

Yearbook 2018



# DIGITAL PARENTING

## The Challenges for Families in the Digital Age

Giovanna Mascheroni, Cristina Ponte & Ana Jorge (eds.)

The International Clearinghouse on  
**CHILDREN, YOUTH & MEDIA**  
at NORDICOM, University of Gothenburg

# The International Clearinghouse on CHILDREN, YOUTH & MEDIA

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In 1997, the Nordic Information Centre for Media and Communication Research (Nordicom), University of Gothenburg, Sweden, began establishment of the International Clearinghouse on Children, Youth and Media. The overall point of departure for the Clearinghouse's efforts with respect to children, youth and media is the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The aim of the Clearinghouse is to increase awareness and knowledge about children, youth and media, thereby providing a basis for relevant policy-making, contributing to a constructive public debate, and enhancing children's and young people's media literacy and media competence. Moreover, it is hoped that the Clearinghouse's work will stimulate further research on children, youth and media.

The International Clearinghouse on Children, Youth and Media informs various groups of users – researchers, policy-makers, media professionals, voluntary organisations, teachers, students and interested individuals – about

- research on children, young people and media, with special attention to media violence,
- research and practices regarding media education and children's/young people's participation in the media, and
- measures, activities and research concerning children's and young people's media environment.

Fundamental to the work of the Clearinghouse is the creation of a global *network*. The Clearinghouse publishes a *yearbook* and *reports*. Several *bibliographies* and a worldwide *register of organisations* concerned with children and media have been compiled. This and other information is available on the Clearinghouse's *web site*:

**[www.nordicom.gu.se/clearinghouse](http://www.nordicom.gu.se/clearinghouse)**

## The International Clearinghouse on Children, Youth and Media, at

Nordicom  
University of Gothenburg  
Box 713  
SE 405 30 GÖTEBORG, Sweden  
Web site:  
[www.nordicom.gu.se/clearinghouse](http://www.nordicom.gu.se/clearinghouse)

**DIRECTOR:** Jonas Ohlsson

### **INFORMATION CO-ORDINATOR:**

Catharina Bucht  
Tel: +46 31 786 49 53  
Fax: +46 31 786 46 55  
[catharina.bucht@nordicom.gu.se](mailto:catharina.bucht@nordicom.gu.se)

## THE CLEARINGHOUSE IS LOCATED AT NORDICOM

Nordicom is an organ of co-operation between the Nordic countries – Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden. The overriding goal and purpose is to make the media and communication efforts undertaken in the Nordic countries known, both throughout and far beyond our part of the world.

Nordicom uses a variety of channels – newsletters, journals, books, databases – to reach researchers, students, decisionmakers, media practitioners, journalists, teachers and interested members of the general public.

Nordicom works to establish and strengthen links between the Nordic research community and colleagues in all parts of the world, both by means of unilateral flows and by linking individual researchers, research groups and institutions.

Nordicom also documents media trends in the Nordic countries. The joint Nordic information addresses users in Europe and further afield. The production of comparative media statistics forms the core of this service.

Nordicom is funded by the Nordic Council of Ministers.

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## Digital Parenting

### *The Challenges for Families in the Digital Age*

Editors: Giovanna Mascheroni, Cristina Ponte & Ana Jorge

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## Preface

It is with great pleasure that we present the 2018 Yearbook from the International Clearinghouse on Children, Youth and Media at Nordicom: *Digital Parenting: The Challenges for Families in the Digital Age*.

The topics addressed in the 2018 Yearbook – how to relate to or mediate children's use of digital media, generational gaps in the use of media and the use of social media to display or seek support in parenthood – are timely and relevant in many respects and have engaged many qualified scholars from around the world. Parenting in the digital media environment is a theme often discussed in news media and among parenting groups. Balancing the opportunities of digital media and at the same time considering potentially unwanted and/or negative effects can be a challenge, both for adults and for the younger generation. There are no established policies, long traditions or experience to turn to and many are seeking advice.

The 2018 Yearbook is the result of a great collaborative effort. Nordicom is deeply grateful to the editors of this new anthology, Giovanna Mascheroni, Cristina Ponte and Ana Jorge, as well as to all the contributors who have made this publication possible. It is our hope that the collection of articles will make interesting reading all around the world, stimulate new research and debate and provide new ideas regarding the topical and highly relevant issue of being a parent in the digital age.

In the work of the Clearinghouse, the global dimension is a core principle, both with respect to the content we publish and distribute and to the contributors who produce it. *Digital Parenting* represents this principle by presenting contributions and examples and involving authors from many areas of the world.

All books published by the Clearinghouse aim to shed light on different aspects concerning children, youth and media, spread current information and knowledge and hopefully stimulate further research. Various groups of users are targeted; researchers, policymakers, media professionals, voluntary organizations, teachers, students and interested individuals. It is our hope that this new Yearbook will be of interest and provide new insights on the topic of *digital parenting* to a broad range of readers.

Göteborg, October 2018

Catharina Bucht  
Information coordinator

Jonas Ohlsson  
Director



# Introduction

Giovanna Mascheroni, Cristina Ponte & Ana Jorge

Digital parenting is a popular yet polysemic concept that refers both to how parents are increasingly engaged in regulating their children's relationships with digital media (parental mediation), and how parents themselves incorporate digital media in their daily activities and parenting practices, and, in so doing, develop emergent forms of parenting.

## Parental mediation

The notion of parental mediation indicates the varied practices that parents adopt in order to manage and regulate their children's engagement with the media. Our understanding of digital parenting in its first meaning can build upon the well-established tradition of research into parental mediation, initially centered on the mediation of television viewing in order to assess its effects on children's development and behaviour (Austin, 1993; Nathanson, 1999; Valkenburg et al., 1999). As the internet became widely adopted in families with children, researchers were asking whether TV-oriented strategies of parental mediation could be adapted to online media, or whether new approaches were needed (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008). In fact, the affordances of digital media as both physical (portability) and digital objects (personalisation, visibility, persistence, etc.) – that are enacted through practice (Costa, 2018) – all pose challenges to a simple transfer of the TV-based strategies of restrictive mediation, instructive mediation and co-viewing (Valkenburg et al., 1999) to online and mobile media.

The most recent research on parental mediation of children's internet use came to the conclusion that the diverse array of mediation practices employed by parents can actually be grouped into two broad categories: enabling and restrictive mediation (Livingstone et

al., 2017). While restrictive mediation can be effective in reducing children's exposure to online risks, it has numerous side-effects, because it limits children's opportunities to develop digital literacy and build resilience and discourages children's agency within the child-parent relationship. Enabling mediation, instead, encompasses a set of mediation practices (including co-use, active mediation of internet safety, monitoring and technical restrictions such as parental controls) that are aimed at empowering children and supporting their active engagement with online media.

The question is, then, how to ensure children's access to online opportunities while protecting them from potential harmful effects. This question is particularly pressing for younger children, who are now increasingly online even before they can talk or walk. However, there is still a paucity of research on parental mediation of very young children regarding their digital media uses. Available research suggests that parent of younger children tend to favour restrictive mediation, though they are inconsistent in their practices and often use touchscreens as a babysitter while they are doing household chores, or as part of a system of reward and punishment for children's behaviour (Chaudron et al., 2015).

The appropriation of digital media into families' everyday lives is influenced by parenting styles or ethics (Clark, 2013). Parents are variously equipped to face the increasing complexity of the digital world and its social and developmental consequences. Inequalities in parental mediation have emerged based on parents' education or socio-economic status (Livingstone et al., 2017; Paus-Hasebrink et al., 2013). Even among parents of young children, lower income/lower educated parents are likely to experience a generational digital divide and feel less confident in their ability to guide children's use of touchscreens and prevent their exposure to risks. As a consequence, they are reluctant to engage in parental mediation and scaffolding of their children's digital literacy practices. Children are left to experiment on their own, learning by trial and error, or seek out support from their older siblings (Mascheroni et al., 2016).

A similar digital generation gap is experienced in developing countries, especially among rural families where parents lag behind in the adoption and use of technology and children are likely to teach their parents how to use computers, mobile phones and the internet (Correa, 2014). Prior research into parental mediation has shown that children act as agents of change, by introducing new technologies in the family, reversing existing media rules or creating new rules, guiding their parents' use, and mediating media effects (van den Bulck et al., 2016). The so-called "child-effect" (van den Bulck et al., 2016) invites the researcher to consider mediation as a reciprocal process, whereby both parents and children and the family as a cultural unit are transformed. Families with children are usually early and enthusiastic adopters of new technologies, which, in turn, shape the family's communication practices and media consumption habits. However, and despite the fact that the child-effect can and, to varying degrees, does occur in all families, it has been largely under-investigated so far.

## Parenting practices

A similar attention to the diversity of contexts in which digital media are incorporated and negotiated, and a caution against easy generalisations, should be paid when we address the second meaning of digital parenting – that is, how digital media have become increasingly entangled with parenting practices. In the Global North and, increasingly, in urban contexts in the Global South, the pervasiveness of the internet and mobile media is giving rise to an emergent form of parenting, called “transcendent parenting” (Lim, 2016), whereby parents are faced with the challenges of transcending online-offline social interactions, the multi-media and multimodal environments, and the “timeless time” of parenting.

While providing means for remote parenting and coordinating family life, new technologies pose new challenges to parents. Emergent mediated parenting practices include sharenting – that is, the (over)sharing of children’s pictures and personal information on social media (see Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017), the increasing reliance on the internet and parenting apps for advice, and the use of wearable devices in order to calculate babies’ health data and behavioural patterns, or to monitor the child’s whereabouts. Together these practices concur to an unprecedented datafication of children’s lives: Children’s data are tracked, stored in commercial platforms, analysed and monetised as part of a “surveillance capitalism” (Zuboff, 2015). Through sharenting and the use of wearable objects, children are involved in ever intensifying networks of surveillance, including commercial dataveillance and “intimate surveillance” (Leaver, 2017) from parents. The implications for children’s future can only be speculated at this stage, but are likely to compromise children’s rights to privacy, as well as rights to be forgotten and to remove content they might feel constraining later.

## Structure of the book

This book addresses the challenges and opportunities faced by parents in digital times taking into account multiple levels of digital penetration among families from different social classes and regions across the world.

The 20 chapters that follow engage with evidence drawn from a wide range of methods for data collection and analysis: Surveys administered to both children and parents, allowing a comparison of the answers; longitudinal observation of families and child-parent relations, showing changes and continuities in time; in-depth interviews with parents and young people; ethnographic research, including auto-ethnographies; discourse analysis of online discussions on sensitive topics. This plurality of methods and the identification of knowledge gaps should prove inspiring for future research and interventions.

The book is organized along three sections: Digital parenting in context; Parental mediation in practice; and Challenges, risks and opportunities of digital media for parents and children.

The section *Digital parenting in context* sheds light on a host of sociocultural environments: Global North and Global South, urban and rural areas, middle class and disadvantaged families, migrant and minority families.

Chapter one presents us with a global and comparative view. Sonia Livingstone and Jasmina Byrne note how parents all over the world are responding to the rapid pace of technological innovation. As the authors observe, context matters: While parents in high-income countries are slowly moving from restrictive towards enabling forms of mediation, in middle and low-income countries restrictions are still the preferred way to deal with technological change. The chapter ends with suggestions to support parents from different contexts in the process of empowering their children online.

The second chapter focuses on deeply digitally connected households across the world. Sun Sun Lim introduces the concept of “transcendent parenting”, mainly experienced by middle-class parents. Surrounded by their digital ties, parents constantly communicate with their children and guide their children’s media use. The author discusses this parenting practice, its manifestations at various developmental stages of the children and its implications in terms of emerging parenting obligations.

In contrast to these media-rich households, chapter three addresses the case of isolated rural communities in Chile, where most of the households don’t have internet connection, even when access infrastructure exists. Isabel Pavez and Teresa Correa explore not only the role young children play in the digital inclusion of their families, but also the complexity and tensions that emerge through this process and their relation with traditional family values.

The following chapters examine other contexts and perspectives. Chapter four presents a longitudinal panel study, covering twelve years (2005-2017), on the role played by the media within 18 socially disadvantaged families in Austria. Ingrid Paus-Hasebrink analyses parents’ mediation practices and how they changed with respect to both children’s age (from 5 to 17 years old) and changing media over time, discussing the observed patterns of mediation practices.

This is followed by two chapters looking at families from minority groups also living in industrialized societies. In chapter five, Sabine Little focuses on ways in which, in the UK, parents of different cultural and linguistic backgrounds use digital technology to support their children’s language development. The author points out that these parents face tensions between their ideological assumptions regarding the use and over-use of technology versus the motivational pull they know technology has for their children. In chapter six, Marketa Zezulková and Lucie Stastná look at a group of Roma families in the Czech Republic and listen to their family narratives. The authors explore the role of cultural experiences expressed in these narratives in parental mediation and digital parenting and underline their value for the construction of new knowledge about parental mediation, their motivation and forms.

Chapter seven, the last one of this section, engages with the topic of parenting from the point of view of adolescents who reflect on the ways their parents negotiate digital responsibilities and rights with them. Based on interviews collected in the US and

Portugal, Lynn Schofield Clark and Maria José Brites note that families who embrace a commitment to social justice when they are considering digital activities of their children may produce agentic environments. By contrast, families with low levels of agentic discussion and decision-making may reinforce low digital agentic options, actions and decisions.

The section *Parental mediation in practice*, the second of this book, gathers contributions from different angles and contexts on how parental mediation is being adapted, at an empirical as well as conceptual levels, in a (post)digital age.

Chapter eight, by Thorsten Naab, reviews the theoretical framework of traditional strategies of parental mediation of very young children in the context of social media activities and suggests media trusteeship as a complementary approach. Interviews with parents reveal that they possess only limited concepts of how they could support their children's digital media development, and they seem to apply ad-hoc tactics to cope with changes of their children's media autonomy.

Next, the chapter by Yehuda Bar Lev, Nelly Elias and Sharona T. Levy presents an ethnographic and longitudinal study of a "technologically saturated" family of a boy from the age of six to 27 months. Following the infant, then toddler, through a period of nearly two years, allowed the authors to understand how the media use of the child evolved and was shaped by parent-related factors and the presence of older siblings.

A study from Australia and UK, focusing on parental evaluations of children's (0-5-year olds) touchscreen technologies, is presented in chapter ten. Leslie Haddon and Donell Holloway reveal that parents of young children are less concerned about inappropriate content and contact than parents of older children. Parents recognised the learning and developmental benefits or detriments of children using touchscreen devices and spoke with mixed feelings about how these technologies can be useful to keeping children occupied.

Chapters eleven and twelve reveal mirrored reports from parents and children on online practices. Rozane De Cock and colleagues look at early gambling behaviour in online games, focusing on parent's perspectives on children's engagement in games, and on children's reporting about their game play incorporating gambling elements. The study with primary school children of on average 10,5 years old in Flanders shows the challenges for parental awareness and mediation posed by the convergence of gambling and digital games where there is no obligatory strict classification system and labelling of simulated gambling games and their gambling characteristics, and there is an online context of simulated gambling games.

Lorleen Farrugia and Mary Anne Lauri present parents' awareness and management of their children's online risks in Malta, an insular, Catholic culture, in chapter twelve. The balance of supervision and independence parents enact in relation to the online use of children was investigated in two studies with parents and children 8 to 15-years old. Besides discovering a gap between children's online practices and parents' awareness, the authors found that parents proceed by "trial and error" in their mediation strategies to adapt to changes in technology.

Chapter 13 brings the perspective of German professional educational counsellors on how parents deal with children's use of mobile media and internet when raising up their children and how they try to find ways to improve parental media education. Gisela Schubert and Susanne Eggert describe how parents struggle with this when their children get older, and their media use increases and becomes more independent, seeking family counsellors to help them.

Jos de Haan, Peter Nikken and Annemarie Wennekers' chapter closes this section with a contribution focused on the Dutch case, where scientific research, supported by ministries, has been the foundation for evidence-based parenting support. Practical outcomes included training programs for different agents, with the aim of contributing to the safe and playful use of the internet and the development of digital skills of children.

Lastly, section three, *Challenges, Risks and Opportunities*, brings discussions on emerging risks, challenges and opportunities brought about by digital media for parents and children.

The section opens up with Veronica Barassi's reflection on the relationship between parents' digital practices and the production of children's data traces. Drawing on a qualitative and ethnographically informed research which explores the impact of big data on family life, the author argues that the multiple variety of data traces that are produced daily about children can be used to profile them as citizen subjects and calls for attention to issues such as algorithmic inaccuracies and data justice.

Chapter 16 engages with the "screen time" debate. Alicia Blum-Ross and Sonia Livingstone analyse the guidelines by the American Academy of Pediatrics' (AAP) (issued in 1999 and updated in 2016) in relation to the existing evidence about the lived experience of families in the digital age, drawing on interviews with 73 diverse families in London. They argue that AAP and similar time- or exposure-based guidelines rely on an insufficient evidence base, and lead parents to prioritise restrictive forms of "screen time" that neither serves the purpose of keeping children safe nor help them towards opportunities.

In chapter 17, Pille Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt offers an auto-ethnographic account on digital parenting of a child with rare genetic syndrome – CHARGE – with the help of closed Facebook groups. The author explores the activities of three online groups of parents and identifies the helpful "therapeutic affordances" – as defined by Merolli and colleagues (2015) – provided by social media for these parents: identity, flexibility, structure, narration and adaptation.

Chapter 18 looks at the digital mediation of childbirth in the UK. Ranjana Das found that online discussions of birthing display the juxtaposition of two value laden narratives: One – the "good" birthing – emphasizes the necessity and superiority of a drug-free vaginal birth, sits within the feminist rebuttal of obstetric domination of birthing and is an empowering discourse; the other seeks to silence those whose births did not fit within this model, and presents them with the task of silencing the "horror-stories" experiences.



The last two chapters address (anti-)sharenting strategies, with regard to parents sharing pictures and information of one's children on social media. On chapter 19, Maja Sonne Damkjaer presents a study of eight Danish first-time parent couples' use and experience of digital media in relation to their new role as parents. The author identified four types of communicative orientation that characterise parents' approach to Facebook as a social network site, in relation to differences in aesthetics, values and attitudes toward sharenting. Finally, Ulla Autenrieth's chapter explores the reaction to risk assessment in relation to children's digital photos: The anti-sharenting position and the behaviour adapted by some parents that show pictures of their young children on social media sites. Analysing the emergent photo practices, the author introduces a photo guide to support families in discussing these issues.

The chapters thus illustrate the diverse opportunities, constraints and tensions that digital media pose to parenting and family life, encourage further debates, and suggest future policies. As other publications of the Yearbook collection from the International Clearinghouse on Children, Youth and Media, this book reaches out to a variety of readers, including professionals in the field as well as NGOs and other policy makers. As editors, we also hope that parents all over the world find here topics and discussions related to their own experience.

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I.

Digital parenting in context



# Parenting in the Digital Age

## *The Challenges of Parental Responsibility in Comparative Perspective*

Sonia Livingstone & Jasmina Byrne

### Abstract

As children in high, middle and even low-income countries gain access to the internet via a range of digital devices and services – most often via a mobile phone – parents are feeling challenged in their competence, role and authority. In response, parents draw on their available resources – socioeconomic and cultural – and their preferred parenting styles as well as some of the principles of positive parenting. In high income countries, a shift is underway from restrictive towards enabling forms of parental mediation. In middle and low-income countries, the evidence suggests that restrictive mediation is generally favoured by parents, although this brings costs in terms of children's opportunities online, especially for girls. In all countries, the rapid pace of technological innovation undermines parental competence, this in turn undermining children's willingness to turn to parents for support. We conclude with suggestions to support parents in meeting the growing challenge of empowering their children online in diverse contexts.

**Keywords:** positive parenting, parental mediation, digital media, Global South, Global Kids Online, cross-national comparisons

### Introduction

Who is responsible for enabling children's internet use and protecting them from risks? Generally, the first answer is parents, especially when it comes to keeping children safe. Parents are held responsible for teaching their children about values, social norms and accepted behaviour. They are also expected to enable their children to study, help in the family, keep healthy, cross the road, and make good judgements about people, places and information. In enacting these responsibilities, parents – we include here

step parents, grandparents and any other adults and older siblings taking on a caring role – have always been able to draw on their own life experience and the traditions and knowledge of their community.

But as children in high, middle and even low-income countries gain access to the internet, parents are feeling challenged – especially as their children use mobile devices that are difficult for parents to supervise, and technologically complex services that parents may not understand. They are also influenced by popular worries about screen time, internet addiction, stranger danger and so on. So whatever is *normatively* expected of parents, there are *practical* limits to what they can do. No wonder that, in whichever country has recently gained widespread internet access, there is a groundswell of concern – *from parents* as they struggle to enact their responsibilities and *about parents* as governments worry about the digital divide, child protection and cybercrime, on the one hand and, on the other, the digital skills of the future labour force.

Also under pressure are schools, expected to teach the digital literacies needed for children to benefit from the expanding digital opportunities; welfare and mental health services, now expected to address problems children face in proprietary online services; law enforcement, dealing with networked crimes involving child victims at considerable scale; and businesses, striving to expand into digital markets but undermined by issues of consumer literacy and trust. From the perspective of these organisations, the more that parents can take on to prepare their children for the digital age, the less the burden on them. Conversely, the less able parents are to enable and protect their children, the greater are the calls for appropriate education, regulation, public expenditure and corporate social responsibility.

## Parenting offline and online – how do they relate?

What kinds of parenting styles are likely to be effective in relation to the digital environment? There is a growing body of evidence, especially from high and middle-income countries, that demonstrates the importance of positive parenting for child development, including early childhood physical, cognitive and emotional development, educational outcomes, improved communication and trust, reduction in risk taking behaviour among adolescents, improved social competence of adolescents and reduction of violence (Daly, 2007; Knerr, Gardner & Cluver, 2013; Moore, Whitney & Kinukawa, 2009). What is often considered “positive parenting” includes “stimulation and affection, clear and focused praise, supporting increasing autonomy, encouraging healthy habits, goal setting, establishing firm rules and consequences” (De Stone, 2016: 10). However, when children enter adolescents from around the age of 10, there are also changes in parent-child relationships with adolescents seeking more autonomy and independence (Patton et al., 2016), and parenting styles must adapt.

In 2007 the World Health Organization (WHO) developed a framework that examines key dimensions of parenting or parental roles that positively affect adolescent

well-being: connection, behaviour control, respect for individuality, modelling appropriate behaviour, and provision and protection (WHO, 2007). These parental roles can be easily applied to all situations and environments, including to children's digital world, as follows:

1. Connection – a positive, stable, emotional bond between parents and adolescents is an important factor contributing to child and adolescent health and development. In the digital world that means that a child or an adolescent who feels connected with their parents is more likely to share their offline and online experiences without fearing their access will be blocked. Our Global Kids Online study shows that where children say they have positive relationship with parents in general (manifested through support and praise) they are more likely to share with them when negative things happen online (Georgiev et al., 2017; Logar et al., 2016).
2. Behaviour control – this includes “supervising and monitoring adolescents’ activities, establishing behavioural rules and consequences for misbehaviour, and conveying clear expectations for behaviour” (WHO, 2007: 11). When it comes to children and the digital technologies, this could include rules about time spent on the internet, use of digital devices after bed time, in children's bedrooms, during meal time, as well as understanding what children do online, how they set up their privacy controls, with whom they share personal information etc. South African parents surveyed through Global Kids Online on average exhibit the digital skills of 12 to 14-year olds, making it relatively difficult for them to support and supervise their children's online behaviour (Phyfer et al., 2016). The Bulgarian Kids Online survey shows that parental engagement in children's online activities declines with children's age, with 44 per cent of parents engaging with 9 to 11-year olds and only 30 per cent with 12-year olds and older (Kanchev et al., 2017).
3. Respect for individuality – this means allowing the adolescent to develop a healthy sense of self, apart from his or her parents. This includes listening to what adolescents have to say, trusting them to complete their responsibilities or to take on new roles in the family. In the digital domain this means allowing children and adolescents to explore the internet independently in much the same way we would allow them to explore the physical world. The age and capacities of the child matter, as younger children will clearly need more guidance than the older ones. The Global Kids Online research shows that the 9 to 11-year old group finds it particularly difficult to know what information online is true and what is not (Byrne et al., 2016).
4. Modelling appropriate behaviour – children and adolescents identify with their parents, absorb the values and norms established in the home and try to emulate parental behaviour. If parents spend most of their free time online, there is a strong likelihood that the children will do too. If parents share too much information

online, will that affect how children share their own personal information or information about their friends? Through development of their sense of agency children may depart from the established norm in the family and decide to take a different approach to that of their parents. We have seen examples of children disagreeing over “sharenting” or parental sharing of content and images of their children online (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017).

5. Provision and protection – parents cannot meet all the needs of the growing adolescent. Their role is also to seek the resources for their children that they cannot provide or to ensure that they have access to appropriate services. When it comes to protection of children online parents still have an important role to play. But so do peers, teachers and other adults in children’s lives. When asked who they turn to if they experience something hurtful online, children would turn to “peers” first and then “parents” second, as we show below (Byrne et al., 2016).

To what extent these parenting roles will be fulfilled, what parenting style will be adopted and what parenting practices will prevail will depend on many factors including parental education, beliefs and culture as well as the individual and institutional support available to parents. As we discuss in what follows, this varies in different parts of the world.

## In high income countries

In the early days of internet access in Europe and North America, many children became confident and competent internet users before their parents and teachers. This resulted in a considerable generation gap – parents underestimated their children’s use and the risk of harm they encountered online. As a consequence, few parents supported their children’s internet use beyond the fact of providing access. By the same token, few children turned to their parents for support when they encountered a problem on the internet. A culture rapidly developed in which, to generalize, many parents felt disempowered – ignorant of their children’s experiences online, susceptible to media panics about internet predators or pornography, and therefore restrictive in managing their children’s internet access.

But the situation is now changing. A recent survey of 6,400 European parents of children aged 6 to 14 (in France, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, Poland, Italy, Sweden and the UK) found parents to be fairly concerned about their children’s online experiences – especially exposure to violent images and being bullied online, but also about their children being exposed to data tracking, digital identity theft and advertisements for unhealthy lifestyles (Livingstone et al., 2017a). However, analysis of what parents said they actually did to manage their children’s internet use revealed two styles of parental mediation:



1. Restrictive mediation: Parents restricting or banning or insisting on supervising any of a long list of online activities
2. Enabling mediation: Parents undertaking active strategies such as talking to a child about what they do online or encouraging their activities as well as giving safety advice; also activities that might seem restrictive (use of technical controls and parental monitoring) but are better interpreted as building a safe framework precisely so that positive uses of the internet can be encouraged.

In terms of outcomes, more enabling mediation by parents was positively associated with children's experience of online opportunities, but also with more online risks. Conversely, more restrictive mediation was associated with fewer online risks experienced by children, but also they enjoyed fewer opportunities. This makes it problematic if policy-makers concerned with risk urge parents to restrict children's internet use without recognising the costs to their online opportunities. But also problematic is the tendency of educators to urge parents to enable children's internet use without recognising that this may bring more risk. In addition, both parents and policy makers need to be aware that risks do not necessarily translate to harm and that enabling mediation helps children to build resilience and adopt strategies that can help them stay safe both offline and online.

Further analysis of the European parent survey showed that parents prefer a risk-averse restrictive strategy for their less skilled children, presumably doubting their child's ability to cope with risk if they encounter it, while being more encouraging of if their children, or they themselves, are more competent internet users. Thus in the Global North, it is time to recognize that many parents are also gaining digital skills and they can use these to enable their child online. However, parents who are less confident of their own or their child's digital skills take a more restrictive approach, keeping their child safe, but at the cost of online opportunities – so, to avoid a vicious cycle of disadvantage, parents as well as children could be provided with digital literacy education.

To sum up, what we learned in the Global North suggests the value of an open dialogue between parent and child so that each comes to understand and respond to the online experiences, competences, and concerns of the other. However, insofar as parents or children lack digital skills, inequalities in children's online opportunities may open up. EU Kids Online research shows other ways in which disadvantages in home life offline may extend online: children more vulnerable to risk of harm offline also tend to be more vulnerable online; also, around one in eight parents does not provide supportive or safety mediation; last, around half of parents whose child has encountered an online risk is unaware of this – and this in countries where two-thirds of children say their parents know a fair amount about what they do online.

So even in the Global North, many parents and carers lack time, knowledge or other resources to manage their children's internet use as well as they would wish, either to promote opportunities or minimize risks. And their responses both reflect and reproduce socio-economic inequalities in children's life changes, now online as well as offline.

Moreover, the continual flow of technological innovations further destabilizes parental competence and confidence while placing children at the cutting edge of experimental forms of technological innovation (Lupton & Williamson, 2017). Add to this the contradictory exhortations on the one hand to minimize “screen time” and, on the other, to buy the latest device to ensure children “keep up”, and parental anxieties become intense (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, this book).

## In low and middle-income countries

It seems likely that the above problems are exacerbated in low and middle-income countries for several reasons (UNICEF, 2017). First, even though close to 4 billion people – mostly in the Global South – are not connected, of those who are, young people below the age of 25 are nearly three times more likely than the general population to be using the internet (ITU, 2013). So while children are often “pioneers” in exploring the internet, they may lack support from knowledgeable adults. As Gouws (2014: 14) comments about South African teenagers’ use of technology, although “perceived to be street-smart, arrogant “know-it-alls” and technological experts, they are also young, lonely, insecure and find themselves in a life period of major developmental challenges”.

Many children in developing countries are brought up by a single parent or even by relatives, often grandparents. In Central/South America and sub-Saharan Africa, children are more likely to live with either one or neither of their parents than children in other regions (Child Trends, 2017). Factors such as migration, illness, parental death, poverty affect these family units’ functioning and parents or caregivers are often left with little resources and time to help with their children with the digital skills. The digital divide between children and their grandparents is even more pronounced and it is hard to expect that a 70-year old will be able to monitor his or her grandchild’s internet use or support them with the development of digital skills.

Sometimes, parental mediation techniques are based on the cultural norms prevailing in society, tending to restrict children’s digital use even further (Bulger et al., 2017), which may in turn lead to children hiding from their parents what they do online. For instance, Davidson and Martellozzo (2013: 1456) found in their study in Bahrain, that: “Young people use digital media in much the same way regardless of the social and cultural contexts, but that culturally gendered perspectives place restrictions upon usage.” Specifically, they note that parental expectations about girls’ use of digital media led girls to conceal acts that would be judged unacceptable (such as communicating with boys online) or that would be harshly punished if discovered.

Indeed, parenting restrictions can fall particularly heavily on girls (Livingstone et al., 2017b). As Porter and colleagues (2012: 159) note in their study of three African countries: “These constraints [on girls by parents and communities], often imposed at least in part from positive welfare motives, can be a substantial barrier to accessing education and improved livelihoods, especially (but not only) in rural areas.” A study

of parental mediation practices in South Africa found that girls received less parental mediation with regard to their internet use, which was associated with fewer online risks but also with lower levels of digital skills and fewer online opportunities (Phyfer & Kardefelt-Winther, forthcoming).

The degree to which parents and carers are often reluctant to discuss sexual matters with teenagers can leave them vulnerable to online and offline risks as they search for answers online, potentially finding problematic content as a result (Nwalo & Anasi, 2012). No wonder that girls themselves call for efforts to educate parents, teachers and communities on the importance of their access to the internet, and to having ICTs better integrated in the curriculum (de Pauw, 2011). Parents may also not understand the nature of the risks online. In Turkey, a small-scale survey of 12 to 19-year-olds found that “the most reported form of exposure to cyberbullying students experience is being insulted and being threatened” (Aricak et al., 2008: 259) yet that parents and teachers tend to see verbal threats as less serious than physical bullying face-to-face, notwithstanding research which shows harms from cyberbullying (United Nations, 2016).

In South Africa, parents do worry about children experiencing of bullying online yet a sizeable percentage of children (40%) said they experienced bullying in person which parents did not mention as a concern. Such one-sided worries stem from the lack of parental knowledge of both digital technologies and their children’s life experiences, so their mediation practices may go “from total restriction and no access to a device, to access to a device with little guidance on how to use the internet safely” (Phyfer et al., 2016: 15).

In addition, since in the least developed countries school attendance is low, pupil/teacher ratios are high, and the overcrowded classrooms and untrained teachers are common (UNESCO, 2016). It seems fair to conclude that in many countries, children lack a supportive and/or informed adult in their lives who can teach them to navigate the internet safely or offer support when needed.

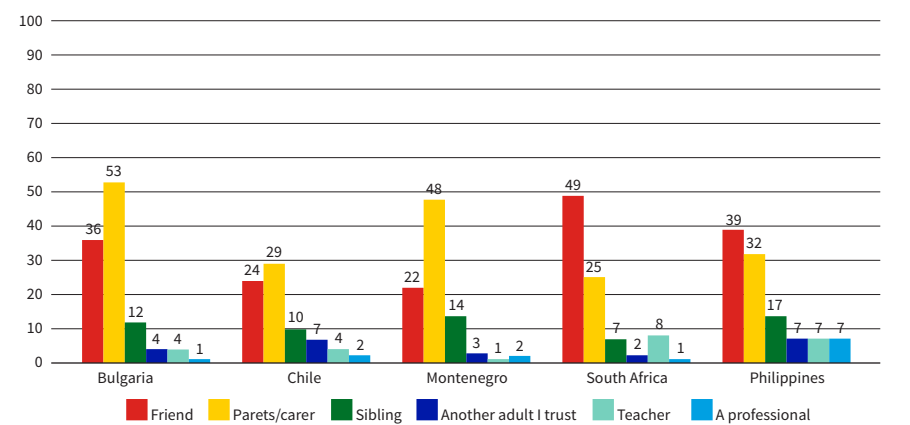
## What is being done, what can be done?

Policy and practice must respect the different conditions that apply in different parts of the world. The Global Kids Online (GKO) project is interviewing and surveying parents and children (aged 9-17) across different continents to benchmark and track children’s online access, skills, opportunities, risk and safety – and the skills and protective actions of their parents. Recent findings from partners’ research reveals the different sources of support that children themselves turn to in different contexts (Byrne et al., 2016; Cabello et al., 2017; Georgiev et al., 2017; Kanchev et al., 2017; Logar et al., 2016; Phyfer et al., 2016; Popadić et al., 2016).

Figure 1 shows that in Bulgaria and Montenegro parents are more likely to be children’s first recourse for help when something is problematic on the internet, compared with in the Global South countries surveyed. In Chile, children seem less likely

to tell anyone at all, while in South Africa and the Philippines, friends are preferred over parents, though both are helpful. In no country do children turn to teachers or other professionals in significant numbers. This suggests that it is difficult to provide alternative adult sources of support to parents, but that children might be supported by peer-based mentoring systems.

**Figure 1.** The last time something happened online that bothered or upset you, did you talk to anyone of these people about it? (per cent yes, by country)



*Comments:* 9 to 17-year olds in all countries. In Bulgaria, Chile and Montenegro, representative national samples are used. Caution is needed for the findings from the Philippines and South Africa, which are based on pilot data; in the Philippines, the sample is very small. For methodological details, see [www.globalkidsonline.net/results](http://www.globalkidsonline.net/results)

Multi-stakeholder discussions often express the hope or expectation that parents will take primary responsibility for child safety online. Parental mediation can be tailored according to the age, maturity, cultural or psychological circumstances of each child. It doesn't limit adults' freedoms online and it is cheap. Moreover, parents are already on hand, willing to play their role. But they also expect that their child's school will offer them advice and safety education, and that the government will "police" the internet so that parental lapses in effort or effectiveness don't have disastrous consequences.

In Europe, Insafe<sup>1</sup>, is the awareness-raising network for national centres that coordinates the annual Safer Internet Day and provides parental guidance regarding the latest popular site or newest online fashion among children. Furthermore, there are numerous multi-stakeholder initiatives that draw together the combined expertise of educators, parenting groups, child welfare bodies, industry, and law enforcement (see, for example, the work of the ICT Coalition in bringing together the internet industry; Croll, 2015).

Coordinated, accessible, parent-focused efforts in the Global South are few and far between (Livingstone et al., 2017b). Although there are many parenting education programs in this region, very few address children's online experiences. Integrating online issues into existing programs may be a way to reach more parents and address their needs holistically. Also likely to be useful is peer mentoring, given children's preference

to turn to a friend for a support, especially when it comes to marginalized groups of children, e.g. children with disabilities or adolescent girls in societies where gender inequality undermines girls' opportunities to benefit from ICT use. For instance, in Iraq provision of online resources allowed adolescent girls to access information, also linking them to peer-to-peer support networks where they could discuss issues usually considered private or taboo in their society (UNICEF, 2013).

## Conclusion

We have drawn on the available and new research to argue that, in both the Global North and the Global South, while it is entirely appropriate to call on parents to play a key role since they are ideally positioned to address the particular "best interests" of their child, policies which leave the bulk of the responsibility to parents will find that this works better for relatively privileged families than for the majority, including for those particularly vulnerable or at risk, thereby leaving many challenges for the rest of society to address. The problems are multiple. First, parents are usually not the first people children wish to tell about their relational, emotional, or sexual concerns. Second, the internet is hugely complicated and fast-changing, making it difficult for a busy parent to grasp what children need to know. Third, some parents do not take on this responsibility, and they are "hard to reach" by awareness campaigns. Fourth, small minorities of parents are truly neglectful or abusive to their children, making it inappropriate to rely on them to ensure their child's safety. However, for those seeking to prevent or manage the risks of harm to children, it is important to empower all parents and to provide a safety net for circumstances of childhood vulnerability.

Some trends in the Global North have implications for experience in the Global South. For instance, the growing understanding and willingness of parents to engage with their children's internet use as they catch up with their early adopter children. Some trends in the Global South have implications for experience in the Global North. We can point the trend towards "mobile first", replacing first use via desktop or laptop computer, which is now also spreading in the Global North, reducing parents' ability to monitor their child's internet use (Mascheroni & Ólafsson, 2015). Other trends invite us to recognise that, also in the Global North, some children escape parental oversight by going online outside the home, or lack reliable parenting or adult figures in their lives.

The WHO five parental roles have resonance for families everywhere, for most parents struggle with the tension between protecting their children versus giving them the freedom to explore, learn and grow independently. In addition, most parents can be encouraged to draw on what they know about their child and the wider society, as often this knowledge is also applicable in the digital domain. Therefore, in considering the stakeholders supporting parents, there are questions about balance. In future, it will also be critical to include parenting in the digital age as a component of parenting programmes currently being offered in the North and the South and to evaluate them

for impact. Such examples of evidence-based programmes include Triple P or Sinovuyo Teen parenting programme (Haggerty et al., 2013; Cluver et al., 2018), indicating the positive impact of specific interventions in relation to parenting support.

In seeking answers to these dilemmas, we would refer to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child which clearly specifies that parents have the primary responsibility for childrearing, but it also places obligations on states and communities to support parents in these endeavours. It seems that the old saying “it takes a village to raise a child” still applies in a digital world. It’s just that the village is now both local and Global.

## Note

1. [www.saferinternet.org](http://www.saferinternet.org)

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# Transcendent Parenting in Digitally Connected Families

## *When the Technological Meets the Social*

Sun Sun Lim

### Abstract

In the digitally connected household lives the transcendent parent. Mobile media and cloud computing enable always-on, always-available information and communication services, shaping the communication practices and media consumption habits of parents and children. For the transcendent parent, these digital ties enable and shape how they communicate with their children, and how they guide their children's media use. In this chapter, I discuss the practice of "transcendent parenting", its manifestations at various development stages of the children, and its implications for emerging parenting obligations.

**Keywords:** transcendent parenting, parental mediation, mobile media, timeless time, family communication

### Introduction

All the way from birth to the first day at kindergarten, the first overnight camp, and school concert, to graduation from university and the first day at work, parents are marking their children's milestones with and through media. Photographs of perfect moments, frozen in time, are widely shared with friends and family, belying much of the frenetic activity that would have surrounded many of these significant events. Behind the scenes of digitally connected families are busy lifestyles lubricated by micro-coordination, with smartphones enabling parents and children to manage packed schedules, and a slew of media devices offering content that informs and entertains. The digitally connected family inhabits an environment that is powered and enveloped by always on and always-on-hand mobile media.

Indeed, in many urban societies, information and communication services enabled by mobile media and cloud computing are increasingly pervasive. Percolating through all strata of society, these services shape the communication practices and media consumption habits of families, influencing how parents guide their children's media use, and how parents and children connect with one another. From this highly mediatized climate has emerged the transcendent parent. In this chapter, I discuss how the practice of "transcendent parenting" is occurring in an environment where ubiquitous media pervades everyday life, wherein parents must transcend every media consumption environment their children enter, their children's offline and online social interaction milieu and "timeless time" as experienced in the apparent ceaselessness of parenting duties. I will first outline the media environments of young people from childhood and adolescence through to emerging adulthood, before discussing the implications of their media use at each stage of young people's development.

### Growing up in a digitally connected family

The digitally connected family, virtually a mainstay in Western urban societies and strongly emerging in urban areas of the Global South with rising internet access (Global Kids Online, 2016), is deeply and richly connected by multiple media and communication platforms. It is not uncommon for such families to acquire and own the full complement of media devices, including shared items such as televisions and desktop computers, and individually used items such as video game machines, music players, tablet computers, and smartphones. In these media-rich households, media use is both the primary activity of children at various junctures throughout the day, and a secondary activity that occupies little pockets of time. Media multi-tasking is increasingly practised by young people, both within and across devices, including both traditional and digital media. They can listen to streaming music when conversing with friends via social media, while also playing a game on their laptops simultaneously. Or they could be watching a Youtube video while sending a Snapchat message to their friends via their smartphones. Indeed, a study by Singapore's Media Development Authority (2015) on the media use of Singaporean children aged 0 to 14 found that their top paired multitasking activities were watching TV and using mobile devices, using computers and using mobile devices, using mobile devices and listening to music, watching TV and using computers, using mobile devices and reading newspapers or magazines. In other surveys in Asia, 57 per cent of the respondents in China (Statista, 2016a), 52 per cent in Japan (Statista, 2016b), 66 per cent in Taiwan (Statista, 2016c) and 63 per cent in Vietnam (Statista, 2016d) reported that they went online via other devices like computers, smartphones and tablets while they watched TV. Parent-child communication in digitally connected families can also manifest such characteristics where complementing their face-to-face communication, parents can be connected to their children via multiple communication platforms, such as messaging apps, social media, email, and

voice or video calls. The range and extent of parent-child mediated communication will naturally differ by age as children become more independent and have growing access to, and competency with, personal media devices. The transcendent parent is one who must harness these multiple modes of communication to keep watch over and keep in touch with their children wherever they may be.

## From kindergarten to elementary school

Even in the pre-school years, when most children are yet to carry around personal media devices, they can be digitally connected to their parents through proxies. When left in childcare or kindergarten or with appointed caregivers, these children are connected to their parents in various ways. For preschools and nannies, parents are no more than a phone call or text message away, with some parents in China, Hong Kong and Singapore even installing webcams or CCTVs in the home to keep an eye on appointed caregivers (Chan, 2015; Chen, 2017; Hussain, 2016), and preschools in countries such as Malaysia are offering parents live webcam streaming of their classroom activities too (Chung, 2016). Through these different communication channels, parents remain digitally connected to their young children even while physically apart from them.

Within the home, parents play a critical role in curating the domestic media environment. With the growing proliferation of household media technology, parents must manage more devices and consequently, more content as well (Jennings, 2017). Indeed, there is much that parents must do to ensure that their children's media consumption is optimised to reap the greatest benefits and minimise risks. With family context being the child's first and primary environment for consuming media (Harrison, 2015), parents must make considered decisions on purchasing media products, devices and services, helping their children to explore media environments safely, and supervising their media consumption in light of typical household routines.

For pre-schoolers, watching television and playing video games at home is typical, and watching videos or playing games on mobile devices while outdoors is increasingly common as well. Their parents must thus ensure that they cultivate a healthy media environment for their children and purchase age-appropriate devices, download suitable apps, games and videos, and perhaps install parental control filters to regulate harmful or unsavoury content. The mind-boggling plethora of media content targeted at children today necessitates that parents undertake investigative parenting (Jiow et al., 2017) that involves researching into the different types and forms of media content that they deem ideal for their children's developmental stage to identify positive and potential adverse effects. Investigative parenting would include consulting teachers, paediatricians and other parents, reading parenting blogs and media content reviews, perusing public education materials from relevant organisations, assessing product information claims and so on. The parent thus has much to do if desiring to consciously create a healthy media diet for their pre-school aged child. They may also engage in active co-viewing

or co-use where they guide their children on their media consumption, in the hopes that they will learn to make wise choices.

As children enter elementary school, they become more independent. Increasingly, elementary school aged children carry their own mobile phones, often purchased by parents for the purposes of micro-coordination and safety concerns. Equipped with their own devices, these children may use their mobile phones to engage in shared media use with their peers such as watching a video on a phone or playing tablet games together. Even though such shared media use is likely to be innocuous, exposure to age-inappropriate content may occur. Parents thus have to be proactive and inculcate in their children skills of discernment and establish a relationship of trust so that their children will turn to them if they encounter media content that is disturbing or confusing.

Apart from having to keep a watchful eye over their children's media consumption, mobile media has also heralded new parenting obligations in the child's younger years. Schools may be directly connected to parents via apps that enable parents to monitor their children's academic progress, in-class performance, homework, personal development milestones, and even the foods they purchase in the cafeteria. Social media platforms such as Whatsapp and Facebook present yet another parenting obligation in the form of parent chat groups for their children's classes to discuss school-related matters (Philomin, 2015). These can range from daily minutiae such as the forms children must submit and the sharing of homework tips, to weightier issues such as discussing the quality of teachers and the school's academic programs. While these digital connections may seem at first brush helpful for parents to be more involved in their children's school lives, it begs the question of whether parents can become *too* involved. Such trends have also raised questions of whether children may become more dependent on their parents for tasks which they should perform on their own.

## The tween years

As children enter their tween years, around the ages of 8 to 12, they attain greater autonomy and their media use patterns become more complex because a growing proportion of them will be given their own devices to manage. They will also be avid social media users, directly connected to their peers over multiple platforms, but also to their family. Face-to-face socialising with peers will take place alongside mediated interactions via platforms such as Whatsapp, Instagram and Snapchat.

With greater independence to explore the online world on their own, parents will likely take a backseat and offer advice or support at critical junctures, but cease engaging in close supervision of their children's media use. Parents will typically introduce guidelines and rules for their children to abide by, including possibly creating contracts on their device use with terms that they want their children to honour (Hoffman, 2012).

Parents need to therefore see their role as supporting their children as they navigate their mediated and mediatised environment, as social actors, media consumers, and

content creators. Parents who wish to mediate their children's online social experiences have to consider the different online spaces their children could potentially explore and the varied opportunities for sociality that such spaces enable or facilitate. Such mediated interactions with peers can be enjoyable but do require emotional maturity on the part of the child to cope with any awkward or difficult communication situations that may occur. For instance, an argument that escalates within a group chat may fracture friendships and create unwelcome tensions, possibly precipitating into online indiscretions and cyberbullying, with potential ramifications for offline, face-to-face interactions as well. Interactions with unknown online acquaintances are dicier too, as some can be with people of a sharply distinct sociocultural makeup, with behaviour, values, and worldviews that may not be consonant with their own.

Hence, parents have their work cut out for them when it comes to preparing their children for different online opportunities and their attendant gains and risks. Parents must actively instil values in their children and inculcate skills of discernment. Yet providing such guidance will not come easily or naturally to parents, many of whom will have to invest time and effort to familiarize themselves with the complex media environment, and the ever-growing plethora of communication platforms each with their own affordances and challenges. Parents will have to engage in discursive mediation (Jiow et al., 2017) to explain and discuss with their children the benefits and risks of different kinds of media content and forms of mediated interaction, while also rationalizing for them the rules and regulations they may impose on their media use.

## Teenhood to delayed launching

As children enter their teen years, they will likely seek and be granted greater independence and autonomy from their parents. Parents are likely to continue instilling values in their children and reinforcing those already inculcated in their earlier years. The parent-child relationship will also evolve from a superior-subordinate nature towards more of a buddy or peer dynamic. However, parents will still have to continue to offer guidance and support for the child's mobile media use, possibly with issues of managing excessive use and moderating the child's attachment to mobile media devices so that their overall well-being and relationships with significant others are not compromised (Kwon et al., 2013).

