstone og Hirsch 1992). The perspective directs our attention to the importance of context in understanding the ways ICTs are used, and the significance of the home as one such important context. The basic argument is that in order to understand the various how and whys of ICT-use it is necessary to assume not a simple subject-object relationship but to include a significant third factor, namely the social setting in which the subject relates to the object. The home – as a phenomenological reality – affects the way people relate to and use ICTs. Social practices surrounding broadband technology thus has to be contextualised. From the consumer side, home and family is the important setting for broadband use.

'Home', 'family', 'the moral economy of the household' and 'domestication' are central terms in the domestication perspective (Silverstone, Hirsch og Morley 1992). The home is posed as a contrast to the public sphere in the sense that it constitutes a different social and cultural context – i.e. containing specific values and perspectives – than what surrounds it, i.e. the public sphere, hence the centrality of the terms 'home', 'family' and 'the moral economy of the household'. Therefore technologies that are potentially 'useful' to the household are produced in, and associated with, the public sphere the acquisition of such commodities requires a 'translation'; they need to undergo a transformation that implies that they are given a meaningful place in the home and become morally acceptable.

"This engagement involves the appropriation of these commodities into domestic culture – they are domesticated – and through that appropriation they are incorporated and redefined in different terms, in accordance with the household's own values and interests" (ibid: 16).

According to the authors, this process of domestication involves four phases, or aspects. First, the *appropriation* of an ICT refers to the actual purchase of the object. *Objectification* points to the actual usage and physical positioning of the object within the household while *incorporation* denotes the ways the ICT is given a place in the cultural framework of the home. *Conversion* points to the ways the ICT is displayed vis a vis the world (ibid: 20ff). In relation to broadband appropriation and objectification are vital. Besides from describing these phases, the Domestication perspective helps us tune attention to morality and the values inherent in homes (Silverstone 2006). Though it is important not to essentialize homes it is reasonable to start with the fact that 'home' is the central 'significant other' of the public sphere, hence it should be possible to identify a set of values that constitute the prototypical home. In short, in contrast to the public sphere, being dominated by the mentality of bureaucracy and market economy, the home is that which harbours the family, and the romantic ideology that the family is built on. This celebrates the intimate and emotional – that which is said to concern our selves and essential qualities as individuals (Shorter 1975; Luhmann 1986; Giddens 1992; Borchgrevink og Holter 1995). The family – as the prototypical framework for, and result of intimate feelings – stands forth as every action's

*reason*; it is what gives, at least discursively, life meaning (Sørhaug 1996). In popular conceptions the home – representing trust and security – is the haven in which the individual can find refuge from the cold hostility and mercilessness of the public arena.

In a potential contrast to the romantic ideology of familism; the demand for thinking and acting as a collective, stands individualism, the strong ideological force associated with Western modernity which emphasises not only the right to be unique and special but in fact demands that we all have to search for the uniqueness in ourselves, also has a harbour in homes.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand we might regard familism and individualism as complementary; it is with the advent of individualism – with its focus on the right and obligation to create a meaningful life-trajectory, combined with the perennial meaninglessness of the modern public sphere – that the family stand forth ideologically as a major setting for a meaningful life. Be that as it may, we contend that familism and individualism are two strong ideological forces that affect the uses of broadband in Norwegian homes.

ICTs, as objects and media, bring public life into the domestic sphere and hence threaten to break down the moral borders that surround, and thus help to define, the family. This makes them ‘dangerous things’ (Douglas 1966). On the other hand, ICTs can promote family sociality by functioning as objects/media that gather the family. If of a ‘good’, or at least acceptable, kind, broadband use can be instrumental in generating family sociality of the right kind by giving its members time together and providing them with a focus, hence building the family as a unit. However, if the daily experience is more one of concern and worry – that the broadband does not function, or requires too much time and competence, it may constitute a threat to the ideal of spending ‘quality time’ together. Likewise, media content might be of the wrong type, mediating or promoting attitudes, mores or information of types that fit badly with what is considered appropriate within the family context. The potential both for ‘good’ family sociality, time-saving, entertainment and rest, as well as family fragmentation, time-consumption and frustration due to lack of competence and qualified help, illustrates the ambivalence that is commonly found among consumers who give voice on problems with broadband. Required technological competence can be seen as an important factor related to the domestication of broadband internet access, and as time is scarce in modern households it is subordinated to the moral economy of the households they might have high demands to support and functionality. Whereas free time for one or several members of the family to seek higher technical competence in order to install and seek for failures on the broadband will conflict with familism, the actual heightening of technical and other competences of one or more members in usage of broadband might fit well the ideology of individualism. It could nevertheless be argued that broadband as a highly complex product requires higher levels of technical competence than the ordinary private households might be expected to hold. If this is so, is it then reasonable to sell broadband products directly to single households by current standards?

