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12 Family, media, and the digitalization of childhood

Anja Riitta Lahikainen & Ilkka Arminen

The diversification of families by media

The degree of digitalization in homes varies among families with children. Firstly, the amount of available ICT and media technologies differs from home to home. For example, the families participating in our project had between three and 11 devices, including televisions, computers, game consoles and DVD players. In addition, there were (smart) phones which were not counted (Lahikainen et al., 2015, pp. 52–53). Secondly, ICT expertise varies between families. Thirdly, parents' practices concerning the control and encouragement of their offspring to use ICT devices also varies. Consequently, ICT and media usage patterns and the consequent role of media in children's socialization in the home is dependent on many factors and is the result of the complicated intertwined processes of the parents' and children's decision-making.

The factors mentioned above consequently contribute to vast diversification in the socialization and digitalization of childhood (Repo & Nätti, 2015; see also Chapter 5). One could use many different criteria for categorizing the families according to the role of media in the socialization of the offspring at home. Based on the results of our research project, we chose an eating metaphor when referring to the parents' use of media in the socialization of their children. The families could be divided into two groups: the *gourmets* are families where children's media use was carefully regulated mainly by arranging other types of joint activities with children, such as board games or outdoor-activities, whereas the *gourmands* are permissive families who encouraged children's technology use and regulated it only loosely. This latter group seemed to prioritize learning how to use ICT media devices over other activities, and if the parents themselves were not very experienced in using technologies, this decreased the control even further. Making media accessible to the children was for some families a way of organizing otherwise chaotic situations, for example, when a mother alone prepared a meal for five children, including one-year-old twins.

Several factors characterize parental management of their children's media use at home: access to available media technologies is limited, the children have a few simple rules concerning the use of media, and parents watch over their children's use of media technologies. Parents are also accessible to their children and plan a daily programme. When media are ubiquitously accessible and there are several children in the family, it is more difficult for parents to

manage daily home life and combine the different interests of the family members. The regulation of children's media usage becomes even more difficult when children get older.

When we tried to ascertain clear tendencies in the differences between the families examined, we discovered two prominent factors: the age of child and the type of media device. Younger children used computers less and watched TV more, relatively, compared to 12-year-olds. Among the older children, the time spent with computers (laptops, desktops, tablets, smart phones) was considerably longer than among the five-year olds (Lahikainen et al., 2015, p. 52). The parent-child conflicts in the use of media tended to take place in front of the computer instead of in front of the television and they occurred more often with older boys than with girls.

It became very evident that the structuring of daily life, including the use of media, takes place within the frameworks of the family structure and the parents' position in working life. For example, a single mother with a baby and a five year- old child is more dependent on online contacts with other adults than a working mother with older children and a husband. A five-year-old child easily gets less attention from the parent(s) if there are also younger children in the family.

Media in family interaction and socialization

Media can be used or abused in multiple ways from the point of view of socialization. The special feature of television lies in its capacity to offer its spectators the feeling of being part of a wider audience that shares experiences together (Kellner, 2005). This is true also for family audiences. We found that despite the appearance of new media technologies, sharing time together watching TV programmes like sports, competitions and games is still popular among families with children (Repo & Nätti, 2015).

Watching television together, however, need not mean that all family members are concentrating on it alone. The family members can come and go or do other things at the same time, such as surfing the Internet with a smart phone, tablet or laptop. Tolerance of multitasking seems to be growing. In particular, TV is such a mature media that its consumption is open to numerous parallel activities (see Chapters 7 and 10).

At home in front of the television, children can learn and become socialized in a number of different ways. They observe their parents' responses to TV programmes, and in learning about their parents, they also learn what they like themselves. They learn to talk and exchange opinions, as described by Suoninen (see Chapter 7) and Tiilikainen and Arminen (see Chapter 10). Parents also mediate the impact of the programme contents by commenting on and interpreting the

programmes, as described by Kallio in this book (see Chapter 6), increasingly also web searches assist knowledge formation (see Chapter 3).

In addition, our findings concerning the uses of mobile phones and tablets highlighted that the devices are also used as uniting media and a means of contact between the child and the parent. They may function as a way of getting parental attention and gaining intimacy by being close (see Chapter 10).