With entry into emerging adulthood, young people will enjoy an unprecedented degree of personal independence. Those who are bound for university education will live on their own for the first time and be responsible for their duties, needs, and daily routines. And yet, even as they are living away from home, young people are avidly keeping in contact with their parents via daily exchanges of text messages, voice and video calls, and social media connections (see for example Gentzler et al., 2011). Indeed, there is growing evidence for the phenomenon of delayed launching where young people increasingly delay the responsibilities of adulthood and remain "under the care"

of their parents (Kins & Beyers, 2010). My recent research on Vietnamese university students in Singapore shows that even when the students hail from semi-rural areas where household internet connectivity is not a given, they set up internet-enabled mobile phone subscriptions for their parents back home so as to ensure a constant line of contact with their parents (Pham & Lim, 2015). Members of these transnational families then communicate frequently using affordable and visually rich messaging platforms such as Skype or LINE that facilitate voice and text communication. Despite being separated by a great distance, the parents continue to check on the safety and whereabouts of their children, either by contacting them directly, or by viewing their social media updates, and in some instances, even contacting their children's friends.

### Parenting in a digitally connected family

In the digitally connected family therefore, mobile media and cloud computing have broadened both the scale and scope of parenting obligations, heralding the practice of transcendent parenting. In the mobile-infused climate that characterises many urban societies today, parents and children are connected in multiple ways, thus introducing new parenting obligations. To fulfil these obligations, parents must increasingly engage in transcendent parenting which is manifested in three key ways.

#### *Enveloped by media*

As digitally connected families are practically enveloped by media, parents must make efforts to create a home environment in which their children can safely and productively consume media. However, with the advent of mobile media that streams online content directly into children's personal devices, parents will find the ability to manage or supervise their children's media use more challenging given the diversity of content and intensity of use (Jiow & Lim, 2012). Beyond the home too, the parent has diminishing control because the child can engage in independent media use or shared media experiences with friends. How do parents then ensure that they are the omni-present voices of authority to guide their children towards all that is edifying and beneficial in media, and to steer them away from that which is risky and harmful? Parents may employ technological mechanisms such as installing filters and monitoring software that tracks their children's online history. However, such measures do not accord privacy to the child and can erode trust between parents and children. Ultimately, besides using such blunt regulatory tools, parents have to inculcate in their children enduring values and powers of discernment that can buttress children when they encounter media experiences that leave them troubled or confused. Transcending the complex and diverse multi-media environments that children can transit through is thus a constant challenge that the transcendent parent must negotiate.

### *Keeping watch online and offline*

As children's interactions with their peer's flit seamlessly between offline spaces and online environments, the transcendent parent must also do likewise. Parents must seek to understand the climate of sociality their children inhabit, as well as to grasp the roles that media devices and content play in their peer interactions. Social interaction in online channels have their own language, logics, rhythms, and norms that children may adopt and practice, but without a full appreciation of their implications and consequences. As well, complications arising from online disinhibition such as identity multiplicity and experimentation, deceit and abuse may present themselves (Suler, 2004), even as virtual interactions can be rewarding and enlightening. These wider possibilities thus raise issues that necessitate parental guidance and support. The transcendent parent has to thus build an open, trusting relationship with their children and exert a firm yet benevolent presence so that their children know that they can approach them when they face unexpected media encounters that upset or confuse. To perform this task effectively, parents must first develop an awareness of the communication affordances of mobile media and understand their children's level of emotional maturity to cope in the face of difficulty.

### *Always-on parenting*

In the digitally-connected household, the pace of life seems to approximate the situation of "timeless time" (Castells, 1996), or when phenomena lose their chronological rhythm and are instead arranged in new time sequences based on the social context and purposes due to technological advancements within the networked society. The time for communication becomes "timeless" as it can now be compressed through split-second and expedient technologically mediated connectivity, while individuals' states of staying connected and being disconnected become increasingly blurred. The transcendent parent seems to be particularly vulnerable to "timeless time" in the face of relentless digital connectivity enabled by mobile devices. Parenting duties now no longer just exist when the parent and the child are together. It continues to persist regardless of schedules and spaces and disrupt the parent's other commitments in daily life. For instance, even when children are under the charge of appointed caregivers, the mobile-connected parent seems to be on permanent standby for emergency calls or routine communication from their children, and their caregivers. The parent of today is likely to receive distress text messages or voice calls from the school about the child's behaviour, or even email reminders about various school requests when he or she is at work. And after the children have been put to bed every evening, parents go online to deal with their own correspondence, but invariably also to manage matters relating to their children such as coordinating an after-school playdate or childcare arrangements. Parenting is now "timeless" and relentless. Indeed, even when the children leave for college, the transcendent parent can continue to play an active role in their children's

lives, enabled and encouraged by efficient and seamless mobile media connections. Transcendent parenting is therefore a state where parenting duties seem perpetual, with little chance for a respite.

## Conclusion

In the digitally-connected family, young people are constantly under the oversight of the transcendent parent. Yet the full implications of this trend for children's development is yet to be closely examined. Similarly, the amount of "emotion work" (Hochschild, 1979) – or the act of trying to manage the degree or quality of emotional exchange in accordance with socially shared rules – the transcendent parent must engage in is growing and needs to be closely monitored. Specifically, future research can delve into the following issues: how do parents of different socio-economic profiles cope with the demands of transcendent parenting? Do higher socio-economic status (SES) parents have more intellectual and financial wherewithal to adopt tools and strategies that can help ease the transcendent parenting burden? Or are they conversely more pressured by the overwhelming amount of knowledge about the normative standards they must strive to meet as "responsible" parents? How do lower SES parents guide their children's mobile media use given their time and resource constraints? Which aspects of their children's mobile-facilitated, peer-to-peer interaction do parents find hardest to manage? Which genres of media content do parents find difficult to explain to their children? What literacies must parents possess to understand the implications of cloud computing, so as to effectively mediate their children's mobile media use?

These questions need to be tackled through a combination of methodological adaptation and theoretical innovation. We need to develop research protocols that can accommodate the mobile multi-screen, multi-app, multi-media, and multi-modal environment that envelopes families today. Crucially, we should also refine current parental mediation frameworks that originated in a much less complex era, when active, restrictive, and co-viewing/co-playing strategies sufficed. Current research on media use in the domestic realm tends to be somewhat dichotomous, concentrating either on the media content consumed, or on the media consumption context separately, without necessarily linking the two despite the importance of doing so (Lim, 2015). Now that families are virtually enveloped by media, it is critical that research accurately charts how content and contexts interact, delving into the typical settings in which children consume different kinds of media content, on which devices and in whose presence they do so, and the online and offline interactions surrounding such media use. Importantly, these research findings should be shared in a timely and effective manner so that policymakers, educators, and media producers can work in tandem to forge a media environment that enhances the well-being of digitally-connected families.



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# Resistance, Opportunities and Tensions

## *The Role of Children and Young People in Internet Adoption of Isolated Rural Communities*

Isabel Pavez & Teresa Correa

### Abstract

Chile has undergone numerous technology policy-making initiatives that have progressively diminished the internet connection gap. However, isolated rural areas are the Achilles' heel because, despite having access infrastructure, households' internet connection remain scarce. At the same time, the evidence shows that children and youth, particularly from lower socioeconomic status, may have a key role in their families' digital inclusion process. Therefore, this chapter explores the role that young people play in the digital inclusion of isolated rural families, but also the tensions that emerge in the process. Through qualitative methods that included 48 interviews and six focus groups, the findings indicate that the presence of young people at home is a relevant factor in internet adoption. However, the scenario is complex as the internet is mainly perceived as a disruptive element that threatens communication within the family and the traditional values of those tight-knit communities.

**Keywords:** children, young people, digital inclusion, rural communities, internet

### Introduction

Young people are migrating from rural communities, which is problematic in many ways. From a media and communication perspective, research has suggested that children and young people are the ones that enhance the use of new technologies among their families. For example, they have the tendency to influence parents as well as other adults to get acquainted with the internet, which is more frequent in vulnerable contexts and among lower socioeconomic status households (Chu, 2010; Correa, 2016; Katz, 2010). This generational gap is particularly evident in vulnerable contexts because young people

are usually more exposed to new ideas, including technology, through their school and friends and may become an entry point of these into the community (Kotilainen & Arnolds-Granlund, 2010). This is even more relevant in isolated rural communities, which are in a more disadvantaged position than their urban counterparts (Liao et al., 2016; Park, 2017). On this regard, access to the internet and digital opportunities go hand in hand, and it could be a way to tackle unequal distribution of resources. This is why rural populations have been largely identified as a target by digital policy-making agendas across the world in an effort to further their economic and social development by providing them access to resources such as communication and information, among other things (LaRose et al., 2011; 2012).

Yet, isolated rural communities continue to lag behind (Townsend et al., 2013) in part because their day-to-day is placed in a different and isolated context, where most of them are employed in manual jobs such as farming, fishing and mining, which lower the chances of being exposed to digital technologies (Park, 2017). Furthermore, because they conduct their daily activities in secluded areas, surrounded by a geography that somehow outlines a mentality of isolation, people are more likely to fear new situations by increasing their reluctance to try new things (Correa & Pavez, 2016). Furthermore, precarious roads and almost nonexistent public transportation have also a direct impact in both their quality of life and access to services, such as health facilities and, more importantly, education. The latter is one of the main reasons why children and young people are forced to migrate to larger rural or even urban areas if they wish to continue their formal education. This phenomenon, which is known as the “brain drain effect” (Petrin et al., 2014), has a greater impact on the social and economic development of these communities. Moreover, this highlights the key role that young people plays in the digital inclusion process of these communities as they bring new technological needs and ideas to their homes.

## Digital inclusion in rural Chile

Isolated communities in Chile offer an interesting scenario to study this phenomenon. The country has one of the highest connectivity rates of the region (Pew Research Center, 2016) and household internet access has risen from 61.6 per cent in 2013 (Rivera, Lima & Castillo, 2014) to 87.4 per cent in 2017 (Subtel, 2018). This is in part result of a consistent governmental digital agenda, which has targeted, among other populations, rural areas. One of these initiatives was the public policy program All Chile Connected, in which antennas for 3G internet connection were installed between 2010 and 2011, providing first-time internet access to isolated rural communities.<sup>1</sup> This policy aimed to connect the last digitally-excluded territories, helping the country to achieve 90 per cent of internet coverage (Subtel, 2016). However, since the access infrastructure was provided, just a small percentage of inhabitants have become internet users. In fact, 63 per cent of them have never used it and 61 per cent of households are still disconnected (Correa et al.,

2017). Although social, cultural and economic circumstances tied to the particularity of their isolated context help to understand this reluctance (Correa & Pavez, 2016), two aspects stand out. First, 50 per cent of the households do not have members under 30 years old and the population is aging. Second, one out of four people who have used the internet report that their children taught them how to use it. Therefore, the objective of this chapter is to further explore the role played by children and young people in the digital inclusion process in isolated communities that have recently received internet access infrastructure. It also aims to provide an insight of what the opportunities are, as well as the tensions and challenges of this process in these rural settings.

To investigate this phenomenon, we rely on qualitative data that come from 48 ethnographic interviews in ten isolated communities throughout northern, central and southern Chile, as well as six focus groups in three communities with different levels of internet adoption, named La Población, Los Maquis and Puerto Fuy. At first glance, the data gathered indicated that participants identified children and young people as reaping the most benefits from this access infrastructure. These children and young people were determined to be tech savvy, appropriating technology particularly for educational and entertainment purposes. Although this was expected, we also found a more nuanced and complex scenario: the internet infrastructure, a sign of progress allowing these communities to connect for the first time, also faced high levels of uncertainty. Tensions and resistance emerged from the diffusion and domestication of the internet.

## A laptop in the kitchen:

### How educational policies further technology in rural areas

Evidence has consistently shown how valuable young people's internet usage is for family members as they act as internet socializing agents (Ito et al., 2009; Livingstone et al., 2013; Livingstone et al., 2014). In vulnerable families, it has been emphasized that one of the most relevant factors that has a direct implication for the digital inclusion of the home is the presence of children. This is mainly because of the educational needs. In a representative survey of isolated rural Chilean households, 75 per cent of those with household connection argued that one of the main reasons for acquiring internet was to provide support for their children's education (Correa et al., 2017). Furthermore, in the interviews participants agreed that boys and girls were clearly in a disadvantage if they did not have internet access at home.

Two relevant public policies that were consistently mentioned by families when doing field interviews were *I Choose My PC* and *My First Laptop*. Promoted by the Chilean Ministry of Education since 2009 to date, they provide computers with free internet access for one year to students with the highest grades. In a national impact assessment study, 87 per cent of the children benefited with this policy stated that "the arrival of the computer has been a great help for my family" (Mineduc, 2013: 256). Figures also indicate that the computer served as a gateway for younger siblings, fathers and mothers

who had previously shown no interest or had no opportunity to access technology in their home. In these households, 65 per cent of siblings, 50 per cent of mothers and 38 per cent of fathers took advantage of this new access and used the computers for work, study, entertainment and communication (García et al., 2009). This was also the case for the families from these isolated communities, as for many of them it was the first time they would have a laptop in the household, which provided the opportunity for other members to explore and become familiar with the technology.

What happens with age is that for us, *the internet* arrived very late. For [the young people in the room] it is easy to find any tool [...] Doing it yourself gets complicated, hopefully we know how to turn it on and off. In fact, I sometimes have to go and get the little grandson to help. The resulting feeling is why have we not become more familiar [with the internet] before. (Javier, age 59)

For example, participants reported how adults were somehow included in computer use, which was facilitated by the constant presence of the device in a common family area such as the kitchen. There, children would deliver the first guidelines for the development of digital skills and information search that was relevant to their parents in their occupations as farmers, artisans and small tourist entrepreneurs. They benefited from this access to technology in a variety of ways, even if they had never used a computer previously. For example, to seek relevant information as the case of a farmer woman who never used a computer of any kind until her granddaughter arrived with a laptop to the home:

I was taught to use it [the computer] but it scared me. I have my page [on the Facebook website], they created it for me and I have it there, so I have Facebook but I do not understand a thing. Every so often I say [to her granddaughter] "Please check my Face." I had a lot of friend requests! [laughs] (Carmen, age 48)

Although Carmen cannot be considered a skilled and regular internet user as such, and admits to be scared of it, she has a social media account. Still she has taken a first step, spending time together with the child on the computer. As was later clarified, the child also helps her to look up information that is relevant for her. Although this digital inclusion process is by no means a straightforward one, somehow these situations allow technology to become part of everyday life, as children and young people find opportunities for their parents and the seniors of the house to familiarize with it or even obtain benefits from its use. This is highly valued by adults that encounter this kind of technologies in a familiar and protected setting as the home. Despite the fact that they need to ask for help, the tendency is for them to explore it in order to follow their interests and needs, such as to look for health information, to apply for financial help, and also to make use of social media in order to increase the extent of communication with people outside the community. This is an informal yet a more familiar setting compared to a formal course. In some cases, assistance from children can be crucial when they have ventures, as for example an adult woman in Puerto Fuy, who has two

daughters of 13 and 17 years old, and recently had installed a cabin next to their grocery business to receive tourists during the summer. In the interviews she commented that:

My daughters have one [website], they made for the cottage, it has a page. Yes, they know the drill, kids nowadays are born with the phone, the computer and all that. My eldest daughter, she handles the internet very well [...] it is like another life for them. (Teresa, age 47)

As in this case, children execute activities that parents request and that can be beneficial for their undertakings. Nonetheless, parents also reported to often feel at a disadvantage in terms of technological skills. When children take on the task of teaching their parents, adults described these encounters as mainly uncomfortable, with children growing frustrating and losing patience quickly. For example, a man that has invested in a computer for the home shared in one of the focus groups that:

I ask my daughter to help me and she says “noooo” and complains that I should be the one learning how to do it. Then she starts to teach me but it goes so fast, from one thing to another, just one time and really fast. That is bad, they have no patience and one also gets angry and then explodes and each one goes by their own way. (Pedro, age 44)

It was common that parents expressed a great dissatisfaction at their inability to keep up with the children, which resulted, especially for non-users, as a reinforcing mechanism for insecurities and fears that the internet evokes in the first place.

## Children learn best

As it was stated in the survey (Correa et al., 2017), the educational support of their children was usually confirmed in interviews and focus groups as one of the main reasons to have internet connection at home. In a context of limited educational facilities, where rural schools usually only have one to two teachers and only provide primary education, which force children to migrate to boarding schools at an early age, education is a central theme in families. This is why both internet users and non-users agreed on the advantages for children and young people to access it from their homes. Phrases such as “children learn best” or “it is the only way to do the homework they get in school” were mentioned, yet it was often stressed that the lack of technology placed them at a disadvantage. This is also highlighted by the rural geography, where absence of transportation, schools located relatively far away from children’s homes, and harsh weather increase the challenges to return to school during the day in order to complete homework.

Yet education is not the only aspect of it, because close and tight networks are perceived as strengths in these localities, creating a sense of familiarity that shelters them from feeling excluded or isolated (Pavez, Correa & Contreras, 2017). Thus, as expected,

communication is an issue that takes special relevance in rural contexts (Rusten & Skerrat, 2008), particularly in these localities where transportation possibilities are scarce and highly dependent on the climate. Therefore, communication advantages were of special interest for parents who wanted to keep in contact with their children who migrated at the age of 12 to 13. Thus, the richness that multimedia communication delivers is highly valued. For example, a young woman in Puerto Fuy commented on one of the focus groups that “one sometimes needs to see the person’s face, not only hear the voice. Because after so much time away we forget the details”. Another participant of the same community said: “It is different when one sees the face, as when they call [and say] ‘aunt, something happened to me and I do not know what to do’”. As unusual as these circumstances may seem, they are part of a context of isolation where the ability to have multimedia communication by sharing photos and videos over social networking sites were very much valued. In fact, the need for communication was expressed by all participants, as a way to maintain contact with family and friends that live outside their community.

## Addiction and the threat of traditional values

Children and young people were pointed out as the ones that use the internet the most in these localities. Participants account how in public places where there is access to Wi-Fi or in schools during recess, minors jumped into their laptops and play online videogames or check out social network sites. Also, in the northern community of Alto del Carmen, in winter or when the weather hampered signal quality, adult interviewees recounted with oddness how they witnessed a group of young people climbing the hill where the antenna is located in order to find a better signal.

Although this greater extent of use may strengthen the virtuous circle where greater access results in increased skills and decrease of fear and anxiety among older adults (Pavez et al., 2017), the fact that children tend to go faster in learning digital skills is not always perceived as a positive aspect. A teacher from La Población explained:

I work in a one-teacher school, I have to do everything, I teach technology as well, but I have to admit that one sometimes remains as digitally illiterate in relation to children because children learn so fast, and sometimes they know more technology than oneself. (María, age 41)

In this testimony two issues are important to highlight. The first relates to this increasingly established social belief that age is synonymous with digital skills. That is, for all participants of this research, there is a perception that children and young people in their communities have innate technological skills and make better use of the internet. Although this could be argued as a result of the greater exposure to it, it is relevant to mention that in these communities this perception of knowledge is usually received with fear. Fear of what they could encounter on the internet – a network mainly de-



scribed as “no man’s land” – fear of what they could do and, particularly, fear for them to become addicted. This was especially present among non-internet users, where most of their beliefs were fueled by rumors and not by direct experiences (Pavez et al., 2017). Furthermore, based on their experiences with young tourists, visitors or people outside the community, participants described outsiders as “fixed to their phones”. Usually they would take distance from this situation and dread to follow the same pattern, as one participant commented:

For me it [the internet] might be harmful, it would not do me any good, because there are people who are looking at their phones, fixated to them and not working. It’s a joke. Imagine, you are here talking and people are only looking at their phones [...] It is a vice, they become addicted. (Ramiro, age 52)

They also reported to feel mainly puzzled by the high level of use of mobile phones by others and how these technologies were present in almost every encounter. For instance, a participant from Puerto Fuy described that her 17-year old son, after working in a city, returned “changed, as he was no longer my son”. For this woman, the rituals of the family dinner were very important and she was horrified that her son would bring the mobile phone to the table and use it while his parents ate with him. A 46-year old man explained how, in an attempt to improve communication with his teenage daughter, hide the mobile’s charger, with the hope that his daughter would lose interest of it. These testimonies speak about how, in localities where smartphones with internet access are just breaking, people fear that technologies are taking over their family life as well as how much they value face-to-face communication. Therefore, their discourses tend to develop the idea of traditional values being threatened by young people that are too caught up by technology. Therefore, in communities like these, with cohesive social networks, where respect and solidarity are of high significance, children and young people are seen to be going in the wrong way. Thus, technology, especially in the case of non-users, tends to be demonized and identified as a disruptive element that threatens these values (Pavez et al., 2017). These perceptions are also more persistent among those who lack first-hand experiences with the web due to almost non-existent public initiatives that would help them to explore the web in a way that could be meaningful for them or in tune with their daily life and needs.

## Conclusions

Children and young people play a key role in the digital inclusion process of rural communities. These are localities that face a high level of isolation, migration of the youth and aging of the population, which become a major obstacle to internet adoption. Moreover, participants in this research – particularly non-users – tend to be afraid of the impact of this technology, arguing that internet use leads to addiction, access to improper content and even threatens face-to-face communication (particularly mo-

biles). However, this is a complex scenario because there is also awareness that it is an educational tool, particularly to overcome pre-existing disadvantages. In fact, previous research has shown that educational support is the main reason for having household connection (Correa et al., 2017). Families facing the migration of their young children to boarding schools also see it as a valuable communicational tool. Adults benefit from being incorporated into the digital world, for example social media, as it increases their connection with family and friends living outside the community. In some cases, they also take advantage of the internet as a way to promote their ventures. However, low rates of internet usage still persist, as those most likely to use it continue to migrate. Additionally, depending on the cultural context of the community where the technology is being introduced, the internet can be perceived as a threat to that community's traditional values, thereby hindering its appropriation. Therefore, the question that remains is how to promote the opportunities that are brought by internet usage and also how to take advantage of this new infrastructure and other instances of access at home, positioning it as more than an educational tool but also as a way to further the social and economic development of the families and their isolated communities.

#### Note

1. It is worth mentioning that Chile is a country that has stood out as one that has consistently implemented a series of public policies aimed at providing digital infrastructure and equipment, particularly among children and young people. Moreover, the public-private efforts of the last decade that have been equipped with access infrastructure and focused on mobile connection are achieving an unprecedented increase in internet penetration in the country.

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# Mediation Practices in Socially Disadvantaged Families

Ingrid Paus-Hasebrink

## Abstract

The chapter at hand presents a long-term panel study on the role of media within socialisation of socially disadvantaged families in Austria and sheds light on how the parents of the study dealt with mediation practices. Firstly, the chapter introduces the study and briefly defines its theoretical and methodological basis. Secondly, it presents selected results with respect to parents' mediation practices. The central question is how they changed over time with respect to both children's age and changing media use over nearly twelve years of research. Against this background, different practices of mediation will be discussed and observed in the longitudinal study. Finally, the chapter reflects on and summarises the insights and outcomes relating to parents' mediation practices.

**Keywords:** socialisation research, children and media, mediation practices, socially disadvantaged families

## Introduction

Europe has been exhibiting increasing rates of poverty and social exclusion since the mid-1980s. Due to rising unemployment rates, changing ways of living together and reductions in social benefits (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2016; Palentien, 2003; Toczydłowska & Bruck, 2017), even wealthier countries like Austria have been experiencing an increasing rate of poverty and social exclusion. The unequal distribution of resources and opportunities affects the circumstances for family life (Jokinen & Kuronen, 2011). Socially disadvantaged families have to face and cope with particular challenges in their everyday lives, such as unemployment, often interlinked with health problems, and challenging socio-emotional problems (Paus-Hasebrink & Kulterer, 2014). Against the background of a rapidly changing media landscape, characterised by a meta-process known as “mediatization” (Krotz & Hepp, 2013; Lunt & Livingstone, 2015), these fami-

lies – like families in general – are confronted with an enormous amount of media and the charging task of being ready to support their children in acquiring media literacy. Keeping in mind the relevance of a “second level digital divide” (Hargittai 2002; see also Helsper, 2012; Livingstone & Byrne, 2015; LSE, 2017), these parents and their children may be seen as experiencing a lack of options to participate in contemporary mediatised society in an appropriate and beneficial way.

The chapter at hand presents a long-term panel study on the role of media within socialisation of socially disadvantaged families in Austria from 2005 until 2017 (Paus-Hasebrink, 2017; Paus-Hasebrink, Kulterer & Sinner, 2019) and focuses especially on how the parents of the study approach parenting and the mediation of media literacy. I decided to use the term mediation practices as they are part of parents’ overall parenting practices. In the first step I will introduce the study and briefly define its theoretical and methodological basis. Secondly, I present selected results on parents’ mediation practices with respect to both children’s age and changing media. Against this background I discuss different practices of mediation observed in the longitudinal study. Finally, I will discuss and summarise relevant insights and outcomes relating to parents’ mediation practices.

## Theoretical and methodological implications of the long-term panel study

The analytical approach underlying this research is based on three concepts that may help to understand the interplay between socio-economic and socio-emotional aspects within everyday life. In this chapter I will focus on the aspect of mediation practices – how parents are able to interact within children’s socialisation and bring up their children and within this context what parents’ mediation practices look like. Table 1 provides an overview of these concepts.

Based on the concepts *options for action*, *outlines for action* and *competences for action* (see Paus-Hasebrink, 2018), a qualitative panel study was conducted. 20 (reduced to 18 since the second wave) socially disadvantaged families with children (boys and girls) who were five years old in 2005; up to the end of the study, when they were almost 17 to 18 years old, have been selected. In these twelve years, six waves of data collection and analysis were conducted. In doing so, the research covered relevant phases of development from kindergarten, mid-childhood to youth. The families have been selected according to relevant criteria for their social conditions (formal education, job, and income) and specific living situations (e.g. single-parent families, large families). Beyond these criteria I considered the area of living: urban and rural areas and areas with a poor infrastructure (e.g. mountain areas, bad bus connections, no railway stations around).

In order to operationalise the above mentioned analytic concepts, several reactive and non-reactive methods have been used, such as a standardised questionnaire for the parents, asking for details of income, formal education, constellation of the family etc. Observational methods served as an additional tool to investigate how the child

**Table 1.** Conceptual framework

Options for action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Related to the individual's specific socio-structural conditions and to the socio-structural aspects of society as a whole (political, economic, cultural and media contexts)</li> <li>• Describe the objective characteristics of an individual's social conditions, which are shaped by the rules of the social field(s) in which he/she operates</li> <li>• Represent an ordered arrangement of possible (and impossible) actions</li> </ul>
Outlines for action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Related to subjective perceptions of social conditions</li> <li>• Represent the ways in which the subject transforms the objective characteristics of his/her life situation into a subjective action guide</li> <li>• Reflect what makes sense to the subject and indicate the viewpoints from which he/she structures perceptions and interpretations of the world</li> </ul>
Competences for action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Related to the resources which are at the individual's disposal</li> <li>• Reflect the competences characterised by an individual's material, cultural and social resources</li> <li>• Represent cognitive or motivational prerequisites for an individual's actions, including the use of media</li> <li>• Reflect competences in the realisation of the individual's outlines for action</li> </ul>

and the parents conduct their everyday life and how they deal with the conditions of their specific social situation in *doing family* (e.g. cope with conflicts, proximity etc.) (see Morgan, 2011). The ways in which family members interact with each other is connected to “family climate, family paradigms, family coordinated practices, and family myths and rituals” (Maccoby, 2015: 24). It includes specific communication practices and media-based practices of sense-making and, in this context, practices of mediation. As core of the study these observations have been combined with guided, in-depth interviews separately with the child and the parents – mostly the mother, in some cases both parents. The aim was to grasp different aspects of their everyday life, such as their usage of media and the mediation practices parents applied.

Against the background of the interlinkage of socio-economic and socio-emotional factors and parents' coping practices – which served as indicators for the three mentioned analytic concepts – we present selected findings. The focus will be on parents' mediation practices and how they changed over time; on the one hand with respect to both the children's age and their media usage and, on the other hand, due to changing conditions in the families' conduct of everyday life.

## Selected findings

### *From kindergarten to youth*

At the beginning of the longitudinal study, when children went to kindergarten, television was the main media activity of children whereas picture books, reading to children and listening to radio plays was quite rare. In this time, the parents had rather vague ideas about mediation practices; most of them remarked that children should not see

violent content in general, but later on it became obvious that this aspect had to be seen as an indication of social desirability. Very rarely parents picked up media related topics and talked to their children. Only when children themselves wanted to talk about something they saw on television parents answered to the best of their knowledge. All in all, we observed a lack in parents' media literacy to support their children. Only few of them were able to deal with media topics and to communicate with their children to give them background information about media contexts.

When children came to school a striking result was observed; by far all parents of the panel improved their media equipment. Independent of financial resources they bought computers and monitors, because they did not want that their children to stand back in school. Beyond that, they were afraid to lose teachers' and other parents' respect if their children were badly equipped. Almost all parents of the panel assigned the task of media education to teachers because they did not feel competent enough, or fooled themselves that these tasks definitively belong to school.

The families in the longitudinal panel were equipped with a lot of media devices; in the third and especially the fourth wave most households had a computer with internet (Livingstone et al., 2015). As the parents displayed very little knowledge of and skills concerning internet use, there was an impalpable anxiety about risks and dangers on the internet, especially concerning high costs and virus infections. Many parents still had a negative attitude towards electronic media and preferred not to have a closer look at the content their children used. In some families issues related to privacy protection were mentioned but most of the parents showed a lack of knowledge and literacy to give their children advice and to support their internet usage. Instead some of them revealed a careless usage of social media themselves; for instance, they put photos of their children on social networking sites like Facebook, which their children felt embarrassed about. At the same time some parents recognised that nowadays the competent use of computers and the internet has become a key qualification for the future career of their children. In these cases the parents again largely relied on schools to teach media literacy, especially when it came to the internet (Paus-Hasebrink et al., 2012; Paus-Hasebrink et al., 2013). Beyond that, most parents assured themselves that their children are grown up now; therefore they felt even less responsible than in the years before.

## Practices of parental mediation

The parents of the panel mostly showed incompetence when it came to issues of mediation, often due to their own deficient *options for action*, their deprived social situation due to unemployment etc. which often led to them being occupied with a lot of problems while coping with challenges on multiple levels of everyday life, such as a lack of time for their children, a lack of leisure time for themselves, worries about the future, etc. These factors tightly interacted with parents' *outlines for action*. The parents were often severely limited in building and arranging *outlines for action* as they



often were not able to define goals for coping with problems in everyday life. Many of them had difficulties to make up their own plans and to fulfil their wishes and desires, both as couple and as parents and as families as well. All panel families had an ideal image of themselves and of family in general – for most of them this included to care for their children. But the interplay between deficits in *options for action* and *outlines for actions* often induced developing or blocking adequate *competences for action* to manage the challenges of everyday life – all in all they did not have resources to support their children's upbringing and with this their media usage in general and even less their internet usage. Against this background one has to have in mind that the parents of the panel were less educated and had almost little or no knowledge about handling media, especially the internet.

In the following section I look deeper into the practices of mediation, which will be identified by taking all families into account over the whole time frame of the panel study.<sup>2</sup> Five dominant practices of mediation have been identified: *laissez-faire*, *unmethodical restriction*, *arbitrary control and exploitation of dominance*, *amicability* and *child-centered practices*. These practices worked closely together with parents' specific interplay of *options for action*, *outlines for action* and *competences for action*.

### *Laissez faire*<sup>3</sup>

This kind of practice prevailed in the panel. The parents, who showed *laissez faire* practices, were unable to cope with everyday challenges and therefore they showed either no interest in their children's media usage in general, or they were convinced that children had to learn that bad things can happen, and that they could learn this best by using media. Some of them believed that there is no need for media education or communication about media in the family any longer when children went to school. At that time they should at least be old enough to learn using media in a sort of trial and error approach. Many parents were convinced that if there was any necessity for media education, schools had the responsibility to fulfil this task.

Especially single-parent families and large families showed this practice, i.e. particularly those who lived in severely deprived socio-economic constellations, without any hope that things might improve, and, in connection with this, who were stressed by a difficult socio-emotional situation and excessive demands which seemed to nearly subvert them. These families had substantial problems to cope with everyday life challenges. Single mothers who showed this practice had extreme difficulties in their *doing family*, partly because of their experience of being abandoned. When life situations changed because a new partner came into the family and problems occurred regarding a child from an earlier partnership, this practice could be observed as well. In the cases of large families with more than five – in some cases even up to nine or ten children – parents could not manage all tasks in their everyday life at the same time; within their stressful everyday context they had no resources to support their children's upbringing.

As the children grew older, also other families, who had previously displayed different attitudes, started to display a more *laissez faire* attitude with regard to their children's media usage. They were convinced that their children were old enough to use media without any rules or mediation from their parents.

### *Unmethodical restriction*

The practice of unmethodical restriction includes restrictive proscriptions and limitations in order to control children's – often extensive – media usage. However, parents did not apply these rules in a consistent way, and they did not make sure that their children respected them. To the contrary, parents underwent their own regulations situationally either by using media as gratification or as punishment. For instance, when the children were younger and parents wanted to have time for housework, business work, or just leisure time for themselves, they often used the television as a baby-sitter – often without having a look at the content. This practice of using media unreflectedly as a way to keep their children occupied occurred frequently over extensive periods of time in these families. The overall practice of unmethodical restriction occurred as a reflection of insufficient *options for actions*, with a negative effect on building and performing *outlines for action*; these parents showed problems in coming to terms with their own lives. This practice could be observed particularly in families – same as for the *laissez faire* practice – in large families and single-mother families, when the children were younger. Similar results were found in the studies from Valkenburg et al. (2013) and Livingstone et al. (2015) as well. In mid childhood or in adolescence this practice became rarer, because parents believed their children would need no mediation anyway.

### *Arbitrary control or exploitation of dominance*

This practice is applied by parents who arbitrarily control and abuse their children, often with a certain degree of violence: on the physical level, for example, with fathers who beat their children, or on the psychological level, by exerting pressure. By these practices parents try to debase their children in order to treat their own crude problems. This kind of practice could be identified in cases of dysfunctional partnerships between parents that also affected the relationships to their children. In some cases massive forms of parents' dissatisfaction regarding their *options for action* and their *outlines for action* led to a lack of self-efficacy in connection with an overestimation of their *competences for action*. This induced negative feelings, which turned aside to their children. By acting in an abusive and dominant way these parents tried to overcome the lack of self-efficacy. For example, a father used violent computer games, which are permitted only for grown-ups, as gratification or as a part of a mediation practice in order to calm his son down. The son was almost bound to them because they gave him an opportunity to cope with his aggressions caused by his father's violent actions.

### *Amicability*

In these cases, parents, especially single mothers, showed a high level of amicability and they used media together with their children. However, they did so first and foremost to spend time with their children without showing either active engagement or any other mediation practices. This practice is quite similar to co-viewing or co-use (Valkenburg et al., 2013). Especially when children, foremost daughters, grew older these mothers valued media usage together with them. They practiced a relationship of amicability, blurring the lines between parent-child-roles. These mothers had massive problems to cope with limited *options for action* and unfulfilled *outlines for action*, especially with loneliness and the lack of a partner who they could share their worries and problems with. So they compensated feelings of being alone by explicitly using media together with their daughters while almost disregarding their children's wishes and interests. In these families, mothers did not apply mediation practices that were directed to supporting media literacy, only talks about interesting content could be observed.

### *Child-centered mediation practices*

This practice could very rarely be observed. Only in some cases of upgraded *options for action* and, in connection with this, settled *outlines for action*, which led to a better scope of performing adequate *competences for action* and in which parents had the resources needed to focus on their children's interests and needs, we observed practices of child-centered mediation. These practices were found almost only in nuclear families who accomplished better financial resources over time through a new place of work, better salaried jobs or double income. A similar result concerning income could be found in the study from Livingstone and colleagues (2015). These families succeeded in creating rather relaxing environments for all family members: A better socio-economic and with this a better socio-emotional situation gave parents the opportunity to an improved coping with everyday challenges. Furthermore, in those cases of mothers' marriage with a new partner, where the partner was financially better situated and able to be a good and caring stepfather, things went better and *doing family* worked well.

## Discussion and conclusion

Given the correlation between parents' socio-structural background and their specific ways of interacting and supporting, the study showed that parents' resources shaped their capital of their competence of supporting their children (Paus-Hasebrink et al., 2013). Based on the three central analytical concepts *options for action*, *outlines for action* and *competences for action*, parents' and children's practices, including parents' mediation practices become understandable and comprehensible as it relates to the interlinkage

of subjective perception, action-driving orientations, and everyday life practices against the backdrop of socio-structural conditions.

With respect to specific forms of interaction between the three concepts, parents had resources for either enhancing or failing in coping with their everyday life. Having parents' specific *options for action* in mind, the longitudinal study emphasises the high relevance of interaction between family members (Goldberg et al., 1999), especially in parent-child relationships, where the degree of proximity, trust, and reciprocity that parents were able to build up with their children had relevant consequences for the ways of parenting and family communication. The parents' mediation practices, which were observable in the specific way parents interacted with and mediated their children in the longitudinal study, were highly relevant to children's socialisation (Paus-Hasebrink, 2017; see also Clark, 2013; Smetana et al., 2015). The qualitative long-term perspective allowed for insights into the interplay of the dynamics of children's age and parents' individual conduct of everyday life and the context of their socio-economic and socio-emotional situation as well as their coping practices with everyday challenges in *doing family*. Further deeper analyses of the longitudinal study will focus on parents' mediation styles and specific effects on their children's media usage: Are there any direct changes? Which role does children's age and gender play in this context and which role can be observed between the interactions of parents and children especially on the focus of parents' mediation practices and both parents' and children's media usage over almost twelve years? Studies show that the parent-child relationship is bidirectional and that children themselves also determine what pedagogical practices their parents will use, often inconsistently (Van den Bulck, Custers & Nelissen, 2016).

## Notes

1. Festl & Gniewosz (2017) described that the parents' co-use of ICTs was a significant mediator for the middle- and lower-educated families, precisely for lower-educated fathers'.
2. Knop and colleagues (2015) identified similar mediation practices in their research on children's and adolescent's use of mobile phones and internet.
3. Livingstone et al. (2015) use the term "laissez faire" in order to describe a special mediation strategy, which can be characterised as warm and supportive but non-demanding.

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# Drawn in All Directions

## *Heritage Language Families' Use of Technology*

Sabine Little

### Abstract

This chapter explores the experiences of parents from a variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds, specifically focusing on their use of digital technology as a means to support the development of the heritage language with their children. Based on both a quantitative and a qualitative study, the chapter explores family tensions linked to emotions as part of heritage language use, and the internal struggle parents face when it comes to their ideological assumptions on use and over-use of technology, versus the motivational pull they know technology has for their children. As well as focusing on data from the study, the chapter critically engages with the literature around digital technology for language learning and explores the special “niche” heritage language families occupy in this context.

**Keywords:** heritage language, technology, family, children, digital

### Introduction

This chapter focuses on ways in which parents of different cultural and linguistic heritages use digital technology to support heritage language developments in their children. Based on a study involving 212 families via a questionnaire, followed by ten family interviews, the chapter explores family tensions between varying emotions attached to the heritage language, with parents occupying multiple spaces as gatekeepers, facilitators, instructors in the heritage language, and parents.

Lim's notion of “transcendent parenting” (Lim, 2016) argues that, in the modern era, parenting goes beyond traditional childcare, having to transcend the online as well as the offline interactions of the child, dealing with constant connectivity, and incorporating multiple media environments the child might engage in. In her conclusion,

Lim argues for the need for researchers to look at interactions between parents and their children within the sphere of technological connectivity. For heritage language families, “transcendent parenting” is old news, although not in the meaning implied by Lim (2016). On a day-to-day basis, heritage language families must transcend various cultural assumptions, discrepancies between the home and the school environment, and multiple languages. For these families, digital technologies offer both a potential bridge (if used to connect the younger generation to parental language and culture) and a barrier, if it illustrates yet another aspect of differentiation between the generations.

This chapter begins by exploring the literature around heritage language families and related technology use, before, in the second part, highlighting in brief a research study with 212 heritage language families, drawing out key findings to assist in the discussion around heritage language development through technology, and transcendent parenting in multicultural, plurilingual families.

## Heritage language families

The term “heritage language” describes a scenario where language is “inherited”, passed down the generations. This term is as problematic as it is realistic – like a biological inheritance, other factors may influence the strength with which the language is passed on, like a material inheritance, it can be either adopted or rejected (Bourdieu, 2000). Like a family heirloom or keepsake, the language may have more meaning for some family members than others – for some family members, it may be an integral part of their identity, while for others, it may merely be a burden or additional chore (Little, 2017a).

As far back as 1959, Borrie recognised the importance to remain connected to cultural roots, with Fishman (1991) problematizing the “language shift” that occurs between heritage language families across the generations. This language shift describes the way in which language priorities – and, ultimately, knowledge and understanding – change between generations, often leading to neglect of the heritage language by the third generation at the latest (Little, 2017b).

Families may have a multitude of reasons to maintain the heritage language, ranging from the emotional to the pragmatic (Little, 2017a). Some families further make links between the language and other cultural values, such as customs and behavioural traits (Mu, 2014), and thus, the language is viewed as a considerable part of the family identity. These factors mean that those seeking to pass on the heritage language – typically the parents – are looking to identify ways to create emotional and motivational connections between the children and the heritage language, typically drawing on a variety of resources in order to expose the child to the heritage language (e.g. books, videos, apps) and to facilitate family interaction and communication (e.g. trips abroad, phone calls, Skype conversations).



## Attitudes towards technology – family and cultural perspectives

Literature which focuses on the distinct difficulties of heritage language families in the area of technology use is difficult to find, necessitating a more over-arching look at available research. Hamilton and colleagues (2016) point to the role of parents as gatekeepers, controlling screen time and the purse strings in terms of which games, apps, etc. are purchased. This means that parental values with regard to technology are of particular importance, and, just like with heritage languages, there are distinct differences across families as to how technology is viewed. While Ortiz, Green and Lim (2011) found that parents viewed technology use among their children as advantageous to future career prospects, other studies warn of its impact on well-being (Hinkley et al., 2014), childhood obesity (Hamilton et al., 2016; Sanders et al., 2016), and damaging consequences of increased screen time in low-income families (Dubois et al., 2008). Studies within spheres of non-Western cultures are even rarer, although Samaha and Hawi's (2017) study with parents in Lebanon comes to similar conclusions, adding the important note that parents should avoid using screen time as a lever for reward or punishment with their children. Atkin and colleagues (2014), in a study comparing screen time data across various studies spanning twelve years, eight countries, and over 11,000 children, conclude that parental education remains a factor in screen time, but that, across all studies, two thirds of children exceed the two hours daily maximum, recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics' Council on Communications and Media (Strasburger, 2011).

While several of such studies make it into the public domain, the issue is that results are often simplified for public consumption, creating headlines and bite-size interpretations that make it impossible for parents to adequately assess whether information is relevant for their child. Many studies, for example, do not differentiate between different types of screen time, although Hinkley and colleagues (2014) come to the conclusion that time spent in front of the television is more detrimental than time spent in front of the computer. With the rapid advance of technology, however, and children's adaptability to it, there are a multitude of possible scenarios that remain unexplored – in one family explored in the study described in this chapter, a child would watch an English gaming tutorial on the internet (with audio), while playing the actual game (in the heritage language, with written descriptions to advance the game-play) on a small gaming device. The lines between active and passive technology use, and what we can confidently say about how children make use of technology, continue to blur and move positions, leaving researchers scrambling to keep up, and parents struggling to “transcend” their children's technological and cultural experiences.

Studies on children's screen time also frequently neglect the active involvement of key participants – the children. Berríos, Buxarraís and Garcés' (2015) study, for example, shows that screen time among children is perceived as participation in social activities, via social media, including both age-appropriate and age-inappropriate activities. These findings, drawn together, illustrate that “screen time” is a much more complex

term than a first glance might predict, encompassing both active and passive technology use, gathering of information, language learning, and social activities. For parents to try and “transcend” their child’s virtual life, this understanding is important, as is an understanding of how language and literacy development in the heritage language may fit into the children’s portfolio of their digital lives.

## Usefulness of technology in acquiring language and literacy skills

While many parents are concerned about the time their children spend engaged in digital activities, there are also undeniable motivational attributes of technology for language acquisition and practice, which chimes with the parents’ wish to pass the heritage language on. Again, the field of heritage language education has to “borrow” from the more over-arching area of languages education, meaning that much of the literature is aimed at second-language or first-language literacy learners, with all related connotations this brings in terms of identity construction.

The research field around technology in the early years is particularly vibrant, with a plethora of research aimed at learners’ developing literacy skills in the mother tongue (Kucirkova et al., 2014; Merchant et al., 2012). In contrast to those researchers who point towards negative implications of technology use, Marsh and colleagues (2017) explored young children’s emergent digital literacy practices in the family context, arguing for a shift in literacy development to a more multi-modal approach (Kress, 2010), and suggesting a change in focus, from “family literacy” to “family digital literacy”. If literacy in digital and multimodal contexts is viewed as an introduction to family practices, and an apprenticeship into exploring the world, then heritage language families, once more, need to consider to what extent digital practices represent (or, indeed, transcend) the languages and cultures in the home.

An issue related to research with heritage language speakers is that they are by no means a homogenous group – children’s level of competence in the heritage language may range from virtually non-existent to a level equal of monolingual native speakers. As such, trying to group these children together is doomed to failure, unless the focus is on small-scale, comparable groups of children. Eisenclas and colleagues (2016) reported a study of three custom-created games for a group of nine heritage language children, aged 5 to 8, speaking German. The game was perceived as motivational, and aided in the acquisition of literacy, showing the potential of custom games, despite the doubtlessly poor potential financial return on any game created with such a small minority in mind. Other research with older learners shows the potential motivational benefits of learner choice and control (Lam & Rosario-Ramos, 2009), with older learners choosing to spend time on multiplayer games online in another language (Rama et al., 2012).

## Exploring technology attitudes with heritage language families

The study outlined in this chapter was conducted with 212 families in the U.K. via an online questionnaire, followed up by ten family interviews. Volunteers were drawn from bilingual parenting groups on social media, thus assuming a certain level of interest in heritage language education, and a certain level of technological understanding. Questions in the questionnaire covered the language level parents hoped for in their children, resources used, and a sub-group of questions explicitly related to technology attitude, efficacy, and usage. From the data, it became obvious that parents essentially occupied one of three distinct stances in their attitude towards technology, being either forcefully positive, forcefully negative, or “curious”, i.e. having made some use of technology so far, but admitting to little awareness of availability, and wanting to learn more. In general, the younger the children, the more negative the parental attitude towards technology, mirroring the notion of gatekeepers explored by many researchers previously (Hamilton et al., 2016; Samaha & Hawi, 2017). Nevertheless, 24 per cent of children of primary-school-age in the study had access to their own mobile device with internet access, with 54 per cent using a parental device, 12 per cent owning a computer, and 36 per cent using a family computer (multiple answers were possible). This shows that ownership of a mobile, internet-ready device is twice as ubiquitous as computer ownership among primary-school-aged children, and, although there is obviously a considerable difference in age at primary-school level, shows the trend for parents to facilitate internet access for their children. Looking specifically at language and motivation, it may not be surprising that 66 per cent of parents said their children were interested in computer games, 56 per cent said their children were interested in browser-based games, and 82 per cent stated their children were interested in mobile games and apps. This was matched by 55 per cent of parents who themselves stated an interest in apps and games. More interestingly, though, an encouraging 78 per cent of parents stated their children were interested in learning the heritage language – yet only 10 per cent used apps and games for language learning at least once a week, and only 15 per cent used apps or games in the actual heritage language at least once a week, with these two groups overlapping almost completely. This shows that parents are not necessarily making use of their children’s motivated attitude towards both the heritage language and the use of technology, and further responses may give us a reason to understand the reasons for this: Only 17 per cent of parents stated they were confident about the market of apps and games available to support the heritage language, and cost was an issue for about a quarter of parents (27%). Over half the parents (57%) wished for more availability of apps and games to support the heritage language.