## **7 Competence and time in households**

The assumption that consumer competence, that is consumers familiarity and knowledge of products and overview and insight in the markets, has significance on how well they choose and purchase is commonplace and often grounded empirically on survey data (Berg 2005:

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<sup>14</sup> The home can with regard to individualism provide a moral room for being on one’s own, pursuing self-realisation and personal goals (Giddens 1991; Hall 1992; Williams 2000).

9).<sup>15</sup> Two aspects of this are worth consideration. Firstly that the assumption often follows a model of the consumer as an economic man performing rational choices; that is, the more informed a consumer is the better choices they will do. Secondly, that the empirical grounding for such claims draws heavily on data from surveys. Surveys often base their measurement of consumer competence on respondents' linguistic evaluations of themselves as to how well they are oriented on prices and products and the extent to which they base their motivations and choices on economical self containment and/or the concern for others (e.g. Example above). The finding is often that this competence then has some bearing on how consumers linguistically report on their practices in the market. One problem is obviously that forces choice answers restricts answers that are more relevant to the respondent than those offered. Another more serious that one makes a comparison between a linguistic based measurement of consumer competencies to a linguistic based measurement of consumer practices and assumes this can tell us about consumers practical actions concerning the products and markets in question. Although such linguistic competence in self-evaluation obviously has some bearing on practical activities involved in solving actual problems consumers encounter with their purchased broadband product (reading product descriptions, making telephone calls, reading manuals etc) it is of another sort than the technological and communicative competence that this solving often will require (finding out what technical procedures has to be done and doing them). One thus has to be careful in concluding from such survey data to the practical knowledge and competence of consumers. Also because the act of consumption is seen as a cultural phenomenon in which the symbolic use it taken to be as important as its use-value (McCracken 1987). From this follows that we argue from a more context based line of thinking than what is commonplace on consumer competence and practices. The idea is that the context of the home, eg in comparison with the work-place, has material and social aspects that influence on individual competences understood as a practical competence, i.e the being able to carrying out the relevant action, getting things done and problems solved.<sup>16</sup>

One aspect that frames competence in this respect is obviously the material realities of the home. 'Private' domestication of broadband is partly determined by the spatiality, normativity and sociality of the local context (Sletteemås 2007: 38). That is material structure, local policies, rules and norms play into the domestication process. Where you live can for instance determine what products are available and possible to purchase/install. In some instances the computer that is supposed to process the service may be too old or weak, -something the consumer might find out when trying to installing and getting the product to work after having purchased it. It is in these circumstances perfectly possible to encounter problems although one possesses competence that has made one do seemingly rational choices judged from aspects of price and width of broadband.

A rewarding way of using the domestication concept is to understand it as the various ways people make media integral parts of the language-games they engage in (Helle-Valle 2008). The "term 'language-game' brings into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life" (Wittgenstein 1968: §23, emphases in the original). The language-games are formed by forms of life (practice). This means that if we want to study meaning we need to study language within a form of life. As people perform their practices with broadband in different places they also move in and out of different language-games and communicative contexts. Thus, people might not only act differently, but also

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<sup>15</sup> Consumer competence is seen as a resource comparable to economic resources, that is a resource that gives possibilities and frames the extent to how good choices the consumers are able to make (Berg 2005:19)

<sup>16</sup> Consumer competence is a term that has been used, not only on the level of the individual both also on group and institutional levels such as the household (Berg 2005: 18).