The need to regulate children's use of media devices is clearly one consequence of the attraction felt toward the use of media by family members of all ages. According to the generational contract, the responsibility for the younger generations is delegated to the parents because of their superior knowledge and experience, whereas children are thought to have a limited responsibility (Mayall, 2002, pp. 27–28). Nobody however, is in the position to control and limit the parents' use of media and communication technologies. Children try to interrupt their parents using media devices because they want their parents' attention (see Chapter 9). These attempts often fail (Mantere & Raudaskoski, 2015; Mantere, 2014).

Reasons for attempts at control seem to vary. Generally, adults are thought to have more rational reasons for controlling their children than the children controlling their parents. Usually, for example, it is thought that it is children – and not the parents – who are under the spell of media and communication technologies. It became evident in our project that parents may also become overwhelmingly interested in virtual worlds and online relationships; this may threaten the face-to-face encounters on which younger children are especially dependent (See Chapter 9).

Most media-related conflicts between parents and children, however, were due to a child's computer use and related disobedience. It was difficult for the child to stop playing or doing whatever else they were doing with computer technologies and to comply with the parent's wishes for the child to do something else (see Chapter 8). Unlike when watching television, knowing what someone is doing in front of a computer or the screen of a tablet or mobile phone is difficult. Therefore, understanding the actions of the user (a child or an adult) is very difficult for a bystander (a child/parent). The diminishing accountability of ubiquitous media use (be it the parents' or children's) may increase the severity and difficulty of resolving conflicts.

Children do not necessarily want to exclude/isolate themselves from the flow of ongoing events at home, although the online attractions may win in a competition against everyday family life. For example, some children report that they would like their parents to be more interested in their online activities, unfortunately often without success (Noppari, 2014). New mobile devices, unlike desktops, enable simultaneous participation in other family activities besides online activities, thereby potentially improving the integration of media and technology use into

other family activities. They may even add new ways of seeking the proximity/intimacy of the parent, a desire that has not disappeared among children. (See Chapter 10).

The most obvious reason for parents to limit their children's media use is the necessity of getting children to perform other actions, such as eating, washing, brushing teeth, doing homework, taking part in extra-curricular activities and going to sleep on time. Parents have to schedule the children's time use, something which is difficult not only for a five-year-old, but also for a 12-year-old and even more so for an older child. The parents scheduling of the family members' time has probably become more troublesome and time-consuming than before. With the increase in media usage at home, children's and parents' differing online interests and the proliferation of other leisure time options, the time shortage and conflicts about time usage are bound to become more pronounced.

Children expecting their parents' attention

There were other kinds of 'conflicts' too. Children were dissatisfied with their parents, and tried to get them to change their activities. Sometimes children desperately sought their parents' attention and tried to interrupt their actions, especially when the parent was concentrating on online activities (Mantere, 2014; Mantere & Raudaskoski, 2015).

In both cases mentioned above, conflicts arise when one party does not know what the other online party is doing. In both cases, the dissatisfied family member – the child or the parent – tries to defend the in-group-relation of the family members against the online activities or sociability that are seen as outsiders. They remind the other of the priority of family intimacy over online relationships, activities and commitments. The out-group against which the family member occasionally fights is not a well-defined, stable group, or even a known group; instead, it is the bystander's ever-changing creation/image representing the unknown outward link of the other family member.

The type of conflicts described above can be interpreted at the level of the general functioning of the family institution in society, too. In the other words, in the longer historical perspective these conflicts can be seen as evidence of the permanent value of the family to its members, and of the family's ability to resist outside forces that threaten to disperse it. In this case, we deal with the dark side of media and communication technologies. This interpretation is further confirmed by other kinds of observations in our project. Family members use new media purposefully to promote family relationships and intimacy (Arminen & Weilenmann, 2009).

What is new in family life?

Thanks to the new mobile media, daily family life and interaction are no longer limited to the home. They move in space along with the family members. Messages with pictures, photos and music can be sent, short and long phone calls between family members can be made and taken throughout the day, and livecasts are becoming increasingly common. Connectedness can, in principle, be guaranteed. But the same is true for relationships to people outside the family, too. The holders of media tools have the freedom to choose.