These findings, when taken together, show that parents in multilingual families have to do more than just “transcend” their children’s technology use. In Lim’s (2016) work, parents might struggle to keep up with their child’s knowledge and understanding of technologies, and an awareness of the child’s digital social spaces. Unless they are guided, however, younger heritage language children are unlikely to come across technologies,

games, apps, or social spaces which support the heritage language. Unless children and families are part of a strong, digitally aware heritage language community, games and apps are unlikely to be shared via “word of mouth” among children, and they are unlikely to stumble across them as part of “standard English” digital practices. Therefore, parents have an additional role, not only as “gatekeeper”, but also as “facilitator”, in identifying opportunities for children to enjoy and engage with the heritage language. Interview data showed that parents would expect technology to serve as a means to keep children entertained, as well as expose them to the heritage language – one mother commented:

We started using Youtube with him in order for him to watch some Peppa [Pig] and Fireman Sam in German but we gave up because he would click the options on the right-hand side and end up going through Peppa episodes in this order every time! German – Polish – Czech – and he would invariably end up with the English episodes, [...] so we have stopped using Youtube altogether for now. (Mother of son, age 4, German)

This example is illustrative of the triple expectations several parents had of technology – namely, to *expose* the child to the heritage language, to *motivate* the child to engage in the heritage language, and to do so *without parental input*, essentially entertaining the child independently of parental engagement. The son showed significant technological aptitude, being able to navigate the side menu to arrive at a situation which he deemed more enjoyable – watching the programme in English, not German. However, rather than engaging in co-viewing, the mother here decided to stop the use of the technology altogether. This example illustrates potential dangers in parents making assumptions in what their children might find motivating, and how the multiple roles of language teacher, facilitator, motivator, gatekeeper, and parent may play out within the concept of transcendent parenting in heritage language families. Another mother further illustrated her control over the child’s digital engagement with the heritage language:

The gaming [apps in Chinese] he likes but there’s another new one I’m getting him to do which is a Chinese writing one, so the writing one sometimes I think it’s like homework in a way so he’ll basically...sometimes I find he’s not doing it correctly or just simply doing it. (Mother of son, age 5, Malay, but choosing Chinese as heritage language)

The app in question seeks to “gamify” character writing, awarding points for accuracy, but is obviously not perceived as engaging by the child. One mother was categorical in rejecting all technology, preferring to use books to introduce her child to Russian. She comments that this approach is most familiar to herself and explains how she learnt to read from her great-grandmother. As a family, the parents take the position that screen time is “addictive”, and thus technology is kept away from the child. This illustrates Hamilton and colleagues (2016) notion of the parents as gatekeepers, and is a long way away from Marsh and colleagues (2017) proposed “family digital literacy”. In interviews, it was interesting where parents saw the “usefulness” of apps. Several children did not

have the language skills to engage in apps aimed at monolingual native speakers, but found the apps aimed at learning the language to be confusing to their identity as heritage language speakers, with one 8-year old referring to them as apps for “proper German children”. Again, a lot rested on parents’ ability to navigate website, identify suitable digital material, and introduce it to their children. In this context, educational apps would sometimes win over apps aimed at more straightforward gameplay, with parents not always seeing the benefit of simple exposure to the heritage language in a context enjoyed by the child.

## Conclusion

Parents in the study outlined in this chapter made use of the motivational aspects of technology to support their children’s heritage language, but still functioned as gate-keepers (Hamilton et al., 2016) in terms of which aspects of digital technology they considered suitable for children to engage with, often focusing on formal learning above entertainment. As such, parental expectations were that technology would not only motivate the child to learn the heritage language, but also do the actual teaching, and preferably without parental input, i.e. functioning as a motivator, teacher, and babysitter. These triple expectations are difficult to uphold, especially bearing in mind the complexities of identifying suitable technology specifically aimed at heritage language children. In line with Samaha and Hawi’s (2017) concerns surrounding screen time as reward or punishment, this translates into the heritage language context through parental assumption that use of technology is a reward in and of itself, suggesting that children will more likely engage with heritage language resources if they are presented in a digital format. While this was true for some families, there is a loss of value from missing out on shared, constructive family experiences around the heritage language. Playing online games together, taking an interest in reasons behind children’s digital choices, and involving children in accessing and selecting games, apps and other digital content could help parents not only to transcend their children’s digital practices, but also create further stimulus for conversation and communication both in and about the heritage language. These changes in family practices, in turn, help to empower children to chart their pathway into the heritage language and culture, taking on the role of expert in their own digital practice, and mutually negotiating family digital practices.

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# Parental Ethnotheories in Children's Digital and Media Lives

## *The Case of Romanipen*

Marketa Zezulkova & Lucie Stastna

### Abstract

The article discusses the possible relevance and value of parents' cultural beliefs, and the research on them, to parental mediation and digital parenting theory and practice. It draws upon a small-scale ethnographic research conducted with seven Czech Roma families, which phenomenologically focused on young children's media experience and learning. The possible role of parental ethnotheories and cultural experiences in general, and of romanipen in particular, in parental mediation and digital parenting emerged subsequently from the interviews with the children's mothers. This article draws upon three family narratives that are used to illustrate how research into parental ethnotheories could possibly lead to an alternative interpretation of existing, and the construction of new, knowledge about parental mediation approaches, motivations and forms. Reflecting the participating Roma families' lived experience, parental mediation and digital parenting are not differentiated in this article.

**Keywords:** parental ethnotheories, parental mediation, Roma, children, media experience, learning

### Introduction

The Romani people represent Europe's largest minority (European Commission, 2016), yet the rights of many Romanis are being constantly violated by distinct parties directly and indirectly involved in their lives. For example, Czech policy, educational as well as public, faces criticism for a lack of knowledge and acknowledgement of Roma children's upbringing and lived experiences, often seen as inconsistent with the majority population (Kaleja, 2011). According to The Open Society Foundation's



report No Data – No Progress (2010), developed under the framework of the Decade of Roma Inclusion (2005-2015), the indirect violation is mainly caused by insufficient knowledge of the “Roma world”. The argument is that such knowledge is “necessary for breaking the vicious circle of ignorance and prejudice: ignorance generates prejudices, and prejudices foster ignorance” (National Office on Anti-Racial Discriminations, 2011: 10). Even though the concept of the “Roma world” is ambiguous and reinforces the feeling of alienation and otherness, we should not underestimate the importance of research seeking better knowledge and greater understanding.

This article contributes, although only initially and partially, to such understanding by discussing Roma children’s upbringing in general, and in the context of media and digital technology in particular, because nowadays these “underpin and overarch the experiences and expressions of everyday life” (Deuze, 2011: 137). Up to now, the role of media and digital technology in Roma children’s upbringing and lived experiences, and vice versa, have been mostly neglected by research. We address this gap by drawing upon a qualitative study conducted with Roma families living in the Czech Republic, which was funded by the Short Term Scientific Mission (STSM) award by the ISCH COST Action IS1410: The digital literacy and multimodal practices of young children (DigiLitEY). The aim of the project was to explore the Czech Roma children’s media experience and learning across home and institutional settings. Children’s upbringing was not originally part of the research focus; the need for a greater understanding of this aspect emerged from the field research. Whereas we discuss the findings focused on the Czech Roma children’s media experience and learning elsewhere (Zezulková, 2016), the focus here is parental ethnotheories and their role in parental mediation research, theory and practice.

## Parental ethnotheories and romanipen

Parental mediation is mostly understood as conscious parental strategies and actions aiming at maximising the opportunities and minimising the risks related to children’s media consumption and production (Schaan & Melzer, 2015), but we also include “natural” and possibly “nonstrategic” parental mediation emerging from parents’ and children’s lived experiences. Parental mediation studies originally reacted to children’s home TV viewing, but since then the focus has expanded to other media (Stastná, 2017), out of which digital media have their own digital parenting field. Our article, however, reflects the dialogic nature of diverse media genres and platforms (Woodfall & Zezulková, 2016). This is why digital parenting and parental mediation are both discussed here. Another reason is that both fields have neglected the role of parents’ cultural beliefs here theoretically framed as parental ethnotheories.

The concept of parental ethnotheories was coined within social anthropology by Super and Harkness (1986) as part of their “developmental niche” framework. The framework contains three interactive systems through which a child’s cultural environment can be



studied: 1) the physical (places) and social (people) settings; 2) upbringing customs and practices; and 3) parental ethnotheories, or parents' "culturally shared beliefs" (Harkness et al., 2011: 800). Harkness and Super (2005) further elaborated the framework by applying a hierarchical approach, firstly through proposing the leading role of parental ethnotheories due to their impact on where, with whom, and how children are being brought up. The framework has since been applied by various cultural and cross-cultural studies (e.g. Ganapathy-Coleman, 2013; Harkness et al., 2011; Mone et al., 2014), but not in the context of Roma parents' cultural beliefs.

Parental ethnotheories is undoubtedly an equivocal research area, and in the context of Romani culture also greatly complicated. Firstly, issues might arise from the ambiguous nature of "culture" that can be defined and understood in many ways (Woodfall & Zezulakova, forthcoming). For the purpose of this article we follow Stavenhagen's (1995: 67) understanding of culture as the "self-contained system of values and symbols [...] of a given social group" that forms a distinct collective identity. Secondly, an important but difficult question is if parents' beliefs are due to "culture" or whether they are more influenced by demographic and socioeconomic factors that often covary with cultural, or ethnic minority, groups (Harkness et al., 2011). For example, several studies focused on parental mediation in low-income and minority families suggest that they might have similar parental approaches to, and beliefs about, media and digital technology, that are at the same time different than those of the middle and upper class white families (e.g. Clark, 2009, 2013; Lareau, 2003; Notten & Kraayakamp, 2009; Warren, 2005). Warren (2005: 852) equally suggests that "no studies have reported any significant relationships between ethnicity and [...] mediation", which might however be caused by the difficulty of separating the often narrowly interconnected ethnicity and income.

Thirdly, identifying the role of Romani culture and collective identity in parental ethnotheories could arguably be particularly difficult and challenging. Among the reasons might be, for example, that Roma people do not have their own state of which national culture could serve as a reference point, and that Romani culture has been sustained mainly through oral tradition. On the other hand, Romani people have a unique cultural self-definition known as "romanipen", often referred to as the totality of what it means to be Roma (Frištenská et al., 2004). Sekyt (2003) suggests that romanipen is hard to explain or even recognise by non-Roma people as it is a question of emotions and feelings rather than of a clearly defined set of characteristics and norms. Within romanipen, one's willingness and desire to belong to the community and to follow its values and beliefs is what makes a person Roma regardless of his or her ethnicity. The role of "romanipen" as a form of Romani culture in parental ethnotheories is therefore not only more approachable, but as our research found, also more relevant to Roma children's digital and media lives.

## Research approach and design

With the aim to gain a greater understanding of Roma children's media and digital lives and learning, we conducted a small-scale ethnographic and phenomenological research in April and May 2016. The participants were six low- and one lower middle- income Czech families with young children in which at least one parent self-identified as being Roma. The participating families had a shared experience of racism, segregation and ethnic alienation, so it was crucial to thoroughly plan and make ethical and legal decisions throughout the entire research process.

Among the main decisions we had taken was to treat the participants as experts on their own lives, as well as to create and offer multiple opportunities for the participants to share their beliefs and experiences (Clark & Moss, 2005) and for us as researchers to openly and empathically see, listen and experience (Stein, 1916). The research therefore included multiple research techniques, including the participatory observations at the children's homes and in their communities and informal educational settings, in-depth interviews with three social workers, five mothers (as the fathers were not willing to be interviewed), and two grandparents, as well as unstructured conversations with nine children, out of which four additionally gave guided tours. For more detailed information about the research design, see Zezulková (2016).

We will now focus solely on the parental, possibly cultural, beliefs of three families. As this was not a case study research, it is only for the purpose of this article that the following paragraphs are framed as family, concretely mothers and their children's, narratives. These mothers were chosen as their beliefs and experiences connected to children's learning in general, and in connection to media and digital technology in particular, illustrate well the overall research findings connected to the role of parental ethnotheories in parental mediation as the subsequent discussion section will highlight.

### *Alena's approach to upbringing and parental mediation*

Alena used to be a user of an NGO educationally and emotionally supporting Roma mothers and their children in need, an organisation through which we got in touch with her. This now middle-income family, including Alena's working husband, retired mother, a 6-year old girl and a 7-year old boy, moved from a segregated Roma community several years back. Alena has then begun to work as a social worker at the above mentioned NGO, leading its pre-school day care. Both her children have been attending a Waldorf School.

Alena began her story at the point of her life where the family moved out of the community. She said that "for two-three years during this transition, I did not belong anywhere, there was nowhere I was accepted except by the people at [the NGO]". She remembered that her family experienced discrimination and social distance from both "the new White neighbors and the Roma friends, because the Whites were suspicious

of us and the Gipsies said we weren't one of them anymore, [...] still today the Roma mothers call me *gadjí* and say that I don't understand their situation".

Alena argued that being of Roma ethnicity only made life in the Czech Republic harder, so her children "don't even know what Gipsy is, they don't understand it, if they hear something, I explain it to them, but I raise them knowing they are the same as everyone else". On the same note Alena explained that for that reason her "kids don't live that Gipsy life, I don't raise them that way, that if you don't want to, you don't have to [...] and that they can do whatever they want all day long". Consequently, the children's after school time and weekends were divided in between unstructured leisure time and structured learning and family time.

At the time of the observations, the children's free time immediately after the school, and all the way until the homework time, was centered around digital and popular media, involving mostly PlayStation, mobile or computer gaming, online film streaming or a play with diverse toys related to their favourite media stories. The parents neither controlled the activities and media content, nor did they join the children. When asked, Alena did not see any risks or benefits linked to their media uses, except that it was a "great way for her children to relax before they have to do their homework". She had the same opinion about and parental approach to TV, which was the main medium involved in their family time with the father and the grandma being present as well. In contrast, the learning time at home was dominated by print media, mostly books, some of which Alena had written and drawn for her children as "a nice memory they will one day have". When it came to reading and learning from and with books, Alena was actively involved, giving it a sense of a family time.

### *Pavla's approach to upbringing and parental mediation*

Pavla was a housewife in a low-income family with seven children of ages ranging from just a few months to 10-years old. Her partner worked and their house was in a city suburb, where poorer (not only Roma) families lived. There was a public kindergarten, but the five pre-school aged children didn't attend; they used to go to the NGO's day-care, but not anymore. Pavla explained that with the newborn baby it was now difficult to take the other children to the NGO's daycare, which was an hour away by bus. The oldest son attended an elementary school, but the parents had decided to send him to a special school next year as he was, according to Pavla, failing all subjects.

Pavla did not talk much about education or her children's future, but when asked about her main role as a parent, she said it was to help them to "scrape through elementary school, to have the basics". Pavla said it would "make her very happy if they finished", but that she "won't force them into anything, that no, they can't do whatever they want, I don't let them, but also I don't force them to do things". She appreciated when her children found something they enjoyed, which included popular media texts and mobile phone and online games. The reasons were that the children entertained themselves, that it was a way of making them happy, and that they could learn something. For example, she

said about her 6-year old daughter Julie: “she loves Monster High and Frozen, coloring books, dolls, she can spend hours, alone, playing with it, [...] and when she celebrated her birthday, we made a Monster High cake for her, it was nice”. Julie also liked Hello Kitty games and, according to Pavla, the cooking one “taught her how to use cooking ingredients”. Having only one mobile phone in the family, Pavla said they had a ten-minute rule for taking turns, because otherwise they “keep arguing”.

### *Helena’s approach to upbringing and parental mediation*

Helena had four children. She was at home with the youngest son who was eight months old. Her oldest son was 8-years old and attended an elementary school where most students are Roma. Her two daughters, 6 and 7-years old, were both regular visitors of the NGO’s daycare. Helena’s husband was unemployed, receiving social security benefit. This low-income family lived in a residentially and socially segregated Roma neighborhood, referred to by the NGO’s social workers as “one of the city’s worst Roma ghettos”.

Helena, similarly to Pavla, said she would not force her children to study or do things they did not want to and that all she wanted as a parent was for her children to be “well-behaved”. At the center of her attention were her childrens’ own likes and interests, but in contrast to both Pavla and Alena, she actively took part in them. She read books to them, because the children themselves asked for it as they enjoyed it. She thought they might like it because “when I read to them, they have their own fantasy, on TV they have it all made already, like when the adult reads, the fantasy works”.

The issue Helena was dealing with, however, was access to digital technology which was subject to the families’ immediate economic situation. She said that usually “tablets, mobile phones, they have that a lot”, but continued that now “I don’t have money for it, so right now we don’t have it”. At the time of the research Helena mainly wished for her children to have a computer at home, saying “I agreed with my mum now, that she, because she has like more money, that she will help to buy a computer for the kids”. She then focused on the oldest, 8-year old David, saying whenever he is on a computer and on the internet, he “learns a lot of things, he finds there anything he is interested in” and continued that “he is too small now, but when he is bigger, he can learn English there, because books are expensive nowadays, but there he can find and learn anything”. Helena’s children shared with us their enjoyment of, interest in, learning and education, as for example David told us that what he liked most about school was the “curriculum” (“*učivo*”), what he most disliked was “the boys fighting”.

## Discussion

We chose to share the stories of these three families, because their beliefs about and approaches to upbringing and parental mediation illustrate well both the similarities and differences among the seven participating families and, possibly, their romanipen.

However, since parental mediation, parental ethnotheories and romanipen were not the original research focus, instead emerging from the field research as relevant and contextually important themes, the following interpretation and discussion should not be read as conclusions but rather as “introductions”. The overreaching argument is that research seeking more complex and research-grounded understanding of the interrelationships between parental ethnotheories and parental mediation (or digital parenting) would be valuable.

Such research could offer new interpretations, and expand existing knowledge, of parental mediation and digital parenting styles. For instance, highlighting the differences between the families, Alena's parental mediation could be compared to “parental interference” described by Westerik and colleagues (2007) as a deliberate interference with children's media use induced by parent's own ideas of what the child should do in order to grow up into a desired adult. Reproducing the popular distancing dichotomies between media platforms and genres (Woodfall & Zezulková, 2016), books and literature were put the highest, while digital media and TV the lowest, within Alena's hierarchy based on the societal and learning importance assigned to them. Although Alena did not have protectionist parental mediation tendencies, she acted as an authoritative figure *shaping* the child into *becoming* a certain, for example well-read, adult. We call this *authoritative parental mediation*, which is comparable to Baumrind's (1967) parenting typology that considers authoritative parenting as the most preferable one for, although this goes without saying, the majority of society.

In contrast to Alena, in Pavla and Helena's cultural beliefs children were firstly *be-ings* and only then *becomings*, thus the focus was on their immediate needs and wants, including in connection to media and digital technology. Both mothers suggested that they would not force their children to anything, which is according to Frištenská and colleagues (2004) and Frištenská (2010) caused by one of romanipen's core values, this being “unconditional love for their children” (*authors' translation*). Whereas Alena's unconditional love meant to be future-orientated, for Pavla and Helena the present was important in its own right. However, even though Pavla and Helena's cultural belief was possibly in agreement, its translation into parental mediation practice varied, which suggests that having shared parental beliefs, cultural or not, does not necessarily lead to the same parental mediation.

Firstly, Pavla's *pragmatic parental mediation*, as we call it, was driven by pragmatic reasons, making their immediate life easier (e.g. by setting rules preventing arguments) and in her view possibly also happier (e.g. since media and digital technology were something the children enjoyed). This approach to the child's upbringing might however be compared to “natural growth parenting” based on the belief that the child becomes adult even without the parent's profound interference as observed by Laureau (2003) in American low-income families. This once again demonstrates the difficulty of clearly separating culture and income variables in parental beliefs and approaches to upbringing in general, and to parental mediation and digital parenting in particular.

Secondly, Helena's approach was also driven by the children's immediate happiness,

but in comparison to Pavla, she actively encouraged and above all joined her children in their media experience and learning for their mutual enjoyment and appreciation. She was practicing what we might call *engaged parental mediation*, with the primary goal being *sharing* rather than purposefully shaping her children's lives. Interpreting her parenting and parental mediation from the point of view of learning theories, we could argue that her approach was truly social constructivist. Her parental mediation was based on "the development of shared [...] understanding [and skills] of the subject and task in hand" (Laroche & Bednarz, 1998: 3). It is also possible that Helena's social constructivist engaged parental mediation supported and nurtured her children's interest in learning (Sivan, 1989), so "forcing" or purposeful shaping was not needed. This style of parental mediation thus challenges the media effect research tradition still dominating parental mediation and other relevant studies and practices (Clark, 2011).

Furthermore, the parental mediation studies have so far mostly focused on parents' beliefs about media and digital technology, which in the hierarchy of parental ethnotheories would be at the bottom, while the higher overall (cultural) ideas about the child have been mostly neglected. Equally the studies have mostly explored and examined the forms, techniques and/or effect of parental mediation (Valkenburg et al., 1999). Less attention has been paid to parents' motivations, which has usually been simplified to a dualistic differentiation between protectionism and empowerment. Clark (2011: 330) opposed this by saying that the decision about parental mediation strategy has to be understood in relation to a number of contextual factors, including the desire to be a "good parent". Our research is in agreement with Clark (2011), as we found that the overall beliefs (e.g. about children as being or becoming), and diverse motivations (e.g. immediate versus future children's happiness) were inseparable from the forms. Since we have already discussed the higher parental beliefs, we will now look deeper into the importance of motives behind parental mediation that could be connected to parental ethnotheories. For this we return to Alena.

Alena's cultural belief influencing her parental mediation was arguably impacted by her own experience of negotiating and choosing between the two cultural models – romanipen and the dominant white majority culture – rather than by romanipen itself. Roma people as a social group have a collective "history of oppression and forced assimilation", which has made many of them "reluctant to self-identify" (Walsh & Krieg, 2007: 170). For instance, Roma people in the Czech Republic still suffer the past "communist politics of assimilation" (Frištenská et al., 2004: 17), prevailing impacts of which make it harder for the recent integrational initiatives based on multicultural model and pluralistic approaches to have a wider impact. Alena's parental ethnotheory, that also played a role in her parental mediation, could have therefore been impacted by her belief that assimilation was the only way of achieving social equality. The negotiation between two, or more, cultural models in relation to one's social equality might be a shared experience of not only Roma people, but also other ethnic minority groups.

We argue that parental mediation driven by hope for social equality and life without discrimination should be studied further. Yet we do not suggest that the popular inte-

grational rhetoric surrounding Roma people's digital literacy (see e.g. A practical guide. The Roma people and the use of ICT as a socio-economic and cultural inclusion tool) should also penetrate parental mediation research, theory and practice. While access to digital technology undoubtable is an existing issue, the motivation of providing low-income Romani families access should not be an integrational one. We fear that the borderline between assimilation and integration of Romani people is still too thin, so even well-meant discourse, policies and practices might have a different impact on Roma parents and their children than intended by the majority society, us researchers included.

## Conclusion

In this article we suggested that *romanipen* as a set of cultural beliefs, and the Roma minority's negotiation of multiple cultural models, could play an important role in Roma parents' ethnotheories. Concretely, we highlighted how parental ethnotheories of the marginalised Czech Roma mothers caring for young children were potentially connected to their parental mediation approaches, motivations and forms. The aim of this article, however, was not to link *romanipen* to concrete parenting styles. We argued against causal understanding of these connections and instead tried to portray their contextual and socially constructed interdependence.

Drawing upon various possible interrelations, we offered alternative parental mediation concepts (authoritative, pragmatic and engaged). These concepts, as well as any arguments we made, are tentative; they are open to any re-interpretation and re-use. They were developed not to conclude but to encourage discussion. Therefore, our main goal was to at least partially demonstrate the possible relevance of parental ethnotheories, and the value of their research, to parental mediation (and digital parenting) theory and practice. Yet such research can only be relevant and valuable when Romani people, and arguably all minority groups, are treated as experts on their own lives.

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# Differing Parental Approaches to Cultivating Youth Citizenship

Lynn Schofield Clark & Maria José Brites

## Abstract

In this chapter we reflect on how parents and their children negotiate their digital responsibilities and rights during the adolescent years, in light of their expectations regarding agentive involvement in life decision-making. Parents are expected to exercise their parental responsibilities for keeping children safe and for nurturing them into adulthood, which includes into the duties of active citizenship. To discuss these issues, we use two different qualitative samples within family contexts, in the U.S. and in Portugal. Our results suggest that families who embrace a commitment to social justice when they are considering digital activities of their children may produce agentive environments. Given this, we posit that young people may come to view practices of citizenship as an extension of their experience of agency within their home contexts. In contrast, families with low levels of agentive discussion and decision making may reinforce low digital agentive options, actions, and decisions.

**Keywords:** agency, digital parenting, digital rights, family context

## Introduction

Children's rights are bound up with the rights and responsibilities of the parents and caregivers with whom they live. On the one hand, parents and caregivers are expected to exercise their parental responsibilities for keeping children safe and for nurturing children into adulthood, which includes nurturing them into the responsibilities of active citizenship. On the other hand, each nation-state has interests in securing the conditions that allow for the continuation of a society's social, political, economic and cultural institutions. This chapter looks at how these two expectations interrelate in

the negotiations that occur between adolescents and their parents in relation to the digital realm.

As Livingstone (2016) has documented, much of the existing research on parenting in digital environments, and indeed even the conversations among parents themselves, focuses on keeping children safe from harm. But how do parents and their children negotiate their responsibilities and rights during the adolescent years, as young people grow closer to the age of adult citizenship with its expectations for agentive involvement in life decision-making?

The research that informs this chapter is drawn from two ethnographic studies. In the U.S., Lynn Schofield Clark worked as a member of a research team that conducted participant observation, interview-based, and youth participatory action research (YPAR) in an urban public school and in 54 households in the southwestern U.S. with young people under the age of 18 who came from lower, middle, and upper income backgrounds (Clark, 2013; Clark & Marchi, 2017). Like almost all U.S. young people, those in the sample lived with a parent or guardian at least through their eighteenth birthday, when youth become eligible to vote, age out of foster care, usually complete a high school degree or its equivalent, and enter the workforce, the military, or university. Thus, family environments shape the years just prior to voting age and give shape to civic habits (Clark, 2013; Clark & Marchi, 2017).

In Portugal, Maria José Brites conducted a Portuguese PAR project (ANLITE, SFRH/BPD/92204/2013), in the city of Porto, concentrated on two different contexts: a middle-class community (public school) and a deprived area (youth center), with the use of participant observation, media production and semi-structured interviews (25 young people/15 families). In Portugal, family environments are also important contextual elements that shape young peoples' experiences with digital media, and can be important predictors of young peoples' abilities to be agentive within civic life (Brites, 2015; Brites et al., 2017).

In our qualitative research in both the U.S. and in Portugal, while we have had many discussions about parental authority and teenage autonomy in digital spaces, we have encountered very few parents who are conscientious about their role in relation to political socialization or civic cultures. Dafna Lemish (2007) similarly found that even when families talk about news and television environments, conversations about online spaces were commonly oriented towards risk and danger prevention. In fact, when young people consult their parents about dilemmas related to rights and citizenship, adults emphasize personal safety issues over ethical considerations (James, 2016). Thus, it is not surprising that existing research into digital parenting affords few insights into how parents might encourage young people to seek out political information or engage in political and civic acts.

Our focus in this chapter is on what has been termed political socialization, or research that explores the development of political agency among youth. This work has explored the ways young people grow into self-awareness of their distinctive human rights and of the social responsibilities that are regulated by the nation-state(s) in

which they live. First, we consider how young people become aware of themselves as persons who are granted certain rights in the contexts of their parents' wishes. Then, we consider the differing paradigms of developmental and critical citizenship, arguing that whereas most parents are aware of the developmental aspects of youth citizenship, a critical approach to citizenship suggests that differing parenting practices might also be at work and worthy of greater examination and support. We offer examples of parents who embrace this second approach.

We argue that many parents express a great deal of concern about the risks that they believe their young people face in the digital realm, which leads them to curtail their children and youth's online expressions in various ways. In some cases, young people might comply with their parents' decisions without concern, whereas in other situations, young people do what they prefer without parental approval. Our findings suggest that the parental provision of space for youthful ethical decision-making is an important foundation for the development of an engaged and agentive approach to citizenship. We explore the possibilities for such connections in our final section.

## Growing into human rights

All parents seek to develop in their children a capacity for leading good lives. During the adolescent years, young people experience an increase in autonomy as they develop stronger decision-making capacities and as they attain the means for independence through access to education and transportation. At this point, they also develop a greater range of responsibilities, as they come to learn that the exercise of their rights must not disadvantage others or impinge upon others' rights.

As young people enter their teen years, they find themselves increasingly negotiating over their rights. What are their rights to privacy? To participation? To being heard? Where are these rights negotiated in relation to family members, in schools, in workplaces and in other public places? Conflicts emerge as parent's exercise what they believe are their rights to assert parental will and their responsibilities to set rules about access to and use of the digital realm, and as young people seek to exercise what they believe are their rights to autonomy and independent decision-making. These conflicts often emerge in relation to where and when young people use their mobile phones and for what purposes (Clark, 2013).

Many parents express a great deal of concern regarding the risks they believe that their children may face in digital spaces. For example, Alexis, age 13, whose parents and siblings had a low level of education, lived in a low-income area and attended a low-income school. Because his grandmother worried about pedophilia, she intrusively supervised his activities on Facebook and directly asked him about men that he might have interacted with on Facebook, reminding him that she would see all of his online interactions. Alexis had relatively few opportunities to consider his own communication rights. Even though he regularly participated in a youth center that emphasized human

rights, he did not articulate and did not seem aware of the idea that access to the internet might be understood as a human right.

Other young people discover a conflict over rights through their encounters with their peers, but they believe that their parents' need to protect them overrules their own rights to privacy. Carmen, age 16, had parents who upheld strict rules about when and where she could use her mobile phone, which was not permitted when she was with other family members. Her father also felt that it was within his rights to view his daughter's text messages whenever he chose. "It's not like I say anything bad, so it's okay", Carmen explained to her peers and the interviewer. Several of her peers bristled at this comment, with one bursting out, "That would suck!" Carmen then shrugged with discomfort and in response to the objections of other peers, she added that she believed that her parents trusted her. She noted, "My dad just worries". Carmen felt that her parents' assertion of their parental rights, while deemed intrusive by others, was appropriate and consistent with their desire to raise her as a person who was growing into adulthood with rights, but also with responsibilities that were tied to her family and were subjugated to the rights of others.

Kayla, age 16, had a similarly protective single mother, but unlike Carmen, Kayla chose to conceal many of her actions. She acted out of her sense of her right to participate in actions that her mother would consider dangerous, often participating in self-harm through her engagement in online bullying. She chose to go online at a friend's house so that she would be away from her mother's supervision.

In contrast to the tendencies of Alexis, Carmen and Kayla to view their rights in direct relation to their parents' actions, Ivone, age 16, was a good student who was very conscious of her own rights to information, even if she was not aware of the fact that access to the internet might be considered a human right. Although she came from a family in which both parents were college-educated and she was active in her middle-class school and in the community and had many internet-related school assignments to complete, she noted that "My parents don't want to give me home internet access", primarily because they believed that her younger brother was addicted to games. When she learned through the interview process that others considered access to the internet a human right, she said that this new information could be used to alert her parents that their household policy was impinging upon her human rights and creating ambivalence about how she could exercise her rights in her home. Her parents, she noted, liked to listen to her opinions and she believed they would take that in consideration.

Through their interactions with their parents, these four young people have learned that they have some, yet limited, rights, and that their options are constrained by the parameters of their family's approaches to those rights. They might choose to comply, as did Alexis and Carmen, or resist, as did Kayla, or they may choose to renegotiate the terms of their relationship, as did Ivone.

In contrast to the great deal of research on protecting children from potential internet risks, there is little research on how information and communication rights such as those established by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child are related to human rights.

In the context of the U.K., Carter (2014) has argued that the well-being of the child rests on the child's ability to exercise communication and information rights as a human right. In today's digital context, giving children opportunities to critically and actively read the world is an important part of preparation for citizenship. As Buckingham (1999) has argued, "The media are central to the political process in modern societies; and media education – teaching about the *media* – could become a highly significant site in defining future possibilities for citizenship" (Buckingham, 1999: 182). Citizenship must be understood as rooted in civic cultures that can be fostered by the digital, beyond the traditional idea of politics and participation as Dahlgren (2009) has stated.

Initially, a great deal of optimism surrounded the ability of the internet to provide the architecture for active participation in public life. But almost three decades after Tim Berners-Lee created the world wide web, we know that the internet is not a space that is free from the constraints of power relations.

## Developmental vs. critical approach to citizenship

In both U.S. and Portuguese societies, youth under the age of 18 (age of majority) are often positioned within what might be termed a developmental approach that views youth as not-quite-ready for citizenship, or in which youth are included in activities of citizenship in a symbolic or token manner. This is consistent with a protective approach to childhood that views children as not quite ready for adult decision-making and in need of supervision or direction, as we saw in the four previous examples.

A developmental approach to citizenship, however, is premised upon the assumption that young people grow up in a context where basic rights are assured and where they can look forward to a future in which their rights and responsibilities will expand. This is of course not the case for many young people who have experienced marginalization due to disability, race, sexual orientation, lack of access to resources, or their parents' citizenship status (Fraser & Gordon, 1994; Harris, 2011).

While many have viewed children as "incomplete" human beings, then, more recent work on children's rights suggests the need to better conceptualize children's interests so as to understand the moral claims they have to the rights they and all people are afforded (Archard & Macleod, 2002). When young people cannot count on basic rights and are skeptical about whether or not they or others they know have ever had those rights, it is difficult to imagine why they would want to participate in the civic or collective life of a society (Flanagan, 2013). From a critical perspective, then, hope for change becomes a key dimension of how youth citizenship must be reconceptualized.

A number of young people in our samples expressed hope for change. In the U.S., this was expressed in relation to issues of immigration and support for the right to higher education (e.g., the DREAM Act), support for continued participation in the Paris climate change treaties as well as support for confronting Islamophobia, racism, sexism, and discrimination that is based on sexual orientation (Clark & Marchi, 2017).

In both the U.S. and Portugal, hope for change was also expressed in relation to issues of being heard and having a voice in matters of public concern.

We argue that young people learn about how they may participate in social change through the experiences they have in their home lives. The civic environments where young people live, especially in relation to their families and their own willingness to participate in public life, provide important contexts that can reinforce civic interests (Brites et al., 2017). One example is Jada, age 16, who underwent a terrible experience that she and her mother reframed as a social justice issue and whose story was covered in the news media (Stewart, 2014). Jada had attended a party, where she accepted a drink and did not remember anything after that. Several weeks later she received a text with a photo that apparently had been taken at the party. In the photo, Jada was unconscious and half undressed. The photo and story of her rape circulated on social media, and other young people disparaged her as it came to be shared widely as a meme. In response, rather than retreating in shame, Jada, with her mother's support, decided to make a public statement about her experiences of rape and cyber harassment. When asked why she supported her daughter's decision to approach local news media with her story, Jada's mother explained her daughter's wishes to journalist/writer Lynette Holloway: "She wanted to make a difference so that other young ladies can come forth and say what is actually going on" (Holloway, 2014). Her mother thereby encouraged Jada to reframe the digital space as a location through which Jada could reclaim her dignity. This experience included both a recognition of the violation of a young woman's rights and an expression of the hope that both she and her mother had that things could be different. As she gave voice to her experience, Jada was able to claim an agentic role not only for herself, but on behalf of other young women who might similarly experience such online mediated humiliations.

Another example of a civically engaged young person was Rui, who at age 19 lived in a low education and low-income family with his mother and sister, as his father lived abroad for work. For Rui's parents, education was a high priority. Although they lived in a lower income area, both Rui and his sister attended a middle-class school, where Rui was student union leader. Rui identified as interested in politics and in civic matters and was a great driving force to create student radio at his school. Rui's family was not particularly politically involved, although his home life, like Jada's, created the context through which agentic political action could be envisioned and enacted. Rui and his sister lived in a house full of books that represented special interests in architecture, politics, religion, culinary arts, and school, and thus this family differed from other lower income families where there are fewer reading materials and fewer interests represented among those materials. In fact, his mother was so committed to being informed on current events that, when she was cleaning the train as part of her work, she collected the expensive news magazines that others left behind, reading them thoroughly in order to gain an informed opinion on a variety of children's issues, including those related to the internet. Rui's mother was very committed to the idea that young people deserve a right to have a voice in public matters and encouraged her children to participate in a



variety of situations. Echoing his mother's views, Rui said that he considered information as power (Brites, 2015), and he wanted to use that power to improve his and others people's lives. He clearly viewed his access to the internet as a birthright, like the right to expression, even if, at the same time, he was not familiar with the ways that some speak of access to the internet as a human right.

Unlike Jada and Rui, Marta, age 14, lived in a family context (with a younger sister, mother and father) heavily directed to the cultural and political environment. In Marta's home, where they opted for no television, family members had a habit of talking about news and each person brought home daily news themes of which they became aware during the day to be discussed in family, which family members viewed as an instructive but also a fun activity. Through her school, Marta and her mother participated in a variety of volunteer projects. Viewing the internet through the framework of a larger context in which decision-making occurs, Marta's mother explained that she was especially concerned to "prepare and educate to life, as there is no point in [attempting to] control [internet use]". With rights come responsibilities, Marta's mother pointed out.

The parents of Jada, Rui, and Marta provided a supportive environment for the fostering of a civic identity among their children by creating an ethic of social justice. Jada's mother supported her daughter's desire to see her individual problems as those that are shared by others. Rui's mother modeled what it means to be well-informed and to take advantage of every available opportunity to learn and to utilize that learning to shape one's environment. Marta's mother engaged her children in conversations about current events, thereby supporting the idea that young people have a stake in what is happening in the world around them and responsibilities that go along with their rights.

## Conclusion

Family life is an important location for the development of civic culture, and the online spaces through and in which young people communicate are key locations in which the civic habitus is enacted (Dahlgren, 2010). When young people are denied the right to make decisions that affect their lives, or when they are encouraged to see themselves as less agentive than the adults in their households, they may experience themselves as powerless, which in turn can impact both the development of a civic sensibility and a more general sense of well-being.

As we have pointed out, it is important to consider how young people might grow into greater awareness of themselves as civic actors as they gain decision-making authority over their own lives and as they become increasingly aware of the discrepancies between what is and what ought to be in society. When young people in their teen years are encouraged to see themselves as able to take agency in how they are represented, in how they speak about current events, and in how they participate in activities orchestrated to amplify youth voice and to secure rights for themselves and others, they learn to embrace an ethic of care through the enactment of civic actions.

Embracing a critical approach to citizenship, therefore, raises new questions in relation to parenting in a digital age, such as: in the emergent digital context, how might adults provide the resources youth might need in their own efforts towards embracing critical citizenship? How can parents encourage young people to take debates that are often framed as individual moral issues into online spaces and reframe them as issues of justice and rights that affect both the individual and others in society?

As we have discussed in this chapter and in other work (Brites, 2015; Clark, 2013), parents are continuously making decisions regarding how they will establish and maintain the digital contexts in which their children grow up. Whereas many parents mostly consider possible negative consequences of digital media, some parents are focusing on broader questions related to how young people live out the values that their parents and indeed all family members deem important.

This chapter highlighted the stories of some families who embrace a commitment to social justice and who therefore view the digital activities of their children and youth in relation to the question of whether or not those activities support the family's broader commitments to social justice and active civic engagement. We argue that this might be considered consistent with a critical approach to citizenship in that in these cases, both parents and their young people are aware of how certain rights may be curtailed due to structural systems of oppression, whether related to class, race, gender, sexual orientation or something else. When both parents and youth prioritize actions offline and in digitally mediated realms that acknowledge and are responsive to these lived inequitable situations, we argue that young people may come to view practices of citizenship as an extension of their experience of agency within their home contexts.

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## II.

### Digital parenting in context



# From Media Trusteeship to Parental Mediation

## *The Parental Development of Parental Mediation*

Thorsten Naab

### Abstract

Active mediation, restrictive mediation, and media co-use are widely discussed strategies of parental mediation. This chapter reviews their theoretical framework in the context of social media activities. It suggests media trusteeship as a complementary approach to parental mediation that parents especially apply until their new-borns, infants, and toddlers have developed abilities to use digital media autonomously. The transitional process from trusteeship to parental mediation is further investigated empirically based on 29 in-depth interviews. The results indicate that although parents believe digital media will be a vital part of their children's lives, most parents are unaware of their trusteeship and its fluidity. Parents possess only limited concepts of how they could support their children's digital media development. Instead, they seem to be driven by the transformations of social media and apply ad-hoc tactics to cope with changes of their children's media autonomy.

**Keywords:** parents' media trusteeship, parental mediation, social media, media generations, digital identity

### Introduction

Digital media are a vital part of young families' everyday life. Family members of all age share their opinions, experiences, and knowledge with a network of family, friends, and public (Taddicken, 2014). Furthermore, they implement digital media in their daily activities resulting in a mediatisation of almost all areas of their social life (Hepp, 2016). Within this context, parents moderate their children's media use to protect them from negative media impacts and to foster positive developments (e.g., Clark, 2011; Shin,

Huh & Faber, 2012). While research on parental mediation indicates that parents apply different strategies of media use regulation (Shin & Li, 2017), their common basis is a coordination process between parent and child: Parents discuss, restrict or supervise media use with their children. This process seems different considering new-borns', infants', and toddlers' limited abilities to reflect and to communicate about their media use. Therefore, this chapter proposes the concept of media trusteeship as a complementary approach to parental mediation. While especially young children are unable to manage their media use autonomously, parents hold trust and are responsible for their children's benefit with regard to property and authority.

However, media trusteeship is only a transitory strategy of parental mediation. As soon as children learn to reflect and negotiate their media-related demands and strive for greater autonomy in media use, parents need to develop different and more collaborative forms of parental mediation. The idea of this transitory process is at the heart of this chapter which aims to reconstruct the parental development of parental mediation. Specifically, it asks what concepts parents develop to cope with the transition of responsibility for digital media use. The paper discusses how different forms of media trusteeship connect with the specific strategies of parental mediation that are currently considered by communication scholars. Therefore, the review of existing research on parental mediation as well as literature on children's and parents' media use focusses on evaluating concepts used to describe and explain parents' media-related parenting behaviour.

These theoretical considerations are augmented with the results of 29 in-depth interviews as the concept of media trusteeship proves to be suitable to explain parental mediation with regard to new-borns, infants, and toddlers. However, the empirical perspective also reveals that parents are only marginally aware of the transitory nature of media trusteeship and have developed only limited ideas about how to pass on their trusteeship responsibilities to their descendants. In conclusion, this chapter argues for a stronger analysis of the parental development of parental mediation.

## Parental mediation

Being "the most influential people in the development and socialization of children" (Sonck et al., 2013: 96), parents are primarily responsible for their children's media-related development and well-being (Shin & Huh, 2011; Shin & Li, 2017). Communication scholars discuss mainly three different strategies that parents apply to protect their offspring from media threats and to cultivate positive developmental outcomes: active mediation, restrictive mediation, and co-use (Nathanson, 1999; Shin & Huh, 2011; Valkenburg, Krcmar, Peeters & Marseille, 1999).

Parents participate in active mediation when they explain and discuss media with their children. This strategy focuses on the parent-child negotiation of positive, negative, or neutral arguments about media use (Martins et al., 2015). Active mediation



increases children's understanding of media content (Lemish & Rice, 1986), supports the development of media critical thinking (Fujioka & Austin, 2002; Youn, 2008) and hinders media induced aggressive behaviour (Nathanson, 1999).

Restrictive mediation describes a strategy that regulates children's media use through implicit and explicit rules. These rules are usually linked to the amount of time children are allowed to use media, to whether the content is desirable to use, or both. Although restrictive mediation leads to a decreased exposure to media risks (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008), less media use (Vittrup, 2009), and less aggressive children (Nathanson, 1999), Nathanson (2002) argues that media restrictions can cause a forbidden fruit effect that counteracts parents' mediation goals. Considering the appearance of a negative age effect regarding restrictive mediation effects (Martins et al., 2015), it seems arguable that the effects of this regulation strategy may reflect mainly the degree of parents' importance as authority figures for their children.

Finally, parents engaging in media co-use supervise (Nikken & Jansz, 2014) and monitor (Livingstone, 2008) their children's media activities to take countermeasures if necessary. This parenting strategy is associated with a mostly non-verbal parent-child negotiation. Therefore, children use media content with higher parental desirability (Lee & Chae, 2007) as well as parents' co-use can signal parental approval of media content and media practice (Nathanson, 2001).

## Media trusteeship in the context of parental mediation

All of the mentioned parenting styles can be understood as a coordination process between parent and child. While active mediation supposes that children communicate with their parents, restrictive mediation requires children to understand parents' rules of media use and render them into their media behaviour. Media co-use demands children to coordinate their media use non-verbally with their parents, who also assume that children can reflect and actively choose their media behaviour. Arguably, newborns and infants may not meet the communicative requirements of the mentioned strategies of parental mediation. Even toddlers might possess only limited abilities to reflect and communicate about their media use. For this reason, research concerned with parental mediation focuses its attention on older children (e.g., Livingstone, 2008 about children aged 12 to 18) or solely on parents (e.g., Martins et al., 2015; Nikken & Jansz, 2014).

However, a growing body of research indicates the importance of media within the lives of young children (Nansen & Jayemanne, 2016). Therefore, this chapter proposes parents' media trusteeship as a complementary strategy of parental mediation. The trusteeship concept describes the idea that a person holds trust and is responsible for the benefit of another with regard to property and authority. Specifically, "the duty of the trustee is to preserve and enhance the value of the assets under his control, and to balance fairly the various claims to the returns which these assets generate" (Kay & Silberston, 1995: 92). Within the context of parental mediation, parental media

trusteeship understands parents as trustees of their children's media-related, properties and all media activities that parents make on behalf of their children. The idea of media trusteeship is not dissimilar to the concept of privacy stewardship introduced by Kumar & Schoenebeck (2015), but more comprehensive as it includes additional media-related properties children might hold such as image rights.

Parental media trusteeship appears to be firmly entangled with parents' personal media use as well as with parents' perception of their children being part of their personality rather than individual entities. The reason is that a substantial part of parents' daily routines revolves around the challenges concerned with their parenthood (Bartholomew et al., 2012). Therefore, parents' digital media activities likely include content about their children or are related to the challenges of parenthood (e.g., Bartholomew et al., 2012). Furthermore, parents disclose child-related information to enact good parenthood (Kumar & Schoenebeck, 2015). Analogous to other styles of parental mediation, it is assumable that parents substantiate their trusteeship role in different ways depending on their children's age (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008; Shin & Huh, 2011; Valkenburg et al., 1999), media perception (Valkenburg et al., 1999), media knowledge (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008; Sonck et al., 2013), parents' general parenting style (Eastin et al., 2006) and previous experiences regarding negative and positive media effects.

## From media trusteeship to parental mediation

Besides being a complementary strategy of parental mediation, media trusteeship is likely to be an antecedent of active mediation, restrictive mediation, and media co-use as well. While children's abilities of autonomous media use will undoubtedly grow during childhood, parents are required to monitor children's demands to follow their media-related development. Therefore, media trusteeship appears to be a transitory strategy that fades out of relevance for parents the better children reflect and communicate their media-related actions. However, the mechanism that drives the change from media trusteeship to other styles of parental mediation appears unclear and needs further clarification.

Two perspectives appear to be worthwhile to look at: research on factors that influence parental mediation styles and research on parents' role development. Regarding the first, it is safe to assume that children's age should be an important determinant of the transition process because children's abilities to reflect and communicate about their media use increase with their age. Furthermore, the transition process might be connected with parents' general parenting style. Assumedly, parents that tend to a stricter behavioural control of their children might hold longer to parental mediation through media trusteeship. This practice goes probably hand in hand with parents' perceptions of media hostility. The more parents perceive media as a hostile environment, the longer they might cling to taking media use decisions on behalf of their children.

Considering parent's role development, research considering this phenomenon indicates that parents' role perceptions undergo a substantial change until their children enter elementary school (Mowder et al., 1995). It seems highly reasonable that children's admission to the system of formal education marks a turning point in parental mediation at which parents need to adjust to the appearance of other socialization agents in their children's lives. Admittedly, with regard to parents' transition from media trusteeship to other styles of parental mediation, this point in time should be only regarded as a possible proxy than a real turning point.

## Research questions and research strategy

The previous sections outlined that parents are responsible for their children's media-related development. Previous research literature has identified three main strategies parents apply to guide their children's media-related development: active mediation, restrictive mediation, and media co-use. It was suggested that the current theoretical work on parental mediation should be complemented with the media trusteeship concept. Although this approach helps to understand how parents regulate young children's media behaviour in a mediatised world, it was argued that media trusteeship is only a transitory strategy of parental mediation. The empirical perspective takes up on this idea and aims to describe how parents develop their media trusteeship into other forms of parental mediation. The following guiding research questions were addressed:

RQ1: How do parents develop their trusteeship role?