think differently, in different language-games (Helle-valle 2008). Questions of consumer competence with broadband might illustrate how. Most people work in places where broadband is a part of the infrastructure related to production, with support people around to make sure it works. They might thus have user knowledge with broadband but lack the relevant installation and support knowledge. They also lack the social network of people, -that is the knowledge of who the relevant person is that can give support. More importantly they might give meaning to the broadband product within the language-game this product has at their work; a service. When they apply this to the broadband product at home, this causes frustration because private subscriptions are given meaning within another language-game; sellers see it as a simple product that consumers are supposed to handle much on their own.

Mansell (1996) argues (with reference to Wendt 1987), that capabilities, capacities, competencies necessarily are related to a social structural context and inseparable from human sociality.

*“In periods of rapid technical innovation and instability that are characteristic of changes in techno-economic paradigms, there often are severe discontinuities between the capabilities of human actors in all walks of life and those they are expected to acquire. The requisite knowledge sets are not freely given. In fact, on the contrary, capabilities arise from diverse experiences and they are the result of substantial investment of time and other resources” (ibid 1996: 28).<sup>17</sup>*

Mansells discussion is directed at firms and the commercial sphere but related to this and relevant to the focus of this paper is obviously the social realities of the home, - the relations and expectations, obligations and practices people in the household are part of. This brings us to the aspect of time and to how factors of competence and time intertwine in households.

Leisure time, the time household members are off from work and school and potentially can spend time together, is increasing (Frønes 2002). Time is nevertheless a scarce resource in many modern households where the moral economy focuses on reducing time spent on housework and domestic chores through useful technology. Conceptions of time are however full of complexities. “While the public sphere is dominated by instrumental relations (zweckrational; ibid.) and hence clock-time, the home is – or rather should be – dominated by event-time; time that is ideally not measured in quantities but is tied directly to the task it is involved in because they are considered to be existentially important” (Helle-valle 2007: 53). As time is subordinated to the moral economy of the households and households differ the time scarcity might take different forms. Whereas time-squeeze is a common theme among households with children it might not be so in households without (Helle-Valle 2007).

One argument for households purchasing broadband is often related to time-saving goals connected to ideals of familism; e.g. paying invoices on the internet, a quicker way to achieving the relevant information one needs be it phone numbers, the latest news of the best buy of products etc. it is not accepted within this moral economy to spend time on installation

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<sup>17</sup> Mansell speaks of design and capabilities (competencies) as axial principles in the matrix of human action. Design is a concept used to draw attention to the importance of human action and its complexities, whereas capabilities is used to focus on the dynamics of the communication process and the formation of human capabilities through the process of technical and institutional change (Mansely 1996: 21). “Capabilities, in the sense of power to act, can be expressed as a result of action embodied in institutions (as organizations as well as by the actions of individual agents (...)). Power then can be conceived as a capability that varies as a result of the accumulation of knowledge as well as the constraints and opportunities in an actor’s environment” (Mansell 1996: 28).

and the like. The expectation to broadband is to have functionality; that the thing works when you need it. Hence the frustration and complaints from private consumers when it doesn't, that they can't make it work when it should be working. Although consumers in households might not spend too much clock-time sorting this out (waiting in line on the phone to report the problem and finding someone to help, quarrelling about who is to pay the cost of the installation they didn't manage themselves), the time spent is conceptualized as long as expectations were that broadband should save time paying bills so they could spend more time doing family relations. It is in this respect that individual consumer competence over time might play into the conceptions of households experience and practices with broadband. First and foremost because the domestication of broadband, gaining access and using it, is different in comparison to that of other ICT's in the family; such as. tv, computers, phones. Although all family members might be users of broadband technology in households (when installed and functioning, it is a service available, accessible and usable to all), the competence required to make this technology work is usually tied to one person. The competence requirements this person meets are often great and demanding with respect to using family time in early phases of broadband history in the household. However, as the person involves him (or her) self with the technology over time, the persons' individual competence with broadband technology is likely to increase. Although one effect is that individual competences with respect to the broadband technology will vary considerably between family members and enforce individualism, another effect is that households ideals of familism are ensured as the increased competence of individual family members over time stabilises the functionality of the households broadband internet access. Hence the reduction of complaints to the consumer Ombudsman.