New media have enabled family members to introduce new patterns to interact both facially and from a distance, socially and individually, both in and outside family life (see Chapter 10). For example, mobile phone cameras provide extraordinary opportunities to document one's life outside the family for other family members and thus re-share experiences. As videophone technologies become more common, these opportunities are growing ever greater. Eventually, these developments may lead to new questions: how do families become accustomed to continuous changes occasioned by the adaption of brand new media applications and services, and how profound are the changes these socio-technological developments pose for family interactions?

Child–parent relationships with media

Our main empirical data are video recordings of the daily life of families with children. The recordings have given us an opportunity for an extraordinary sharp holistic observation of daily family life and child–parent interaction in particular, both in relation to media at home and interaction when media are not present. In all 26 families that allowed the cameras into their lives, the cameras were positioned and the parents turned the cameras on and off according to the same principles, which guaranteed the systematic observations of families.

In general, family interaction is very rich and complex, full of parallel actions and semiotic objects, and it is deeply embodied, as demonstrated by the extracts of family interaction analysed in this book. The intimacy of family relationships developed in the family members' history and the mutual familiarity – as well as the history of mutual negotiations behind daily family life – constitute special features of this interaction, revealed through this project.

Socialization of the children at home seems to be embedded in all family activities, and media-related socialization forms a growing part of this process. Besides providing for their children, parents also have to oversee their children's homework, peer relationships and hobbies. Household chores were the most seldom shared activities during the days of research.

Privatization or individualization within the family

Exposure to an increasing amount of new media services combined with increasing time shortage due to an active, individualized lifestyle increases the risk of the privatization/isolation of individual family members from each other, but it may strengthen the family members' online relationships with peers. The differences in tastes and priorities between family members may further add to the feeling of separation. Service and application designers also utilize this differentiation effectively in designing media platforms for increasingly narrow niches, and create tempting worlds to be participated in, mainly individually, for all family members. The privatization of family members from each other may be the utmost latent consequence of a new media sphere, including the immediate ubiquitous accessibility of acquaintances online.

Media applications dynamically influence family relationships in many unexpected ways (see Chapter 3). Individualization and privatization of the children away from rest of the family at too early a stage may become a serious problem, challenging the depth of family relationships. However, the problem is not insurmountable so long as the cohesion of the family is maintained. The attractiveness of family relations is founded on a strong recalled history of family togetherness. We assume that up to now such family unities are still commonly formed, and newborn children have the opportunity to enjoy a close/intimate, bodily relationship with the parent(s) without the disturbing interference of media during the first months of life. Positive events shared together are also needed to continuously maintain the sense of mutual togetherness.

With the help of social media, a new and yet largely unknown connectedness is being achieved. It would be premature to assess its meaning for the growing child under the process of socialization and individualization. All we clearly know is that living an online life is a growing part of the daily life of ever younger age groups. We have provided an overview of daily family life with children and media and offered insights on how media are situated in the process of socialization in families. However, to learn and understand the long-term consequences of the digitalization of family life, we have to wait until the today's babies grow up.

The unpredictable implications of ubiquitous technologies

New technologies are fiercely debated, both in everyday life and in academia. There are ongoing discussions on what is considered a technological or media disturbance, and what should be tolerated. It has also been noticed that the norms clearly vary between societies and cultures (Ling,

2012). In all, the considerations of the overall utility and potential harm of technologies are endless, not least in the education of children. Would it be beneficial to equip all schools with the latest technologies and gadgets for all pupils? Would this guarantee improved quality for education? As long as there is no consensus on these kinds of fundamental questions, we can hardly expect any clear answers for parents.

Again, we may seek help from research: can it solve our problems, and provide an objective, even a transcendent vision? One of the merits of our study is that we provide a reasoned answer as to why research can hardly provide such a vision. As technological applications have become part of the common repertoire of most people in most societies, they have simultaneously become tied to local circumstances indexically in so numerous and unforeseen ways that they are inseparable from multitude ways of living, as our study on family life shows. Consequently, technological development that is increasingly differentiated and serving a growing number of distinguished population groups shows a persistent tendency towards cultural differentiation (Arminen, 2007). The appropriation of technologies by no means leads to a uniform cultural and social development. Ubiquitous technologies afford seamless interaction between people and integration into differentiated global networks, and at the same time, we may be concerned on good grounds about the erosion of social relationships and family ties.