RQ2: What concepts do parents develop to cope with the transition of responsibility for their children's media use?

RQ3: How is media trusteeship connected to other parental mediation styles?

The conducted study concentrates on the microscopic level of individual media practices. It aims to reconstruct parents' considerations about parental media regulation. The study attempts to assess parents' awareness of their role as trustees and how they substantiate their trusteeship (RQ1). Furthermore, it scrutinizes parents' trusteeship sustainability as well as their tactics and strategies to cope with their children's media-related development (RQ2). Finally, this work evaluates the significance of media trusteeship in relation to other practices of parental mediation (RQ3).

## Method

This study relies on two series of face-to-face in-depth interviews: The first series of 21 interviews was conducted from December 2016 to August 2017 with parents with at least one child aged between zero and six years. Another series of eight interviews was

carried out in August and September 2017 with parents with at least one child aged between six and ten years. All participants were permanent residents of Germany. Parents' social media postings about children, their personal experience, and their behaviour concerning these topics were chosen as entry points for both interview sets. During conversations, the interviewers broadened the topic towards parents' general media-related strategies of parenting as well as their development of media regulation practices. The first series of interviews lasted between 22 and 58 minutes, those of the second series of interviews lasted between 20 and 36 minutes.

## Results

The interviews provided comprehensive insights into parents' ideas about parental media regulation and their according practices of parental mediation. However, this richness can only be cursory reflected as a selection of particular findings which summarizes the individual perspectives of the interviewees to three main arguments: parent's styles of media trusteeship (RQ1), how they develop their trusteeship over time (RQ2), and how their trusteeship style might link to their style of parental mediation (RQ3).

### *Styles of parental media trusteeship*

Although each dialogue partner substantiates their media trusteeship differently, the individual lines of argument reflect nuances of three main types of trusteeship roles which parents tend to take: cyber-wall hermits, re-activists, and naive optimists.

*Cyber-wall hermits.* Parents who understand their media trusteeship as cyber-wall hermitage try to establish absolute control over their digital communication to shield themselves and their family from any media threats. Therefore, these parents have developed a somewhat restrictive approach to media activities with regard to their children. They base their regulations on a comprehensive understanding of the social and technical aspects of digital media. Furthermore, cyber-wall hermits utilize their technical knowledge and invest considerable time and effort to realize technical countermeasures to media threats. Finally, a significant inequity between their media consumption and their trusteeship practice can be found. While cyber-wall hermits indicate to be familiar with a broad range of digital media services, they try to withdraw their children almost entirely from digital media. Instead, they explicitly encourage their children's use of books and audio plays.

*Re-activists.* A basic open-mindedness characterises the re-activist style of media trusteeship towards children's digital media use. They believe that digital media can contribute positively to the daily lives of their children. Despite their general laissez-faire with their children's media use, re-activist parents have developed some regulations during their trusteeship. However, in contrast to cyber-wall hermits, re-activists started to reflect upon possible media threats only after critical incidents happened.

This re-active perspective on their children's media trust appears to be the dominant regulation mechanism of this rather common media trusteeship style as well as its main problem: Parents understand their trustee role as a maintaining task until their children can make autonomous media decisions. Instead of actively improving their children's media literacy, parents deploy countermeasures to repair or conceal the damage of possible media threats.

*Naive optimists.* Similar but different to re-activist parents is the case of how parents substantiate a naive optimist-style of media trusteeship. Both media trusteeship styles share the belief that positive media effects largely outweigh the occurrence of media threats. However, parents who follow a naive optimist style of media trusteeship apparently blind out their perception of media threats. This behaviour seems to reason either in parents' belief that the occurrence of harmful media events is improbable or their belief that future benefits outweigh current threats.

### *Parental development of media trusteeship*

Considering characteristics of the identified media trusteeship styles, it is no surprise that the majority of our dialogue partners with new-borns, infants, and toddlers has only limited ideas about how to develop their trusteeship over time and how to pass on their responsibilities to their children. Notably, parents who practice the naive optimist or the re-activist style of media trusteeship appear to lack the awareness of the educational potential of their trustee role. For this reason, it is not surprising that the development of their trusteeship style seems to be controlled mainly by the development of children and external circumstances. In contrast, cyber-wall hermits see a link between their trusteeship and their children's media literacy. Moreover, they are aware of the time limitation of their responsibility. However, although this group is concerned about the development of their trusteeship style, the depth of their reflections remains at the level of popular opinions and beliefs. It seems that cyber-wall hermits' child-protection focused perspective on digital media seems to at least hinder an educational utilisation of their social and technical media knowledge in a more productive way. Therefore, analogous to parents who practice a re-activist or naive optimist style of trusteeship, the development of children is the driving force, while parents' activities are reactive in nature. Finally, it should be emphasized that the stability of the three identified forms of media trusteeship over time is only superficial. Almost all parents report a growing discrepancy between their perceived parenting role and the perceived influence on children's media activity during the course of parents' media trusteeship which increases their willingness to adapt their trusteeship style. In particular, parents with a cyber-wall hermit style of media trusteeship report that they perceive situations as tense where these differences become obvious. In contrast, parents who follow the trusteeship style of re-activists and naive optimist appear to be immunized against this phenomenon.

Considering the link between media trusteeship and parental mediation, the interviews suggest that parents seem to develop ad-hoc tactics to cope with changes regard-

ing their children's increasing media autonomy rather than developing a prospective strategy of parental mediation or media literacy education. Although parents of older children can precisely recapitulate their media regulations when their children were infants, differences in the style of media trusteeship seem not related to later differences in parental mediation. Instead, it appears that parents' specific style of parental mediation develops as a product of their children strive for media use autonomy as well as the emergence of new media technology and its appropriation within the familiar environment. This process becomes particularly evident in families with siblings who have a considerable age difference. While a specific pattern of media use and its regulation might be significant for the firstborn, the second child often has a disparate media use pattern. Although the parents strive for a largely consistent, cross sibling media regulation, the interviewees leave no doubt that the transition from media trusteeship to parental mediation is essentially determined by the personality of the child and his or her expectations about media use. Ultimately, the interviews also show that over time, parents themselves become more confident in using the media techniques that their children integrate as a matter of course in their everyday life. For example, some parents of older children report that they had initially drawn up very restrictive rules and relaxed them over time after gaining a better insight into how the new media worked.

## Discussion and conclusion

The primary aim of this chapter was to reconsider parental mediation in the context of new-borns, infants, and toddlers. The literature review carved out that active mediation, restrictive mediation, and media co-use build upon a coordination process between parents and children about the conditions of media use. Considering young children's limited communication abilities, this chapter suggested the concept of media trusteeship to describe parental mediation of new-borns, infants, and toddlers. The empirical research which is presented in this chapter illuminates this general thought and evaluates the link between media trusteeship and parental mediation: The conducted study identifies cyber-wall hermits, re-activists, and naive optimists as different styles of media trusteeship. Although they show a different understanding of their trustee roles, all three styles of trusteeship can be seen as defensive behaviour schemes which are driven by concerns about media threats. Moreover, the identified trusteeship styles lack a prospective approach to the same extent as parents are coping with changes in their children's media autonomy. Considering the interview material of both interview sets, parental development of parental mediation appears to be a juxtaposition of ad-hoc tactics rather than a consistent strategy. Therefore, it is no surprise that a clear connection between media trusteeship and parental mediation cannot be found. Instead, the development of parents' specific style of parental mediation appears to be significantly driven by the objects of parental mediation: the emergence of new media in the lives of children as well as children's striving for media autonomy. Meanwhile, parents play

only the supporting role. However, parents' media skills in dealing with (digital) media develop during the course of their media trusteeship as well which may lead to the use of other media trusteeship strategies for siblings. Consequently, communication scholars should address the transitory stage of media trusteeship to help parents to develop their children's media literacy actively.

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# Development of Infants' Media Habits in the Age of Digital Parenting

## *A Longitudinal Study of Jonathan, From the Age of 6 to 27 Months*

Yehuda Bar Lev, Nelly Elias & Sharona T. Levy

### Abstract

The introduction of the iPhone in 2007 marked the birth of the *digitods* – a new generation of children born with ready access to the digital devices. Little is known, however, about the development of infants' and toddlers' digital habits and how the parents and the family environment in general affect this process. The present study makes an initial attempt to fill this gap by using a combination of ethnographic methods in the case study of one child (Jonathan) from 6 to 27 months of age. During the fieldwork, we sought to examine how Jonathan's media uses are shaped and changed over a two-year period and to identify the different family and parent-related factors determining this process. The study's findings support the claim that use of digital media has become a normative behaviour among very young children and emphasize how deeply it is integrated into the daily parenting practices.

**Keywords:** digital parenting, touchscreen devices, parenting practices, toddlers, early childhood media habits

### Introduction

The introduction of the iPhone in 2007 marked the birth of the *digitods* – a new generation of children born with ready access to a vast range of touchscreen devices (TSDs) (Holloway et al., 2015). Indeed, a recent study, carried out in the United Kingdom in 2015, shows that 75 per cent of children aged between six months and three years used a touchscreen on a daily basis, increasing from 51 per cent at 6 to 11 months to 92 per cent at 25 to 36 months (Cheung et al., 2017). It appears that very young children are eager to adopt and use the TSDs and there is even some evidence that by the age of two years they acquire several technical skills to operate them (Bedford et al., 2016).

Little is known, however, about the formation of infants' and toddlers' digital habits and how the parents and the family environment in general affect this process, as most studies on this topic were cross-sectional rather than longitudinal. The present study makes an initial attempt to fill this gap by using a combination of ethnographic methods in the case study of one child (Jonathan) from age six to 27 months. During the fieldwork, we sought to examine how Jonathan's media uses are shaped and changed over a two-year period and to identify the different family and parent-related factors that determine this process.

## Theoretical background

Our research was guided by three theoretical perspectives: social learning theory (Bandura, 1965), ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 1995) and the uses and gratifications approach (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1974). According to social learning theory, learning is a result of observing behaviour (Bandura, 1965). Thus, even young children may observe, imitate and adopt their parents' and older siblings' media uses (Lauricella et al., 2015). For example, infants are more likely to look at the TV if their parents do so and to look away from it if that is what their parents are doing at the time. That is, parents facilitate their children's television viewing by their own viewing behaviour, possibly providing an implicit (and unintentional) form of instruction about when to pay attention to the screen (Anderson & Hanson, 2010). In addition, the time parents spend viewing various screen media is significantly associated with their children's screen time (Lauricella, Wartella & Rideout, 2015).

Furthermore, according to ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 1995) and its implications on media uses in the family (Jordan, 2004), understanding the formation of young children's media habits requires us to focus simultaneously on the characteristics of the individual child, the critical setting of the home and parental attitudes and practices concerning media. In this context, studies on the amount of infants' and toddlers' screen viewing have found that parents who believe that media have a positive impact on child development allow their children to watch more screen content (Lauricella, Wartella & Rideout, 2015; Vaala & Hornik, 2014).

Finally, the uses and gratifications approach (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1974) suggests that parents might seek to satisfy their childrearing objectives and personal needs by using media with their children (Beyens & Eggermont, 2014; Nabi & Krcmar, 2016). For example, parents might use screen media to occupy the child while they need to complete household chores or to regulate his/her behavior during challenging situations such as during meals or before bedtime (Beyens & Eggermont, 2014; Elias & Sulkin, 2017). Parental digital practices are no less relevant regarding the use of the TSDs that are employed by parents as digital pacifiers at home or in public places (Kabali et al., 2015).

The present study thus seeks to observe the development and consolidation of media habits during the first two years of the child's life, with attention to the totality of fac-

tors that are likely to affect this process, particularly the technological environment at home, family members' media habits, parental views regarding children's media use and the digital practices that parents carry out in performing their parental roles. Findings will be gathered in the toddler's natural environment and will thus enable evaluation of long-term processes.

## Methodology

The methodology chosen for this research is based on a case study approach that allows a deep and nuanced understanding of a particular social phenomenon from a holistic perspective (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). While selecting the family for in-depth analysis, we adhered to two major criteria: First, the infant who is the focus of the study should not be the first child but should have at least one older sibling who could serve as a model for developing the infant's media habits. Second, the family should be technologically saturated, with an abundance of different media devices, including TSDs, available for all family members, to ensure it is not the lack of access to devices that prevents the infant from engaging with such media.

As this study is part of a long-term research project among ten families, we were able to select a family that met these requirements in full. Accordingly, the family chosen for the case study consisted of two parents and three children: an 8-year old boy, a 6-year old girl and a 6-month old infant whom we call Jonathan. Both parents were in their late thirties, held academic degrees and practiced prestigious, white-collar professions. However, only the mother was in charge of daily childrearing routine, as the father travelled abroad frequently and spent time at home mostly on weekends. The family has been living in an upper middle-class neighbourhood in central Israel. The couple owned abundant internet-connected screen devices, including two smartphones, three laptops, two PCs, two tablets, four TV sets connected to the internet and an X-box console.

To conduct the study, we applied a combination of ethnographic methods, that included eight observations at the home conducted every three months, three in-depth interviews with the mother, a weeklong media diary completed by the mother when Jonathan was 20 months old, as well as text and video reports she sent when she perceived an event she considered important to Jonathan's media uses. The observations took place in the family home from the time Jonathan was 6 months old until he reached the age of 27 months.

Each observation lasted an average of three hours during both weekdays (typically between 17:00 and 20:00) and weekends (between 09:00 and noon) and was videotaped. The principal categories used for conducting the observations were Jonathan's activities and behaviours, his and his family members' media uses, the family members' interactions concerning the media and the mother's parenting practices applied with Jonathan and his siblings. Interviews with the mother focused on her attitudes, and those of her husband, towards media effects; Jonathan's daily media uses and preferences; the chief

changes in his development; and the reasons behind the mother's uses of media with Jonathan. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim.

Analysis of the data began with sequencing the various layers of information according to Jonathan's age and segmenting it with respect to principal developmental periods: up to 12 months, 13 to 18 months and 19 to 27 months, as these periods differ significantly according to cognitive, linguistic and motoric development (Guerra et al., 2012). Jonathan's media uses, his mother's attitudes and her parenting practices were analysed separately for each period and comparatively across periods. Thematic analysis was used throughout the process of coding to create meaningful patterns relevant to the research objectives (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

## Findings

### *6 to 12 months*

The interview conducted with Jonathan's mother at the beginning of the study (when Jonathan was 6 months old) portrayed her as critical of media use and anxious over the possible harmful effects of excessive screen exposure on child development, such as attention and concentration problems, as can be seen in the following quote:

I believe that there is something very passive about [a child's] watching television that does more harm than good. It is of no benefit to child development. My husband even believes that it can cause autistic behaviour[...] Every minute that children watch television or use an iPad or PC is a waste of time.

Despite Jonathan's parents' apprehensions regarding media negative effects, our observations showed that in practice the family was characterized by a rather permissive approach regarding the older children's media use. On more than one occasion, Jonathan's siblings were watching television and/or playing with tablets for about two hours. We did not observe the older children's joint media activities, however: while one was watching television, another played with an iPad or vice versa. Furthermore, we noticed that the parents themselves were heavy media users: on weekends, the father worked on his laptop for a long time and he and his wife both used their smartphones very frequently, usually for reading and writing text messages. In the first interview, the mother mentioned that she even had difficulty restraining herself from reading Whatsapp messages while breastfeeding, though she realized that it was at the expense of interacting with her 6 months old son:

I would often breastfeed and chat via Whatsapp[...] At that time, I was not maintaining eye contact with him [Jonathan], but with my phone[...] It is really easy to spend an entire day without looking my baby in the eye. That's why whenever I breastfed, I would place my phone so that I always appeared to be looking at Jonathan, even when I was reading messages.

Jonathan's intensive exposure to screen media thus began during the earliest moments of his life, as he watched his mother use her smartphone constantly, even while he was being cared for in very intimate situations. In addition, Jonathan was highly exposed to the television programs aimed at his older siblings. As indicated, the two older children used to watch television for long periods in the living room. Whenever Jonathan was there with his mother, it was virtually certain that he would be exposed to screen content. Often, the older children played games on tablets while the television was still on. As such, during the first few months of his life, Jonathan experienced intensive background exposure to a multitude of screens, sounds and content.

Jonathan's foreground TV exposure began at the age of six months. In the interview, his mother told us that when Jonathan woke up too early (around 6:00), she or her husband would carry him to a crib set up in their bedroom. There, he watched Baby Einstein clips on YouTube streamed to a bedroom TV set while his mother tried to get a bit more rest.

Another important development took place at the age of nine months, when Jonathan displayed interest in the BabyTV Channel, a television network for infants and toddlers. Jonathan's first encounter with the channel was during a family trip abroad, when he watched iPad clips of children's songs that his mother uploaded from the channel's website before the flight. Jonathan showed a great interest in this content, so his mother decided to show him BabyTV at home too and to use it as part of her childcare routine, as may be seen in the following observation conducted when Jonathan was 11 months old:

At 19:00, after his bath, Jonathan's mother would strap him into his bouncer seat and say: "This is television time". At the same time, she put his socks on him and combed his hair as he watched. Afterwards, she looked straight at the researcher and explained: "That gets him ready for sleep". Following this routine, Jonathan remains in the seat for another ten minutes and watches the BabyTV Channel with great interest, while his mother goes to the kitchen and prepares dinner as she sends and receives Whatsapp messages.

On other occasions too, we observed the mother putting Jonathan in front of the TV during meals, to calm him down before bedtime or keep him busy when she was unable to give him attention. Moreover, Jonathan's parents encouraged his transformation into an enthusiastic TV viewer by providing him with accessories aimed at intensifying his viewing experience. Thus, at the age of 11 months, Jonathan was given a comfortable TV chair for toddlers that was placed in front of the TV set in the living room. A month later, he was provided with his own remote control (without batteries), because he insisted on watching TV while holding a remote just like other family members.

### *13 to 18 months*

1-year old Jonathan is now attending a childcare centre for eight hours a day (8.00-16.00) while his mother is back working full time. When he returns home, the living room TV

set is usually on and tuned to BabyTV, his favorite channel. During this period, he starts using his limited verbal skills to express this preference by saying “Baby”. Furthermore, as in earlier observations, the television is still serving as a multifunctional parental aid for Jonathan’s mother, as may be seen in the following observation conducted when Jonathan was 15 months old:

Jonathan gets restless and starts to cry. His mother asks: “Are you hungry? All right [...] We’ll put the TV on for you.” After she turns on the set and takes him in her arms, she tells him: “Let’s dance!” Jonathan is happy and claps his hands when his mother sings “ta ta ta” and dances to the music of BabyTV, but only for a short while. After about a minute, she seats him in his TV chair. Then she goes to the kitchen, picking up her smartphone on the way, as Jonathan remains alone watching TV in the living room.

Jonathan’s media experience, however, is now more diverse than in the past. At the age of one year, Jonathan was given his brother’s old iPad. The device became so important for Jonathan that its brand name was one of the first five words he could pronounce: “iPo.” For Jonathan’s mother, the iPad soon became an additional parental aid that helped her facilitate childcare, occupied Jonathan when she needed to complete household chores or granted her some free time that she usually used for reading and writing messages on her smartphone.

It is important to indicate that most of Jonathan’s iPad usage was individual and not mediated by his mother or older siblings. What we noticed during observations was that the mother uploaded the first video on Youtube (usually children’s songs from BabyTV website) and then handed the iPad to Jonathan, who operated the device on his own, while his mother was busy with her household chores.

### *19 to 27 months*

At the beginning of this period, Jonathan is not only an enthusiastic TV viewer, but also an eager iPad user who knows exactly what media device he would like to use and expresses his viewing preferences verbally: “Baby” [for BabyTV] and “iPo” [for iPad]. As Jonathan’s iPad use increases to more than one hour, however, his parents begin to worry. Their formerly neutral stance toward iPad usage became negatively oriented, as is evident in the following excerpt from the interview with Jonathan’s mother conducted when her son was 19 months old:

Jonathan can sit for an hour and watch clips [on the iPad]. We started to worry and we are trying to wean him away from it[...] The clips can harm the [neural] connections forming in his brain. They have repetitive and fast-moving elements. He would be better off playing.

Although Jonathan’s parents are worried about the amount of time Jonathan spends with the iPad and the harmful features of the animated content (such as the fast moves), they

do not pay sufficient attention to the images to which he is exposed, as the following observation reveals:

Jonathan was playing with toy cars while watching BabyTV on the living room TV set. Then the mother handed him an iPad that was already playing a favourite clip of his – based on the children's song *Daddy Finger* – and went into the kitchen. Jonathan immediately stopped watching television and grabbed the iPad. At first, he appeared to lack interest in any particular clip and was skipping from clip to clip while watching each of them for about 20 seconds. But then one clip attracted his attention: It featured an innocent children's song, but in the background, the Incredible Hulk was engaging in some highly aggressive behaviour towards other characters. Jonathan was totally engrossed in the clip and spent much more time watching it – 3.5 minutes – than any other clip he viewed on that occasion. All in all, Jonathan watched videos for about half an hour, going through 41 clips and viewing only one (the Hulk) from beginning to end. All that time, his mother remained in the kitchen, looking at him from time to time, but completely unaware of the images to which her son was exposed.

Several insights may be derived from this observation. First, Jonathan's mother offered him the iPad so that she would have time to make dinner. As we know from previous observations and the interviews with the mother, she assumed that being an eager iPad user, Jonathan would use the device for a long time. The iPad thus served as a readily available digital babysitter that kept him within the limits of the living room without seeking his mother's attention. In addition, this observation reveals the lack of parental mediation of Jonathan's iPad use, as the mother selected the first clip only, relying on her son's ability to proceed from clip to clip. It also appears that the mother was not aware of harmful content that was only a couple of clicks away from Jonathan while he remained within the ostensibly safe space of children's songs.

All other observations were evidence to the very rare attempts at parental mediation, that were applied to book reading alone. Moreover, even those few attempts took place when the television was on in the background and competed for Jonathan's attention, as demonstrated in the following observation conducted when Jonathan was 24 months old:

Jonathan points to a book on the floor with pictures of animals. His mother picks up the book and asks him: "What does a lamb say?" But even though Jonathan asked for the book at his own initiative, he did not answer her, but remained engrossed in watching the TV screen. His mother, looking tired, asks him the same question again, but not in an engaging and enthusiastic way. Jonathan did not respond. Seeing there was no response from Jonathan, his mother got up and went to the kitchen, while Jonathan stayed put and watched television.

We completed the study when Jonathan was 27 months old. At this age, Jonathan expresses a clear preference for iPad over television. This change can be seen in a new arrangement of his media accessories: His TV chair had been removed from the living

room and stood unused by the door to the den, in contrast to the iPad, that was permanently situated on the coffee table. In parallel, it seems that the iPad's central role in his mother's parenting routine has changed her negative views regarding this device. While in the past, she voiced apprehension over its use, in her last interview, she chose instead to emphasize the iPad's contribution to her son's development:

As time passed, I became convinced that it's beneficial. He has a choice and can control how much time he watches each clip, unlike watching television that is completely passive. The iPad facilitates the ability to control content [...] He learns to skip ads and to control what he watches and for how long.

Jonathan's mother thus found a solution, if only temporary, to the dissonance she experienced when she criticized excessive media use but needed television – and later an iPad – as a multipurpose tool to help her balance care of Jonathan with her other household duties and with her need to have time for herself.

## Discussion and conclusions

The study's unique value is reflected in a long-term holistic examination of a formative process of shaping media habits and skills of a very young child in his familial environment. First, in line with social learning theory (Bandura, 1965), the study indicates how a toddler is influenced by his family members' media behaviour. Indeed, by the end of the study, Jonathan had become a media consumer like his older siblings, who prefers individual iPad use to joint media activities. Likewise, in accordance with ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1995; Jordan, 2004), the study shows how family interactions shape the child's media experience and its findings emphasize the crucial contribution of the immediate family environment to the formation of media habits and preferences in early childhood.

Furthermore, the study reveals a significant contradiction between deep parental concerns regarding media's harmful effects and Jonathan's high media exposure, that became intensified by his mother's frequent use of screen media as part of her childrearing routine. In this sense, the implication of the uses and gratifications approach (Katz et al., 1974) on parent-child relationships reveals that Jonathan's media habits have been determined by his mother's parenting needs. As the study demonstrated, Jonathan's mother heavily employed television and later an iPad as a stand-by babysitter and a digital pacifier, despite her concerns towards media negative effects. Thus, in contrast with the well-known assumption that parental attitudes have a powerful influence on their children's media exposure (e.g. Vaala & Hornik, 2014), our study shows that other forces, such as time pressure and daily constraints, moderate the relationship between parents' negative attitudes and children's screen use.

Moreover, it appears that Jonathan's mother, who experienced a strong need to use media with her child as part of her daily routine, eventually adopted a more positive



attitude towards media effects. This finding provides a rare empirical evidence of the theoretical assumption that associations between parents' attitudes and their children's screen uses might not be linear and causal but rather reciprocal and mutually sustaining (Jordan, 1990). Although the prominence of certain media uses may be ascribed to parental attitudes, our study suggests that parents who experience a greater need to use the media with their children may develop a set of beliefs consistent with their digital parenting practices to avoid dissonance.

Finally, we would like to thank Jonathan's parents, especially his mother, who opened their home and hearts to us and allowed us a rare glimpse into the life experience of a contemporary family in which a new baby is born into a digital media-saturated home environment. It is important to emphasize that we find no fault whatsoever in the mother's intensive use of various media as she raises her toddler. On the contrary, our intention is to present a realistic picture of the life routine of a mother of three who has to manoeuvre between supporting her husband's career, achieving her own professional goals and raising a family and who at times finds relief in digital parenting practices that help her cope with the various types of pressure engendered by household management and bringing up children.

Thanks to the mother's openness and honesty, we achieved a more nuanced perspective on the daily life constraints underlying the young children's media experiences that should be recognized in future studies on shaping infants and toddlers' media habits. As such, our findings not only support the claim that TSD use has become normative behaviour among very young children (Holloway et al., 2015), but also emphasizes how deeply it is integrated into the daily childrearing routine and parenting practices.

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# Parental Evaluations of Young Children's Touchscreen Technologies

Leslie Haddon & Donell Holloway

## Abstract

This chapter reports the first findings from the Australia-UK Toddlers and Tablets project, exploring how parents of 0 to 5-year olds evaluate the role of touchscreen technologies in their children's lives. The findings indicate that parent's evaluations, covering both their concerns and satisfactions, are in many ways similar to those of parents of older children. Nonetheless, there are some differences that stand out. Parents of children in this age group are less concerned about inappropriate content and contact – most likely because they are in closer proximity to their very young children in the home. They tend to reflect more on the learning or developmental benefits or detriments of touchscreen use. These parents also revealed, often with mixed feelings, how touchscreens can be helpful in occupying their children, either when the child needs to be distracted or when they themselves need time to carry out other tasks.

**Keywords:** parent, concerns, learning, babysitter, touchscreen

## Introduction

Over the last two decades we have seen a wealth of studies on children's use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) generally and mobile phones and the internet more specifically. Much of this research has been about older children, especially teenagers and with good reason given, they were the first children to gain access to these ICTs. As children began using technologies at ever younger ages, there was more research on pre-teens but there were always far fewer studies of very young preschool children's experience of ICTs, especially in the home (Holloway et al., 2013). More recently, touchscreen technologies, principally but not only the tablet and smartphone, have an interface that has made ICTs more accessible to this age group.

This chapter reports the first findings from the Australia-UK Toddlers and Tablets project, exploring how parents of 0 to 5-year olds evaluate the role of these touchscreen technologies in their children's lives. From the literature, it is clear that for parents of younger children there is more of a learning agenda than the online risk agenda discussed by parents of older children. Hence, the qualitative interviews in this study explored parents' various concerns – sometimes arising through what they had read – about what negative things their young children might be learning, and what type of experiences young children might be missing, what type of competences they might not be developing, through interacting with ICTs (rather than doing other things). On the other hand, we explored parents' views of the benefits of children using these technologies, especially the wide range of things that the children might actually be learning through this interaction with tablets and smartphones. However, not all of the discussions were framed in terms of learning, and in particular the research also explored the ambivalence expressed by these parents when using ICTs to occupying children.

## Literature review

There is now a limited amount of research on the general ICT use of very young children aged 0 to 5 in the home (examples include Gutnick et al., 2011; Rideout, 2011; Vandewater et al., 2007; see Holloway, 2013 for a review). Within that literature some material specifically on touchscreen use is emerging: e.g. Chaudron, (2015); Lauricella and colleagues, (2015); Neumann, (2014); Verenikina & Kervin, (2011). However, in terms of providing a context for specifically understanding the evaluations of parents it is more relevant to outline some key themes from series of publications about preschool children's use of ICTs more generally produced by a Scottish research team – Plowman, Stephens, Stevenson and McPake.

These researchers systematically outline a range of moral panics about ICTs expressed in the media especially, among which are concerns about the negative effects on children's social development as children interact more with technology and less with other people, the addictive nature of such technologies, the inauthentic experience of the digital world compared to the physical one, and limitations that technology brings to children's imagination (Plowman et al., 2010a). The researchers note how parents themselves sometimes mention these considerations but also express reservations about them, depending on a range of background factors. Hence, one interest in this chapter is the issue of the extent to which parents do or do not share these concerns.

On the more positive side, these researchers among others have addressed the issue of what parents feel children learn though using technologies. Beyond developing operational skills in manipulating the technology, children can find out about the world through ICTs, and through their use enhance dispositions such as developing independence, sustaining attention and building confidence (McPake et al., 2012; Plowman et al., 2010b; Stephen et al., 2013). However, in the Scottish research parents tended not

to see all of these outcomes as learning (Stephen et al., 2013). Nor did they appreciate how children learn to engage in cultural practices such as talking to relatives on mobile phones or sharing memories by watching DVD recordings (Plowman et al., 2008). In fact, the researchers found that parents often introduce technologies to children not so much for learning but for “babysitting” or occupying children (Stephen et al., 2013) – teaching them to use technologies such as DVDs so that the children do not disturb the parents (Plowman et al., 2010b).

While this chapter investigates parents’ perceptions of the different forms of learning identified above, it also explores other rationales for positive evaluations by parents, particularly in relation to touchscreen technologies rather than ICTs more generally. For example, in the grandparenting literature, there has been some work on how video chat apps such as Skype and Facetime had been used to facilitate social interaction between generations (Forghani & Neustaedter, 2014; Kelly, 2015). Lastly, the chapter re-examines the issue of using technology to occupy children, noted above, because this evoked mixed evaluations by parents.

## The Toddlers and Tablets project

Toddlers and Tablets is an Australian-UK project funded by the Australian Research Council’s Discovery Programme. The arrival of various devices with touchscreen technologies has meant that very young children now have an interface through which they can more easily access the digital world, including the internet, compared to using a mouse and keyboard. While this can provoke concerns (e.g. about potentially more screen time) and enthusiasm (e.g. about earlier digital capabilities, if not literacy), we have seen that there is limited evidence about young children’s experiences of these technologies. Hence this multi-method study looked both at children’s practices with touchscreen technologies and the perspectives and actions of key actors in their lives, principally parents, but also grandparents and paid child carers. The research involved case studies of families in both countries.

The family studies each entailed an initial interview with one or both parents, depending on the (often busy) timetables of the participants. The parents were then supplied with a video camera and asked to record some examples of their children’s use of tablets and smartphones, with suggestions (e.g. videoing their use, if they had difficulties, if they received help). During a second visit to pick up the video camera there was a chance for the researchers to observe the child using the technology and ask further questions. In the case of the UK study this was videoed and in the Australian study this was audiotaped and field notes were taken.

In the UK, there was a total of nine families (plus a pilot study) and in Australia there were also nine, recruited through diverse sources (e.g. work places, social networks, childcare) but principally involving snowballing. In the UK, all but one lived in London, the exception living in the commuter belt around London. The Australian

sample came entirely from Perth. While the project aspired to produce a range of family circumstances there was a preponderance of middle-class families in both countries. The gender balance was roughly equal in both countries, with slightly more 2 to 3 and 4 to 5-year olds. Older siblings were present in some families (Australia six and the UK four), and some had two children in the 0 to 5 age range of the project (Australia four and the UK two). In the UK, the cosmopolitan nature of London was reflected in the fact that quite a few of the parents had been born in other countries: Italians, a Slovak, Australian, French, Canadian-Indian and Russian. The Perth sample in turn reflected migration to the country with Chinese, Korean and Singaporean participants as well those with other heritages such as Dutch, Croatian and Italian.

The families filled in consent forms and their identities were anonymised (for participants see Appendix, Table 1). The analysis of the interviews and video material was in large part informed by reaction to the literature on young children outlined above.

## Findings

Parental worries about the consequences of touchscreen technology for younger children overlap with, but are not the same as, concerns about older children. As in the case of parents of older children (Livingstone, 2002), parents of these younger often wanted their children's experience to be balanced between a range of activities, digital and non-digital (e.g. play with toys, play in the garden). In the UK, several parents commented that if their child had been using ICTs too much they would have intervened – but it turned out this was not an issue because the children concerned simply did other things. Nonetheless, others in both countries were still concerned, setting limits their children's use of the technology.

Some parents were apprehensive that touchscreen use was out of balance, as when one UK mother thought her daughter was using the tablet a little too much or another tried to avoid getting to that stage by encouraging alternatives. One Australian mother explained:

I think it [...] first of all it's the habit of being isolated [...] and sitting up in bed watching screens alone. And the hours can just whizz by [...] And I don't like her getting on their first thing in the morning before we're up. (Claire, age 42)

Here we see the fears of social isolation that had emerged in interviews with parents of older children (Haddon, 2017) as do worries about addiction (Haddon & Livingstone, 2014), here noted by this Australian mother:

I've had to put down some rules with him now about watching videos on YouTube because he was getting really obsessed about it and wanting to watch them all the time and not wanting to read, not making anything, not doing anything. (Kate, age 39)

Sometimes parents faced a dilemma, expressing these previous concerns but also wanting their child to learn how to use the technology. In the UK, because she was wary that her daughter Libby was becoming dependent on technology Stella allowed its use (and indeed supported it when her child got stuck) but did not promote it. This lasted until her daughter went to nursery when she discovered that ICTs were on the curriculum and Libby was behind peers in computer skills – at which point Stella encouraged more use of the tablet.

There are some concerns, however, that seem more specific to younger children, with a few UK parents in particular referring to what they had read about good parenting practices. Rohan had read that technology was not good for brain development because the interaction was too passive. Klara became a little apprehensive after coming across an article that suggested children might not develop the ability to entertain themselves if they relied on digital stimuli too much and that the structured digital world might also restrict the development of imagination compared to free play. This worry about the kind of play children experience and implications for mental development was also expressed in Australian interviews: “I think it actually stifles creativity” (Kate, age 39).

Comparing various screen technologies (e.g. TV versus tablets) sometimes helped parents to arrive at more nuanced understandings about different ICTs. Francoise from France was also worried about tablets limiting children's imagination, but she was even more critical of TV for doing the same thing, and so limited her children's TV viewing as well. Francoise's husband Craig followed up Francoise's discussion of some people using tablets as electronic babysitters with reference to older generations who had used the TVs in the same manner. Meanwhile, Linda may have had a few reservations about tablets, but thought they were much better than TV because they were interactive while Klara was another parent who was far more critical of TV, observing that 2-year old Simon could not turn away when watching TV and became irritated. Meantime, the Cheung-Yeo family in Australia talked in terms of a spectrum: TV watching was the most passive, games on the tablet afforded some interactivity but within set rules, while human interaction was the richest experience.

In terms of the physical consequences of using tablets and smartphones, as with parents of older children (Haddon & Livingstone, 2014) some parents in this study were concerned that use of these technologies might lead to eyestrain. Nevertheless, these worries about physical development seemed more acute with children of this young age, the more striking example in the UK being Lorenzo's concern that his son might not develop as much physical dexterity using apps compared with offline activities. Meanwhile, Daniel expressed some malaise about the radiation his daughters might be exposed to with all the WiFi boosters in the house.

The various worries about online risks identified in research on older children (Mascheroni & Haddon, 2015) were less apparent in this study. For example, possible exposure to adult content, a concern of parents with older children (Haddon & Livingstone, 2014), was not mentioned so much in the case of younger children in either country. This was partly because the young children often could not access the digital

world generally on the internet in particular without the parents' help, or else there were parental settings that meant "...on the iPad there's nothing going to harm him" (Kate, age 39). In addition, some parents in both countries made sure they were always around when the child used apps such as Youtube and many parents made sure only Kids Youtube could be accessed.

Where there was a worry about various types of content, some of the same themes as with older children emerged – e.g. "shoot 'em up" games on the devices as a form of exposure to violence – although sometimes there was a different emphasis compared to adult content for older children. For the Ross family in the UK the danger, which actually first came up in relation to the music channel on the TV rather than the tablet, was sexualisation when a girl band of 18-year olds were wearing revealing clothing and dancing in a sexual fashion. Meanwhile, Linda was concerned about an animation on Youtube that showed stealing, so this was an issue of the moral principles learnt by young children. And even though it was in a cartoon, she was uncertain if the depiction of the birth of a baby was age appropriate for her 4-year old. Some Australian parents commented that content could be scary for children this age and sometimes this had to be checked out in advance because of the sensitivities of their young children. In the UK, for example, Sandra's 3-year old daughter Penny became upset if she saw videos of animals being hurt while their son was not so bothered at the same age.

As regards more positive evaluations, even parents with some apprehensions often acknowledged children have to know something about technologies as "part of the modern world" (Mirabella Tosetti, UK). The Tosettis, in particular, were among the parents who were quite proud of their child's digital skills, but also positive about the digital world in general.

I think we are trying to expose him to lots of different foods and languages and people and things [...] because I grew up in a small town, I was really bored, it was pre-internet and I always desired to have something like this but it didn't exist [...] so I thought what a wonderful thing for him to have access to, all these marvellous things. (Mirabella, age 41)

To varying degrees, many of the parents also thought that their children learnt about other things, not just operational skills related to ICTs. In the spirit of "learning about the world" identified in the Scottish research, parents in both countries often thought that various digital experiences had helped their children to learn shapes, colours, numbers, language in general, specifically English language in households that spoke another language and the language of one of the parents (e.g. Russian in the Mansi family or Mandarin in the Zhang-Chen family). Watching programmes online taught the children about some aspect of daily life, as when Linda noted how daughter Leela had learnt about tooth cavities and airline sickness through watching programme on the tablet. In fact, the Tosettis cited a whole list of what Leopoldo had learnt including finding out about animals, nursery rhymes, encountering classical music, potty training and appreciating cultural practices like birthdays (or for the Australian Zhang-Chen family,



“what Christmas is about”). Meanwhile, in the UK the Mansis noted how 23-month old Sergei made connections between what he had seen in an app on Youtube and the outside world, such as the fact that a leaf resembled a rainbow. The Mansis saw the digital world in general as reinforcing what he had learnt from other sources.

Upon reflection, many parents also felt that using the technologies had helped their children to develop the positive learning dispositions noted by the Scottish researchers. For example, in the UK several parents thought that simply having to wait for the technology to work (e.g. upload an app) helped to develop patience, as the Mansis explained when they told Sergei that he could not use the tablet because it was on charge:

I don't think he understands what it means to charge something but he understands that that is a process that the iPad needs to go through to work properly so [...]. the patience aspect as well I think is developed through that. (Rohan, age 34)

[...] sometimes I use it [...] like for example if he breastfeeds a lot during the day [...] I will tell him the milk needs to charge. And so he knows that that's when he needs to wait. (Nadia, age 38)

Then there are the outcomes that have a bearing on interaction amongst family members. Probably the most unproblematic is the use video chat apps like of Skype and Facetime, discussed in previous research, to keep in touch with grandparents, and also parents when they were away. This was used far more in the Australian sample, perhaps reflecting distances and hence less face-to-face contact, but also by the UK participants who had relatives abroad. As regards the implications for face-to-face interactions within the home, the evaluation was more mixed, with some lamenting the decline of family time because everyone was looking at their own screens, while others found positives, as when the iPad provided a focus for grandchild and grandmother to play together.

Finally, and in line with the Scottish research, many parents added that they did use touchscreens to occupy their children at times, although their own evaluation of this was mixed. Many of the Australian parents stressed the benefits for the child, from entertaining a child on plane flights or car drives, distracting a child when going through a medical procedure or having their fingernails cut through to soothing a child who has had a stressful day at kindergarten. In both countries, parents acknowledged that this could also benefit them, giving the parents a break to get on with other things such as the cooking or giving them a space to study for themselves. However, the UK parents had more reservations about this, especially when thinking about how this practice would be seen by others as using an electronic babysitter (Haddon & Vincent, 2015). Hence, Nadia mentioned she felt guilty about occupying Sergei, that there was some stigma attached to it, while other parents mentioned it would be a last resort or they would not use the technology for that purpose in certain public spaces like restaurants. Maybe this reflects the great pressure of some public discourses about good parenting, specifically documented in the UK, where parents should always be attentive to and interacting with young children – as opposed to occupying them (Macvarish, 2016).

## Conclusions

Parents of younger children often share some of the same desires as those of older children, especially the wish to see some balance in their children's life. Some express similar concerns about the potential anti-social effect of technology use and how these technologies can be too attractive and tempting, referring to obsessiveness and addictiveness. However, even when showing concern about physical effects or "appropriate content", the fact that these are younger children adds a developmental aspect to parents' evaluation, be that physical development, children's development of values, or the fact that preschool children may not be very resilient at this stage. It is also striking that the risk agenda associated with older children – what they might encounter, who they might encounter, what they might get up to online – is mainly absent for parents of these very young children. By and large, these parents think the children are safe from those types of risks, in part because of the children's lack of competence and also because of parents' monitoring and ability to control the digital environment in which their children operate. In fact, there is much more of a learning, or early learning, agenda that informed parental evaluations. Various parents referred to many of the different types of learning identified in Scottish research. And even if they were critical, questioning the quality of the digital world, where it restricts imagination and creativity, this is also informed by a learning agenda – i.e. what do children learn (and not learn) in different settings?

Although important, learning is not the only consideration in parental evaluations. We had various examples of how touchscreen technologies could have positive or negative implications for interpersonal interaction, related to parents' wish for the child to be sociable. Parents also value the fact that these technologies could help the child cope with various situations, including potential boredom. Lastly, there were the benefits for the parent of occupying children – a point rarely mentioned by parents of older children – which parents can appreciate but which can create mixed feelings against a wider public discourse about the "good parenting" of younger children.

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Appendix

Table 1. Details of the sample

P/t = part time f/t = Full time

Family name	Composition	Children 0-5	Older sibling	Ethnicity	Occupations
UK					
Brent	Ted (44) Elizabeth (43) +3 Children	Ellen (4)	Andrew (11) James (9)	English	(T) International development consultant (E)P/t Finance section of an NGO
Brown	Jerry (38) Klara (37) + 1 child	Simon (2).		(J) English (K) Slovak	(J) Director of a family company (K) Not working
Greenfield	Danny (41) Trish (35) +1 child	Andrew (21 months)		English	(D) Careers advisor in a university (T) User interface designer
Jameson (Pilot)	Craig (38) Francoise (42) + 2 children	Floyd (5) Owen (3)		(C) Australian (F) French	(C) Own business in procurement (F) Intelligence officer for the financial services regulator
Kramer	Michael (28) Stella (31) + 2 children	Libby (4) Owen (1)		English	(M) Management accountant (S) P/t receptionist in a primary school.
Mansi	Rohan (34) Nadia (38) + 1 child	Sergei (23 months)		(M) Canadian-Indian (N) Russian	(M) P/t academic, p/t yoga instructor (N) Not working
Palmer	Linda (33) + 2 children	Leela (4)	Marissa (16)	English	(L) Not working
Ross	Ron (31) Sandra (30) + 2 children	Penny (3)	Frankie (6)	English	(R) Bus driver (S) P/t hotel receptionist
Spinner	Daniel (42) Karla (41) + 3 children	Imelda (4)	Alice (9) Belle (7)	English	(D) Advertising (K) P/t IT firm
Tosetti	Lorenzo (41) Mirabella (41) + 1 child	Leopoldo (2)		Italian	(L) animations and special effects (M) Not working

**Table 1.** Cont.

P/t = part time f/t = Full time

Family name	Composition	Children 0-5	Older sibling	Ethnicity	Occupations
<b>Australia</b>					
Andrews/ White	Richard (40) Kate (39) + 3 children	Liam (5) Scott (2)	Ben (8)	Australian	(R) Runs workshops (K) Not working
Bernard	Scott (40s) Sarah (40s) + 5 children	Connor (5) William (3)	Xavier (13) Sean (11) Chloe (9)	Australian	(S+S) Family business selling solar panels
Cheung/ Yeo	Jo (38) Marie (37) + 1 child	Samuel (20 months)		(J) Singaporean (M) Vietnamese	(J) Internet service provider (M) P/t Large industrial company
Cullen	Sherryl (37) + 4 children + her parents (60s)	Finn (14 months)	Elle (16) Adam (12) Alexa (9)	Australian	(S) F/t student, nursing (Grandfather) retired (Grandmother) Tourist centre assistant
Davis	Malcolm (42) Isabelle (41) + 3 children	Phoebe (5) Emma (2)	Jacob (10)		(M) Educational consul- tant (I) P/t Geologist
Lawe/ Tammell	Richard (47) Rosalie (50) + 3 children	Ben (5)	Samantha (16) Amelia (12)		(Ri) General manager of a boutique hotel chain (Ro) Co-runs a children's clothing business
Lim/Park	Andrew (42) Mi Na (40) + 2 children + Mi Na's mother (65)	Michael (4) Emily (23 months)		(A) Singapo- rean (M) Korea	(A) IT in a large multina- tional (M) Instructor in digital design for gaming
Petersen	Jeff (40) Claire (42) + 2 children + Claire's mother (70s)	Emma (5)	Freya (9)	Australian	(J) P/t at an educational facility (C) Runs several online businesses, p/t Commer- cial artist. (Grandmother) Retired
Zhang/ Chen	Stanley (36) Rita (33) + 1 child	Lavinia (28 months)		Chinese	(S) IT in a mining company (R) Finance section of a bank



# Early Gambling Behaviour in Online Games

## *Parental Perspectives vs. What Children Report*

Rozane De Cock, Bieke Zaman, Maarten Van Mechelen  
& Jonathan Huyghe

### Abstract

In this study, we focus on early gambling practices in online games via surveys administered among primary school children and their parents. The convergence of gambling and digital games comes along with new challenges for parental awareness and mediation. The lack of an obligatory strict classification system and labelling of simulated gambling games and their gambling characteristics makes it hard for parents to identify potential risks. In addition, the online context of simulated gambling games lowers the threshold for children to be exposed to gambling activities at a very early age. Our research questions are twofold: (1) What are parents' perspectives on children's engagement in gambling games? (2) What do children report about their game play incorporating gambling elements? Our study therefore measures parental mediation of games of chance and explores its relation with early online gambling behaviour in children.

**Keywords:** children, gambling, online, simulated gambling games, parental mediation

### Introduction

The lines between gaming and gambling are becoming increasingly blurred in online games that are popular among children. This chapter will focus on the growing amount of new forms of easily accessible online games with free gambling elements and the role of parents to guide their children's gaming behaviour. As the incorporation of gambling elements in games such as slot machines or casino features where one can win to proceed in the game is on the rise, parental guidance and active intervention is much advised. Games with gambling features are often embedded in social media and promoted by online pop-up ads, free play time offers and tempting messages that

promise high chances of winning. King and colleagues (2014: 305) call this phenomenon of non-monetary gambling in online games “simulated gambling” and define it as “a digitally simulated interactive gambling activity that does not directly involve monetary gain but is otherwise structurally identical to the standard format of a gambling activity due to its wagering features and chance-determined outcomes of play”.

The emergence of simulated gambling and their increased popularity among children comes with four concerns and potential risks.

Firstly, the lack of an obligatory strict classification system of simulated gambling games and their non-monetary gambling characteristics might give the false impression of an innocent form of game play. The grey zone in which these games operate makes it hard for parents and children to see potential risks (King, Delfabbro & Griffiths, 2010) and can lead to the development of positive attitudes towards gambling and actual gambling behaviour at an early age. A study among Australian 12 to 17-year olds shows that a history of playing simulated gambling games is linked to a higher risk of endorsing indicators of problematic gambling (King et al., 2014).

A second concern is that non-monetary incentives such as candy, toys and certificates can function in the same way as money, or even become more appealing to children than money (Hardoon & Derevensky, 2001). It suggests that objects of value do not have to be part of the tangible world, as digital objects such as credits, points, levels, avatar features or game tool characteristics can hold the same attraction.