## **8 Summary and suggestions**

Broadband internet access is a complex product intertwined in a complicated structure of services and support systems. This is partly due to complexities in the infrastructure and technology that broadband functionality depends on. Partly to unclear lines of responsibility on the supplier side vis a vis consumers (ref. the earlier referred letter to VG by a complaining consumer). The supplier wants to sell a service, but not to be responsible for the technical products that are necessary in order for the consumer to make use of their service. The consumers wish to buy broadband as a service that will enable them to enjoy surfing on the internet, but their experience is that they are given a package of several technical devices (a bag containing wires, a manual and no one to help them make it work), - thus of having purchased a commodity product. Neither suppliers nor consumers want to have responsibility for the technical devices, the material/commodity-based side of the service. The result being frustration on both parts.

The reduction in complaints to the Consumer Ombudsmann can be interpreted in several ways. Either as a result of more relevant information given to the customer prior to purchase as well as support services having improved, partly because Consumer Ombudsmann and the Consumer Council has taken action with the suppliers in order to solve the problems. Or as a result of the time consumers have had to gain competence and to establish themselves as customers of a functional broadband. It could be that current actions taken by the Consumer Ombudsmann and the Consumer Council together with suppliers really have reduced certain problems consumers encounter with broadband. The principle that all expenditures and information of relevance to the consumer should be given in the marketing of product and services is essential and now better regulated. As these initiatives are focussed on improving

customer support at the first line contact (e.g. the “good practice” rules enhancing better support through a customer service telephone line) they do not however attend to the core aspect of problems as these prevail on the consumer side as family members and citizens. In concluding this paper we suggest three aspects in need of attention in relation to understanding how consumers in households relate and react to the various aspects of broadband internet access as a product and service.

Firstly, broadband consumers in Norway seem to be thrown between the many sub-suppliers of broadband when facing problems (ref mentioned consumer complaint in VG). The enforcement of a law that could ensure some clear principles concerning a point of consumer contact not only for advice but also for technical support in combination with clearer divisions of responsibility (as is the case in England) seems to be necessary in order to ensure that the customer/consumer gets what she or he thought they bought- so that they in fact do achieve the functionality of the product.

Our argument has been, secondly, that conceptions of support services are varied, especially those of suppliers and consumers. Further research on the issue should therefore focus consumer conceptions of support. A qualitatively based approach seems necessary in order to trace the different language-games peoples concerns and conceptions of support are a part of in relation to broadband. We have argued that the domestication perspective offers a way to understand and explain the range of adaptations of broadband that can be found as it reveals the complexity and subtlety of dynamics and mechanisms that together constitute processes of domestication. Moreover that the various consumer logics can be fruitfully understood in light of competence and time as two factors in the domestication of broadband in households. At the core one might say that consumers want broadband functionality without having to take responsibility for the technical products and devices needed.

Aside from this a third political question needs to be resolved. Seen in connection to the national goal of supplying full coverage of broadband to Norwegian citizens the question of support and consumer competence is brought to another level: to the level of citizen – consumer questions (Slettemås og Helle-Valle 2003). What competencies are reasonable to expect consumers to have? What competencies are required on behalf of the consumer for instance in order to obtain a certain price? Is it for example reasonable to expect of consumers to solve their technical problems on their own or to voice their technical competence in first line contact with customer support (phone)? If yes, who are to pay for the average consumers to achieve these competencies, not only the specialized person in the household? It is widely acknowledged that elementary ICT practices are learned by doing it with people who already know how to perform these tasks. A task the state has gone to several actions to support its citizens in achieving in other areas (e.g. Datakortet). The more complex the practice the more this is true (e.g. installation of broadband products). Should such heightening of consumer competence be included as a part of the broadband service or should it not?

The case of broadband sheds light on issues with relevance to more general problems surrounding products and services that are complex; the marketing of these products and the competence and processes involved in consumers domesticating of these products.

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