Those who have been concerned about social fragmentation have used concepts such as ‘balkanization’ (Van Alstyne & Brynjolfsson, 1996), the ‘echo chamber’ (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008), or ‘filter bubble’ (Pariser, 2011) to refer to various mechanisms of how the recent networking technologies of various mechanisms strengthen communication among small like-minded groups and prevent exchanges with outer groups. The fear is that this strengthens egocentric networks, and may lead to a balkanized world in which the tyranny of the like-minded prevails. Within families, we may see increased isolation between family members, immersion in online communities, decreasing joint family time and widening opinion gaps between family members.

Alternatively, we may speak of a heightened, connected presence, where ubiquitous technologies afford a social connection at any moment, accelerating social exchanges between people beyond the bounds of time and location (Licoppe, 2004; Arminen & Weilenmann, 2009). According to this vision, the remote or mediated relations and co-present relations are starting to merge, creating a condensed, intensified presence. This allows the emergence of the phenomenon of ‘together individually’, where family members’ relationships are enriched and deepened by access beyond the immediate moment (see Chapter 10). The miniaturization of devices and their consequent pervasiveness is also seen as an advantage that enables communication and makes people increasingly accessible to each other. Furthermore, the mediatization of families does not

necessarily endanger their ability to socialize; it may even enhance it. Lim (2016) has argued that the practice of ‘transcendent parenting’ is emerging and going beyond traditional parenting; it incorporates offline and online environments, making parenting ceaseless and all encompassing.

Pervasive, ubiquitous technologies pose new methodological challenges for research. As intriguing as our videotaped materials of the everyday life of families are, they actually lack access to the content of the mobile technologies. Unfortunately, mobile content often remains out of reach for most studies, both for technical and ethical reasons (see, e.g., Raclow et al., forthcoming). This limitation makes it very hard or sometimes impossible for researchers to decipher what people are doing with their laptops, tablets or smartphones. At times, this limitation can be turned into a strength. This is the case with the notion of the ‘sticky device’ (see Chapter 9). The sticky device describes purposefully the use of a device from the perspective of a bystander who does not have access to what is going on between the user and the device: the bystander’s frustration may also be increased due to this lack of access to what is going on.

From an analytical point of view, though, it remains a problem that without the mobile content, we are not able to see why the person is tied to the online activity. The individual may be tied to work because of out of office hours duties posed by the employer, or to a sudden family crisis that requires an immediate response, or to amusing Facebook posts. Indeed we do not know whether the person has turned to browsing through amusing Facebook posts due to stress caused by one or the other of the two first scenarios. In any case, without access to the mobile content, our understanding of the reflexivity of user–device interaction remains shallow if we are not able to follow the user–device interaction in which the user’s actions are redirected due to browsing through new information or to find out whether there is an ongoing person-to-person communication (Arminen, 2005). Consequently, observational studies or recordings of interactions tend to provide only limited, narrow and perspective-bound access to the participants’ multidimensional social realities (which are still growing ever more complex in a technologically augmented world). Moreover, it is short-sighted to discuss ICT devices being addictive or posing a new stress factor to families: devices are mere vehicles that can open up access to other people or to numerous online realms, such as games, expert knowledge or social networks.

Finally, the fast and accelerating development of the technological world creates a flux in which it is increasing hard to predict the future. Exciting new technologies and applications come and go, and only a few are here to stay. For instance, mobile livecasting is becoming a huge success, but we cannot yet know whether it will continue to capture people’s interest – and with what kind of consequences – or if it will be superseded by some new phenomenon. One of the new services may well impact the organization of social action and relationship formation and lead to

cultural and political transitions that we may start to appreciate only afterwards. Nevertheless, in many respects, family life and its ties to social accountability will remain central and constant. The new media and technology developments will intensify social life, and add to the constant negotiations of individualized and digitalized forms of family life, but in its accountability family life will remain central.

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