Thirdly, players engaged in simulated gambling are likely to make an irrational connection between their play behaviour and the outcome of the game, as if it would concern a typical skill-based game play (King et al., 2014). It is typical for gamblers to believe one can win thanks to developed skills; the interpretation of gambling outcomes is influenced by a false positive belief in odds, and so-called magic thinking. Derevensky, Gupta and Baboushkin (2007) see the same thinking strategies reoccurring within children. When they are engaged in gambling, children believe not only luck is involved in winning or losing, but also their skills.

Finally, the online, digital context in which simulated gambling occurs adds to their increasing risky potential. The wide spread uninterrupted access to the internet together with the rise in accessibility, affordability, and popularity of online devices and applications among young people lowers the threshold to be exposed to digital gambling activities. Both for adults and children, this online expansion comes with possibilities for anonymous gambling and growing difficulties to restrict gambling activities, something that was easier to control before the digital age (King et al., 2014).

As Hardoon and Derevensky (2001: 211) already labelled offline gambling as “the most frequently reported potentially addictive behaviour engaged in by children and adolescents”, the societal and academic need to study exposure to online, and therefore less controllable, gambling related activities is high. Research on child gambling behaviour and children’s use of online and offline games of chance is very rare (Bellringer et al., 2014) as the majority of studies on gambling focus on adults or adolescents.



Nevertheless, previous retrospective research on offline gambling has shown that gambling behaviour starts already in preadolescence (Bellringer et al., 2014; Gupta & Derevensky, 1998; Vitaro & Wanner, 2011). This early stage is crucial because adolescent and adult problematic gamblers indicate that they were initiated in gambling at approximately at the age of 10 (Burge et al., 2006; Gupta & Derevensky, 1998). Gambling is less visible than other illicit and pernicious behaviour for children such as alcohol, tobacco or other drug use, but starts around the same period in development (Hardoon & Derevensky, 2001). Gambling disorder is the only non-substance-related addictive disorder that is included in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5). Prevalence rates of adolescent pathological gambling appear to be twice the size of adult gambling rates or even more, indicating that between 4 per cent and 8 per cent of adolescents struggle with problematic gambling behaviour (Gupta & Derevensky, 1998; Ladouceur et al., 2013). Next to the estimation of the percentage problematic gamblers, there is a large group that does not (yet) show severe symptoms of gambling disorder, but has been involved in gambling, which is legally not allowed for minors. As Petry (2003) describes, gambling exists along a continuum: from non-gambling, gambling, to mild, moderate and severe gambling problems. One third of all boys and one sixth of girls between eleven and fourteen years old admitted to have been gambling in the three months previous to the study (Chaumeton et al., 2011). This exposure to gambling is not innocent as the work of Derevensky and colleagues (2007) shows that 10 to 15 per cent of these minor's risk to become addicted to gambling during their adult life. In addition, gambling problems among Swedish youth were associated with poor mental health and alcohol use (Fröberg et al., 2013).

As online gambling is on the rise, the harmful potential of this far less controllable form of wagering is far higher. Wong and So (2014) revealed that adolescents who gamble online are three times more likely to develop problematic gambling habits than their peers who gamble offline. The risk is higher for boys as they are more involved in gambling than girls and older adolescents play more often monetary forms of gambling compared to younger teenagers who look more for free gambling sites. This last type of gambling games opens the gate to monetary gambling and points into the direction of the success of simulated gambling games. This subtle integration of gambling aspects in online games that are initially not linked with gambling such as adventures games is of pivotal importance in an ongoing changing context. King and Delfabbro (2016) conducted a systematic review of all studies researching digital simulated gambling (e.g. online casino games, demo games, free instant win games) and found only six empirical studies on the phenomenon among adolescents conducted in only three countries: two in Australia, three in the UK and one in Canada. These studies reported a prevalence rate of simulated gambling during the life span of adolescents between 2.3 and 28 per cent.

Following the rationale elaborated above, this chapter will focus on instances of early gambling in online games played by young children (primary school age) and the crucial role of their parents in mediating children's game play behaviour.

## Family influence and parental mediation

The socialization function of family members in children's offline gambling behaviour has already been discussed by Gupta and Derevensky (1997) and Tremblay, Huffman and Drabman (1998). A high majority (81%) of the children between 9 to 14-years old that had been gambling reported to have done so along with family members (Gupta & Derevensky, 1997). In a survey study on family related gambling activities, Shead and colleagues (2011) found that fathers reported to be engaged in more sports related and competitive gambling activities such as poker, primarily with their sons. Mothers, on the other hand, were more likely to be involved in raffle and lottery scratch ticket activities together with their children. Most adolescent gamblers have been initiated in gambling by their parents (Bellringer et al., 2014; Gupta & Derevensky, 1997). Parents serve as trainers during family gambling related activities and parents' own gambling behaviour predicts early gambling in children (Vitaro & Wanner, 2011). The social learning theory of Bandura (1986) provides an explanatory framework to understand how fathers and mothers act as primordial role models. It shows how parents can not only trigger children's involvement in gambling, but more subtly and prior to any gambling activities also shape children's attitudes towards this type of games. Even before mirroring their parents' behaviour, children form attitudes towards gambling games and perceive them as socially accepted and normal activities (Vitaro & Wanner, 2011). The latter authors make a plea in favour of prevention programs that precisely focus on the attitudes of children towards gambling. Wong and So (2014) also emphasize the importance of educational programs that help raising awareness of online gambling risks among minors and their parents.

Parental behaviour and parental attitudes towards gambling can increase or decrease the gambling risks in children (Shead et al., 2011). Permissive parenting attitudes and setting gambling examples enhance the risk, whereas restrictive measures and active parental mediation such as discussing gambling activities and rules discourage child gambling. Vitaro & Wanner (2011) found that parents who gamble are more tolerant to gambling games and less effective in monitoring their children's gambling behaviour. Research also revealed gender differences in parental behaviour, responses and attitudes towards youth gambling. Shead and colleagues (2011) showed that mothers were more likely to judge gambling as a serious issue than fathers, and that mothers gave evidence of less lenient attitudes. Mothers and fathers also differed regarding active parental mediation practices, with mothers engaging in more conversations with their teenagers about gambling and being better informed about prevention and educational measures than fathers. Parents tended to overestimate the age of their children's first betting behaviour and underestimated the chance that their children had already been gambling (Ladouceur et al., 1998). Acknowledging that the convergence of gambling and digital games comes with new challenges for parental awareness and mediation, and that parents act as important socialization agents, this chapter aims to study parental mediation and focuses on parents' versus children's perspectives on simulated gambling.

## Aims and methodology

Based on the literature review, our central research questions are twofold. On the one hand, we investigate what parents' perspectives are on children's engagement in simulated gambling activities. On the other hand, we focus on what children themselves report about their game play incorporating gambling elements. We will analyse whether these two perspectives diverge or show similarities. Previous research mainly focuses on adolescents and adults but as gamblers indicate that they started at an early age, precisely the group of primary school children is an important age cohort to study. For this reason, we formulated the following research questions and hypotheses:

- RQ1: To what extent do parents of children in the highest grade of primary school allow their children to engage in gambling games?
- H1: Fathers hold a more positive attitude towards gambling games than mothers do.
- RQ2: To what extent do children in the highest grade of primary school report engaging in computer games incorporating gambling elements?
- H2: Active parental mediation concerning games of chance is negatively linked to early online gambling behaviour in children.

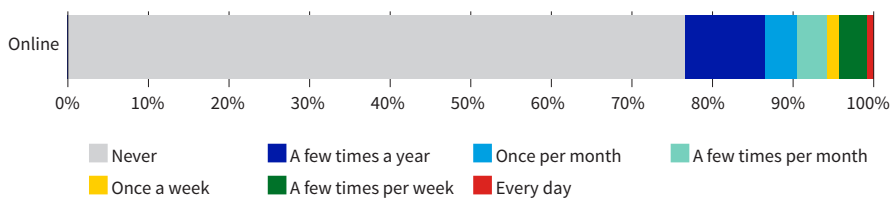
In the spring of 2016, we administered paper-and-pencil questionnaires among children of the fifth and sixth year in 16 primary schools, geographically spread over Flanders, the Dutch speaking part of Belgium. The questionnaire was tested beforehand in two classrooms in order to evaluate the comprehensibility of the questions for this young age group and to time the duration of completion. This led to changes in the precise wording of questions and ensured the planned timeslot for the survey (approximately 50 minutes). The survey consisted of several parts asking for demographic information, possession of media devices, use and frequency of playing different games and gambling types. We also measured attitudes towards gambling, and the parental mediation measuring instrument developed by Nikken and Jansz (2006), which was originally built for gaming, was adapted by our research team to measure mediation for games of chance. Only children whose parent or guardian gave their written permission in advance were offered the children's questionnaire on gaming and games of chance. In addition, we gave children a print version of the parent survey and an informed consent form for their own participation to be returned when filled out by a parent/guardian. The research protocol was approved by the university's Social and Societal Ethics Committee.

A total of 645 children filled out the survey (response rate of 84%). The average age was 10.5 years; half of them were boys (49.5%), half of them were girls (50.5%). The response rate of parents was considerable (53%), yielding 344 completed adult surveys with an average age of 42. Although the majority were mothers (76.7%), the participation rate of fathers (21.3%) was relatively high compared to other parent surveys (see EU Kids online response rates in Vandoninck, 2016).

Results

Our results show a high discrepancy between what parents allow their children to do and what children themselves report about their online gambling game behaviour. 95.6 per cent of the parents say their children are not allowed to play games of chance. 4.4 per cent says this is only possible under specific conditions. Only 1.2 per cent of the parents thinks games of chance should be permitted for all ages. However, 23.6 per cent of the children report playing free digital gambling games such as free casino games.

**Figure 1.** Children’s reported frequency use of free online gambling games (per cent)



12.6 per cent of the children play this type of games once a month to several times a week, one percent does so on a daily basis. Of the children who report playing free digital gambling games, 28 per cent says playing along with (close) family members, 19 per cent does so with friends, seven per cent plays online with strangers but the largest group plays non-monetary gambling games on their own (44%). These simulated gambling games make use of virtual currencies instead of real money or make it possible to win virtual objects of value such as so-called “skins” to garnish guns in a shooter game by opening chests or the winning of treasures filled with gems in adventure games. Gaining a particular chest is not merely related to player skills but linked with a, for the player unknown, odds ratio as is the case in games of chance. Three per cent of the children said they had been playing online games for money. They were helped by family members or by friends. Also three percent of the children had already engaged in online betting. Nearly three quarters of the children (73.6%) say they are not allowed to play games of chance by their parents, a quarter thinks they can.

Our results do not support the hypothesis that fathers hold a more positive attitude towards gambling games played by children than mothers, although fathers do play these games more often than mothers ( $M= 1.51$  for fathers vs  $M=0.80$  for mothers,  $t=-3.66$ ,  $df=92$ ,  $p<.001$ ). Both fathers and mothers generally agree with the statement that they think playing games of chance could be harmful for their children ( $M=3.32$  for fathers and  $M=3.43$  for mothers,  $t= 0.98$ ,  $df=317$ ,  $p> .05$ ). Both groups of parents also equally believe that playing games of chance could form a treat during the developmental process of their children ( $M=3.07$  for fathers and  $M=3.30$  for mothers,  $t=1.92$ ,  $df=315$ ,  $p> .05$ ). The results reveal that fathers ( $M=2.81$ ) do not play games of chance more often along with their children than mothers do ( $M=2.83$ ,  $t=.39$ ,  $df=312$ ,  $p>.05$ ).

Active parental mediation concerning games of chance is significantly negatively linked to children's early offline gambling behaviour (Kendall's tau =  $-.36$ ,  $p < .001$ ) but not significantly to early online gambling behaviour (tau =  $-.13$ ,  $p > .05$ ). The majority of the parents (62.8%) does never talk to their children about their use of games of chance (see Table 1) whereas only 6.2% never talks about general computer games that their son or daughter plays. Parents often forbid their children to play a specific game of chance (62.8%) but a quarter (26.5%) never gives any explanation to their child about what happens in such a game.

**Table 1.** Parental mediation of children's computer game playing and games of chance involvement (per cent)

How often ...	Often	Once in a while	Seldom	Never	Sum
do you play computer games together with your child?	0.9	16.0	44.7	38.4	100
do you talk with your child about the computer games it plays?	33.8	47.9	12.0	6.3	100
do you watch closely whether a computer game is suited for your child?	63.2	29.8	3.8	3.2	100
do you read the content description of a new computer game your child is going to play?	18.0	19.2	26.1	36.7	100
do you play games of chance together with your child?	0.0	0.6	15.5	83.9	100
do you watch closely which games of chance your child is playing?	28.3	12.2	5.7	53.8	100
do you talk with your child about games of chance it plays?	16.3	11.9	7.5	64.3	100
do you forbid your child to play specific games of chance?	62.8	9.4	5.8	22.0	100
do you read information on the games of chance your child plays or wants to play?	13.5	11.9	11.5	63.1	100
do you give explanation to your child about what happens in a game of chance?	27.2	30.3	16.0	26.5	100

## Conclusion and discussion

Our research among Flemish children of on average 10-years old shows that nearly a quarter of this young age group is engaged in free digital gambling games such as free casino games and one out of seven does this on a regular basis (once a month to daily). More than a quarter of the children who play simulated gambling games reports playing along with (close) family members. Our research is one of the first to study the prevalence of simulated gambling among preadolescents as most studies focus on monetary forms of gambling or gambling games among adolescents or adults. In line with previous research on offline gambling (Bellringer et al., 2014; Gupta & Derevensky, 1998; Vitaro & Wanner, 2011) indicating that gambling starts already early in childhood, our study has demonstrated the early prevalence of simulated gambling too. Acknowledging this might form the gateway to more serious and monetary forms of gambling at a later age, detecting instances of early gambling is of high societal importance. As the big majority of parents say their children are not allowed to play games of chance, our findings reveal a wide gap between what parents allow and what children themselves report on simulated gambling behaviour.

From a parental mediation perspective, special attention is needed from parents for children's online contact with gambling elements. Talking and discussing games of chance seems to be related to children's real life (offline) engagement in gambling such as playing casino games with friends and betting behaviour. Our data show that the more parents talk about this, the less often children engage in it. Unfortunately, this is not the case for the more hidden online gambling activities. This holds especially true when simulated gambling activities such as free casino games are concerned. Parents do not expect their young children to be exposed to gambling features through popular online games that are not labelled as games of chance. This can create a false feeling of safe, harmless entertainment while it is likely to pave the way for the engagement with monetary forms of gambling and the creation of positive attitudes towards gambling among children. The non-monetary objects of value such as rare gems, digital points and levels or skins function as strong rewards, comparable to monetary wins. In contrast to previous literature, our survey data do not indicate that fathers hold a more positive attitude towards gambling games played by children than mothers do. We call upon future evidence-based research to come up with awareness raising prevention programs that offer parents – fathers as well as mothers – a more thorough insight in the rapid changing game world in which the lines between gambling and games are becoming increasingly blurred. A recognizable industry label on games indicating incorporation of simulated gambling features could

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help parents in their monitoring role. As more than a quarter of the children who play simulated gambling games play together with family members, it is clear that home is an important location to get a grasp on this spreading phenomenon.

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# Maltese Parents' Awareness and Management of Risks their Children Face Online

Lorleen Farrugia & Mary Anne Lauri

## Abstract

Parenting children in the digital age involves the challenge of achieving the delicate balance between supervising children's online behaviour and allowing them online independence. It can be even more pronounced in an insular culture based on Catholic values. This challenge is discussed in the view of the results of two studies, a qualitative study using focus groups with parents (n=26) and a survey questionnaire carried out to children aged 8 to 15 years and their parents (n=1,324). Results showed that there was a gap between what children do online and what their parents know about these practices. Parents have no clear-cut strategies to prevent risks. They use both enabling and restrictive mediation strategies, but the constant changes in technology mean that they have to adopt a "trial and error" approach to parenting.

**Keywords:** parents, awareness, children, online risks, challenges

## Introduction

In a culture characterised by relatively stable rules and norms about upbringing but where developments in new media are being adopted rapidly, raising children can be a challenge for Maltese parents. They have to balance conflicting priorities (Ofcom, 2012) and adapt their parenting ways to each new wave of technology (Warren, 2016) while engaging in what Yardi and Bruckman term "trial and error approaches to parenting" (2011: 3238). The aim of this chapter is to identify Maltese parents' awareness of how children behave online and understand the challenges they face when parenting the digital generation.

## National context

Some factors in the Maltese context might be relevant to understanding parenting experiences. Rutledge (2010: 8) argues that as much as we would like to blame the media for many of the things that happen, it is not separable from society. “Human experience does not happen independent of the current social, political, and technological environment”. Malta is no exception. The characteristics of the Maltese media landscape are shaped by its oral culture, geographical proximity to Italy, and the importance given to its institutions and political developments (Borg, 2009).

In Malta, the nuclear family unit is still relatively strong and most parents follow their children closely. When reflecting on social media, Narayan (2013) argued that social media, rather than being merely a space, have now become a real, tangible place because of the lived experiences of those who inhabit it. Social media have influenced greatly the upbringing and the socialization of children. Parents feel this new responsibility and while some take it in their stride, others are at a loss about what they should and should not do.

Malta can be considered a media rich environment, and despite its small size it is rated among the best countries in the European Union (EU) for Information Technology. The drive by the state to make technology more accessible was reflected in the spread of new media and a significant increase in internet users over a short span of time. The online world became rapidly accessible (Borg, 2009).

Through the years, several measures were taken by the government to increase digital accessibility and media literacy. Two such initiatives are digital literacy becoming a cross-curricular theme and the One Tablet per Child project. The Malta Communications Authority (MCA) aims to help develop the country’s information and communications technology (ICT) potential and to support the island’s transition into a knowledge-based society and economy. One of its initiatives, BeSmartOnline!, supports children’s safe and responsible use of the internet together with local stakeholders.

Data from MCA indicates that over 98 per cent of Maltese children have access to the internet (Lauri et al., 2015). This compares quite well to the 87 per cent of all children aged 9 to 16 in the EU Kids Online survey that have internet access from home (Livingstone et al., 2011). With the high prevalence of internet use among Maltese children and young people, it becomes increasingly salient to help them navigate the online sphere. Parents have an important role to play. When children are young, they can help form positive attitudes towards new media and also discuss the good and the bad that these platforms can offer. It is also relatively easy to “control” their young children’s use of the internet. However, when children grow older and spend more time online, new media, and in particular mobile devices become more of a challenge for parents to monitor (Hart Research Associates, 2011). It also becomes more and more difficult for parents to impose restrictions on media use, and it is sometimes difficult for parents to find the right strategy to negotiate the use of new media. They often have to learn by trial and error. This behaviouristic way of learning takes time and sometimes parents are

not fast enough to keep up with growing children and their relationship with the fast changes in media technology.

## Mediation strategies

Parents take specific actions to deal with their anxieties about their child's personal, physical and psychological safety online. Livingstone et al. (2017) categorised mediation styles into two broad strategies. Enabling mediation responds to child agency and incorporates safety measures. Restrictive mediation is typically used more by parents who are less digitally skilled and tend to control their children's use of the internet. Another reason why parents restrict their children's internet use is because of their fears that their children are exposed to different values from the ones they are trying to impart (Hargittai, 2013). Shame based messages in reaction to adolescents' encounter with problematic online content, such as pornography, deter open communication between parents and child (Zurcher, 2017). The role of fear and shame could be especially relevant to understanding Maltese parenting in a context that has deep-rooted Catholic values.

The internet puts into question traditional values because of its different affordances. Malta is predominantly Catholic, and the influence of the Catholic church is still strong, despite the government recently introduced civil laws, which widened the separation between church and state. The Church's teachings about new media as "fully human forms of communication" that call us to "use wisely the means at our disposal" (Vatican, 2016) are often discussed during the Sunday homily. In Malta 51 per cent (Discern, 2005) of the population attend Sunday mass and therefore listen to these teachings. Moreover, this topic is frequently discussed by the Church's media. Parents are constantly reminded about their duty to oversee their children's use of online technology.

## Research context

The two studies in this chapter were carried out on the Malta island, which is the largest of the three Maltese islands in the centre of the Mediterranean. Malta has an area of 246 square kilometres and a population of approximately 440,000 people (World Bank, 2017), making it one of the most densely populated countries in the Europe. Malta joined the EU in 2004 and is the smallest of the 28 countries presently part of the EU. Given the widespread proliferation of new media in Maltese families, the studies tried to identify the challenges Maltese parents face. The results would enable comparisons with other European countries and equip the MCA<sup>1</sup> with evidence upon which to base interventions targeting parents.

The first study was a survey conducted during November and December 2014 with children aged between 8 and 15. During the same period a second questionnaire was distributed to their respective parent or guardian. The aim of the research was to investi-

gate and compare parents' perception of their children's internet use and to find out how knowledgeable parents were of the children's online activities and whether they had the skills to help their children online. The parent and child questionnaires<sup>2</sup> were based on the research carried out by EU Kids Online (Livingstone et al., 2011). Some questions were modified<sup>3</sup> to reflect the Maltese context and to enable longitudinal comparisons with data collected by MCA in previous years. Once finalised, it was pretested and the research proposal was approved by the University of Malta Research Ethics Committee.

Cluster sampling was used. Participants were selected by randomly choosing four schools (two Primary and two Secondary) from each of the six demographic regions of the Maltese Islands. Schools in Malta can be run by the state, the church or independent educational organizations. All three types were represented in the sample. Meetings were held with the respective teachers to explain the data collection, which was carried out in class. Two thousand children and parent questionnaires were distributed. Paired parent and child questionnaires (n=1,324) were given the same index number to enable matching of parent-child data. The data was analysed using SPSS. When comparing the answers given by parents and children, clear differences emerged.

A second in-depth study was thus carried out to understand the lived experiences of parenting children in the digital age. Four focus groups were carried out with a convenience sample of 26 parents of children aged 8 and 16. Parents who had at least one child in this age group were contacted through local community groups in Malta by the researchers. Parents who accepted the invitation to participate were given information about the research together with a consent form. In all, 26 parents took part in the study, 15 mothers and 11 fathers.

The discussion focused on how their children used the internet, what the parents were worried about, safety strategies they employed as well as any negative experiences their children went through while online. These discussions were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Inductive thematic analysis as discussed by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used to analyse the data. The next part of the chapter will discuss the findings from both studies to identify parents' awareness and management of the risks their children face online.

## Discussion

The studies offer some insights about the ways parents in Malta deal with online risks, and the possible implications related to the mediation styles used. Though Malta is small, insular and Catholic, some of the results found are very similar to those in countries very different from Malta (Livingstone et al., 2011; Mascheroni & Ólafsson, 2014).

### *Perceptions and awareness of risks*

Many of the parents who participated in this study seemed to have a negative attitude towards the internet and the risks associated with it. Table 1 presents the percentages of

children and parents who agreed with statements about the risks associated to internet use. While children's responses seem to indicate that most of them are aware of what could go wrong, the discrepancy between child and parent responses shows that parents are even more cautious. While over one-fourth of children feel safe online, only 8 per cent of parents felt that this is a safe place for their children.

**Table 1.** Risk perceptions (per cent)

	Child	Parent
It is important to use privacy settings on SNS	78.8	80.6
The internet is a safe place for children	26.3	8.0
It is safe for children to make new friends over the internet	15.7	3.3
There are no risks if children post photos of themselves on a social network	12.2	6.0
I am not worried about the personal information there is about my child/myself on the internet for others to see	13.9	23.2
It is fine for children to post things publicly on SNS	11.4	6.2
Others may post photos of me/my child without permission	7.4	3.8
I would be willing to meet someone I made friends with over the internet	12.7	n/a
It is risky for my child to meet with people they got to know over the internet	n/a	56.8

*Comment:* Based on children's questionnaire and parents' questionnaire: Tick which of the following statements you agree with. (Multiple response question). n=1 324 paired questionnaires.

The negative impression parents seem to have of the internet was iterated during the group discussions. While parents did mention the benefits of the internet, these were often overshadowed by the wide range of concerns and fears they had about their children's safety. The themes related to the parents' awareness of benefits and risks of the internet are presented in Table 2 below.

Parents' major fears were that their children could be exposed to pornographic and violent content and that they could be groomed by pedophiles or cyberbullied. They also expressed apprehension that their children could get into trouble and that home is no longer a safe place for them since they could be bullied even when at home. They felt that children were not developing adequate social skills since they spent far too much time chatting and watching videos. Parents also believed that the time spent online could be better used for other offline activities.

The computer is in your house. Before they used to go to school and find bullying there and home was a safe haven, but now it's not a safe haven anymore because they have access. (Female, age 45)

Parents were aware it would be unrealistic to expect their children not to use the internet or not encounter any risks. Even though this was often difficult for them to accept, they were conscious that they needed to mitigate, not eliminate, risk.

You want to manage the risk. You can't not have internet in the house today because it's an interactive tool – you would be losing out on a lot, even for school. Today they will tell you to visit this site and get this information. (Male, age 45)

**Table 2.** Parents' awareness of risk online

Category	Codes	Themes
Awareness	Benefits of the internet	Research Schoolwork Efficiency
	Fears regarding their child's safety	Home no longer a safe haven Inappropriate content Fear of the unknown Breaking the rules Getting into trouble Inappropriate contact
	Concerns	Unable to communicate New distraction Time issues Not knowing how to help
	Risk	Cannot be eliminated Cannot be controlled Letting go Can be managed Child can be the perpetrator Not new risks
	Intention	Accident Mistake Looking for trouble Repetition

While recognizing that the internet could offer many opportunities for learning and development, parents have great concerns regarding the inevitability of online risk and struggle with balancing conflicting needs. Parents' attitudes could also impact the children's openness to explore the online world and their feelings of shame and guilt. For parenting to be effective, the parents' authority should be in balance with children's agency particularly regarding issues such as self-expression and autonomy.

*Preoccupation with screen time*

As Table 2 indicates, one of the parents' concerns was related to the amount of time their children spend online. One father, when talking about his 14-year old boy regarding this issue, says:

If he had his own way, he'd spend days on end, and also nights online. From our end, we limit this time (Male, age 40).

Parents often found themselves in a bind:

the problem is that nowadays while studying they need the computer... and they waste time (Female, age 47).

In the survey, children and parents were asked to specify the amount of time the child spent online. There is a substantial difference between the children's responses when compared to their parents. It was clear that most parents (65%) underestimated how much time their children spent online. Over 13 per cent of the children said that they were always online during weekends; however only four per cent of parents were aware of this. This result could be partially due to the perception of what it means to be always online. For some it might mean that the child is constantly using the internet while for others it might mean that access is always available (mostly through mobile devices) and the child can access the internet at any time.

There were also discrepancies between what parents allowed their children to do online and what the children claimed they did. Table 3 indicates that the greatest differences were observed in the areas of chatting, video calling, watching videos and doing schoolwork.

**Table 3.** Activities carried out online (per cent)

Activities	Children	Parents
School Work	69.9	87.8
Browsing	44.5	38.0
Playing Games	80.3	84.4
Social Networking	43.2	38.2
Chatting	45.9	28.2
Email	29.4	22.3
Video Calling	41.0	26.2
Downloading Music or Films	36.4	25.6
Streaming Music or Films	33.9	24.3
Watching Videos Online	71.2	59.9
Blogging	11.1	3.5
Online Shopping	18.3	4.5
Upload photos videos or music to share with others	n/a	12.8
Give out personal information	n/a	0.6

*Comment:* Based on children's questionnaire: Which of these activities do you do on the internet? and parents' questionnaire: Which of these activities is your child allowed to do on the internet? (Multiple response questions). n=1,324 paired questionnaires

Parents seem to fear that their children do not use the internet wisely. It could be argued that this fear was previously experienced about television, with the difference that the internet is ubiquitous and parents' fears cannot be allayed just by restricting viewing time and censoring content. In the focus groups, parents expressed a sense of loss of control, sometimes even feelings of helplessness. Maltese parents are still quite preoccupied about the time children spend online, notwithstanding the fact that they underestimate this time. This suggests that Maltese parents still need to shift their focus to how children use screen time rather than focus on the amount of time they spend online.

*Choosing the lesser of two evils*

Parents were asked to rate their own ability to help their children when something bothers them online. More than 77 per cent of parents responded that they could help their children. When asked about the safety measures parents applied online, only 1.6 per cent applied the extreme form of restrictive mediation of not allowing their children to use the internet. The most common activity was speaking to their children about online dangers (67.2%).

**Table 4.** Monitoring activities carried out by parents (per cent)

I make my child aware of the dangers she may encounter on the internet	67.2
I keep track of the websites my child visits	66.0
I am aware of the people with whom she interacts	44.6
I use software to prevent spam, junk mail or viruses	42.8
I check the messages in her email or chat history	39.1
I check which contacts and friends she adds	36.9
I stay nearby when my child uses the internet	36.8
I am strict on the time my child uses the internet	35.3
I check her profile on social networking sites	33.6
I use blocking or filtering software	28.9
I do not let my child use the internet	1.6

*Comment:* Based on parents' questionnaire: What safety measures do you normally apply to keep your child safe when using the internet? and Which of the following actions do you take? (Multiple response questions). n=1,324

Parents were also asked how they helped their children online. 58 per cent of the parents said they talk to their children about online activities. This result is comparable to the results obtained by Net Children Go Mobile (Mascheroni & Ólafsson, 2014). Over 50 per cent of parents help their children with difficulties, explain why some websites are harmful and suggest ways to use the internet safely. However, when compared to their European counterparts (Livingstone et al., 2011), Maltese parents seem to talk



less about ways of behaving towards others and dealing with troublesome situations. This could indicate that they do not feel comfortable discussing such matters, possibly because they deem their knowledge and skills are lacking, as the survey replies seem to suggest. Some parents kept track of the websites their child visited (66%) indicating that they also monitor their online activity to ensure their child's safety. This trend is more apparent when the child is under 11 years.

The strategies for managing risk that parents spoke about during the focus groups (Table 5) can be mainly classified according to the two categories of mediation mentioned by Livingstone and colleagues (2017).

**Table 5.** Risk management strategies

Category	Codes	Themes
Managing Risk	Enabling	Relationship with children Openness and honesty Teaching values and life skills Right and wrong Trust Using experiences to teach
	Restrictive	Limiting time Online time as reward Discipline Knowing passwords Checking and monitoring Filtering software Devices in a public place

The enabling approach emphasised trust and the importance of a relationship based on openness and honesty with their children as a way to understand what they are going through online, and for the children to know that they had a reference point when they needed to discuss something. Parents also taught children values, life skills, and the concept of right and wrong, by using real or anecdotal experiences related to the internet to teach lessons about online behaviour.

I think the most important thing for us is, it's true that today it's a bit more difficult than before, but you have to keep a good relationship with the children. Because if they want to hide things from you they can hide a thousand things. That you're there for them and show them that you're their friend and when you need to make a stand you have to do it. (Female, age 47)

Apart from these enabling approaches, parents also adopted restrictive strategies to protect their children. They often mentioned limiting the time children could spend online, particularly when they had younger children or where it concerned the time spent online playing games.

Aha – manage the risk, you can't say no, but at the same time you can't pretend this is nothing to worry about. You have to introduce certain types of processes and certain controls as we mentioned already like supervision, the material, the content, the position from where they operate, the filters – there are a number of filters that are designed for children so you can manage, but not remove everything either. (Male, age 45)

Another measure used by parents to prevent their children from using internet inappropriately was to set rules about where children could access the internet, such as the living room. They were aware and even admitted that this was becoming very difficult with mobile devices. Some parents allowed children to use the internet and social networking sites only if they knew the password and admitted to checking their children's profiles and search history to see whether there was anything dubious.

Of course – we know her password and most of times when she's chatting we would be near her. (Female, age 38)

Parents who used restrictive mediation could only apply certain strategies at home and only when the children were young. Once children started growing up, parents' control diminished greatly and some realised that enabling mediation strategies were better.

When discussing their strategies, parents mentioned having to choose between the "lesser of two evils". For instance, they often chose to set up a Facebook account for their underage kids not to be left out. It was frustrating for parents to admit that all their efforts to give their children a good upbringing could be undone by others online. Such comments reflect the religious cultural context in which parents tackle their struggles.

There seems to be disparity between the generation of adults influenced by Catholic values and the younger generation that was born in a new media environment. These findings could reflect how parents in traditional cultures, when faced with rapid technological developments might resist instead of embrace the changes. This adds to the other parenting pressures they have to deal with.

## Conclusion

The results of these two studies show that parents are unsure of what the effects of the internet are on their children and fear for their children's safety. Parents face the struggle to constantly adapt their strategies because as their child grows up, the child's internet uses and activities change often. Technological changes are also rapid, and parents often have children of different ages and different personalities that also require diverse ways of approaching online risks. For parents to be successful mediators, they require a set of strategies to allow them sufficient flexibility to change approaches as required. Parents seem to be negotiating between restrictive and enabling strategies as they see fit depending on their beliefs. Training organised by the MCA, the Cybercrime Unit, local councils, parish groups and schools help parents understand how to achieve the delicate

balance between ensuring children reap the benefits of the internet while safeguarding them from risk. Not all parents are actively involved in this training and this is where the challenge for policy makers lies. It is easy to reach parents who want to participate and learn but some children have to survive online without any help from their parents. In such cases, we strongly believe that the role of the teachers is even more important and media education in schools could help create the space for this type of mentoring.

## Notes

1. The two studies were commissioned by the Malta Communications Authority.
2. The survey included five sections: internet access, internet use and activities, risk perceptions, risk experiences and coping, and online safety.
3. One such question included a set of statements to assess parents' perceptions such as "The internet is a safe place for children who are my child's age". These statements were in both the 2010 and the 2012 versions of the questionnaire. The MCA requested that such questions be included to be able to draw comparisons.

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# “Daddy, Your Mobile is Stupid, You Should Put it Away”

## *Media Education from the Perspective of Professionals*

Gisela Schubert & Susanne Eggert

### Abstract

Problems with digital and mobile media are often one of the reasons behind a family's decision to consult a family counsellor. Parents of young children feel quite confident handling the media education of their children. For access to digital media, young children need their parents' help, so they know about the media usage of their daughters and sons. But when kids get older, their media use increases and becomes more independent. Consequently, parents have less control over the media usage of their children. In some cases, they need professional help with media education. According to family counsellors, many issues result from early media education.

**Keywords:** media education, mobile media, family, educational counselling, perspective of professionals

### Introduction

Media habits and the role of media in families have changed a lot over the years. About ten years ago, different devices were used for different purposes. Mass media played an important role for entertainment and information. Computers and the internet were used for gaming, communication, and to search for information. Mobile phones were used for communication, cameras for taking pictures, MP3 players for music, etc. Nowadays, we don't need all these different devices. With the development of mobile devices like the smartphone and tablet, all these media are combined in one device. Since these devices are equipped with touchscreen technology, they are easy to handle, even for young children. The challenges of (parental) media education have changed as a result of this development.

The most obvious challenge parents name is ensuring children don't use their mobile devices too much. Many parents feel their daughters and sons are on their mobiles almost all the time. Some are convinced that their children do badly in school because of their digital devices. Others are afraid that their children could become addicted. Further problems connected to the usage of digital devices also cause conflicts in families, such as finding the right time for children to have a smartphone of their own. Parents also worry that their children could find "the wrong type" of friends online, or they fear cyberbullying, legal conflicts due to abuse of personality rights, copyright etc. As a consequence, parents would like more insight into their children's media practices and prefer their children to reduce screen time, especially time spent on their smartphones. But children don't want their parents telling them when, how often, and how long they should use their digital devices. Their devices mean a lot to young people, so they want to decide themselves how they use them (Livingstone et al., 2013). They are living in a mediatised world (e.g. Krotz, 2014), in which digital media are part of everyday life, so young people in particular cannot imagine reducing their media usage. Parents often cannot understand the importance of digital media for their children, causing a clash between two different perspectives. At this point, parents need support and some decide to consult a professional educational counsellor.

Media related issues are increasingly becoming a reason why families decide to consult a counsellor. But even counsellors often have difficulties mediating conflicts connected with the media usage of young people and ask for professional support. This article deals with the observations of professional educational counsellors. They identify the problems parents have with media education and try to find ways to improve parental media education.

## Family life with mobile media

Since 2015 the JFF – Institute for Media Research and Media Education – researches how family life is connected with mobile media. The aim of the MoFam (*Mobile Media in Families*) study is to discover the attitudes parents have towards mobile media and the mobile internet, the challenges they face, and to find out which support they need in their media education. The study also addresses different professionals (teachers, carers in child care institutions, educational counsellors) and asks what kind of support they need. In the first part of the study, interviews were conducted with parents of children aged 8 to 14 years and group discussions took place with professionals in educational counselling (Wagner et al., 2016).

Below, we focus on these professionals. What are their experiences and what kind of challenges do they observe in counselling situations with families dealing with problems connected to media education? What strategies have they already developed in their work?

## Method and sample

We conducted interviews with professionals working in educational counselling or in child and youth welfare service institutions. A total of 35 professionals participated, 24 women and 11 men aged between 21 and 64.

During the first part of the interview, professionals were asked to name media issues related to their daily practice. In the next step, we focused on mobile media and internet in families, to find out how professionals estimate the relevance and influence of children's siblings and peer group. We also wanted to evaluate what they know about and how they assess the media literacy and media educational competencies of parents. The last part focused on needs: what are the needs of parents from the professionals' perspectives and what are the needs of counsellors and educators themselves?

As a first group, we interviewed professional educational counsellors. Educational counselling institutions offer parents, children, adolescents and families counselling and support. They cover a wide range of diagnostic, counselling and therapeutic services. In particular, for families living in challenging conditions or in multi-problematic settings, educational counsellors are important, qualified points of contact.

We also talked to people who work in youth welfare service institutions. These institutions either work like day care services with disabled children who need social and emotional training, as well as learning assistance. Other institutions accommodate children and adolescents permanently, due to substantial, consolidated and non-temporary disorders. Professionals take over educational tasks, they accompany adolescents and help them deal with conflicts in a safe space. In addition, they provide advice and therapy for the families of these children. More than parents, they have to follow the rules of legal protection for children and adolescents. That means the use of media devices like laptops, smartphones or tablets is strongly restricted or even prohibited. From the perspective of the institutional body, these restrictions have a protecting and stabilising function. Adolescents experience them as strong limitations, which keep them at a distance from the normality of their peer group (Kutscher & Kreß, 2016).

## Professionals name challenges in media education

### *Experts for education are looking at media issues*

A substantial knowledge of developmental tasks of children and adolescents, including disorders etc., is the working base of all interviewed professionals. In the following section, their expertise is linked with their observations on media and media education. The professionals themselves develop hypotheses to explain specific constellations of problems.

First, professional counsellors note that media related issues are a motivator for attending counselling in most cases. In almost every application and first interview, some relation between media usage and internal family conflicts emerges. In many

cases, there are underlying communicative and relational conflicts between the family members, but these are overlapped by media issues and their impacts. Often parents who are searching for support in counselling have a critical and reflecting attitude, but they worry that the situation could turn. Professionals recognise resignation and excessive demands placed on parents, regardless of social surroundings and socioeconomic status. For professionals in youth welfare service institutions, the setting is different. Counselling parents makes up a small part of their work and media issues are not usually the obvious issue in counselling sessions. Only when professionals ask the parents about available media devices at home, do they talk more intensively about media education and related issues.

*Changing media conditions are a challenge for children and young people, but they also change parental media use*

In some cases, adolescents ask for counselling. Many issues they discuss are connected with media use. They talk about conflicts they have with their parents related to time spent gaming or to inadequate regulatory measures put in place by their parents. They mention overly anxious parental reactions regarding the sharing of photos or cyberbullying. Furthermore, the adolescents themselves – like their parents – are worried their media usage could be excessive and they could get addicted. They worry that they can't go without gaming or permanent contact with their peers via messengers or social networking services etc., but at the same time, they have a fear of missing out. From a professional perspective, however, it is unclear if these worries of adolescents result from their (worried) parents or by the coverage these dangers receive in the media. It is certainly obvious that there are challenges for children and adolescents at different developmental levels (Eggert & Wagner, 2016) which require appropriate support:

- Young people feel forced and obliged to use some communication tools by their peer group, but also by educational authorities, e.g. teachers who announce homework or relevant information in Whatsapp chats.
- They are challenged by online services and new applications. To gain (structural) media knowledge and to handle media in a competent way, they have to interact with it. They also have to gain insight to make up their own minds and develop an attitude towards these developments.
- Furthermore, even young people are worried about losing control of their media usage.

Even though counselling interviews are normally focused on the media usage of children and adolescents, the meaning of mobile media in the parents' daily life has to be taken into account.



### *Media can be crucial for stagnation of relational development*

Professionals observe young people's increasing interest in media activities and growing usage times. At the same time, they experience that parents on the one hand are overwhelmed with the technical development of devices and apps. On the other hand, parents often do not feel comfortable defining limits for their child. Media issues frequently cause conflicts to emerge. However, quite often a breakdown in the relationship between parents and children underlies the present problems. If these problematic conditions are combined, they restrain and inhibit a stable and trustful relationship within families. Particularly during puberty when boys and girls have to deal with developmental tasks – for example knowing and developing their own identity – they distance themselves from parents and conventional attitudes. Social network applications, messaging services or games offer young people various ways of presenting and arranging their identity. Mobile media devices also have the advantage of expressing all these possibilities ad hoc and in (almost) any place, which also means without controlling parents or adults. The risk of conflicts and the risk to lose contact with one another increase. Professionals mention situations which in their opinion can influence the relationship between family members in a negative way:

- when parents put toddlers to bed: instead of reading to them, they let children watch short videos on a tablet or smartphone
- when a permanently running TV replaces family communication and interaction
- continuing isolated media communication between family members: social interaction within the family suffers. For both adolescents and parents, it is difficult to put their devices away and to get involved in family life.

### *Concerns of professionals (and parents)*

Professionals are faced with diverse media related issues and difficulties. The following section outlines an overview of the mentioned aspects regarding younger children.

“At what age does it make sense for my child to have her/his own smartphone?” is a pervasive question in families with younger children. Many parents think about giving children their own smartphone when they move from elementary to secondary school. Professionals observe that the age of ten years seems to be a “magical barrier”. From this age on, “a mobile phone is necessary for the existence as a human being”. The importance of communication within the peer group increases. For young people, it's important to belong to a particular group and to share preferences e.g. on Youtube. For parents, it is most important to be in contact with their child – and vice versa – in case of problems or to make arrangements. Most children in primary school do not have smartphones, but professionals expect this to change, which means an increasing number of primary schoolers may soon have an internet enabled mobile device. Possible problems forecast by professionals are:

- As soon as children have their own device, there is no further discussion in families about the usage; not about content, nor usage time or rules regarding how to use it.
- In many families, parents pass their old devices on to their children. But only in rare cases are parents aware of available age-based adjustments. Most parents and even some professionals don't know about the possibility to impose limits through the operating system, or to install specific child protection software.
- Parents are more likely to be worried about financial and technical aspects. Purchasing a smartphone forces them to decide between different contract options: they see the advantage of prepaid (the cost is easier to control), but they are worried that in an emergency, a child cannot call. On the other hand, contracts enable permanent online access.

One of the most alarming observations made by professionals is that more and more parents pass their mobile devices to their toddlers. For some mothers and fathers, it is standard practice to give their child a smartphone or a tablet to play with. Parents use it to distract or calm the child, so they can work, make a phone call or check emails. New and crucial from a professional point of view is the fact that touchscreen technology makes handling a smartphone easy, even for the youngest kids. Furthermore, mobile devices can be used everywhere. In this context, professionals are also worried that parents might be less aware of the needs of their kids – particularly toddlers – when they themselves are distracted by excessive mobile media use. They describe situations when parents are on their smartphones using headphones while making a phone call, texting messages, checking emails, etc. In these situations, the mother or father is not in tune with the needs of the child and might not be aware that the child has hurt itself on the playground or lost its pacifier etc. In the professionals' point of view, young parents have quite an uncritical attitude towards the media use of their toddlers. In particular, they neither reflect developmental issues regarding media usage, nor have they engaged with age appropriate content. They notice that many parents don't have a critical view of their own media usage either, or of how their young children perceive the presence of media in everyday family life. There are some parents of young children who need help with their media education, but only few make use of counselling services, asking questions like, "At what age is it appropriate to use a mobile device with my child?" or "How do I teach responsible use of mobile media?" In the professionals' opinion, parents don't visit counselling services until difficulties arise, by which time it is often already too late.

In their daily consulting and educational practice, professionals experience a lot of situations where a lack of awareness of parents' function as a role model becomes apparent:

- Parents playing online games extensively at night were not aware of the manifest conflict with their daughter, who displayed inappropriate smartphone use. When

it was discovered, the parents did not even consider how their own behaviour was related to the issue.

- Professionals see parents playing on their smartphones extensively, but trying to hide it from their children. However, children see through this easily and become aware of their parents’ duplicity.
- During sessions with their clients, like a family breakfast, professionals gain an insight into media related interaction in families and see how parents are using their devices. They observe children complaining about their parents because they are occupied with their devices all the time. For example, a little boy told his father: “Daddy, your mobile is stupid. You should put it away!” Professionals frequently experience parents who are permanently on call, even in counselling interviews.

The described situations have one thing in common: parents are not conscious of the part they play in shaping the dynamics of family life and there is a lack of a critical view of potential risks in the context of media use. Some professionals assume that parents using mobile devices and online applications intensively and without inhibitions see themselves as competent and do not question risks or whether a controlled intervention may be necessary. Regarding the parents’ function as role models, a counsellor said: “It is a matter of fact that parents are not very conscious of their influence as role models for their children. They use media without realising that their children observe all their behaviours – even the smallest action.” At the moment of conflict resolution, when professionals try to develop common rules with all family members, parents are fine as long as these rules aim at regulating the child’s media usage. When it comes to their own media usage and the need for awareness and changed habits, parents are immune to feedback and do not want to abide by rules.

Not so long ago, family counselling was focused on media content, but educational counsellors are noticing a change. Parents don’t seem as concerned whether their child encounters harmful or shocking online content, e.g. videos showing violence against humans or animals, unwanted or uncomfortable contact requests. The duration of media usage seems to be most important problem. The interviewed counsellors notice that children consume non age appropriate or harmful content that is linked to online streaming platforms, films in general or games. Usually, male family members or older siblings enable access to children or toddlers. Mobile devices are preferred because they offer largely uncontrolled usage. Let’s Play videos on Youtube are an easy way to find out and learn a lot about games – what they look like, what are appropriate tactics. This form of access offers children in particular the possibility to gain insights into non age appropriate games. Furthermore, counsellors state that few parents try to control their children’s devices by child protection programmes or set up an account on the devices their children use with (age) appropriate programmes and applications.

### *Further concerns of professionals*

- In many families, media access is used as reward or punishment in situations not linked with media. Parents prevent children from using their devices to assert themselves. It is problematic when these acts show parental overload and provoke conflicts that often intensify. In effect, instead of resolving the problem, it intensifies the conflict.
- Counsellors see a tendency for children of families with multiple problems to use mobile media to escape from their daily lives or to find distraction in digital worlds. Media related difficulties are not recognised in these families because they are already overwhelmed with other challenges, like organising and structuring their everyday life.
- If the parents are separated, inconsistency in media education is observable. Children, especially younger ones, are faced with different rules because parents fail to reach an agreement on their media educational aims and how to implement them.
- Professionals observe that parents are under social pressure. They are competing with other parents all the time, which makes it hard for them to figure out what is best for their family.
- Finally, in many families who make use of counselling, the parents have a problem setting rules and boundaries. Either their rules are unrealistic and unsuitable for the family's situation or the parents are worried that they might jeopardise their good relationship with their children.

### Requirements for good media education

For educational counsellors, it is obvious that media education is a difficult field for parents. But it is also an educational task that parents have to face from the first day. Problems in media education can be summarised as follows:

- Lack of knowledge about media: Most parents cannot keep up with the speed of technical development. They feel badly informed about new devices and tools and they find it difficult to find and install the right tools to protect their children. Furthermore, they don't know what apps and programmes exist for children and how to decide if these are appropriate for the age and developmental stage of their children.
- Lack of interest in what their children are using: Many parents do not know what their children are using, which tools and functions are most important for them, what their favourites are and what is hip in their peer group.

