"It seems like it has always been with us!": Introducing media technology into children's lives and family interpersonal relationships

KSENIA FROLOVA, *University of East Anglia*

ABSTRACT

Research on children and media often focuses on the risks surrounding children's use of media technology and parents' attempts to control, manage and limit it. However, while our knowledge of parental mediation styles and strategies is extensive, our understanding of what motivates parents and other members of the family to *encourage* children to use media technology is far from being comprehensive. Using qualitative data from an original empirical study of UK families and their media use, this article explores *why* parents and other relatives, such as grandparents, see value in children's use of media, and *how* they encourage children to use media technology and maintain an ongoing relationship with it, introducing it into children's lives and family interpersonal relationships from the early months of infancy.

KEYWORDS

Media technology, children and media, parenting, family life, family relationships

Introduction

As Kjartan Olafsson et al. have argued, 'Internet use, and the use of digital media in general, is thoroughly embedded in children's daily lives' (2013, 24). Children do not simply occasionally have access to one or more media technology, rather they *live* in multi-media environments, saturated by media technology (Davies 2010, 172; Goggin 2012, 87; Livingstone 2007, 8; Morley 2003, 448). Contemporary children are often being referred to as 'digital natives', 'natural born net babes' and 'net savvy young', because of their capability of interacting with a variety of digital media platforms and content (Selwyn 2003, 358; Steemers 2011, 160). However, participation for children always depends on *access,* which has to be facilitated and granted by parents or caregivers, who will in turn play a considerable role in children's exposure to media, attitudes toward media, and responses to media (Davies 2010, 177; Nathanson 2015, 133).

Research on children and media often focuses on the risks surrounding children's use of media technology and parents' attempts to control, manage and limit it (Cingel and

Krcmar 2013; Meiricket al. 2009; Schaan and Melzer 2015; Vaala and Bleakley2015). Mediation and monitoring of children's media activities, such as television viewing or gaming, has been established as an important parental responsibility (Faircloth 2014, 30; Walshet al. 1998, 26). Excessive media use (Gentile et al., 2011), inappropriate sexually explicit or violent content (Tomopoulos et al. 2014; Wilson 2008), cyber bullying, grooming and abuse (Olafsson et al. 2013)are just some of the widely researched and publicly discussed dangers that children can potentially face while using media technology, and parents are being actively encouraged by policy makers, journalists, parenting 'experts' and academics to take these risks seriously, and actively monitor and regulate children's media use(Kehily 2010, 175; Lee 2014a, 69; Schaanand Melzer 2015, 58).

While offering some very useful insights into the issue of the contemporary mediated home, childhood and their constant negotiation by parents, these works, however, pose a danger of creating a one-sided picture of children's media use and parental attitudes towards it. The everyday reality, which I had observed while conducting my study with UK families, is that media use is not always seen in a negative context, as risky and harmful, and children's media use is not always restricted by parents. On the contrary, children are often encouraged to use media technology in the home, in the family context. However, while our knowledge of parental mediation styles and strategies is extensive (for a summary, see Chakroff and Nathanson 2008; Schaanand Melzer 2015), our understanding of what motivates parents to *encourage* children to use media technology is far from being comprehensive.

In this article I will therefore share the findings of my qualitative study with families, and focus particularly on this other, less covered, side of the debate, exploring*why* and *how* parents might encourage children to use media technology, introducing it into children's lives and family interpersonal relationships. As it has already been discussed, it is inevitable that contemporary children will be exposed to media, and in the majority of cases, children are introduced to media technology by parents or caregivers. However, it is also worth mentioning that increasingly this first introduction occurs during the early months of infancy. It therefore becomes particularly important to understand why parents begin to expose their children to media technology, as well as how children in the first years of their life engage with media, as there is currently an uneven coverage of children's media use by age, with the majority of research on children's use of media technology being conducted on teenagers (70%), with only a small fraction of studies looking at children under the age of 5 (6%) (Olafsson et al. 2013, 20). The data used in this article will contribute to our understanding of the issue and present findings from families with young children - babies and toddlers - as well as older children.