- Lack of consciousness of role model function: Many parents are not aware of their importance as role models. Children watch and try to imitate the way their parents handle media from the first day on (see also Livingstone, 2016).
- Lack of universally valid rules for media education: Parents complain that there are no generally accepted rules for the regulation of the usage of digital and mobile media. Therefore, they have to make up their own rules, but they are always in competition with other parents and their methods.

## Conclusion: Media education from the start

Professionals in the field of family counselling see that media education is a big challenge for many parents and they observe that more and more parents are overwhelmed with this task. From their perspective, it is a problem that many parents start thinking about media education too late; only when they are facing problems related with the media usage of their children. Parents must understand that media education is a task from the first day on. There are a few points that are crucial for successful media education to help children use media in a competent way to fulfill their needs:

- Awareness of being role models: Parents are role models for their children. During the early years, children try to imitate what their parents are doing because this is the normal and the right way to do things.
  - Parents have to reflect and use media consciously.
- Knowledge about development of children, connected tasks and competencies: Parents have to understand that specific cognitive, motor, as well as social, emotional, and moral skills are required to be able to use media.
  - Parents need knowledge of the developmental stages of children and how these are related to media educational tasks.
- Knowledge about media and media content: Parents cannot keep up with the technical developments of media. But they need to be up to date to a certain extent about the tools and apps that are on the market for the age group of their children or that are used in the peer group of their daughters and sons (see also Bartau-Rojas, Aierbe-Barandiaran & Oregui-González, 2018). Furthermore, they should be able to install a safety programme on the devices that are used by their (younger) children.
  - Parents need basic knowledge about technical developments, safety programmes and tools, but also about content that is popular amongst young people.
- Solidarity amongst parents: Parents need orientation on rules and strategies of regulation. Sharing knowledge and cooperation between parents could be one solution.
  - Stronger solidarity amongst parents would be helpful.

- Cooperation between families and educational institutions: For successful media education, it is necessary that families and educational institutions cooperate and reach agreement as much as possible.
- Media education should be part of the educational concept in all educational settings.

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# Digital Parenting in the Netherlands

## *Putting Theory into Practice*

Jos de Haan, Peter Nikken & Annemarie Wennekers

### Abstract

In this chapter, we explore the Dutch situation on parental guidance of young children's media use. Since 2009, several scientific research projects on parental mediation have been supported by our ministries of Welfare and of Culture and produced practical outcomes. The empirical knowledge has laid the foundation for evidence-based parenting support, which contributes to the safe and playful use of the internet and the development of digital skills of children, both at home and in schools and day-care centers. For teachers, librarians, doctors, and workers in day-care centers, training programs are developed to make them more knowledgeable about children, media and parental mediation. As always in an evolving research agenda there are the "known unknowns". Therefore, this chapter concludes with a sketch of the white spots in our knowledge and a brief agenda for future research.

**Keywords:** parental mediation, digital skills, evidence-based practice, young children, research agenda

### Introduction

Nowadays, children grow up in a media landscape that has changed dramatically. Within the time span of a single generation, people's choice for media consumption has expanded from a relative scarce selection of traditional one-way mass media (print, radio and television) to access to virtually all of the world's news and entertainment, anywhere, anytime, anyhow and above all, interactive (Kaul, 2012). As a result, media now play a central role in many people's daily routines, affecting all life domains. Moreover, media use starts at an increasingly early age. In this chapter, we discuss challenges parents face in guiding their young children up to about the age of 7 in this rapidly changing media

environment, as well as the options for practical support they are provided with. Our discussion focuses on the Netherlands, a digitally advanced country that provides a relevant context, because almost all parents and children use the internet, and because media-literacy has been high on the agenda already since 2005.

In the Netherlands, the digitalization took place relatively fast (De Haan, 2010). From the mid 1980's onwards personal computers entered Dutch households, in the beginning mostly used by adults for professional tasks. The internet found its easy way into Dutch houses due to the wide availability of telephone landlines and high cable television penetration. In the period between 1995 and 2010, the internet evolved from a gadget for a small group of users to a source of entertainment and information for almost everyone, with families with children amongst the early adopters. The introduction of routers helped expanding the use of media technology at home and mobile technology even outpaced the internet adoption rate. Smartphones and tablets found their ways into the family, especially because they seem to attract (very) young children (Nikken & Schols, 2015), which is not surprising considering the way the technology fits the developmental attributes of infants and toddlers: "motion with interesting sounds, high-contrast images, new and constantly changing experiences, and instant feedback that fosters a sense of control" (Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017: 51).

With the expansion of media devices at home as well as mobile technology outside these homes, parental control over children's media use has reached new levels of complexity (Livingstone et al., 2015; Nikken & de Haan, 2015; Nikken & Oprea, forthcoming). That is, parents see several benefits of media use for their young children, who can be avid digital media users, and for themselves (Gutnick et al., 2011; Ofcom, 2016; Plowman, McPake & Stephens, 2010). However, intensified use of new media also comes with increasing risks for children and challenges for parents that are not resolved easily. Moreover, parents are faced with strong opinions in the societal and scientific debate about whether or how very young children should use media (e.g. Radesky & Christakis, 2016).

In this chapter, we first describe current media use of young children in the Netherlands, followed by a discussion of ways in which Dutch parents mediate their children's media use and the problems they face in doing so. Then, we provide an overview of initiatives that have been implemented in the Netherlands in recent years to support parents in guiding their children in the digital domain. We conclude the chapter with a short discussion of unresolved questions and challenges and a brief agenda for future research.

## The media life of children

In the Netherlands, as in many other countries, children grow up in media-rich homes and are going online at ever younger ages. As most research has focused on teenagers, little is known about younger children's interactions with those technologies (Cha-



udron, 2015) nor about how parents value the mediation of their children's media use (Nikken & Oprea, forthcoming). Research in the Netherlands, nevertheless, showed that quite some 0 to 7-year old children possess their own devices (Nikken & Schols, 2015), whereas the average media consumption from electronic screens varies for this age group between one hour per day in low media use families and about three hours in high media use families (Nikken, 2017).

Notwithstanding the media-rich context in which children grow up and moral concern about children's compulsive use of screens, most children maintain a healthy balance between playing digital games, watching videos and performing other non-digital activities (Chaudron, 2015). As such, for most young children safe and playful use of media technologies contributes to their development and to their digital skills. Both at home and in schools and day-care centres, children learn basic computer skills in games by trial and error, without much instruction from parents or teachers (De Haan & Huysmans, 2002). This learning-by-doing is an expression of a self-confident and fearless manner in which many children go about using media devices and the internet (De Haan et al., 2011). Especially basic operational skills are easily and quickly acquired, together with various metacognitive skills, such as the ability to solve problems and to contextualize knowledge when using media content (Shaffer, 2008). Children, however, are not a homogeneous group and differ in their level of media skills. Children from families with moderate, high and very high levels of media use are more cognitively media-literate than children from low media use families (Walrave et al., 2012; Nikken, 2017). Notwithstanding a general positive image of young children's media use, each child encounters situations for which they lack skills and confidence, and thus have to ask for help (Livingstone et al., 2011). At around the age of 6 or 7, for example, social interaction becomes very important for children, but the quality of their digital interactions can be hindered by their lagging state of cognitive development, and their imperfect reading and writing skills (Chaudron, 2015). At these moments, parents in particular are very important as a source for support, advice and guidance (Nikken & Jansz, 2014).

## Mediation strategies of Dutch parents

Being able to access the internet from anywhere challenges parents to stay involved with their children in the digital world. By means of this involvement, also known as parental mediation, they can influence the media practices of their children. Parental mediation refers to the intentional routines that parents use to guide their children's media use, entailing "any strategy parents use to control, supervise or interpret media content for children" (Warren, 2001: 212), but also to creating the media-ecology children are growing up in (Nikken & Schols, 2015). The most common parental mediation practices have been classified as *restrictive mediation* (limiting media use, in terms of time, location or content), *active mediation* (discussing media content with the child,

providing explanations or giving instructions), *co-use* (sharing in the experience of the child's media use), *supervision* (keeping an eye out while the child is using media), *monitoring* (checking the child's online activities afterwards), and *technical restrictions* (using "parental controls" to regulate or block inappropriate content).

The types of mediation strategies parents use have been found to depend on several parent and family characteristics (see for example Livingstone & Helsper, 2008; Nikken & Jansz, 2014; Nikken & Schols, 2015; Sonck et al., 2013). A parent's belief about the effects of media use, for example, is highly important for which strategies the parent applies. A survey in 2013 among Dutch parents of 0 to 7-year old children showed that those who expect positive outcomes of media more often exert supervision, co-use and active mediation, whereas parents who believe children are affected negatively by media content are more likely to supervise, restrict and use technical restrictions (Nikken & Schols, 2015). Furthermore, parents who are convinced that media are too complicated for their child more often use (technical) restrictions, and – with a lower use – also less often supervise and co-use media. Also, parents in larger families apply all mediation types – except co-use – more often than parents with fewer children, and lower-educated parents more often use technical restrictions than higher-educated parents. Finally, fathers are less likely to supervise their child's media use than mothers, and parents with higher levels of media use are less likely to guide their child with active or restrictive mediation.

Parental mediation strategies are also related to certain characteristics of 0 to 7-year old children (Nikken & Schols, 2015). Interestingly, Dutch parents apply all types of mediation more often when their child is a skilled user of media. In particular, active and restrictive mediation and technical restrictions are exerted more often on these skilled children. The child's screen time is not related to mediation strategies, but children are less often supervised when they have media devices of their own in their room. Furthermore, all mediation strategies are applied to children's educational gaming. Parental supervision and co-use are paralleled by more use of entertainment media, and technical restrictions are often applied to children's engagement in social media activities. Finally, parents apply somewhat more active and restrictive mediation on 7 to 9-year old children, but do not seem to vary the type of mediation between their sons or daughters.

## Challenges Dutch parents face in guiding their children's media use

The changing media landscape introduces complex challenges for parents. The most common mediation problems that Dutch parents face with children aged 0 to 7-years old are: Concerns about what is a normal amount of time for a child to spend on media; how to recognize appropriate websites, apps, or games; how to best control children's daily media use; how to help a child that is engaged with media; and how to guarantee children's online safety (Nikken & de Haan, 2015; Nikken & Oprea, forthcoming). Most

respondents feel rather competent in their parental mediation, but almost one out of eight parents find it difficult to mediate their child's media use (Nikken & de Haan, 2015). Moreover, if parents are asked more specific questions about their mediation practices they indicate even lower levels of confidence: one in five has doubts about their active mediation/co-use, one in four about restrictive mediation and two out of five about applying technical restrictions (Nikken & Oprea, forthcoming).

Certain parent, child and family characteristics are found to be systematically associated with the problems parents may encounter when guiding their children's media use, as well as with parents' confidence in their own mediation capabilities (Nikken & de Haan, 2015). The prevalence of mediation concerns is higher among parents who have negative – as compared to more neutral – views on media's influence on children, as well as among parents whose young child is engaged in social media activities, and among parents who also have older children living at home. Confidence in their own mediation capabilities is higher for parents who view media as being positive for children and for parents who have other younger or other older children living at home. Moreover, parents who reported that their child is skilled with digital media are more confident in their own mediation practices, like parents whose child often engages in educational games. Oppositely, parents feel less competent when their young child engages in social media activities (Nikken & de Haan, 2015).

The study by Nikken and de Haan (2015) also sheds light on the factors that enhance or decrease parents' use of non-professional and professional information sources. In general, parents indicate that they are more likely to turn to family and friends than to professional sources when in doubt about their mediation practices. Parents who experience mediation problems are more likely to use both types of information sources. Moreover, professional sources are consulted more often by parents who feel less confident in their mediation, by fathers, parents who do not have older children at home, and parents whose children are engaged in social media and video communicating. Higher educated parents and parents with a negative view on media's influence on children more often turn to family and friends for advice.

These findings have implications for professionals in the area of parenting support. In order to make sure parents are provided with the right information, practitioners might have to reach out to parents more actively – both in person and by means of online support – with attractive and useful information that relates to parents' concerns about children's media use. Specific attention should be given to the role of social media, since parents reported more mediation problems, lower confidence about their mediation, and higher need of support when their young child had an interest in the use of social media. The fact that most social media applications are not intended to be used by young children might be part of the struggle parents have when their young children start using social media. The study also underscores that initiatives aiming at media-literacy and parenting support by professionals should take into account parent's feelings of competence. In most cases, it suffices to provide parents plain information about media use in relationship to children's development, but for parents who are less

confident more practical support in *how* to guide young children's digital media use seems important too to make them more confident. Parents who are well-informed and well-equipped can make better judgements as to which media activities suit their child's development best (Nikken & de Haan, 2015).

## Best practices of parenting support in the digital domain

Already in 2005, when internet use by young children was still rather low, the Dutch National Advisory Board on Cultural Affairs (*Raad voor Cultuur*) advised the government to launch a national program aimed at raising public awareness for media-literacy (Raad voor Cultuur, 2005). The advice led to the implementation of Mediawijzer.net, an independent network organization which promotes and facilitates all kinds of initiatives in the domain of media-education, parental mediation, content production, awareness campaigns and research on the literate use of media (Mediawijzer, 2018). The network is financially supported by the ministry of Education, Culture and Science (OCW), and is promoted in local communities mainly by public libraries. In 2017 the network consisted of well over 1,100 members, including libraries, universities, primary and secondary schools, non-profit organizations such as Mijn kind online (*My child online*) and many professionals who as media producers or psychological or pedagogical specialists create materials and provide services for children or parents. In some projects, these members collaborate with industry partners such as Google, Facebook and Solcon/KPN or Vodafone (who also organize activities themselves on issues such as awareness raising, parent support and the development of digital skills). Every year, in November and in April the network organizes national campaigns promoting awareness about parental mediation and media-literacy in schools, welfare organizations, parenting support institutions and libraries. Also, every year Mediawijzer awards interesting co-creation initiatives that contribute to media-literacy and mediation in the Netherlands.

As a result of the above-mentioned advice by the Raad voor Cultuur in 2005, various educational trajectories have also been established to train and professionalize employees of for example schools or libraries on the topic of media-literacy. One of these initiatives has resulted in media-coaches, of which the Netherlands now have about 800 that function as media-brokers in the community and organize parent-teacher meetings or other initiatives that contribute to awareness about technical issues of media use (e.g. Nationale Opleiding Media Coach, 2018). From 2017 on, a special training for library employees in the Netherlands will be organized by the Koninklijke Bibliotheek (*National Library of the Netherlands*) in collaboration with the Netherlands Youth Institute. This training is aimed at deepening the knowledge of librarians and media-coaches in the domain of media pedagogical issues, and is largely based on state-of-the-art academic research on children and media. As of 2012, the Windesheim University of Applied Science also offers a unique international minor for students in Social Work, specifically aimed at media use in the family and media-literacy (Windesheim, 2018). Each year,

about 50 students complete this program – which so far is the only full minor in the Netherlands on media and parental mediation, next to four other minors on media-didactics in school – and find employment in education (support) and youth work. The minor is directly connected to a “child and media” professorship at the university, and thus incorporates the latest academic findings on children, media and parenting.

Inspired and supported by the Mediawijzer network, the Netherlands Youth Institute in 2015 launched the Toolbox Mediaopvoeding (*Toolbox on parental mediation*), an information set with about 20 fact- and tip sheets about children and media for professionals in healthcare, parent support, or education (NJI, 2018). In contrast to the usual parent advice, this information is age specific – keeping account of child developmental characteristics between 0 and 18 years. Furthermore, it is validated by academic knowledge, addresses both negative and positive outcomes of media use for children, and specifically also addresses children with a mental disability. It also offers hands-on suggestions for organizing an effective parent meeting. At the moment, the toolbox is extended with additional information on parental mediation in families with a non-Dutch cultural background or functional illiteracy. The toolbox, which is financed by the ministry of Welfare, has been heartedly welcomed by professionals in the field who can now support parents with validated information about children and media. These professionals emphasize the importance of parental involvement in shared media usage and their consistency in guidance. They also give parents more insight into how young children experience media so they can make deliberate choices for what does (not) fit their level of development. Thirdly, they emphasize a healthy balance of activities throughout the day.

Other interesting Dutch initiatives which are directly aimed at parents, rather than at professional workers, are Mediaopvoeding.nl and Kijkwijzer. The former consists of a website where parents can post questions about children and media that are answered by professional pedagogues, psychologists or other experts in parental mediation. The conversations are placed anonymously on the website and attract many interested visitors who may have the same concerns in their family situation. The website was created and launched as a cooperation of three non-for-profit organizations with a grant from Mediawijzer and attracts about a few thousand visitors per month who mostly are reading texts.

Kijkwijzer is the national rating system for almost all audiovisual productions offered in television, cinema and on DVDs (Kijkwijzer, 2018). Like PEGI which was developed for video games on the basis of Kijkwijzer, the rating system informs parents and children about potential harm of the content for children under specific ages (6, 9, 12, and 16 years) and indicates which type of content may induce these negative effects (violence, fear, sex, alcohol/drugs, discrimination, and rude language). The system is based on both scientific literature on children and media (Tan et al., 2002) and on regular surveys among parents tapping their needs for information and support. The age classifications and content indicators are provided in television-guides, newspapers, film posters, film- and DVD-boxes and via apps and websites. Kijkwijzer is the joint enterprise of three

ministries (Culture, Welfare and Justice), the media industry (public and commercial television, retail, and cinema) and academic advisors specialized in child development and communication studies. It was launched in 2001 and has been highly appreciated by the Dutch population right from the start.

A shared element in almost all initiatives mentioned above is the strong cooperation between organizations from different domains. In doing so, commercial and non-profit foundations work together with the government and with research institutions to reach a common goal: to inform or empower parents and/or children in families.

## Conclusion: The future of digital parenting

The media landscape will continue to change. In the near future it is likely that virtual reality, augmented reality and the internet of things will become entangled with the media practices of young children. It is important to keep a close watch on these practices and their additional opportunities and risks. This will also call for new initiatives for guidance and support by parents and teachers. In the ever-changing media landscape there is never a final answer to what the best practices are for parental mediation. It is therefore important to further develop our shared knowledge in order to provide solid guidelines on what parents should or should not do. Notwithstanding the many initiatives that have been taken in the Netherlands in the domain of media-literacy and families with young children, we would like to indicate three gaps in our knowledge. First, reliable measures of young children's media use in relation to their non-media activities are scarce, specifically regarding non-traditional Dutch families. Secondly, it is important to know which parenting support initiatives make a significant contribution to parental mediation, and specifically under which circumstances, and for which parents or children. Finally, we need more insight into how media devices and modern technology can assist young children's development and how the school and home environment can best contribute to make a difference.

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### III.

Challenges, risks and opportunities  
of digital media for parents and children



# The Child as Datafied Citizen

## *Critical Questions on Data Justice in Family Life*

Veronica Barassi

### Abstract

This article explores the relationship between parents' digital practices and the production of children's data traces and argues that the multiple variety of data traces that are produced daily about children can be used to profile them as citizen subjects. Drawing on the findings of the Child Data Citizen project, a qualitative and ethnographically informed research which explores the impact of big data on family life, the chapter however deconstructs theories of panopticon surveillance or quantified selves. Instead it sheds light on the fact that the datafication of family life is a complex and messy process, which leads to the production of imprecise, fragmented and inaccurate data. The paper, therefore, argues that we need to start asking critical questions about the relationship between the datafication of children, algorithmic inaccuracies and data justice.

**Keywords:** datafication, digital citizenship, data justice, digital parents, big data

### Introduction

On an average family day data is everywhere. Shopping lists, utility bills, artificial intelligence devices, social media platforms, mobile apps, doctor appointments, school communications, and entertainment devices, all gather, archive and store highly personalised forms of data. In this context, critical questions are emerging on the data traces of children, their everyday surveillance, and the ways in which they may be affecting their rights. What is becoming obvious is that children's personal information is being collected, stored, archived and profiled in ways that were not possible before, and that parents' digital practices are directly related to this transformation. In the last few years, we have thus seen the emergence of research that has looked at children's data. Some scholars have focused on the practice of "sharenting", which sees parents sharing personal data of their children on social media (Ammari et al., 2015; Bessant, 2017; Blum-Ross &

Livingstone, 2016; Kumar & Schoenenbeck, 2015), others have looked at mobile apps, and in particular early infancy apps (Barassi, 2017a; Leaver, 2017; Thomas & Lupton, 2015), whilst some have instead focused on the internet of things and artificial intelligent (AI) toys (Chaudron et al., 2017). By reflecting on all these data traces, Lupton and Williamson (2017) concluded that at an historical time where we are witnessing “unprecedented capacities for monitoring children” we are also seeing the rise of the “datafied child” (2017: 783).

This chapter aims to bring the argument about datafied children further by showing that we cannot analyse the increased datafication of children without asking critical questions about changing notions of digital citizenship. The chapter draws on the findings of the Child Data Citizen project, an ethnographically informed research project on the impacts of big data on family life.

In the first part of this chapter I will explore the concept of digital citizenship not only by considering how it relates to the concept of child (Third & Collin, 2016) but also by highlighting the ways in which the concept is being transformed by our data-driven cultures (Barassi, 2016; Hintz et al., 2017). This first part of the chapter will argue that the emergence of the “datafied child” raises critical question about the ways in which digital citizenship is being re-defined by the surveillance and tracking of citizens from birth.

In the second part of the chapter, however, I will argue that it is important that we avoid essentialist images of the “datafied child”, which understand children as quantified selves, surveilled and profiled by corporate platforms and algorithmic logics. In fact, I will show that what is missing from this essentialist understanding, is a careful reflection about the messiness, unpredictability and inaccuracy of processes of datafication in family life.

The chapter will thus conclude that it is precisely in this messiness, which leads to algorithmic inaccuracies that the most problematic social and political implications of the datafication of children lies.

## Digital parenting in the age of the datafication of everyday life

On a hot summer day in 2016, I walked in to the home of Alicia<sup>1</sup>, a mother of two young children in her 30s who lived in a wealthy neighbourhood of Los Angeles. I had known Alicia for a few months. That day we sat down, with a glass of wine, for an hour interview. After the interview we kept chatting for another few hours. We had the afternoon for ourselves. Alicia recounted how she experienced the “data revolution”, that social and cultural transformation, which saw a dramatic increase in the collection of highly personalised and context-specific data. For her the process, at the beginning, was slow, almost imperceptible. Yet at a certain point, over the last two years, she suddenly realised that she couldn’t join a service without giving up precious personal information, that her health records, utility bills, shopping habits, and the educational data of

her children were all digitised and probably stored in some archive. She also realised that she was constantly targeted by companies.

Alicia used to work in advertising and marketing and she knew how companies used the data, how they profiled consumers and how they approached them through targeted advertising. She also knew that much of the data collected from users, was collected from or integrated with social media content. So she talked about this transformation, and how it affected her life and the life of her family.

Alicia was very aware that her own digital practices and choices as a parent determined the amount of data traces that were produced about her children: she regularly posted her children's photos on Facebook; she used an app operated surveillance system in their bedroom; she relied on different digital platforms to monitor their educational progress as well as their health. Yet overall she conveyed the impression that for her the techno-historical transformation was inevitable and that her children were going to grow up with large amounts of exploitable and highly personalised data traces, which may impact on their lives as future citizens.

Alicia's interview was one of the first that I collected for the Child Data Citizen project, which aims to provide a rich, qualitative analysis of the multiple ways in which parents are experiencing and understanding the datafication of family life. The research focuses on families in the U.K. and the U.S. with children between 0 and 13 years of age. It investigates how parents produce children's data traces, how they understand digital surveillance and online privacy, and how they negotiate with the advent of big data and artificial intelligence. The project relies on a multi-method approach, which combines 50 semi-structured in-depth interviews, one year of participant observation, nine months of digital ethnography of the social media of eight families, two focus groups, and the qualitative platform analysis of four social media platforms, ten early infancy apps, four AI devices and home automation hubs and two AI toys.

The project aims to explore the interconnection between children's data traces and the making of digital citizenship. Its aim is to shed light on the fact that children's data traces are not only constructing their public and civic persona, but need also to be understood with reference to broader processes of surveillance of citizen's personal data. In the last few years, the notion of digital citizenship has been at the centre of an interdisciplinary debate between those scholars that understand digital citizenship as describing the ways in which people use digital technologies to "participate" to society (Mossberger et al., 2007) or enact specific rights (Isin & Ruppert, 2015) and those scholars that understand digital citizenship as linked to the surveillance and governance of citizen's data (Hintz et al., 2017). According to Hintz and colleagues "at an historical time where both state agencies and companies surveille every aspect of citizen's life, we are not just digital citizens because of our actions but also because we increasingly live and operate in a datafied environment in which everything we do leaves data traces" (2016: 732).

The Child Data Citizen project is based on the belief that it is precisely by looking at the datafication of childhood that we can fully appreciate the ways in which digital citizenship is being transformed. Today children are not only digital citizens because

their digital practices enable them to enact and perform their public persona (Third & Collin, 2016), they are datafied citizens because they are coerced into digitally participating to society through their data traces (Barassi, 2017a, 2017b). By signing off terms and conditions, sharing personal information on social media, buying the latest home hubs or AI technologies, parents like Alicia are co-participant in coercing children's digital participation and shaping their data traces. Often parents do not have much choice and even if they clearly see the privacy and security implications for their children, they find themselves forced by their children's schools, health care providers etc. into joining the latest Facebook group or downloading the latest app. As the next part of the paper will show, at an historical time in which willingly or unwillingly parents become co-participants in coercing their children into participating to society through data traces, we at first need to start unpicking and understanding the complex relationship between data traces and digital citizenship, and secondly we need to shed light on the fact that in our data driven society corporations, governments and institutions are using children's data in non-transparent and non-accountable ways.

### *The child as datafied citizen*

We cannot understand the relationship between childhood and digital citizenship without considering Third and Collin's (2016) insightful contribution that argues that we need to re-think the notion of children's citizenship by looking at digital practice. The scholars place a special emphasis on the concept of *performance*, and show that children/youth's digital acts are often directed at confronting, contesting and challenging the adult world in a public and performative way. The emphasis on the performative dimension of digital citizenship is of course not new. Third and Collin's are influenced by scholars like Couldry and colleagues (2014) who argued that the performance of digital citizenship is often achieved through digital storytelling (Couldry et al., 2014) or Isin and Ruppert (2015) who have focused on the relationship between the performance of digital citizenship and the power of speech (2015: 51-65). According to Third and Collin's (2016), however, children's ambiguous position in society, as not-yet-citizen, makes the performance of their digital citizenship more creative and radical than the adult one.

Third and Collin's (2016) article is of fundamental importance as it sheds light on how the public dimension of childhood is enacted through digital practice. Yet there is a fundamental aspect that is being overlooked in Third and Collin's (2016) argument on children's digital citizenship: the question about data traces. If digital citizenship is performed through speech acts, then an important question that we need to address is what happens when data traces "speak for" and "about us". This question lied at the heart of the Child Data Citizen project. The project revealed that on an average family day multiple narratives can be constructed departing from children's data traces, which define them as citizen subjects. These include not only the social media narratives of parents and other family members and friends, like many scholars have shown (Bessant,

2017; Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017; Kumar & Schoenenbeck, 2015) but also the digital narratives that are constructed through the mining of children's personal data.

It is by considering how data traces talk about and for individuals that we realise that when we think about the datafication of children the issue at heart is not only one about privacy and surveillance, but it is about the type of assumptions and conclusions that are reached through the profiling of children's data. A critical example of this can be found if we consider the role of data brokers in our everyday life. According to a report by the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) (2014) the data collected by data brokers relates to numerous different dimensions of family life from web browsing activities to bankruptcy information, voting registration, consumer purchase data, warranty registrations, and other details of everyday interactions. What is interesting about the FTC report is the fact that individuals are identified as 'consumers' yet when the data collected and profiled – as the report suggests – is about voting registration or details about one's own religion, ethnicity etc, then we are not simply talking about consumers and consumers' rights, but citizens' and citizens' rights.

When we think about children's data then, the issues at stake is not only about the protection of the private information that is collected and shared, but also about how the data collected and processed can impact on their everyday life through practices of predictive analytics (Crawford & Schultz, 2014: 98-100). Now, although predictive analytics needs to be understood as a function of artificial intelligence that enables machines to bring different databases together and trace individual patterns (Elmer, 2004), we also need to be aware of the fact that our everyday digital interactions are often determined by individuals who try to "read", "profile" and "predict" other people's behaviours on the basis of their online profiles. The school headmaster, the employer, the insurer constantly checks the data traces of individuals in order to reach conclusions and predict outcomes of specific behavioral or psychological characteristics.

The impact of predictive analytics and digital profiling on people's life is triggering a shift in policy regulations. The latest advances in EU Data Protection laws, for instance, place a particular emphasis on the "right to be forgotten" and also pay particular attention to children's personal information. The problem with the new laws for data protection is represented by their implementation. This becomes evident in the following quote from the EU Commission:

When children have made data about themselves accessible – often without fully understanding the consequences – they must not be stuck with the consequences of that choice for the rest of their lives. This does not mean that on each request of an individual all his personal data are to be deleted at once and forever. If, for example, the retention of the data is necessary for the performance of a contract, or for compliance with a legal obligation, the data can be kept as long as necessary for that purpose. (EU Commission Fact Sheet, 2017: 1-2)

The above quote shows that the implementation of the right to be forgotten is not straightforward at all and can be extremely problematic. In addition to that, when we

think about the digital profiling of children, as Savirimuthu (2015) rightly argued, we need to be aware of the fact that the empowerment discourse about data protection, which assumes that citizens are agents in the protection of their own privacy (e.g. in requesting to be forgotten) does not address the social complexity of processes of datafication. In the next part of the chapter, I would like to focus on an element of this complexity: algorithmic inaccuracies.

### *Algorithmic inaccuracies, digital profiling and data justice in family life*

It becomes clear from the above parts that today the experience of childhood is being affected by processes of datafication. Yet, when we think about children as datafied citizens we should move away from the essentialist notion of “the datafied child”, which seems to define children as “data assemblages” (Lupton & Williamson, 2017). Whilst such notions are tempting when we map – like Lupton and Williamson (2017) successfully do – the multiple digital technologies that collect the data of children, we must acknowledge that the datafication of children is not a linear, cohesive or even a rational process that is transforming them into quantified selves. It is a rather complex and messy process defined by an incredible and almost untraceable plurality of digital practices that lead to the construction of multiple, messy, inaccurate and contradictory predictions.

This latter point emerged vividly during my research. Parents were asked to imagine the type of narratives that people would construct on the basis of the information they shared on social media or through other digital practices and to predict how these narratives could impact on the making of their children as future citizens. Findings revealed that multiple and contradictory narratives could be built on the basis of the data traces of one individual child, and that children could be profiled as consumer, political, gendered, health, legal or class subjects. I do not have the space here to explore the different narratives that could be constructed about a single child or to describe how parents reacted as they reflected on the issue of digital profiling. Part of these findings can be found elsewhere (Barassi, 2017b) where I have explored the relationship between digital storytelling, political data flows and political profiling in family life.

What I am interested in analysing here is the fact that children are being profiled on the basis of highly contradictory, inaccurate and imprecise data traces. When I was carrying out research in the U.S. for instance I interviewed Pia<sup>2</sup> who lived in detached home surrounded by a large garden in the heart of a middle class neighbourhood in Los Angeles. The living room had all the signs of an intense family life, with two mothers, a 9-month old baby, two cats and two dogs. She recounted how her family life was entirely organised around digital technologies, especially the phone, and how she and her partner used both pregnancy and baby apps to monitor the growth of their baby. Then she told me that, although at first these apps seemed to be a good idea because her and her partner would share important information about feeding, sleeping habits etc., at a certain point they just became “too much work”, and the data they inputted was messy and inaccurate.



Apps are one of the fundamental examples of the fact that when we think about the relationship between family life, daily technological use and processes of datafication, there is a clear *human disconnect* between technological discourses and structures (e.g. the promotional culture of self-tracking apps or their design) and everyday practices. During the research it became evident that parents most of the times did not use the technologies as they were supposed to and that the narratives that could be constructed about children's data traces were often the result of imprecise behavior or carefully employed *tactics* (Barassi & Trere, 2012) to protect their privacy and the ones of their children.

The imprecision of children's data flows is a fundamental feature of the datafication of family life. In this context the profiling of children's data is particularly problematic. Of course, through the collection of digital data people can trace connections and behavioural patterns of a child's life. Yet it is important that we understand that these connections and patterns are not necessarily accurate, as this type of data is a type of data, which is systematically taken out of context (Boyd & Crawford, 2012: 670-671) and detached from the intention, desires and understandings that shape everyday technological use in the family.

In understanding the datafication of children therefore we need to ask critical questions about algorithmic inaccuracies and how they can impact on children's life as future citizen. In a beautiful piece on algorithmic bias McQuillan (2016) argues that algorithms are the "eye" of big data. According to him, "algorithmic seeing" does not produce a computational panopticon but a mechanism of prediction which many times reproduces the prejudice of inputs. When we think about algorithmic inaccuracies and the datafication of children, therefore, we realise that current debates about surveillance and privacy should move beyond and include a discussion about fair representation, transparency and accuracy of digital profiling. In other words, we should begin to start reflecting on the issue of data justice in family life.

## Conclusion

Today the lived experience of childhood and family life is being transformed by intrusive and impactful practices of datafication. This paper has argued that we cannot analyse the increased datafication of children without asking critical questions about changing notions of digital citizenship in our data-driven cultures. The paper has shown that children are not only digital citizens because their digital practices enable them to enact and perform their public persona (Third & Collin, 2016). They are also datafied citizens because they are coerced into digitally participating to society through the data traces produced by their parents (Barassi, 2017a, 2017b).

In the second part of the chapter I have argued that when we think about children as datafied citizens the issue at heart is not only one about privacy and surveillance, it is also about the type of assumptions and conclusions that are reached through the

profiling of children's data. This later point is particularly important if we appreciate the fact that the datafication of children is not a linear, rational and accurate process but leads to a multiple variety of messy and contradictory data traces, which are then used to profile children as citizen subjects. In this context, the article concluded, we need to further develop our debates about privacy and surveillance by taking into account critical questions about data justice in family life.

## Notes

1. Fictional name to protect the participant's anonymity.
2. Fictional name to protect the participant's anonymity.

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# The Trouble with “Screen Time” Rules

Alicia Blum-Ross & Sonia Livingstone

## Abstract

In this chapter we analyse the widely influential American Academy of Pediatrics’ (AAP) “screen time” guidelines (issued in 1999 and updated in 2016) in relation to the existing evidence about parental mediation and the lived experience of families in the digital age. In our interviews with 73 diverse families in London, we have been struck by how often some version of these guidelines surfaces, often without knowing where they come from, as parents castigate themselves for allowing their children “too much” screen time, without much critical examination of what this means. We argue that these and similar time- or exposure-based guidelines rely on an insufficient evidence base, and lead parents to prioritise restrictive forms of screen time that neither serve the purpose of keeping children safe, nor of helping them towards opportunities.

**Keywords:** screen time, parenting, American Academy of Pediatrics, families, twenty-first century skills, parental mediation

## Introduction

From worries about toddlers’ use of tablets to teens being glued to their mobile phones or “addictive” video games or social media apps, the amount and nature of children’s “screen time” is as hot a topic as ever. Expert inquiries and journalistic investigations reflect growing concerns that childhood is being thoroughly reconfigured by the influx of digital media. Parents take on, and often amplify, the abundant and fearful claims that screen time is damaging their children physically and mentally. Yet parents – and society – face a troubling paradox. For alongside their worries, families also greatly enjoy the opportunities, pleasures and the conveniences of digital media in their daily lives. Beyond the present,

parents look to tomorrow's world in which the jobs are forecasted to require "twenty-first century skills" crucial for navigating artificial intelligence, algorithms, robots, internet of things, and more (Children's Commissioner, 2017; European Commission, 2017).

Parents are at the frontline in navigating today's contradictory visions of media change – working to ensure that their children learn digital skills and yet castigating themselves for not providing the less pervasively digital childhood they say they benefited from (Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2018). In order to unpack some of the dilemmas parents face in bringing up children in a digital age, in this chapter we put our fieldwork with parents into conversation with the influential guidelines produced by the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), originally produced in 1999 and updated in 2016. In interviews with diverse families in London, we were struck by how often some version of these guidelines surfaced unattributed in our interviews with parents, although they were originally intended for American parents trying to manage their children's television viewing.

In our interviews they were most commonly referenced through the concept of screen time and secondarily through some mention of the famous "2x2" rules, namely that no child under 2-years old should be exposed to any screen media, and no child over 2 should watch more than two hours per day. For example, Robert Kostas's son Jake (aged 15) is now on a "reduction programme" in which the parents are trying to "cut [screen time] down... until it's at a manageable level, which should be no more than two hours." Leila Mohammed, (mother of 8 and 10-year old) told us:

In the news I heard...no more than two hours... one hour I say stop ... do what you want, up and down, stay, go out, writing or what you want, more than one half on the computer and on the TV, it's not good sense.

In the same period of time that we were interviewing parents, the AAP recognised the significant changes in children's media landscape over recent years and decided to update its review of the evidence regarding screen time "harms" so as to revise its recommendations to parents (Chassiakos et al., 2016). However, in key respects the evidence reviewed and the resulting recommendations remain at odds with the experiences and concerns we were finding in family homes. This led us to produce a policy brief for UK stakeholders that highlighted the poor fit between screen time rules and the messy realities of family life (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2016). Here we explain our critique of the revised AAP guidelines and discuss the implications for the still-unmet needs and concerns of parents.

To do so, we draw on our qualitative interviews with 73 families in London, UK. These were conducted face-to-face, usually in family homes but sometimes at another location convenient to the parent. We balanced a purposive sample of parents for whom the digital offered something distinctive (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017) with others whom we recruited as a cross-section of families by age of child (from birth to 17), ethnicity and socio-economic status. In this chapter, we explore whether screen time rules and guidelines match up with parents' on-the-ground practices. We critique the AAP

guidelines on the basis that these are based on limited evidence and often lead parents to focus on restrictive forms of screen time regulation that neither serve the purpose of keeping children safe nor of enabling digitally-mediated opportunities. As other countries are now following the US in developing their own guidelines, often building on the work of the AAP, our critique has a wider applicability (Australian Government Department of Health, 2017; Canadian Paediatric Society, 2017).

### A critical commentary on the AAP “screen time rules”

The original 1999 parental guidance (revisited in 2011 and 2013) centred on banning any screen time for infants and restricting it to two hours per day for children. In 2016, the AAP conducted an updated evidence review (Chassiakos et al., 2016) before publishing its findings and revised recommendations (Council on Communications and Media, 2016a, Council on Communications and Media, 2016b). The new recommendations are not as simple as the headline-grabbing “2x2” rule that has embedded itself into parents’ consciences, with somewhat better acknowledgement that media use must be contextualised within diverse family cultures (Clark, 2013). The new guidelines state that:

1. Infants and toddlers should be screen-free, excepting interactive media like video chats,
2. From 18 months, high quality television content is OK as long as a parent watches and engages with their child,
3. For 2 to 5-year olds, screen time should be restricted to one hour per day, with parents helping to interpret content,
4. Families should develop a “Media Plan” (the AAP provides an interactive tool), including designated “media free” times,
5. Children aged 6 and over should be included in creating the media plan, and parents should enforce time limits to ensure that screen time doesn’t displace sleeping, playing, conversation and physical activities,
6. Last, rather than simply controlling or monitoring their children’s media use, parents should think of themselves as their child’s “media mentor,” paying attention to how they model screen time values for their children.

The new rules are problematic in two ways – first, when one tries to match these recommendations to the available evidence, and second when one tries to match them to the practical realities of family life. Although the AAP has made greater efforts to review for positive effects in the technical report, there are familiar methodological problems. Not all kinds of screen or screen time are equivalent so findings cannot simply be merged. For instance, not all involve sedentary activity (think of motion-enabled games or wearables), so to add up screen *time* and correlate it with obesity is flawed. Also,

researchers often control for only a limited number of factors influencing children's wellbeing and, since they can hardly expose children randomly to potentially harmful media, it is hard to rule out reverse correlation (e.g., overweight children prefer to sit and watch television) or confounding factors (e.g. some children may be kept home by their parents more often for safety reasons). Yet the AAP technical report primarily relies on correlational evidence, and so is unable to draw conclusions that screen time has a straightforward causal effect on children.

There are problematic gaps in the evidence too. There is a section on whether it is alright for babies and toddlers to be in touch with their grandparents using video chat that cites (just) one study on language development (Choi & Kirkorian, 2016), but it remains unclear whether such interactions support or undermine the development of intergenerational emotional connections (McClure et al., 2015). Studies are cited on whether watching videos helps toddlers learn new words (answer: perhaps, but only if parents actively support; Richert et al., 2010) but nothing that recognises children's pleasure in singing and dancing along with a video, or enacting the drama on the screen also with their siblings in front of it. There are studies showing that many "educational apps" are not very educational at all, but few on what children learn from the apps that are effective (see, by contrast, Marsh et al., 2015). Most surprisingly, it's hard to find evidence in the report for the specific new recommendation of a one-hour limit for 2 to 5-year olds. Yet parents might find it surprising that, after decades of research, there still isn't a robust body of research which definitively shows robust causal evidence of harm (Ferguson, 2017), nor which distinguishes different types of effects from different media on different children over the long-term (Millwood Hargrave & Livingstone, 2006). Notwithstanding the limited evidence underpinning the new recommendations, they have attracted significant media attention – with one headline proclaiming "A major update relaxes screen time rules for some kids" (Cha, 2016).

## The daily realities of parenting in the digital age

From our research, we learned that parents understand the role of digital media in the ecology of family life in many different ways. Notably, they are often more concerned about the day-to-day impact and possibilities of media use rather than about abstract future harms. Parents invest in digital media to help their children learn (Davies & Jewitt, 2011), to spend time together (Lull, 1980), and to help children connect with peers, especially when physical safety outside the home cannot be guaranteed or a parent has other demands (Warren, 2005). As both parents and children gain digital skills, assumptions that parents are "digital immigrants" (Prensky, 2001) or that children are passive viewers become increasingly outdated (Livingstone et al., 2017). In this context, it is problematic that the AAP guidelines emerge from the dominant framework driving research (and funding) in the US and in Europe, which has substantially focused on mitigating the presumed negative effects of media consumption rather than, also, rec-



ognising the potential benefits as digital media become important not only for children's leisure but also their learning, communication and participation (Livingstone, 2016). For parents with children who play several hours of sport and then like to collapse in front of a screen, the idea that such viewing will cause obesity must seem misplaced. And for parents whose children who are learning how to code or create their own video content or turning to Youtube to learn a new guitar chord, ignoring potential benefits of screen time could be undermining.

Yet the reach and influence of the AAP rules has the consequence that the very idea of screen time looms large over parents' heads. Time and again we heard parents of young children struggle to balance the convenience of screen time with their worries about being a "good" parent. For example, Beth Watson, the mother of a 4-year old and a 2-year old, who works part-time, pressured herself to "do stuff" on the days she is at home, "otherwise what's the point... why am I [at home] if they're just watching telly?" She mused that although sometimes she "just [hasn't] got the energy to fight it today", she feels "really guilty" if they watch too much TV. This sentiment was echoed by other parents, especially mothers, who used words like "guilty" and "lazy" to describe "letting" children have "too much" screen time – although "too much" was often ill-defined. At the same time, and without taking the opportunity to critique the notion of screen time, Beth happily recounted their kitchen dance parties to Disney songs on Youtube.

In addition to parents judging themselves harshly, they also noted other children's screen time critically. Sweta Fletcher detailed her rules for 4-year old son Nikhil, and her thoughts on his peers:

I might say, right, you can play with [the tablet] until it's time to go upstairs to bed. But normally that's no more than 10, 15 minutes... I think once I let him use it for half an hour because I got distracted... also he doesn't use a tablet every day. And I think for a lot of children, they do. And that's not a judgment. The conversation about screen time is a big thing, because I think a lot of parents worry firstly about how long is okay, and secondly about the impact.

While limiting screen time may be tricky, it is helpful for discipline – a motivational punishment or reward. For example, Ariam Parkes (mother of daughters aged 2, 8 and 9) explained that "a couple of times I've used [screen time] as a punishment... I've taken away the Kindle for a week." The reverse is also true. Daisy Bardem, the mother of boys aged 3, 6 and 8, described how her husband "made up this song... called the Screen Time song, and so if they did something exceptional that we were really happy with, we said, 'that's ten minutes of screen time for you!' So it was a reward and we'd all sing." For some parents screen time was simply a necessity. Mother of three Andrea Foster let her oldest children (6 and 3) "have a couple of programmes while I'm having a shower." Andrea's oldest daughter has autism and so for her the tablet also provided respite from the chaos of her two younger siblings.

Parents viewed the potential negative effects of screen time as both physical and psychological. For example, Amber Boon (mother of a 5-year old girl) wondered whether

“looking at the screen all the time... really limits the amount of eye contact that children have”. Many parents, like single mother Anisha Kumar (with a 3-year old boy) worried that their children might (or had already) become “addicted” or “obsessed” with screens. But even in this there is some ambivalence. Anisha recounted how “on one hand I thought I never wanted him to be addicted... But given that he started speaking late, he picked up so much from [Peppa Pig] and I was like... it can’t be such a bad thing”. Ariam Parkes, although nervous about screen time, also appreciated the new digital homework platform at her daughters’ school because her oldest “loves going on the computer... her maths skills have improved a hundred per cent, just completely – her confidence, her speed”.

One undercurrent in the screen time debate is the elision of very real differences in resources, support or special needs. For instance, Florence Lewis describes:

I think this is one every parent’s battling with, because we all know that you should probably try and limit screen time... However, my [9-year old] son’s on the autism spectrum, and I think that that makes it hard for him to interact in the real world... I try and make sure he gets enough social time that he can handle, and I let him have downtime on the computer because I know that actually relaxes him.

We interviewed several families living well below the poverty line who had diverse reasons for turning to screen time to help their children. For example, single mother Cecilia Apau (with 4 and 8-year old sons and a 13-year old daughter) worked long hours at a grocery store but had purchased a tablet so that her children might improve in “maths, spelling, reading, anything... I want them to learn every day”. Some families lived in unsafe neighbourhoods, so their children’s physical safety was a more pressing preoccupation. Anna Michaels (mother of a 9 and a 13 year-old) said “there’s a lot of gang violence around here,” so she was happy when she could keep watch on her son while he was indoors playing video games or watching TV.

Other families were physically separated – sometimes over great distances. For immigrant families screen time provided a cost-effective way of maintaining ties. Wembe Kazadi (father of a 5 and a 10-year-old) came to the UK as an asylum seeker and described how he had not seen his daughter since she was an infant, but they’d been “speaking on the phone... their mother had Viber and Whatsapp so they could see that I was sending pictures and they were sending pictures to me as well”. Digital media also helped immigrant parents keep their children in contact with their family culture or language. 9-year old Mariana Ferreira exclusively watched Portuguese language satellite TV. Her mother Claudia said she wanted Mariana to “know [she] is Portuguese” and to be able to communicate with friends and family when they visit Portugal.

## Conclusion: Beyond screen time

Having critiqued the screen time guidance, it is only fair to observe that the AAP notes that its approach is deliberately conservative, favouring a precautionary approach in the

absence of solid evidence (Kamanetz, 2016). This is understandable, given that parents want guidance now and cannot wait for further decades of research or, indeed, for their children to grow up only for parents to realise their mistakes. What concerns us most is that parents seem to use these rules as a yardstick to measure themselves against, often judging themselves to be failing if their child watches TV or plays video games “too much,” without a deeper rationale for why they made this judgement (Evans et al., 2011). Further, simple time limits are not actionable when screen time can mean homework, shopping, time with friends or video calls with parents or relatives far from home. So we are, first, concerned about the considerable pressure placed on parents to focus on limiting children’s screen time, given the limited evidence of harm, and we find it troubling that although the old time limits are somewhat relaxed, parents still cite the “two hour rule” as if it were set in stone.

Changing the conversation around screen time will help parents recognise that there are as many ways of “good” parenting with screens as without them. Research has long suggested that when parents “jointly engage” with their children – asking questions, extending play – children attain more sustainable learning outcomes (Strouse, et al., 2013; Takeuchi & Stevens, 2011), and yet this nuanced advice is often lost in the anxiety over watching the clock – instead of watching, or engaging with, one’s child. One can also read the intention underlying the AAP’s recommendations as not so much, in fact, that screens are *bad* for children but, rather, that social, cognitive and physical activity is *good* for children. Our contention is that in the digital age such activities are themselves often mediated, complicating the simple polarisation of screen time (as implicitly mindless and sedentary) versus time well-spent (as implicitly screen-free). For example, consider the sudden popularity of the augmented reality game Pokémon Go in 2016, which raised concerns about safety (Serino et al., 2016) but is also credited with supporting healthy activity and exploration (Althoff et al., 2016; LeBlanc & Chaput, 2017).

For parents caught between fears of media harms and hopes for a digital future, a more nuanced consideration of the nature and purpose of screen media in different contexts is now urgent. The very discourse of screen time distracts parents into counting minutes rather than making judgements about the nature of their children’s media use or reflecting on how they interact with their children through media or model good habits in their *own* lives. Focusing only on limits is hardly a realistic proposition in an age when digital media are fast becoming the infrastructure for work, leisure, learning, relationships and community life.

Instead, we suggest that support for parents needs to focus on helping parents understand that the content of what their children watch and do on and with screens, the context of where they watch and do, and the connections they make (or do not make) while watching and doing. These give more insights into the positive or negative ramifications of digital media use than a simple measure of time. Rather than seeing themselves as policing children’s media use, parents need to be encouraged to think critically about how they can support positive uses and minimize negative consequences (Barron et al., 2009). The next generation of advice for parents needs not only a stronger underpinning

in robust evidence, but also guidance about what uses of digital media might benefit or harm their children in particular circumstances, and why.

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# CHARGE on

## *Digital Parenting of a Child with Rare Genetic Syndrome with the Help of Facebook Group*

Pille Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt

### Abstract

This article relies on auto-ethnography to make sense of the role a closed Facebook group can play in the life of a parent with a child who has rare genetic syndrome, CHARGE. The article will use the concept of affordances as a general framework to make sense of the activities in the Facebook group. For Norman “affordances refer to the potential actions that are possible, but these are easily discoverable only if they are perceivable: Perceived affordances”, thus the Facebook group becomes a sum of imagined possibilities. Previous research has identified the following affordances of social media: *identity, flexibility, structure, narration* and *adaptation*. These five affordances will be used to structure the discussion around the parenting experiences.

**Keywords:** affordances, social media, auto-ethnography, parenting of a disabled child, online support community

### Introduction

The birth of a child with a genetic disorder that brings life-threatening complications is an overwhelming experience. I know, as my youngest son – now 4-years old – came too early, with many diagnoses and with several life-threatening episodes. Having been an avid internet user since mid-90s, turning to online environments was the first and the most obvious choice and I found a few Facebook groups that became “lifelines” and invaluable resources for parenting. This article is an autoethnographic journey that is currently ongoing for me. I have three children and I am writing this account on digital parenting with the help of a Facebook group based on my own personal experiences of parenting a child with complex genetic syndrome causing him to have several severe impairments.

My mother and mother-in-law can share their surprise when coming to greet us home after the birth of our first child in 2005, as we, the new mom and dad, were frantically googling in our bedroom to figure out how to use these eco-friendly nappies with our first-born. They were baffled and a bit insulted that we did not ask them, the generation who had had no access to single-use diapers and had thus mastered the cloth nappies. That was twelve years ago and both my husband and I were avid internet users and saw internet as a first resource to get an answer to our question. Eight years on, when my third child was born and soon diagnosed with rare (one in about 10,000 birth) genetic condition called CHARGE Syndrome, internet was my first resource for knowledge. The website for an American based CHARGE Syndrome foundation<sup>1</sup> became my resource and entry-point to scientific research and personal stories about this genetic syndrome. I used my university library to access medical articles from PubMed collections and my training as a PhD in attempts to master the genre of medical academic writing.

However, this is not the story of my quest for knowledge and mastery of the medical jargon. Nor is it the story of championing for my child against the institutional strongholds of the medical community. These are stories to be written in another time. Current article relies on my expertise as audience researcher and internet-use researcher and looks at the affordances of Facebook in raising a child with multiple disabilities. While basing my story on the personal account of an active internet user, I am fully aware that this is not necessarily the same for all the people, but in the spirit of Ricci (2003: 594) I hope that this autoethnography “allows the reader (and the writer) to experience something new – to feel, to learn, to discover, to co-create”.

## Locating the study

There is an increasing number of articles written about lived experiences of disabilities, however, these articles almost never make it to the arena of the media studies. Ellcessor, Hagood and Kirkpatrick (2017) point out that while there is a wealth of discussions around disability and media, neither of these disciplines is adequately able to grapple the complexities of disability and media together. Similarly, as there are many studies on the issues of parenting, parenting an *impaired* child is discussed much less. Being new to the field of disability studies, I hope this article is written in line with what Ellcessor and colleagues (2017) point out to be the three core contributions in the disability studies. Firstly, I subscribe to the idea that the disability is socially constructed. At the same time, I still feel that my child has impairments which pose real struggles beyond the ones that society imposes. Secondly, I identify and discuss the way a Facebook community is challenging the “normate” subject position and thirdly, I base this story and emphasis upon lived experience as epistemological basis for making claims.

I am a member of three CHARGE Syndrome related Facebook groups: CHARGE Syndrome, CHARGE Syndrome (UK) supporting each other and CHARGE Syndrome Skåne. The first of these is linked to the US charity CHARGE Syndrome Foundation, the



second is a UK-focused “sister group”, and the third is a local Swedish group (which I joined after we moved to Sweden and met parents to children with the same syndrome as my son). I will focus on my experiences with the first one: CHARGE Syndrome group as it is the largest (with over 6,000 members by now) and also has most traffic and conversations – normally, between three to ten posts a day, with an abundance of reactions and comments.

## What is CHARGE syndrome?

CHARGE Syndrome caused, in two thirds of the cases, by a mutation in the gene CHD7; in other cases, the diagnosis is clinical, based on the fact that the child has multiple anomalies and at least one of the following: Coloboma, Choanal Atresia, typical CHARGE external ears and CHARGE vestibular phenotype (small or absent semicircular canals). Every feature of CHARGE can vary from severe to absent and every feature can thus be related to severe to absent disability in that particular aspect. Colobomas affect the eyes causing mild to severe vision loss. Choanal atresia means blockage of nose passages meaning that babies have no way to breathe effectively (as babies learn to breathe through mouth only in 2-3 months of age). External and internal ear abnormalities mean that these children can have mild to severe hearing loss and very poor sense of balance. Often CHARGE is accompanied with heart defects, other breathing related issues, growth problems and cranial nerve damage causing problems with eating, but also issues with facial appearances. The problems with the input mean also that these kids have often difficulties processing the world in the typical manner and that causes a range of educational and behavioural issues that the kids and their parents struggle with. With this list of potential complications, the discussions in the Facebook group also range across a huge variety of topics.

## Therapeutic affordances

I decided to frame my autoethnographic enquiry with the concept of affordance, originally coined by Gibson (1979) who refers to the potential of action that can be taken with material objects or technologies. Norman (2013: 145) adds: “affordances refer to the potential actions that are possible, but these are easily discoverable only if they are perceivable: Perceived affordances”, thus the Facebook group becomes a sum of imagined possibilities. I will explore the affordances of the Facebook group through the lens of the affordance as “best anchored, not as latent capability innate to the technology, but as a potentiality that only exists when leveraged within a specific domain and set of actions” (Majchrzak et al., 2013: 39). Thus the affordances outlined hereafter are based on my experiences and observations in the CHARGE Facebook group and are less universal properties on social media technologies or even Facebook.

However, to connect to the larger discussions of affordances of social media in medical situations, I am using Merolli and colleagues (2013) who have utilized the concept of affordances to do a meta-analysis of medical studies looking at chronic disease management. They identify identity, flexibility, structure, narration, adaptation to be the five key affordances of social media and in a later work (Merolli et al., 2015) operationalize this list for survey research and label the same five as “therapeutic affordances”. I find these affordances helpful as, while children with the CHARGE Syndrome do often not qualify as chronically ill, the processual nature seemingly never-ending struggle has many similar features.

## The global-local dimension of Facebook group

Before embarking on a more detailed discussion of the affordances, the geographic nature of the group needs to be briefly discussed. The Facebook support group is in English, so while there seem to be people who use the group also with the help of machine translation features, the majority of the discussions are in English. That sets up a barrier of being an active member, as it requires mastery of written English. The group is also attached to US-based charity. This means that while global in reach, the discussions end up being still often American: dominated by the US and to a lesser extent Canadian participants. Other English-speaking countries as the UK, Australia and others can also be seen as more active in comparison to smaller countries with other languages. There are overwhelmingly more mothers in the group, although sometime fathers, grandparents, siblings or medical specialists also join the discussions. There are also a few young adults having CHARGE Syndrome who contribute to the discussions with their personal reflections or seeking advice in relation to dating, jobs, internships etc. The group has a few academics and doctors who are experts on different aspects of CHARGE syndrome and who are connected to the charity who are regularly called upon to give expert-advice.

## Identity affordance

Identity: Preferences regarding identity disclosure (Merolli et al., 2013; 2015). While Merolli thinks it is important to be able to choose the level of disclosure in regards to identity construction, I see a different kind of identity-related affordance. With Facebook being increasingly personalised and detached from the notions of anonymity, the parents in the Facebook group mostly use their real names and at least proximate locations to help to connect with other people. Thus the affordance is not related to anonymity. However, Merolli and colleagues (2013; 2015) also operationalise this through the preference to control the amounts and sorts of things other people know about a person and I can more readily relate to that idea. Closed Facebook group still means that your private

Facebook profile is protected unless you become friends with someone and then more information is shared to that friend. Otherwise, the people will be with their real names (most likely) connected through the online identities they construct.

As the concepts of healthy and sick are changing with the advances of medical science and with general democratization and opening the society, a larger diversity can be accepted. Traditionally, it is the healthy majority that has been able to define what is considered “normal” and “acceptable” in society (Foucault, 1990). Today, more and more online venues are discussing intimate and private aspects of individual’s lives in attempts to advocate for changing existing norms and opening the society for accepting a wider range of acceptable practices (Baym, 2015). Parents of the disabled children are using the Facebook group to create an enclave of acceptance and normalisation of their disabled children. While Merolli and colleagues (2013; 2015) can be seen clustering this together with the affordance of narration – recording, sharing and learning from other people’s experiences, then for me, this is also strongly related to identity building. I see this Facebook group as building an identity as the parents through the narratives (which I will discuss below), but also an enclave of normalisation of our different children, which is visible through sharing pictures and videos of their children in four distinctly different categories.

First – children in “normal” activities. This mode would include school pictures, first day in kindergarten, but also Christmas, Thanksgiving, Halloween and other celebration pictures. The pictures are mostly static and demonstrate important occasions often specific to US culture. For instance, the flood of kids in Halloween costumes or fourth of July celebrations can be noted. Birthday pictures are what probably many mothers share on Facebook anyway, but birthday pictures in the CHARGE group have extra meaning, related to the idea of survival. The survival rate of the children with CHARGE Syndrome is 70 per cent to 5 years of age (Blake, 2001) and that means that any of these birthdays are worthy to celebrate. The community also recognises this and shows support with likes and comments.

Second – children achieving milestones. CHARGE Syndrome is in the majority of cases causing numerous developmental delays – sometimes children catch up with the milestones of their healthy peers, other times, some of these milestones will forever remain unreachable. For instance, as children have missing, underdeveloped or different balance organs, sitting, standing, walking, running or dancing are generally harder to master. Thus, part of normalisation process includes sharing these milestones with the Facebook group.

Third – children in hospital/medical situations. The images of children lying on hospital beds, tangled with cords and wires and surrounded by medical equipment are the hardest ones for me. They are also part of the normalisation process. This Facebook group is the community who understands the struggles and the jargon and sees the children underneath the wires. These pictures are emotionally difficult as they remind actively the time when my child was also tangled up in these wires, and these memories are still difficult to digest even if our last hospitalisation was now three years ago.

Fourth – picture for attention/cuteness is a new phenomenon related to people seeking to connect to, but needing to trick the Facebook algorithms. As the technology seems to prefer posts with pictures, people often post unrelated images (mostly still of their child) to their queries. The practice also has a backwards result meaning that they will get more attention and more reactions to their posts, but also more comments in the line of – “I have no answers or can’t comment on the query, but your baby/child is adorable”.<sup>2</sup> As a combination, the picture for attention affordance is related to identity as the images are also used to reaffirm parents of the cuteness factor of their children, but the original purpose behind the images is the need to trick the Facebook algorithm.

Sharing images and videos is a very important technical feature of Facebook to which the identity affordance relies on. I remember a video from my early time in the group where a 5-year old girl was filmed coming down the stairs without holding on to the handrail. The caption could have been something along the lines – “Who needs these balance organs anyway!”. The feeling of pride, relief and hope that this video gave me has left a deep imprint. I don’t remember who the girl was. But I do remember the feeling of irrational hope that one day my baby will be able to do the same. The hope is irrational as the CHARGE Syndrome is a spectrum disorder, meaning that while some people do really well, others might die early due to complications arising from the syndrome. That makes identification process on Facebook complicated as you feel that this could be my baby with both the incredible success stories as well as the early death that is reflected on the site. You identify yourself emotionally with the mothers who mourn their babies as well as with the ones who celebrate their success.

Overall, the identity as the affordance has been a very important one for me. As a mother, I feel that I can share my kid with the community who understands how special his achievements are. With one of the few posts I have made to the community, I shared the image of my baby writing an alphabet. So far the only time he has done this, but for a kid who had just turned four and unexpectedly decided to show us that all the endless hours on Youtube had paid off by him memorising the whole alphabet and being able to write this, the moment was too precious not to share. For me, the image was a bragging moment, but I hope that it was also a moment of hope and pride to many others who could see that nothing is impossible.

## Flexibility affordance

Flexibility affordance is operationalized through being able to choose between synchronous and asynchronous communication (as well as geographic freedom) (Merolli et al., 2013, 2015). The Facebook group for CHARGE parents joins a lot of people across the globe and sometimes people who do not have English as their mother tongue write and seek support from the group. There are some instances where the Facebook group members recognize and utilize flexibility – you can pose your questions and wait for the answers despite the confinements of the time. Being a global group, there are often

active members despite the time, and there are several occasions where mothers post urgent questions (and received replies) also outside doctor's office hours. Sometimes the group is called to help to decide best ways forward. However, there are also examples where questions posted from "wrong" time zones go unnoticed and remain without answers.

The US focus of the global group means that often the discussions are very much US specific. Even if there is geographic freedom, the dominant membership coming from the US also influences the relevance of the topics, and non-US questions are not treated so thoroughly. The specific medical insurance policies, the struggles with particular school systems, success or struggles with particular hospitals are often discussed with a very clear country-specific vocabulary and approach. For me, these discussions have felt less relevant and less applicable. Similar lack of flexibility can also be seen in the discussions of the UK based CHARGE group where the hospital or school system discussions are focused on UK based solutions. Thus, while flexibility is an important affordance, the geographic spread makes some types of posts less relevant to people like me.

## Structure affordance

Operationalized in Merolli and colleagues (2015) survey as filtering and guidance as well as the preferred presence of health professional and preferred presence of a moderator, the structure affordance is related towards guiding the patient through the maze of information. In the CHARGE Facebook group, there are group owners, one of whom is an outreach community manager for the CHARGE Syndrome Foundation, but their presence is not visible. The discussions are overall hardly moderated, and the access to the common resources is not always very clear or transparent. However, there are a few expert members as mentioned before and occasionally members use Facebook tag function to invite the person to join the conversation. However, most of the times, people seem to be happy to rely on the collective knowledge of the group rather than expect the experts to have the answer. This reliance is perhaps related to CHARGE being a spectrum disorder – what might work or be applicable on one end of the spectrum might not be applicable in some other instances.

The Facebook group also relies little on the documents and knowledge resource provided by the foundation. In the earlier days of my journey, I also remember people linking to the function of the document of the group, but this seems to be forgotten. Overall, what the Facebook group lacks in regards to the organization and structuring of the information, participants sometimes compensate with linking, tagging and re-posting. I personally find the structure affordance be the least present through the technical aspects of Facebook, but very much there when it comes to the people participating in the discussions. The possibility to ask repeated questions and to be able to rely on not only the new answers but sometimes also digging up older materials is overall very helpful.

## Narration affordance

In Merolli and colleagues (2013; 2015), the narration is operationalised through recording experiences, sharing experiences and learning from other people's experiences. For me, this is also related to identity building as the narratives are also used to build the identity as the parent of the disabled kid. When in their survey Merolli and colleagues (2015) find that recording and sharing experiences to be less prominent, then in Facebook, the group heavily relies on that. I do believe that people use posts to vent about the frustrating experiences, to show off the milestones, but often also just to connect. Again, a lot of images are used for the range of these functions and the discussion above about the different Facebook images can easily be seen as doubling or the affordances function. I think that this is different for parents of disabled children compared to adults' disease management. The recording experiences are not that well afforded by the Facebook group once posted, I have had difficulties in going back to the posts to gather my own reflections. It is more of celebrating or despairing about the moment. At the same time, these narrations are my way of connecting to other people as I have shared over the distance the growing up stories of a few children who were babies around the same time as mine. Different stories have given space for some painful comparisons, as even then, other children seem to be better in many issues. But at the same time, this has also motivated me to post my few posts or join in discussions as I have hoped to flag my presence to the group. Lu and Hampton (2017) confirm in a nation-wide survey that social media offers informal social support in the form of companionship, emotional support and tangible aid. They conclude that "the association between frequent status updates on Facebook and perceived social support might in part be attributed to what we describe as 'awareness of other's awareness'" (Lu & Hampton, 2017: 876) and I really want other parents to be aware that I am cheering on to their struggles to the best of my abilities.

Overall, I feel like a lurker most of the times. I think I am not active, but at the same time, if I start counting the occasions I have commented on someone's posts, they are not that few. Weirdly, I think the US centeredness of the group makes me feel that I am more on the periphery and I am holding back in sharing my experiences, as they seem to be less relevant to the overall group. I have not posted start of the school or Halloween costume pictures as school start is still a few years away from my child and Halloween is not that important part of my experiences. I do not fret about needing to normalize my child through shared Halloween experience. However, I find it ingenious how people use the Facebook group as a resource to think of solutions that would help to normalize their children and their experiences. A lot of children with CHARGE cannot eat orally, however particularly Halloween in the US is all about candy and sweets. I am fascinated by how important it is to the parents to think of solutions where their non-eater kids would have as much joy from the festivities. They have thought, and shared signals in their community where differently coloured door decorations can be used to mark the houses where Halloween treats other than candy are shared. I do hope

that power of social media is enough in these instances to share the good vibes and positive experiences to all children and that the physical impairments are not leaving the children socially disabled.

## Adaptation affordance

Adaptation affordance is related to the adaptability of social media to suit the frequency and type of use (Merolli et al., 2013; 2015). Elsewhere in the literature, people have established the idea that the difficulties with medical information management include the fact that not always do people need similar information at any given time (e.g. Lubi, 2017). The information needs and behavior change based on the needs of the particular moment. Facebook groups can in this sense keep up and be adaptive to individual's needs. With complex medical needs needing to be prioritized at different moments, the attention and focus of the Facebook page also have varied for me. I have found myself hungrily reading almost every post that I have found in the group at the earlier stages of diagnosis and learning to cope with the situation. At other times, feeding and food-related topics have been very important, and I have read and also commented to many feeding related posts as I sensed I had accumulated knowledge worth of sharing with other community members.

For Merolli and colleagues (2015), the affordance of adaptation relates to the attention given to social media in related to stable or flared stage on pain. Similarly, parents to children with CHARGE syndrome have different stages where they need a different type of advice and support. The first year and the subsequent years until age five tend to be most dangerous, but also most overwhelming. There are parents often asking: "Will this ever become easier?" and always multiple reassurances follow confirming that there will be this sense of coming out of the woods. The Facebook group brings together people who have done CHARGE parenting for more than twenty years with the ones who have just received their diagnosis. The sharing of the experiences through narrations supports the adaptation possibility. I remember being hungry for the experiences which would indicate that things can and will be ok, but I am always heartbroken for the losses of these kids shared on Facebook. While the loss of a child keeps the danger looming much closer than it would be otherwise, my son is four, soon five and thus out of the most dangerous times. At the same time, the positive experiences shared by other parents help me immensely.

## Conclusions and limitations

This experience has not discussed the ethical, privacy-related issues, the critical dimension of parents giving medical advice to each other. Rather, the discussion has been rather positive and uncritical as this is based on my experiences. While writing this

article, I have reflected on the feeling of being in the fringes of the community, but at the same time, wanting to share with others in the same situation that they are seen, they are heard, and when possible, they are supported.

## Notes

1. <https://www.chargesyndrome.org/>
2. These and other quotes are imaginary and are results of generalisation, not actual quotes from any person posting in the Facebook group.

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# Childbirth Online

## *The Mediation of Contrasting Discourses*

Ranjana Das

### Abstract

This article provides an account of the digital mediation of childbirth in the UK. Findings reveal that online discussions offer a cathartic, empowering and questioning space as women prepare for and make sense of childbirth. In contrast, they also often work to silence and shut down as “horror stories” experiences which do not fit into narratives of “good” birthing. I also find that multimodal repertoires are used skilfully to produce visual cultures through which a highly specific maternal subjectivity is mediated. Online discussions of birthing display the juxtaposition of two value laden narratives. The one emphasizes the necessity and superiority of a drug-free vaginal birth and sits within the feminist rebuttal of obstetric domination of birthing and is an empowering discourse. The other which seeks to silence those whose births did not fit within this model, and presents them with the task of silencing the “horror-story” narrative.

**Keywords:** childbirth, social media, maternal, wellbeing, motherhood, mediation

### Introduction

This article reports from a small section of the material analysed in a project funded by the British Academy to run from 2016 till 2018<sup>1</sup>. The broader project has looked at the intersections of maternal wellbeing and new communication technologies (Das, forthcoming), but this brief article focuses solely on childbirth, and provides an account of the digital mediation of childbirth in the UK. I focus in this article on the digital mediation of childbirth and birthing in the British context, using illustrative instances from my work on Facebook birthing groups (Das, 2017a), Youtube amateur video channels (Das, forthcoming), and discussion threads from the childbirth section of an online parenting forum (Das, 2017b).

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Birthing and motherhood in Western modernity has witnessed, like possibly all other spheres of life, a rapid and progressive entrance of media and communication technologies into its realm. Whether one looks at these processes as interruptions, or as developments in the solely positive sense of the term, arguably, like countless other societal processes, birthing itself, in the way it is represented, discussed, experienced and even managed, is increasingly mediated. Following Silverstone (1999), Thompson (1995), and Couldry (2008), in this chapter I understand mediation to encompass the whole host of communicative practices with media technologies, distinct from either media effects, or simply audience interpretations of texts, or even a general comment on media saturation in society. The format of this article does not allow a detailed discussion of my qualitative methodology, or an extensive presentation of analysis – so I extract from my work to present key findings, each accompanied with illustrative instances.

### A cathartic, rationalising and empowering space?

The hearing, telling, recounting and circulating of birth stories works within a critical circuit of interpretive devices which are simultaneously the products of interpretation (of others' stories) and the devices/lenses through which one's own births and others' births are interpreted, contrasted and even compared. Speaking about birth, after birth, outside of the clinical and time-limited contexts of debriefing, serves cathartic and therapeutic purposes for many women. Rogers' (2015) terminology of "maternal essayists" draws attention to the syntactic and semantic textures of mothers' writing on the web – their narrative techniques, artistic self-expression and negotiations of agency. Lopez (2009) positions these writings as a radical act, Johnson (2015) as intimate mothering publics, Pedersen and Smithson (2013) as an articulation of new forms of femininity and Morrison (2011), as the grounds for an "intimate public" to become visible.

One poster says on a childbirth forum – "This thread has made me cry, which I think I haven't done enough of". Another says – "I've never wrote it all down like that before and it's actually upset me all over again. It obviously just doesn't go away. This is kind of like therapy though". The sense of community, camaraderie and solidarity that comes through on childbirth forums is striking, although, as the next section will evidence, this camaraderie often has other less-convivial dimensions attached to it. It is important here that we pay attention to the nature of online discussion groups – they afford an immediacy to the exchange of stories, the scope for a range of interpretations, prejudices and understandings to co-exist on the same visual unit (the full screen), the scope for messages to be removed and be replaced by deletion messages, and the very own language of emoticons, abbreviations and terminology specific to a particular forum.

Chen (2013) offers a critique of mothers writing, from a techno-feminist perspective which is reminiscent of the wider public derision around women's forums and women's online talk that can be traced back to the historical derision towards romance novels

for example (Radway, 1984). Offering a critique of the semantic connotations of the term “mummy blogging”. Chen counters the terminology as reducing the authors of these blogs to nurturers and carers alone. As I have argued elsewhere (Das, 2017a) the *mommy* terminology paternalistically endows these social media practices of mothers writing – with qualities that move them from the centre of investigative priorities to the periphery by using the word *mommy* (instead of mother for example) and that this then works as a convenient, ready-to-employ device of light-hearted dismissal of these texts as anything to be seriously taken or analysed. There is, thus, a broader debate to be had about the words we use to refer to women’s/mothers’ textual practices on social media. This is reflected to an extent in the title of Brady & Guerin’s (2010) work on online parenting discussions where they say these sites are “not all romantic, all happy, coochy coo”.

Story-telling on childbirth forums is discursively recognised and analysed by posters as useful for those that will lurk but not post, read but not share, or those not pregnant yet. This links to the relationship between media, story and narrative in the context of digital media. This references developments on narrative, illness and social media within e-health studies which have theorized the power of narratives to both resource people to make sense of their own experiences, and, through constant reproduction, do important identity work, producing themselves and by extension others as subjects of differential value. Bamberg, Schiffrin, and de Fina (2007) develop theorisations of how this work outlined above is done by the use of narrative to present, produce, maintain and reproduce oneself and one’s own identity by creating a coherent story to tell.

Illness narratives (Frank, 1993) are particularly relevant here – where it is increasingly evident, in many areas of e-health, that there is an emphasis on “coherent narratives with a positive outcome, hence favouring restitution and progressive narratives” (Page, 2012: 50). As one poster reminds everyone, of the importance of not just reading and expressing, but also of supporting and reaching out:

There have been previous threads on which people have outpoured their experiences but acknowledgement and discussion is more than each of us telling our own experiences, so I ask that not only do we tell our own stories but we acknowledge other’s and help them to discuss their past too.

Story-telling and listening to stories around childbirth becomes an important device through which women debate and disagree with institutions and structures, including medical systems, linguistic and discursive devices used socially in speaking about birth and of the systems within and against which women operate in birthing. One poster states categorically – “There are some problems I think in the language that is used around childbirth”.

The emotional role played by story-telling is as significant. These anonymous spaces become areas where discussions of one’s most private thoughts are (usually) acceptable. One mother who experiences a sense of disconnection with her own body, presents her narrative as one of disconnection, and a sense of not being with one’s own physical

self – “That’s the other thing; ordinarily your ‘bits’ are your private property, but after a birth... I felt totally alienated from that end of my body, like it wasn’t mine any more, plus it was kind of rearranged”. Similarly, a poster who has felt detached from her baby since birth, is able to speak of difficult and often socially-unacceptable emotions: “My daughter doesn’t feel like mine. She feels like a child I’m babysitting for or something. That was why I couldn’t carry on breastfeeding – it felt wrong and it still feels wrong sometimes to change her bum”.

### A space that also silences and shuts down?

Pedersen and Smithson’s (2013) account of mothering on the parenting forum Mumsnet discusses how images of good and bad mothers are both constructed and critiqued on the forum. They converge discourses of intensive motherhood and mothering ideologies to analyse mothers’ discussions and points out that mothers re-work and resist the good mother ideal while being conscious of how all these ideals are increasingly mediated (see also Cheresheva’s 2015 study on online narratives of infant feeding in Hungary and Bulgaria).

Attention to maternal work as a coherent set of tasks and functions (Ruddick, 1989) a few decades ago began to recognize the unconscious intersubjective dynamics involved in motherhood. Critical analysis of infant development (including the hyper-mediated nature of infant imagery) has shown to erase a discussion of maternal development except in relation to the well-being of the foetus and infant (Parker, 2009). Parker (2009) coined term “maternal ideal” where the emotional inability to ever separate from her baby is an ideal held up, which can be traced through conceptualizations of “good” mothering and “bad” mothering, relating to the “deviancy” debates on good and bad parenting as strongly classed discourses of neo-liberalism (Jensen, 2012). One of the key aspects of the mediation of birthing has been, Jensen argues, how childbirth TV has rendered birth affectively visible yet silenced the woman as caught between institutions, with birth as something to be feared and as highly medicalised.

Yet, as de Benedictis’s (2017) account of the reception of *One Born Every Minute* reveals, the reverse – the enjoyable, peaceful, natural birth – prepared for in high-cost classes, often a resource for the middle-class mother – has become the ideal and idealized birth, tying very closely into discussions of good and bad mothering by invoking images of good and bad birthing. I draw attention particularly to the term “intensive mothering” which was coined in 1996 by Sharon Hays to represent a group of widely held beliefs about the necessity of investing vast amounts of emotional labour and energy into raising their children, which went above and beyond the perhaps obvious strength of emotions that would usually exist between mother and child (Arendell, 2000; Miller et al., 2007). This can be extended I argue to the discourses round intensive pregnancy (c.f. Tiidenberg & Baym, 2017) and a kind of intensive birthing as I suggest in this article.

Discussions online reflect these tensions, framed through the language of “positive” and “negative” stories, especially when people seek “positive” birth stories, display an aversion to traumatic or difficult stories being shared. The sharing of “horror” stories is not something actively encouraged (there are separate threads created for trauma support) and a number of discursively apparent rhetorical strategies are evident in the silencing of difficult accounts. One of these accounts is to paint the telling of a difficult story as a strategy, removing from the teller of the story any modicum of empathy and painting her instead as a plotter, or just someone sharing traumatic accounts for fun. As one poster says “When you are pregnant people always come out with the horror stories as they seem more interesting”, or that “people definitely love to tell a gruesome story (or 12) to pregnant ladies”. This is displayed often as an attempt to avoid and avert – what has not been heard will do no harm. A poster says “I remember telling everyone I don’t want to know’ before they started speaking if I knew where it was going”. This is evident also in countless threads asking for solely positive accounts, and actively discouraging the sharing of horror stories.

Difficult experiences are as varied as they can be, and yet rhetorically, they are often grouped together, as though they were a homogenous mass that can be eliminated and avoided in the run-up to a birth. The use of language in group settings establishes a certain mode or set of practices as deserving of elimination and another as the *ideal* performs identity-work for the speaker. It manufactures the speaker as a value-laden subject and manufactures the addressee at its ideological antipode. This is a simplification of birthing experiences and accounts that becomes evident in comments which seek to enlist a very wide-ranging set of experiences into a single and often dismissive stream:

It just seems like everyone has horror stories! And not just the people who are overly keen to share horrific stories for all my family and friends who have had babies over the past few years it’s been a litany of forceps, 4-day labours, emcs, inductions with pain off the scale, filthy hospitals...!

Sharing “negative” stories is not simply a question of sharing experiences after birth. The voicing of fears and anxiety is often bounced back to the individual in a way that preserves fears and concerns as the individual’s responsibility alone. This, by extension, becomes a device with which such manufacturing can be sustained longer term, and which contributes to identity-work in terms of both identity production and management. The sharing of “horror” stories as a strategy, the grouping together of “horror” stories into one homogenous narrative, the verbal shutting down of difficult accounts, the projection of fears as self-doubt or scaremongering are findings that align with the discursive silencing of negative accounts. The group is clear at the outset in that all posts must be about the gentleness and joy of birthing.

Language deserves close attention in these online spaces where linguistic devices of exclusions and inclusion are created subtly to filter out certain experiences and offer a voice to others. A Facebook birthing group says the word “pain” is forbidden from use

in the opening post by the moderator. The group moderator's words state this clearly: "Please use gentle language when you talk on here and refrain (sic) from posting references to 'pain' or 'hurt' would be very helpful". A simple rule – of avoiding the language of pain or anything difficult or traumatic – enables the production of a group identity which is simultaneously inclusive (of those that conform) and exclusive (of those who do not), reminding us of John Thompson's exposition of the management of visibility and the struggle for recognition (1995) in everyday life.

On the odd occasion a mother wishes to share her difficult experiences on a Facebook birthing group, this goes against the ethos of sharing only positivity and joy. The gist of a woman's birth story is summarised in one painful sentence: "I am currently in a rehab to walk because in all the manoeuvres to get her out. I have muscle and nerve damage. It's not what I ever expected and I'm just so glad she's alive with us". This story was unlike other stories and not allowed to be posted on the group directly. Instead the moderator made the original post using the word "trigger" – but the woman's story itself did not appear on the post. An edited, shortened version of the story was then posted in the comments. Immediately, a set of successive comments were posted in response to this powerful account of a woman's very real struggles – which involved abuse and chastising the woman for sharing negativity. Eventually these comments were taken down. Overall, however, this story disappeared into the history of the group drawing only very few comments from posters – a stark contrast to the overwhelming, sometimes tens or over a hundred comments in solidarity and support for "positive" accounts.

## Multimodal repertoires of maternal subjectivities

Small-scale, inexpensive, personally-focused media productions celebrating or marking individual accomplishments, journeys and relationships have been at the heart of the *Digital Storytelling* project (Couldry, 2008; Lundby, 2008; Lambert, 2006). Of importance here is what Friedlander (2008) calls digital narratives' aspirations to speaking about 'a world' rather than simply one text being shared between author and audience. This is achieved through a range of means:

Each of its elements – space, time, objects, beings and actions – can be selected, arranged and transformed for the needs of an aesthetic experience. (2008: 186)

The multimodal nature (Kress, 2003) of these compositions demarcates them from other maternal compositions, for instance, developed in textual form, even if online (c.f. Rogers, 2015; Pedersen & Smithson, 2013). They curate an audio-visual world, embedded in digital spaces of sharing, hyper-linking and circulating, in an endless process of semiosis (Kress, 2003) and these carefully curated stories collectively form parts of the narratives making up a mediated framework of reference (c.f. Silverstone, 1999) which are then accessed and referenced by others about to give birth, or those

seeking to make sense of their own birthing experiences. These narratives have critical roles to play in the mediation of social, political and cultural institutions by producing and maintaining hierarchies of voice and power – within which lies their great potential for critique and action, and equally, potential for in/exclusion.

Natural birthing is ritualized and presented online through amateur home videos (see also Mack, 2016) which use multimodality to produce birth as a near-mythic journey, through carefully chosen visual and audio aids, making use of textual devices to create a narrative of not the endurance of pain, but the erasure of it, producing birth not through the pain of labour, but rather as a journey that is ecstatic in going beyond pain at all.

In Video M the opening sequence involves a bright, silver starburst that rotates on the screen with uplifting music, erupting into particles of glittery stars – white on black, light on darkness. Multimodal communication helps mediate the narrative in Video M to produce the birth as a ritualistic experience of the mother who has prepared and practiced to not endure, but overcome any modicum of pain. This achieved as much by the addition of visual and audio devices, as by the textual removal and erasure of experiences, for instance the darkening, obscuration or non-inclusion of any difficult moments in labour, or the removal and editing out of vocalizations. Sound and voice of the actors (for instance regular conversation at a birth centre) is removed in Video M, to be replaced with calm, gentle music, creating (selectively) an ambience of peace, quiet and gentle labour, when, in reality, the text does not convey any of the actual sounds in the room at that particular point in the video because the audio tracks have been replaced with pre-edited music and voiceovers, overlaid by text.

In Video P, devices like soft focus, very slow zooming in on to the mother's pregnant belly, slowed down breathing, elimination of all natural noises, words and sounds, wide angle views that look in from the outside into a room where the birthing mother lies, produces, in attendance to the fading in of powerful instrumental music – the narrative of the gentle, calm birth. It is critical to investigate the syntactic and semantic features here, to make sense of how conventions are made use of, created and broken to produce a specific maternal subjectivity.

Video Y makes use of photographic conventions which make use of black and white still photography and near-still videography, with transcendental music, text and the interplay of light and dark to produce a birth video which eliminates any real sounds, colors or shades which one might expect in an “amateur” home video. Instead, the video is far from amateur. Camera, gaze, lighting, position and context have all been made artistic and well-thought out use of, which, sociologically speaking, of course, carry what Lister and Wells (2001) call “ideological weight”. The use of conventions in this way mediates multimodality (Kress, 2003), an image of the enduring mother who has transcended pain and discomfort – who is at one with nature, and, yet, the constant interplay of edited music, edited audio, carefully edited photography and the use of text overlays produces a very intentional narrative.

## Discussion

One of the overwhelming findings from this work has been the arrival in the UK, of the “good birth” and a digital curation of the near-idyllic and ideal circumstances and forms that a good birth comes with. The narrative around how good the birth is then draws most clearly from the emphasis on calm and quiet, the use of visuals and imagery to invite visions of nature and natural surroundings, and the use of music and audio editing to produce certain birth as the good birth, and the birthing woman as having achieved the ultimate in the entry to motherhood. This finding sits alongside critical feminist theorisations of women doing the “right” thing in motherhood and from the literature on bad and good parenting and mothering (Yadlon, 1997), including critiques of how normative and exclusionary this heavily gendered discourse can get. The mediation of childbirth increasingly sees an individualisation of birthing responsibilities and management of the self, complete with binaries like success/failure, and good/bad birthing and mothering.

My findings point to significant amounts of individual responsibility and self-censure and management being taken on by mothers invested in producing a performance of the good mother – both as a narrative that establishes and maintains itself through social discourse and as potentially silencing and exclusionary device. Mothers expressing guilt at having an “easier” time than others, indicating a subtle sense of competition and comparisons in birthing, mothers with positive experiences discursively demonstrating a stepping-away from praise of any kind, mothers who have had difficult experiences positioning a positive experience as down to individual luck, and a clear sense that traumatic experiences are often down to individual failings in some way.

Some of these discourses contradict each other, but that precisely is the nature of these discussions. At its clearest level, online discussions of birthing display the juxtaposition of two enormously value laden narratives which could even be interpreted as two sides of a single coin. The one which emphasizes the necessity and superiority of a drug-free vaginal birth and sits within the feminist rebuttal of obstetric domination of birthing and is an empowering discourse (c.f. Kitzinger, 2012); and the other which seeks to silence those whose births did not fit within this model, and presents them with the task of silencing the “horror-story” narrative.

## Note

1. The material in this article reworks material previously used in Das, 2017a; 2017b; and 2018.

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# Sharenting = Good Parenting?

## *Four Parental Approaches to Sharenting on Facebook*

Maja Sonne Damkjaer

### Abstract

This chapter discusses the contested practice of sharing pictures and information of one's children on social media, newly coined as "sharenting". Based on a multi-case study of eight Danish first-time parent couples' uses and experiences of digital media in relation to their new role as parents, the chapter identifies four types of communicative orientation that characterise parents' approach to Facebook as a social network site (SNS). The four types are expressed through differences in aesthetics, values and attitudes toward sharenting and consist of 1) family-oriented, 2) peer-oriented, 3) oppositional and 4) non-use. On this basis, the chapter discusses the ways in which sharenting poses new challenges and demands for "good parenting".

**Keywords:** parenting, social network sites (SNS), Facebook, sharenting, transition to parenthood

### Introduction

While parents have almost exclusively been seen as the protectors of their children against the potential harm of media exposure and engagement, they are now increasingly being regarded as (potential) violators of their children's rights and well-being. The reason is the popular practice of "sharenting" – "the habitual use of social media to share news, images, etc. of one's children" (Sharenting, 2017).

Today, many children acquire a digital identity before they can speak, or even have left the womb, as parents' share the joys and challenges of parenting with family, friends and peers on e.g. Facebook, Instagram or blogs. Consequently, sharenting has attracted attention from the general public and from researchers, often focusing on the risk of

misuse or abuse of information shared about children online, particularly photos (Kirkey, 2017). Other interests concern the dilemmas associated with balancing the privacy rights of children against parents' right to self-expression and free speech, which constitutes a legislative challenge (Steinberg, 2017) and an evident ambivalence among "sharents" (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017).

Even so, little is known about the significance and lived experience of sharenting. This chapter explores how parents approach and attribute meaning to sharenting. It is based on a multi-case study of eight Danish first-time parents' use and experience of digital media during their transition to parenthood (2013-2016); specifically, how they approach, navigate and negotiate the use of social network sites (SNSs), mainly Facebook, in their new role as parents. The chapter argues that to grasp the growing significance of sharenting, we must acknowledge that parents' approaches to communication technologies do not spring from rational, intentional decision making, but rather from the competing demands of social, work and family life, self-realisation and the desire to be good parents (Clark, 2011: 330). What it means to be good parents, also in relation to sharenting, is deeply imbued with norms, negotiations, values, beliefs and emotions.

Concretely, the chapter contributes an identification of four types of communicative orientation that characterise parents' approaches to Facebook, and which are expressed through differences in aesthetics, values and attitudes toward sharenting. The four types of communicative orientation are 1) family-oriented, 2) peer-oriented, 3) oppositional and 4) non-use. Since today's parents must deal with sharenting and the specific consequences of opting in or out, the chapter discusses the ways in which sharenting poses new challenges and demands for doing "good parenting".

## Theoretical framework

The study's theoretical framework consists of mediatisation research and audience studies. "Mediatisation" refers to long-term transformation processes where media, enhanced by their increasing entanglement in culture, society and everyday life, become indispensable (Jansson, 2015) and mould social and cultural activities (Hepp, 2013). Mediatisation research explores the complex relationship between media-communicative and sociocultural change by focusing on the role of the media while insisting that research must spring from the relevant cultural fields and communicative contexts, not the media (*ibid.*). The study also employs salient concepts and insights from audience research. Audience research engages with differences and similarities in how people make sense of media (as texts, genres or technologies) and negotiate and (re)produce meanings and social relations (Livingstone, 2012). Audience research has shown that media technologies constitute important communicative and social resources for families' everyday life, but also that families converge and diverge in their approaches to media according to the communicative patterns, ethics or values that characterise their lives (Clark, 2013; Lull, 1980).

The transition to parenthood is considered to begin during pregnancy and end sometime between the child's first and second year. This is an interesting phase for studying 'digital parenting,' since it highlights the initial overlap between media-communicative practices and parenting practices. Becoming a parent entails major practical, emotional, social and relational changes (Cowan & Cowan 1992) and implies a need for information and guidance, building and maintaining social relations and developing a parental identity. These three themes have directed the present case study.

## Case study and method

Given the increasing democratisation of gender roles and parenting responsibilities, particularly in Nordic countries (Viala, 2011), this study chose co-living, first-time parent couples as its case unit. Drawing on both mediatisation theory and audience research, this enabled an examination of how different media types are adopted into everyday parenting practices and woven into the construction of parental identities. The study's eight cases were selected consecutively from an online questionnaire survey in a municipality in Western Jutland, a rural area, and in the fast-growing region of Aarhus, Denmark's second largest city with a population of approx. 320,000 (Aarhus Kommune, 2016). Survey invitations were distributed by local health visitors. Case selection used a combined maximum variation and intensity sampling approach (Patton, 1990) to yield information-rich cases. Criteria for case selection were variation in media use patterns, education level and proximity of social network.

Results from the survey ( $n = 56$ ) showed that the majority of respondents had shared photos of or stories about their children online, primarily on Facebook as this was the most popular SNS among the respondents (only two respondents were not on Facebook). The open commentary fields revealed that parents diverged in their views on sharenting, so the parents' experiences with and attitudes toward sharenting, mainly related to Facebook, became a key focus in the case study. The multi-case study was based on three types of empirical material: 1) qualitative interviews with the eight parents (individually and as couples) integrated with 2) observations of their domestic media environment and 3) an archive of recorded activity and posts from each of their Facebook profiles (all participants except one woman had a Facebook profile) during the pregnancy period and in the first four months as a new family (13 months in total). The archive's data were harvested using Digital Footprints, a research tool for retrieving closed Facebook data with user consent. The study's dataset was analysed using triangulation focusing on recurring topics and categories across the material and individual cases. This included data from questionnaires, field notes and condensation and coding of interviews (using NVivo) and a qualitative content analysis of the participants' Facebook feeds (using Excel and Websnapper), involving coding of more than 5,000 unique posts.

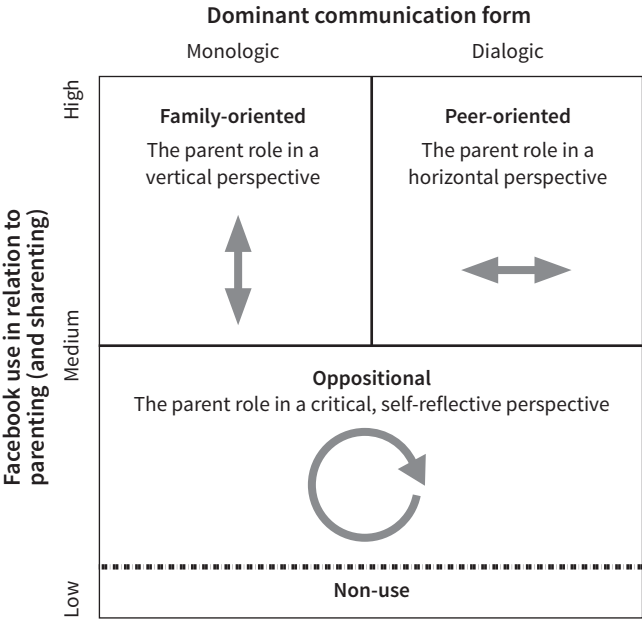
Analysis: Four types of communicative orientation

The analysis revealed that in terms of use of Facebook as an SNS, *sharenting* was an important focal point for negotiation of cultural norms and ideals for the participants in their new role as parents. This complex intertwining of parenting practices and communicative practices – and the values, norms and aesthetics behind – can in sum be conceptualised as specific *communicative orientations* as a proposed new theoretical denotation. This concept covers a continuum of dispositions and patterns of communication and media usage ranging from behaviour patterns that are internalised, unarticulated and taken for granted at one end, to self-reflective strategies for conduct at the other.

Building on the concept of communicative orientation, the analysis included four analytical perspectives: 1) what meanings the parents would attach to the use of Facebook in relation to parenthood; 2) what and how much they would post in relation to parenthood; 3) who constituted their imagined (or possibly targeted) audience for sharenting; and 4) how they would relate to and construct their parental identity in relation to sharenting. The strategy for summarising the analysis of the extensive material was based on Weber’s (1904/1988) concept of ideal types, which has been developed as a method of comparing and interpreting empirical data within qualitative research (Eneroeth, 1984: 163-169). On this basis, four types of communicative orientation that characterise parents’ approach to sharenting on Facebook were identified.

Their basic characteristics and internal relationships are presented in Figure 1.

**Figure 1.** Four types of communicative orientation that characterise parents’ approach to sharenting on Facebook



The model identifies the guiding principles behind the communicative relevance and value that the parents ascribe to Facebook, and how this platform is used in relation to parenting and sharenting. The four types of communicative orientation are classified in the model based on two criteria: The degree of Facebook use in relation to the parenthood (vertical axis), and the dominant communication form (monologic or dialogic, horizontal axis).

In the upper left corner is the *family-oriented* approach characterised by an inter-generational, vertical perspective on parenting in the form of either metaphorical or concrete orientation toward family and family relationships. This results in a predominantly monologic communication form on Facebook where the family is the primary implicit recipient of sharenting. In the upper right corner is the *peer-oriented* approach with parenting at the fore. Here, sharenting becomes a fulcrum for sociality and the exchange of experiences, viewpoints and knowledge with other parents. This horizontal orientation is marked by a mainly dialogic communication form where peers constitute the targeted or primary implicit recipient of sharenting. Both the family- and peer-oriented approach typically imply a medium or high Facebook usage in relation to sharenting compared to the participants' overall activity level.

At the bottom of the model, however, are two types of communicative orientation characterised by not having parenting at the heart of Facebook involvement: *oppositional* and *non-use*. The oppositional orientation is marked by a negotiating, critically self-conscious attitude toward parenting, which involves reluctance or resistance toward sharenting on Facebook. This opposition can arise from a desire to maintain self-identity, interests and relationships that are beyond parenting, but can also be rooted in experiences of context collapse (Marwick & boyd, 2011), lack of control of the shared content or concerns about children's privacy rights. These characteristics imply that the oppositional approach borders on the lower category of the model, non-use. Non-use refers to a communicative orientation where Facebook is not used to communicate about parenting, either on the basis of an opt-out or passive use in relation to self-expression.

## Discussion: How the four types of communicative orientation are manifested

Based on the analysis, the core features and internal variation of the four types of communicative orientation will be exemplified and discussed below.

### *Family-oriented*

Parents who rely on family orientation use sharenting on Facebook to create and perform a family narrative and identity, to mark and celebrate intergenerational ties and to confirm family values such as tradition, the cyclic nature of everyday life and being part of a lineage. Big and small events are displayed on Facebook and visible to all Fa-

cebook friends, e.g. the breaking of the news about pregnancy, the presentation of the baby, developmental milestones including numerous “firsts” (first smile, first stroller ride, etc.). One couple who embraced this approach is Maggie (31) and Joe (31) (all participants were pseudonymised to comply with research ethics). They both have a short vocational education and live in close proximity to their extended family. They enjoy using Facebook to share their new family life, especially photos of their baby girl. Here, sharenting also cultivates affinity and connectedness between the couple, e.g. when they like and comment on each other’s posts. One example is when Joe comments on Maggie’s ultrasound scan: “It looks like you, sweetie.”

Extended family also emphasise family bonds by commenting on these posts, but these exchanges rarely evolve into actual dialog on Facebook, as they seldom exceed more than two speech units (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 2008). The family-oriented approach is therefore mainly monologic. Sharenting serves a relational and a ritual function, e.g. with family portraits often used as cover or profile photos to capture, confirm and display family intimacy. This helps strengthen social ties, norms and bonding social capital (Putnam, 2000: 22-23).

### *Peer-oriented*

This approach focuses on building and participating in heterogeneous social networks of peers whose common interest is the (coming or new) parental role, thereby bridging social capital (Putnam, 2000: 22-23). An important communicative act is to join and participate in one or several large (mostly closed or secret) due-date and parenting groups on Facebook anchored and initiated online. For peer-oriented parents, sharenting posts constitute a very large proportion of all their posts on Facebook. This is the case for Anne (24) and Louise (27). Anne lives in Aarhus together with Michael (26). She’s studying for a professional bachelor’s degree, and he holds one. Louise (27) is studying at a short-cycle higher education and lives with Kenny (29) in the same house as his parents in the countryside. Both women started out as members of “getting pregnant” groups and are still very active in parenting groups on Facebook (ranging from 10 to 500 members) and in sales and DIY-groups centred on parenting. The vast majority of these groups consists of women, but there are groups for men and both sexes, e.g. Michael takes part in a due-date-group for fathers. The peer-oriented approach is mainly dialogic. Most of the posts are centred on exchanging experiences, knowledge and views on the ups and downs of pregnancy and parenting. Consulting questions are very important and address “what one can expect” and “what is normal”, but can also have a mere socialising and validating purpose, e.g. when Louise requests advice on choosing the outfit of the day for her baby girl.

In the peer-oriented approach, sharenting is also used to express dedication to parenting by presenting appealing, fun and often highly aestheticized photos of the child. Posts are often met with responsiveness from other group members, since offering support and intimate interaction characterise the groups, e.g. when Louise goes into labour and



one of the other mothers stays up all night and virtually “holds her hand” by offering her comfort and encouragement. This approach is generally marked by continuous projection, reporting, self-monitoring, information retrieval and, not least, self-identity production through sharenting, often in close interaction with peers.

### *Oppositional*

Unlike the family- and peer-oriented communicative orientations, the oppositional is marked by reluctance or resistance specifically toward the practice of sharenting. This is shown in the extremely low frequency of posts pertaining to parenting on Facebook, often accompanied by the parents’ ongoing discussions and negotiation of sharenting and expressions of dissociation with it both off- and online. Also, this is typically tied to different disconnecting practices (Light, 2014). The motivation behind this orientation may be opposition toward either Facebook as an SNS including its norms and affordances, particular parenting ideals and family norms or certain parts of the network on Facebook. A common feature, though, is reluctance specifically toward sharing child photos.

This is the case for Iris (28) and Anthony (27) who live close to Aarhus, and Kirsten (32) and Matthew (34) who live in a provincial town in Western Jutland. They all hold or study for a Master’s degree. Anthony and Iris rarely share personal stuff on their timelines, but mainly use Facebook for managing leisure, work and study activities through Facebook groups. The context collapse on Facebook (Davis & Jurgenson, 2014; Marwick & boyd, 2011) is the basis for Iris’ reflective opposition toward disclosing personal information. She appreciates the context collusion (Davis & Jurgenson, 2014), i.e. having one place to access all parts of her social network, but rarely has anything she wants to share with all her Facebook friends due to a perceived context collision (ibid.). For Iris and Anthony, the same logic applies to sharenting. Their concern revolves around the key properties of SNS, i.e. persistence, scalability, searchability and invisible audiences (boyd, 2011), since they don’t know “who’s watching” or “where the information will end up”. They worry that their son eventually might feel embarrassed about sharenting posts, and they think that children should shape their own digital identity when they come of age. This mirrors Light’s (2014) notion of an “ethics of disconnection”, e.g. not posting photos of others out of perceived duty or care. However, for Iris and Anthony, sharenting is also an expression of “bad taste.”

Kirsten and Matthew agree, but their opposition toward sharenting primarily stems from a desire to preserve a dynamic identity and interests that lie beyond parenting, e.g. news and art. As Matthew explains: “I don’t like it, when the child takes over the whole profile and identity,” and Kirsten adds: “I can’t stand photos of the predictable, boring nuclear family life.” Still, they don’t totally refrain from sharenting, mostly because family members request it, but they limit it to a minimum and deliberately share unconventional and ironic stories and motives, e.g. a photo of their son’s foot (instead of his face).

The oppositional orientation is marked by a critical, self-reflective attitude toward sharenting, but also negotiation of the norms and expectations of sharenting. Iris and

Anthony had initially opted out of sharenting, but when Anthony's father posted a photo of his new-born grandson without Iris and Anthony's consent, the new parents were forced to engage in communicative mending and decided to let their own voices be heard by posting a birth update on Facebook.

### *Non-use*

Non-use covers a communicative orientation in which Facebook is not used to communicate anything about parenting. This can be an expression of a conscious, active deselection of Facebook in general as an SNS, or an already passive (or dormant) Facebook use and limited involvement in family communication. Christina (29) is a Master's student and exponent of the first type. She has deliberately deselected Facebook, since she does not want Facebook to take up her time. Moreover, she does not want to socialise based on "automated friend lists" and finds it more honest and attentive when people have to "actively decide" to contact her, e.g. to invite her to a social gathering. Her experience, however, is that many people find her choice inconvenient and almost provocative, especially after the birth of her daughter, e.g. by reacting with comments such as "oh, so you don't want to share your daughter?". According to Christina, this is not the case, but she prefers to use more private communication channels, e.g. Snapchat, MMS or the online photo album she has set up to share photos of her daughter and keep in touch with her extended family. In addition, she dislikes the aesthetic that she labels "naked baby butt on a sheep skin" and stresses that she prefers to share photos of her daughter when the little girl is awake, active and dressed in normal clothes.

Kenny (29), Louise's partner, has also embraced a non-use approach. Although he has a Facebook profile, he rarely posts anything, as he prefers texting or meeting face to face. He solely uses Facebook to see what his friends are doing and play games and feels no need to post news from family life. Kenny's non-use owes to the fact that he is not very involved in mediated communication or information seeking pertaining to the new family life, since Louise "takes charge of all that." Non-use therefore constitutes a communicative orientation that can be rooted in a generally limited Facebook use or low engagement in mediated family communication; however, it can also reflect a conscious strategy where Facebook is purposely deselected for communication about parenting and family life. Although this case study cannot establish it definitively, its findings suggest that this latter strategy of purposeful "non-sharenting" – as well as the oppositional approach – is significantly more pronounced among highly educated parents.

### **Conclusion: To share or not to share?**

The case study shows that sharenting has become tightly interwoven with parenting practices and plays a key role on Facebook for the (re)production of parental self-identity and social approval, but also for building and maintaining social ties. However, the

study also reveals different motives behind and approaches to the pressing *dilemma* of whether “to share or not to share”, which is linked to the desire to be a “good parent”. While the identification of four very dissimilar communicative orientations that guide parents’ approaches to sharenting on Facebook confirms the relevance of said dilemma, other questions may also be raised.

The case study documents that sharenting – and family communication in general – has become integral to our shared so-called “onlives”, i.e. lives online, not least on Facebook. It is critical to note that parents are not the only ones to share. Several other groups of people also enjoy taking part in the new family life, not least extended family (it is debated if “grand-sharenting” merits individual scientific scrutiny). When discussing sharenting it is important to note that digital parenting is enmeshed in contexts comprised of “relational selves” (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017), as parents must navigate and negotiate the benefits and challenges associated with sharenting in terms of balancing their own needs and rights against their children’s. Indeed, parents must do so in the light of the double bind of SNSs that operate with conceptions of distinct and bounded identities, on the one hand, whilst fostering sharing and connection on the other, as this is fundamental to their business models (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017; van Dijck, 2013). Parents must also handle the communicative expectations from the social and cultural contexts they are embedded in. If parents refuse to share their family life, others might take the lead, e.g. like Anthony’s father who, out of pure joy, kidnapped the moment (and virtually the baby). Managing and controlling the flow of information related to parenting and family life constitute a new obligation for parents (Kumar & Schoenebeck, 2015). The majority of parents in this case study reported that they were met with requests to share their new family life on Facebook, especially pictures of their child; however, these tendencies might be most pronounced in Denmark and similar wealthy global North countries characterised by technology-rich homes and very high internet and Facebook penetration.

Future research should pay attention to how sharenting is also imbued with norms and expectations from the parents’ surroundings, and how family communication is embraced, negotiated and resisted across different generations and platforms. The complex interweaving of parenting and digital media inherent in sharenting comprises an instance of mediatisation that constitutes a new communicative pressure on parents today, as they are forced to deal with sharenting – and the specific consequences of opting either in or out.

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# Family photography in a networked age

## *Anti-sharenting as a reaction to risk assessment and behaviour adaption*

Ulla Autenrieth

### Abstract

Parents sharing happy family moments on their Facebook or Instagram profiles, and thus publish private scenes of their children's lives to an extended personal networked public (so called *sharenting*) have been a huge issue in recent times. The chapter presents findings of a national funded research project at the University of Basel with the title *Picturing Family in the Social Web*. Central aspects of the chapter are: What kind of risks do parents see when sharing pictures of their children in online environments? How do they deal with those risks and arousing ambivalences? In what ways are social norms affected and adapted in parental peer groups? And what kind of new photo practices do emerge as a consequence? Furthermore, a family online photo guide will be introduced, which supports families in discussing these issues.

**Keywords:** sharenting, family photography, social media, mediatization, media literacy

### Introduction

Recent times have witnessed mounting discussion in English and German media about infant photos on social media platforms. When parents share happy family moments on their Facebook or Instagram profiles, they publish private scenes of their children's lives on an extended personal networked public. This actually private media practice faces considerable public criticism. Such criticism is reflected in the term "sharenting", which is mostly used to denote a negative perspective on parents' (semi-)public image-sharing practices (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017). This criticism notwithstanding, the sharing of family photographs remains a common and widespread activity among new parents, especially new mothers (Ammari et al., 2015).

With the term “networked family”, Rainie and Wellman (2012) describe the framework conditions of current family life. Furthermore, families themselves form networks and are nodes within wider networks of institutions such as schools, workplaces and peer groups. Online technologies are omnipresent; the domestication of digital media is almost complete. Many families live in a condition of high mobility regarding places and means of communication (especially through mobile phones). As a consequence, there is an ongoing mediatisation of childhood and family life (Krotz, 2009). This growing mediatisation is accompanied by an increasing visualization of social relationships, so that there is an annual rise in the numbers of photographs shared online.

In recent years the generation formerly known as the first “digital natives” have become parents themselves. When these natives were young, they entered online-spheres mostly out of their own will, sometimes even without the consent of their own parents. First on social media platforms like Myspace and Friendster (Boyd, 2006), and later Facebook, they connected with their peers and experimented with their adolescent identities (Autenrieth, 2014a). Retrospectively, they can be considered the last generation of internet users who entered the online sphere on their own terms. Nowadays it is these parents who start sharing information and often photos of their babies and little children online and so create their “online biography” (Autenrieth, 2014b).

Unlike the negative public image of sharenting implies, this chapter will show that many parents are actually acutely aware of the potential risks associated with posting images of children. Aware as they are, they are challenged by the difficult issues this raises. This chapter will address the following questions: What kind of risks do parents see? How do they deal with those risks and arising ambivalences? In which way are social norms affected and adapted in parental peer groups? And what kind of new photo practices emerge as a consequence? To conclude, a guide for sharing family-photos in networked environments is introduced.

The chapter presents findings of a study at the Seminar for Media Studies at the University of Basel titled *Picturing Family in the Social Web. A Comparative Analysis of the Growing Image-Based Presentation of Familial Occasions in Participative Online Contexts using the Example of the Parenthood of the So-Called “Digital Natives”*, funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation. Qualitative interviews and ethnographic online observations covered 52 parents of young children. Most of them post photos of their children on social media platforms. This chapter is not about social media celebrities or determined parenting bloggers (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017). The families which were interviewed and observed can be considered “average” social media users. The interviews were transcribed and subsequently coded and analysed with MAXQDA according to the principles of grounded theory. The interviews were conducted in (Swiss) German and translated into English. Furthermore, a corpus was created with (interviewed and not interviewed) project participants’ pictures. For this we established a research profile on Facebook and asked the participants to friend it. This happened before the interviews were conducted. Their pictures were categorized and the five-part typology of anti-sharenting practices introduced in section four below

was created (Kelle & Kluge, 2010). All participants consented to the anonymized use of their statements and images for research purposes. Following the investigation, the Facebook friendships were deleted.

## Changes in modes of photographic production and distribution

In recent years, through the rise of networked media, there have been dramatic changes in the usage of what can be considered private (family) photographs. Rose (2010: 16) describes family “photographs as objects embedded in practices”. While they are still objects heavily tied to social interactions, current practices differ from those of pre-digital times. In the analogue age, production costs and effort limited the number of pictures. In comparison, the quantity of photos taken and distributed today has risen dramatically. On online platforms like Flickr, Facebook and Instagram, hundreds of millions of photos are posted every day. With high-quality cameras in most mobile phones, the tool to take pictures is always within reach. As a consequence, new parents in particular tend to visually document the lives of their new-born babies and share those pictures via various social networks. This raises mounting challenges for the storage of pictures. Various devices – for example mobile phones, digital photo cameras and tablets – of different family members need to be coordinated. Furthermore, archiving strategies need to be established. As our research shows, many families struggle with these photo-managing activities and postpone them to an unknown future.

When I put all the pictures together, I don't know how many thousands there are. I'd like to sort them [...] and then just split them up – every kid, that everyone has a folder, and that later they have better access to the pictures. (Lia, age 33)

Often, over the years thousands of photos are produced and collected in different places, most of them unsorted and unsystematized. Here a change in the communicative significance of photos can be observed. Many of them are produced (and edited) for an instant of connection and communication in a specific context, rather than to be archived and passed down over generations. This ephemeral use contrasts with the potential eternity they might have in networked spheres.

## Widespread fears of posting pictures online and how parents cope with them

What users of personal sharing platforms see in their profiles and what other users see about them is often driven by algorithms that are hard to grasp. On Facebook, for example, the personal network of contacts needs to be understood as a “potential audience”. Members do not know who is watching unless there is some reaction, for example in the form of likes and comments. For many users this uncertainty creates a feeling of



lack of control. We sought to answer the questions: What are parents' central fears about publishing content of their children – especially photos – in online environments? And how do they deal with those risks?

### *Parents' main fears*

Three fears emerged from the interviews. The most frequently mentioned risk was “stranger danger”. Many parents feared that strangers, mostly described as male, could access the pictures and misuse them.

Three fears emerged from the interviews. The most frequently mentioned risk was “stranger danger”. Many parents feared that strangers, mostly described as malwho just go wild on any kiddie pictures or anything. (Anne, age 26)

Well, I mean, there are enough paedophiles and other sick people where you have to seriously think about [...]. It's so ambivalent, right? Especially with the children, I pay great attention to what photos I post online. [...] Because just someone has to press the “like button” and then the photo does its rounds. (Stefanie, age 30)

Another often mentioned fear was the potential commercial misuse of one's photos. Parents imagined how the platforms, especially Facebook, could use their images for advertisements. Analogously the concern was regularly mentioned that companies could use pictures to sell their products.

I really see the problem with Facebook, now that they're on the stock market, where you somehow think, Are you going to take my photo now, even though you're not allowed?, or something like that, which makes me skeptical. (Katrin, age 22)

A third major concern was the biographical footprint parents construct of their children. Parents have started to realize the importance of not creating any digital burden by posting embarrassing content about their children, such as that found under pseudo-ironic Instagram hashtags like #assholeparents. These sites show children in distressing situations with purportedly funny captions. Parents showed some awareness that they need to consider the reactions of their children, once they are old enough to know about the photos their parents shared of them.

Also, I read that I should always have the kids' permission and that there's a risk that they'll be laughed at for the photos at some point. So I'm trying to not upload any stupid videos or the like, which could be embarrassing for the children at some point. But as parents, that's hard to gauge. As parents, you will not find things embarrassing, which the children or others may find embarrassing later, in a few years. (Miriam, age 29)

As previous research has shown, teenagers and even younger children are increasingly critical of their parents' sharing behaviour (Autenrieth, Bizzarri & Lützel, 2017; Moser, Chen & Schoenebeck, 2017).



Contrary to the widespread negative media coverage about sharenting, these worries showed that most of the parents interviewed did not post pictures of their children light-heartedly. This raises the question: What kind of action do parents take to deal with their ambivalent feelings?

### *How do parents deal with the perceived risks? (individual responses)*

Facebook, Instagram, and other social network providers continuously emphasize how much they care about the security options they offer and the personal control that members exercise over their own data. However, hardly any of our interviewees trusted these options.

I have adjusted the basic settings a bit. But I do not think it makes a difference. If you want the pictures, you can get the pictures, no matter how I set it. Facebook has all the pictures, can do with the pictures what they want. So we have no control over Facebook, we're only deluding ourselves with the security options we seem to have. (Robert, age 26)

Many of the parents presented an almost fatalistic perspective on the possibilities that providers offer to secure their profiles. As a consequence, they do not actually rely on the offered privacy settings. Instead, they adapt to potential risks in alternative ways: Individually by reducing content and audiences, and collectively through adapting norms and practices.

### *Reduction of content*

The first, and maybe most obvious response, is to reduce the number of new postings. This is especially motivated by the fact that many users mistrust providers' delete options and seem to be quite aware of the potential consequences of sharing a picture even once.

It's just so that you cannot delete it properly. So I think you have to be aware in advance. So either you put it online in the knowledge that it stays there somehow, even if you press delete. Either you do it then or not. That's why I make sure that there really are only a few photos. (Julia, age 28)

In reaction to their concerns, many parents limit their photo sharing habits to the most important occasions, like birth announcements and significant milestones in the lives of their children.

Yes, when the dwarf was born, we had such a small photo shoot [...]. Otherwise, I have no pictures of the dwarf or myself on Facebook. Except for two, yes only two pictures. One reason is that I think my daughter is still so small and so young that she does not have to be on Facebook or does not have to have so many pictures on Facebook. And those are just the two, the one just after birth. Just to inform

every one of my colleagues. And the other, the photo shoot, to show, ok, she is already so and so far developed. (Andreas, age 30)

Since some parents were contemplating reducing their posting habits, they started using alternative ways of sharing private photos.

So I thought I would like to reduce a bit on Facebook because that's just too big a community [...] For example, this picture of us which I think is very cute. Actually, that's not for everyone, it's actually a very private picture of us, all together in bed. And then I thought I just always feel a bit uncomfortable when I put it online. Then I think about who can see it and also because you can copy and pass things on. That's why I think about just sending more to people's OneDrive albums [...] (Miriam, age 29)

Reducing postings is not limited to quantitative considerations. Sometimes it is not so much the number of photos shared, but the topics and poses that disconcert parents. Accordingly, they may limit the displayed photographs both in number and content.

I think there'd be such embarrassing things for my children [...] which I don't post online. There'd be quite funny photos, but I don't want them to be confronted with them some time again, in a situation that I can't control then. (Sonja, age 29)

As the quote demonstrates, it is not that all parents pursue likes, no matter the consequences for their children. Most parents feel quite sensitive about not sharing potentially disrespectful and harmful content about their children. Nevertheless, differences remain regarding what is considered questionable content.

### *Reduction of audience*

Another frequently mentioned adaption is the adjustment of one's own profile contacts. This goes beyond the kind of obvious 'don't accept friend requests from people you don't know'. Many parents reported a change in their mind-set. While they previously used to accept nearly every friend request from acquaintances, they now try to reduce the potential audience through deleting friends and rejecting friend requests.

It's important to just make it clear to everyone, hey people, it's really dangerous, don't accept a friend request from anyone you don't really know! And maybe that's why I reduced my contacts [...] So now, for about one year, I stopped adding everyone to my Facebook. Even many people I went to school with like 20 years ago, I then reject. I used to accept their contact requests but then kicked them out again later. (Katrin, age 22)

Interestingly, the reduction of contacts is often considered easier than establishing specific rights of access, such as audience groups on Facebook.

No, I tried it [introducing group access rights], I can't do it. I don't know how to do it, but I saw that you can do it. I think it'd be good. It'd also be good, because then maybe the risk is smaller. (Diana, age 29)

Evidently, parents did not only lack trust in social network sites' security and privacy settings; they also lacked technological skills that might assuage their fears.

### *Adaption of norms and practices (collective responses)*

The usage of photographs in online-environments becomes increasingly complicated when more than one family is involved. Since children and parents frequently encounter other families in comparatively private (e.g., birthday parties and playdates) or comparatively private (e.g., playgroups and school events) events, they have to deal with each other's photo-sharing preferences. While parents may love to visually document their family life, taking photos of solely one's own child is neither always possible nor desired. Thus, there is a deep need to discuss photo-sharing practices and negotiate new norms amongst parental peer groups.

This has also happened before, that a mother has said that you cannot show the friend of the child on photos. I don't take pictures of other kids. Never, as long as I don't know if I'm allowed to. I'll not do that. Because I don't want that myself, that someone just takes pictures of my children. I also have a friend who posted a photo of them [the children] online. So I said that I don't really want that right now. Because I want to know who I'm giving permission to for the photos and I don't know his friends. (Doris, age 34)

In order to respect other families' privacy rights and to avoid inter-familial conflicts, parents reported on the need to establish new norms and practices of photo-sharing. The strategies of adapting to the new challenges of networked environments varied among parental peer groups. The obviously most categorical and consistent option was to not allow any online photo sharing at all.

I told everyone I don't want the pictures I send you to end up on Facebook, Instagram, Whatsapp, etc. I want you to keep them safe, and I really don't want to see these pictures anywhere on a social network. That should be really private. (Anja, age 45)

Other parents took a less categorical stance: While they rejected the distribution of photos on social network sites, they accepted private or group messaging-apps.

Family photos, this is private and that should also be private, there must not someone, I was at some point friends with, but have not had any close contact for years, see things like that. There then is Whatsapp to forward. (Andreas, age 30)

Another frequently discussed option is the consensual online sharing of photos. These parents were not categorically against posting pictures of their children online but

expected their peers to request permission to do so. Often this practice was related to a specific aesthetic of the picture. For example, some parents were comfortable with sharing photos of their children online, as long as they did not depict a critical situation (birthday parties were reported to be acceptable), and the faces of their children were not fully visible (as in picture 1).

**Picture 1.** Photo-sharing practices in parental peer groups



The hub giving instructions for the next treasure hunt

### Emerging photo practices: How do parents show their children in online environments against the backdrop of their concerns?

In the history of photography, a main aim seemed to be to attain visual presence and to show one's face. Especially where pictures served as documentary artifacts of family history for future generations, it seemed essential that the face of the person(s) in focus could be clearly seen. The shift to networked photography has, however, introduced a change in this photographic practice. Dealing with the tension between their wish to post photos of their children online while creating as few visual traces as possible, parents have been developing new photo practices that allow them to show their children while maintaining some anonymity. In the tradition of the "anti-selfie" (Tifentale & Manovich, 2018), this can be described as anti-sharenting pictures. This practice reduces the focus on the child and emphasizes the photographic and spatial contexts of the images. We identified five types of pictures with specific practices of (un-)showing.

### 1. *The disguised child (picture 2)*

The disguised children (see picture 2) already wear some kind of mask while they are being photographed. This includes sunglasses, caps and costumes which already cover their faces, especially their eyes, without any further photo-processing.



### 2. *The faraway child (picture 3)*

In this type of photo, the children are photographed from a distance that makes their facial expressions unrecognizable (see picture 3). With this photographic practice in particular, the emphasis of the pictorial expression lays on the context rather than the child.



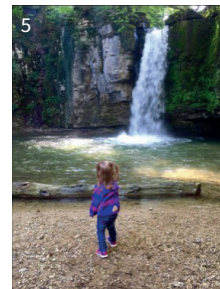
### 3. *The parted child (picture 4)*

Many parents tend to show pictures of their children which depict only fractions of their bodies and faces. The focus here is reduced to those parts of the body considered necessary for telling a specific story, like the hands holding the grasshopper in picture 4. While maintaining the anonymity of the child, elementary aspects required to report a situation or a specific story can nevertheless be shown.



### 4. *The child from behind (picture 5)*

Photographing children from behind is a common anti-sharenting strategy to ensure they remain unrecognizable for unfamiliar viewers. This way of photographing often, for example, shows the child in a wider spatial context that gives some insights into family activities (see picture 5).



### 5. *The digitally processed child (picture 6)*

In contrast to type 1), in these pictures children's faces are covered post-production. Sometimes visible faces are just blotted out (as in picture 1), sometimes digital stickers or emoji are used to "replace" facial expressions (see picture 6). Social networks like Facebook offer convenient in-app opportunities for users to do so.



## The need for a photo-sharing guide for families

While communicating in networked environments has become a common routine for most parents, the sharing of photos remains difficult and contested terrain. On the one hand, parents' wish to share moments of this part of their lives seems comprehensible; on the other hand, children's privacy rights also need to be respected. Even if they are sensitised to the topic, many parents felt insecure and sometimes regretted their earlier sharing practices.

Yes, I'm afraid that the pictures appear where I don't want to see them. That they are somehow used for advertising, or I don't know what. And then I'm standing there and have no right to complain [...]. But these are things that only became clear to me afterwards. So you should first inform yourself about the risks, and worry. And I thought about it all in hindsight, but now I've already posted the pictures. And even if I delete them now, they're still stored. (Magdalena, age 25)

Within parental peer groups, the rules are often very implicit and context bound. This leads to further potential conflicts. Another problem is intra-familial differences: For example, when parents and grandparents have divergent opinions on posting pictures online; or when separated parents have difficulty communicating about their expectations.

It's a contentious issue for me and my daughter's father. He also takes pictures of her and sometimes careless, at least careless in my eyes, so that it comes to arguments between us. The question is always: What kind of photos are ok to put on your profile. For example, I don't want him to share a picture of her sitting in the bathtub. (Tina, age 32)

We identified the need to create some guidelines for families to deal with these insecurities and to explicate some of the implicit norms. We developed two instruments to support parents and families to make conscious decisions about their sharing practices. The first is a family photo guide with some general information on the topic (see picture 7).

The second is a decision-aid flyer based on ten basic questions (see picture 8). Photos should only be considered for sharing if each question can be answered positively. All materials can be downloaded free at [www.netzbilder.net/infomaterial](http://www.netzbilder.net/infomaterial).

## Conclusion

As the enormous numbers of shared pictures demonstrate, visualization is a growing phenomenon in communication. In addition to the specific characteristics of pictures, mostly photos, the resulting digital visual communication has consequences for intra- and extra-familial relations. Within intra- and inter-family networks, new norms and rules of sharing need to be discussed: Decisions need to be made about what is appropriate to whom, and about who has the right to decide what to share. Through the sharing of family photographs with a wide extra-familial audience, the private has



Picture 7. Family photo-sharing guide for networked environments<sup>2</sup>



Picture 8. Decision-aid – sharing or not?<sup>3</sup>



become public like never before. Major points here are: respecting children's privacy rights, but also teaching parents about responsible media usage.

Notwithstanding extreme and therefore notorious social media phenomena (such as #assholeparents), we found that most parents tend to relatively moderate sharing practices and are quite reflective about what to share and what not. At the same time, many of these parents feel insecure. They are torn between their wish to communicate and share family photos with their friends and the need to protect their children's privacy rights. Consequently, we need a more diversified discourse that goes beyond the blanket demonization of sharenting and that can deal with the growing aesthetic differentiations and practices related to posting pictures of children online.

## Notes

1. For a critical discussion of the term "digital native" see Hargittai (2010).
2. The text on the cover reads "Too naked for the internet? – Tips for families on dealing with photos of children in social online networks"
3. The decision wheel lists ten key questions that parents should ask themselves before sharing photos of their children online.

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## Contributors

*Ulla Autenrieth*, PhD, has been working at the Department of Media Studies at the University of Basel, Switzerland, since 2012 and led the SNSF project Family Pictures in the Social Web. Currently she is responsible for the operational management of the SNSF project Service public: Audience Acceptance and Future Opportunities at HTW Chur. Her research interests include visual communication in networked environments, use of online media and media literacy, and the impact of mediatization processes and changing media preferences on media systems.

*Veronica Barassi*, PhD, is a Faculty Member in the Department of Media and Communications at Goldsmiths University of London, U.K. She is one of the founders of the Goldsmiths Media Ethnography Group, the Chair of the E-Seminars of the Media Anthropology Network, and principal investigator on the Child | Data | Citizen Project (Funded by the British Academy). She is the author of *Activism on the Web* (Routledge, 2015), and her work has been published by top ranked academic journals.

*Yehuda Bar Lev* is a PhD candidate in the Department of Communication Studies, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Israel. Bar Lev's PhD project deals with the development of touchscreen devices usage among infants and toddlers. His ethnographic research aims at creating a coherent and holistic framework for understanding the topic. Bar Lev is a member of European COST action DigiLitEY, where he participates in an international ethnographic study on the digital literacy of young children.

*Alicia Blum-Ross*, PhD, is a Research Officer in Media and Communications at the London School of Economics and Political Science, U.K. Her current project, Parenting for a Digital Future, examines the diverse ways that parents approach the task of raising their children in a digital age. She has previously researched media production by "at risk" youth, and also works as a consultant producing, evaluating and advising on the development of education and engagement projects for children, youth and families.

*Maria José Brites*, PhD, is associated professor at Universidade Lusófona do Porto, Portugal. She is the Portuguese coordinator of the European project Media In Action – MIA (LC-00644630; <http://mediainaction.eu>) and she coordinated the RadioActive project in Portugal. Her research interests include participatory methodologies, youth, journalism and participation, audience studies and news and civic literacy. She started the blog <https://anlitemedia.com> as a way to track these issues.

*Jasmina Byrne*, Child Protection Specialist, leads UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti's work on children's rights in the digital age as well as research on family and parenting support. She has overseen and co-authored several UNICEF studies including family support policies and provision in a global context, child safety online, internet governance and children's rights. Currently she is one of the leads of the Global Kids Online research initiative. Jasmina's academic background is in international relations, human rights and social policy.

*Lynn Schofield Clark* is Professor and Chair of the Department of Media, Film and Journalism Studies and Director of the Estlow International Center for Journalism and New Media at the University of Denver, U.S. Clark is interested in how the everyday uses of digital, mobile and social media shape peoples' identities and aspirations, particularly in the context of widening income inequality in the United States. Her most recent book is *Young People and the Future of News*, with Regina Marchi (Cambridge U Press, 2017).

*Rozane De Cock*, PhD, is Assistant Professor in communication sciences and journalism studies at the Institute for Media Studies in Leuven, Belgium. She holds a MA in communication sciences and a MA Post-graduate teacher training (KU Leuven). Rozane has published on internet use, problematic internet use, crime news and coverage of the courts, gaming addiction, gaming and gambling, newsroom practices and news content, children and news, adolescents and media use.

*Teresa Correa*, PhD, is associate professor in the School of Communication at Diego Portales University, Chile. Her research – which has been funded by national and international grants and has been published in more than 30 journal articles and book chapters – focuses on three lines of inquiry: 1) access and uses of information and communication technologies, with a particular focus on family dynamics 2) media sociology and the representation of gender and minorities; and 3) media and family interactions about health-related decisions.

*Maja Sonne Damkjaer*, PhD, is a postdoc at the School of Communication and Culture at Aarhus University, Denmark, currently working in the research project Childhood, Intimacy and Surveillance Practices. Her research focuses on how digital media are embedded in communicative and cultural practices. Her dissertation, *Mediatized Parenthood* (2017), explores how first-time parents use various types of online resources and social and mobile media in their transition to parenthood. Her other research interests include everyday surveillance, online sociality, mediatization theory and methods for analysing digital texts.

*Ranjana Das*, PhD, is a Senior Lecturer in Media and Communication at the University of Surrey, U.K. Alongside a longstanding interest in media audiences and the sociology of the uses of emerging technologies, her current work has a focus on media technologies and the sociology of parenting and parental wellbeing.

*Susanne Eggert*, PhD, works as a researcher at the JFF – Institute for Media Research and Media Education in Munich, Germany, where she is deputy head of the research department since 2016. From 2005 to 2015 she was chief editor of *Merz | Medien + Erziehung* (merz | media + education), and still is chief editor of *merzWissenschaft*. Her research interests include family and media, children/adolescents and media, international media education, media and migration, media and inclusion.

*Nelly Elias*, PhD, is an Associate Professor at the Department of Communication Studies, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Israel. Among her main research interests are media and migration and media and children. She is a member of the Learning in a NetworKed Society Israeli Center of Research Excellence. Within the center she leads a series of projects on the media uses in early childhood, family media practices in the changing technological environment, and media contents addressing infants, toddlers and preschoolers.

*Lorleen Farrugia* is a PhD candidate at the University of Malta researching the social representations of online risks by Maltese children. She graduated in psychology and obtained her Master in youth and community studies where she researched young people and self-disclosure on reality TV. Lorleen is a member of the EU Kids Online Network, and is also a member of the Malta Communications Authority BeSmartOnline! Advisory Board. Her research interests include children, youth and media psychology.

*Jos de Haan*, PhD, is a senior researcher at The Netherlands Institute for Social Research/SCP and Professor of ICT, Culture and Knowledge Society at Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Netherlands. His research focuses on the diffusion, use and consequences new media. He has published widely on developments in cultural participation and media use in the Netherlands and other Western countries, as well as on the digital divide, the rise of e-culture, the acquisition of digital skills and on internet risks among teenagers.

*Leslie Haddon*, PhD, is a senior researcher and part-time lecturer in the Department of Media and Communications at the London School of Economics, U.K. His work focuses on the social shaping and consumption of ICTs, especially looking at studies of domestication. For the last 10 years his main focus has been on children's digital experiences. He is a member of the team working on the Toddlers and Tablets project looking at the smartphone and tablet use of 0 to 5 year olds.

*Donnel Holloway*, PhD, is a Senior Research Fellow at Edith Cowan University in Perth, Western Australia. She has authored or co-authored over 60 refereed journal articles, book chapters and conference papers. She is currently a chief investigator on two ARC grants: The Internet of Toys: Benefits and risks of connected toys for children, and Toddlers and tablets: Exploring the risks and benefits 0 to 5s face online. Her research centres on the domestic context of children's media use for children (0-12) and their families.

*Jonathan Huyghe* worked as researcher at the Meaningful Interactions Lab of KU Leuven, Belgium, and imec at the faculty of Social Sciences. His main topics of interest are interactive prototyping, hybrid devices (physical – digital), gaming and communicating research via presentations and video. Jonathan graduated as master of Communication Sciences at the KU Leuven. He currently works as independent user researcher at Hello bank! Belgium.

*Ana Jorge*, PhD, is Assistant Professor at the Catholic University of Portugal, and researcher at Culture and Communication Research Centre. She has researched on children and youth as media audiences, as objects of representation in the media, and as content producers; particularly on the topics of celebrity and microcelebrity. She is member of COST actions DigiLitEY and European Literacy Network. Her research interests include media audiences, consumer and digital cultures.

*Mary Anne Lauri*, PhD, studied Psychology at the University of Malta and at the London School of Economics. Joined the University of Malta in 1992 as a member of the Department of Psychology. Between 2006 and 2016, was appointed Pro-Rector. Authored several works published in both Maltese and international journals. Won a National Book Prize awarded by the National Book Council (Malta) for the book *Exploring the Maltese Media Landscape* co-authored with J. Borg. Actively involved in political, media and voluntary organisations.

*Sharona T. Levy* is a faculty member at the University of Haifa, Israel. Her prime interest is in facilitating and studying people's learning about complex systems; and restructuring conceptual knowledge in science for deeper and easier learning. To this goal, she works with a wide span of age-groups, conducting research into people's reasoning about systems they encounter in everyday life and about systems which they construct and explore in the domain of science and technology; and develop computer-based and physical learning environments.

*Sun Sun Lim* is Professor of Media & Communication and Head of Humanities, Arts & Social Sciences at the Singapore University of Technology and Design. She has researched and written extensively on the social implications of technology domestication by young people and families, charting the ethnographies of their internet and mobile phone use. Her latest books include *Mobile Communication and the Family: Asian Experiences in Technology Domestication* (Springer, 2016) and *Asian Perspectives on Digital Culture: Emerging Phenomena, Enduring Concepts* (Routledge, 2016).

*Sabine Little*, PhD, is a Lecturer in Languages Education at the University of Sheffield, U.K., and a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy. Sabine's research centres around the complexities of notions such as "identity" and "belonging" in the context of multilingual families. As well as working holistically with families, Sabine is working within formal education contexts to help educators and policy-makers understand underlying complexities of identity and belonging in today's "super-diverse" society.

*Sonia Livingstone* is a professor in the Department of Media and Communications at the London School of Economics and Political Science, U.K. She researches media audiences, especially children's and young people's risks and opportunities, media literacy, and rights in the digital environment. Her recent book is *The Class: Living and Learning in the Digital Age* (New York University Press, 2016, with Julian Sefton-Green) and she leads the projects Global Kids Online and Preparing for a Digital Future.

*Giovanna Mascheroni*, PhD, is a Senior Lecturer of Sociology of Communication and Culture in the Department of Sociology, Università Cattolica of Milan, Italy. She is part of the management team of EU Kids Online and co-Chair of WG4 of the COST Action DigiLitEY. Her work focuses on the social shaping and the social consequences of the internet, mobile media and Internet of Toys and Things among children and young people, including online risks and opportunities, civic/political participation, and digital citizenship.

*Thorsten Naab*, PhD, is post-doc researcher at the Department of Media, Knowledge, and Communication, University of Augsburg, Germany. His current research areas include media literacy and media beliefs, media selection and usage, and presumed media influence and its consequences.

*Peter Nikken*, PhD, is Professor of Children, Media, and Parental Mediation at the Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication, Erasmus University in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, and Lector in Children and Media at Windesheim University for Applied Science in Zwolle. He has written many scientific and popular articles and books on children and media on various topics, such as how parents can stimulate their children's media literacy; age and content rating systems for films, television and games; and the effects of ads, sex and violence in the media.

*Ingrid Paus-Hasebrink* is Full Professor for Audio visual and Online-Communication and head of this section at the Department of Communications, University of Salzburg, Austria. Her research field includes analyses of audio visual and online content as well as media practices of different target groups. Particular interest is paid to young people's socialization and the role of media against the individual and socio-structural background of their everyday lives.

*Isabel Pavez*, PhD, is Assistant professor on the School of Communication at Universidad de Los Andes, Chile, and has participated in numerous research projects regarding digital inclusion in vulnerable populations. She has also served as a consultant for international organizations such as the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean and UNESCO.

*Cristina Ponte*, PhD, is Associate Professor in Media and Journalism Studies at Universidade NOVA de Lisboa, Portugal. Among her main interests are media and family

generations, from media representations of children to family dynamics with the media. A member of editorial boards in leading journals, she has also been on the board of EU Kids Online, COST Action IS0906 (2010-2014) and the ECREA TWG on Children, Youth and Media (2012-2017). She has published extensively in Portuguese, English and Spanish.

*Pille Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt* is a professor in media and communication, in University of Malmö, School of Arts, Culture and Communication, Sweden. Her interests include internet users and uses, cross-media audiences, museums as venues for cultural and democratic participation. She focuses on highlighting the diversity of uses of different media. She has participated in several national and international projects and published over hundred peer-reviewed and popular articles in journals, books and newspapers. She is International Director of the European Media and Communication Doctoral Summer School.

*Gisela Schubert* completed a training as a photographer in Bamberg, Germany. Afterwards, she studied Communication and Educational Science (M.A.) at TU Dresden, where she then worked as a research assistant in the field of educational technology. Since March 2012 she is at JFF – Institute for Media Education in Research and Practice, Munich. In her research she is interested in evaluation research concerning media education, media acquisition research (especially in relation to digital media) as well as the participation of adolescents in a mediatized society.

*Lucie Stastna* is a PhD candidate at the Institute of Communication Studies and Journalism at Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic. Her main focus is parental mediation and media education of adults. She has been involved on various media education projects for schools; Parents, Children, and Media research project; a national study mapping media literacy among the Czech population. She was a national expert on European Audiovisual Observatory's Mapping of Media Literacy project and she currently coordinates the preschool education part of the project Supporting digital literacy development.

*Maarten Van Mechelen*, PhD, is a postdoctoral researcher at TU Delft, the Netherlands, specialized in the domain of child-computer interaction. His current research focuses on early mastering of 21st century skills through design-based learning. Maarten is ACM SIGCHI Communication Ambassador, and co-chair of the Participatory Design Conference (2018) and the Interaction Design & Children Conference (2018, 2019).

*Annemarie Wennekers*, PhD, is a researcher at The Netherlands Institute for Social Research/SCP, where she studies the role of media and technology in society. She has a background in psychology, the social sciences and communication science. Her research includes the study of media use in the Netherlands, with a focus on individual and social differences in the use of (new) media.



*Bieke Zaman*, PhD, is Assistant Professor at Mintlab, part of the Institute of Media Studies of the KU Leuven, Belgium. Her research focuses on digital media (including games), children and interaction design from the perspective of communication sciences and Human-Computer Interaction research. Bieke is associate editor of *the International Journal of Child-Computer Interaction*, and *Personal and Ubiquitous Computing*; vice-chair of the ECREA TWG on Children, Youth and Media; and regular co-organisier of the Interaction Design and Children conference.

*Marketa Zezulakova*, PhD, is an Assistant Professor in the Institute of Communication Studies and Journalism at Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic and an Affiliated Faculty member of Media Education Lab (USA). Her main research interest is in children's media learning and experience within diverse sociocultural contexts. Marketa is an assistant editor of *Media Education Research Journal*, member of Media Education Summit planning committee, and fellow of Higher Education Academy.



# Publications from the International Clearinghouse on Children, Youth and Media

## Yearbooks

Dafna Lemish & Maya Götz (Eds.) *Beyond the Stereotypes? Images of Boys and Girls, and their Consequences*. Yearbook 2017

Magda Abu-Fadil, Jordi Torrent, Alton Grizzle (Eds.) *Opportunities for Media and Information Literacy in the Middle East and North Africa*. Yearbook 2016

Sirkku Kotilainen, Reijo Kupiainen (Eds.) *Reflections on Media Education Futures. Contributions to the Conference Media Education Futures in Tampere, Finland 2014*. Yearbook 2015

Ilana Eleá (Ed.) *Agentes e Vozes. Um Panorama da Mídia-Educação no Brasil, Portugal e Espanha*. Yearbook 2014. Portuguese/Spanish Edition.

Cecilia von Feilitzen & Johanna Stenersen (Eds): *Young People, Media and Health. Risks and Rights*. Yearbook 2014. English Edition.

Thomas Tufte, Norbert Wildermuth, Anne Sofie Hansen-Skovmoes, Winnie Mitullah (Eds): *Speaking Up and Talking Back? Media Empowerment and Civic Engagement among East and Southern African Youth*. Yearbook 2012/2013.

Cecilia von Feilitzen, Ulla Carlsson & Catharina Bucht (Eds): *New Questions, New Insights, New Approaches. Contributions to the Research Forum at the World Summit on Media for Children and Youth 2010*. Yearbook 2011.

Ulla Carlsson (Ed.) *Children and Youth in the Digital Media Culture. From a Nordic Horizon*. Yearbook 2010.

Thomas Tufte & Florencia Enghel (Eds): *Youth Engaging With the World. Media, Communication and Social Change*. Yearbook 2009.

Norma Pecora, Enyonom Osei-Hwere & Ulla Carlsson (Eds): *African Media, African Children*. Yearbook 2008.

Karin M. Ekström & Birgitte Tufte (Eds): *Children, Media and Consumption. On the Front Edge*. Yearbook 2007.

Ulla Carlsson & Cecilia von Feilitzen (Eds): *In the Service of Young People? Studies and Reflections on Media in the Digital Age*. Yearbook 2005/2006.

Cecilia von Feilitzen (Ed.): *Young People, Soap Operas and Reality TV*. Yearbook 2004.

Cecilia von Feilitzen & Ulla Carlsson (Eds): *Promote or Protect? Perspectives on Media Literacy and Media Regulations*. Yearbook 2003.

Cecilia von Feilitzen & Ulla Carlsson (Eds): *Children, Young People and Media Globalisation*. Yearbook 2002.

Cecilia von Feilitzen & Catharina Bucht: *Outlooks on Children and Media. Child Rights, Media Trends, Media Research, Media Literacy, Child Participation, Declarations*. Yearbook 2001.

Cecilia von Feilitzen & Ulla Carlsson (Eds): *Children in the New Media Landscape. Games, Pornography, Perceptions*. Yearbook 2000.

Cecilia von Feilitzen & Ulla Carlsson (Eds): *Children and Media. Image, Education, Participation*. Yearbook 1999.

Ulla Carlsson & Cecilia von Feilitzen (Eds): *Children and Media Violence*. Yearbook 1998.

## Other publications

Ilana Eleá, Lothar Mikos (Eds.) *Young & Creative Digital Technologies Empowering Children in Everyday Life*, 2017

Ilana Eleá (Ed.) *Agents and Voices. A Panorama of Media Education in Brazil, Portugal and Spain*, 2015.

Jagtar Singh, Alton Grizzle, Sin Joan Yee & Sherri Hope Culver (Eds): *MILID Yearbook 2015*.

Media and Information Literacy for the Sustainable Development Goals

Sherri Hope Culver & Paulette Kerr (Eds): *MILID Yearbook 2014. Global Citizenship in a Digital World*.

Catharina Bucht & Eva Harrie: *Young People in the Nordic Digital Media Culture. A Statistical Overview*, 2013.

Ulla Carlsson & Sherri Hope Culver (Eds): *MILID Yearbook 2013. Media and Information Literacy and Intercultural Dialogue*.

Catharina Bucht & Maria Edström (Eds): *Youth Have Their Say on Internet Governance*. Nordic Youth Forum at EuroDig, Stockholm June 2012.

Sirkku Kotilainen & Sol-Britt Arnolds-Granlund (Eds): *Media Literacy Education. Nordic Perspectives*, in cooperation with the Finnish Society on Media Education, 2010.

Maria Dolores Souza & Patricio Cabello (Eds): *The Emerging Media Toddlers*, 2010.

*Young People in the European Digital Media Landscape. A Statistical Overview with an Introduction by Sonia Livingstone and Leslie Haddon*. 2009 (For the EU conference 'Promoting a Creative Generation', July 2009)

Cecilia von Feilitzen: *Influences of Mediated Violence. A Brief Research Summary*, 2009.

Ulla Carlsson, Samy Tayie, Geneviève Jacquinot-Delaunay & José Manuel Pérez Tornero (Eds): *Empowerment Through Media Education. An Intercultural Dialogue*, in co-operation with UNESCO, Dar Graphit and the Mentor Association, 2008.

Ulla Carlsson (Ed.): *Regulation, Awareness, Empowerment. Young People and Harmful Media Content in the Digital Age*, in co-operation with UNESCO, 2006.

Maria Jacobson: *Young People and Gendered Media Messages*, 2005.

Simon Egenfeldt-Nielsen & Jonas Heide Smith: *Playing with Fire. How do Computer Games Influence the Player?*, 2004.



# NORDICOM

Nordic Information Centre for Media and Communication Research

University of Gothenburg  
Box 713, SE 405 30 Göteborg, Sweden  
Telephone +46 31 786 00 00 • Fax + 46 31 786 46 55

E-mail [info@nordicom.gu.se](mailto:info@nordicom.gu.se)

[www.nordicom.gu.se](http://www.nordicom.gu.se)



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