My aim is to move away from the discourse of 'risk' versus 'benefit', because parental motivations are often so diverse and complicated, that they simply don't fit into this quite narrow discourse. I also want to steer away from the analysis of parental

encouragement of the use of media technology in terms of the lack of parent–child attachment, low parenting self-efficacy, or parental disinterest in childrearing, common accusation of 'parenting experts' (Lee 2014b, 8; Nathanson 2015, 134). What it means to be a 'good' parent and a 'happy' child, what skills and knowledge will be required from the 'citizens of tomorrow' are just some of the examples of what can motivate parents to encourage their children to use media technology and maintain an ongoing relationship with it. Similarly, while parents are often seen as the key, if not *the only*, players in the process of facilitation of children's media use (Bulck and Bergh 2000; Livingstone 2007), I will argue that other relatives, such as grandparents, who often live in geographically or even culturally distant locations, can also play an important role in how media technology is introduced into children's lives, and in how and why children's media use is encouraged.By focusing on the positive and encouraging attitudes of parents and grandparents towards children's media use in the context of UK homes, the aim is to contribute towards a better understanding of the place of media technology in familylife and interpersonal family relationships.

Before I move on to the discussion of my findings, I first want to address the issue of definitions. My extensive research on the subject showed that the term 'media technology' has been used in various often conflicting ways, and it is sometimes very difficult to figure out what exactly the term incorporates. In the context of this article,I am using the term 'media technology' to mean various technologies, on which the media, that we use on a daily basis, rely. The term is used to refer to various *media devices* (television set, PC, tablet, phone, game console etc.), *platforms* (operating systems on these devices, such as Apple OS), *applications* (YouTube, Netflix, Amazon Prime, Skype, FaceTime etc.), *servicesand content* (what is offered by the means of the applications, such as On Demand television programmes). This definition has been informed by the work of David Croteau et al. (2012), as well as the empirical data that I have gathered about the use of media technology in the home.

Methodology

The data used in this article comes from a survey, in which 152 participants took part, and 12 in-depth interviews with families. Participants were recruited through online media, such as Facebook groups and forums for parents. All participants had at least one child; although parents of children of all ages were invited to participate, the majority of families that took part in the study had young children under the age of 5. The interviews were conducted in participants' homes, and all members of the family were invited to participate, including children. The interviews lasted, on average, 1 hour and were digitally recorded. All names in this article are pseudonyms.

While the aim was to recruit parents from diverse social, economic, cultural and racial backgrounds, and a large number of online spaces was targeted, it was not always possible, as there was no control over who chooses to fill in the survey or expresses the interest in further research participation. The majority of the participants were white

British middle class, although a fair amount of participants was also working class, and quite a few participants did not have British origin. Due to the geographical location of the researcher, it was also difficult to target vast areas, especially in the interviewing part of the research. The majority of the participating families resided in Norfolk or Suffolk, but interviews were also conducted in Nottinghamshire, Kent and East Sussex. However, as it is the case with most empirical studies, the aim was not to study the 'population', and produce representative and generalisable results, but rather elicit deeper, more personal accounts from respondents, giving them voice, exploring their reasons for media practices and how they are imbedded in their everyday lives (Gray 2003, 16; Olafsson et al. 2013, 23).

Introducing media technology into children's lives

The issue of parents encouraging children to use media technology and to maintain an ongoing relationship with media is not addressed very often in the literature, however, even when it is, it frequently lacks empirical evidence, and is often presented in a limited context, mainly focusing on the reasons and motivations around 'convenience'.It has been widely argued that media technology provides a convenient and readily available way of entertaining and occupying children, when parents do not have another alternative due to economic or time pressures, or have to engage in household tasks, take care of other siblings,or simply take a break (Rideout and Hamel 2006; Zimmerman et al. 2007). In my research many parents have indeed discussed using media technology for entertainment and distraction both inside and outside the home, in situations like going on a long journey, waiting for public transport, at doctor's surgery or hairdresser's. Particularly in the households with young children media technology was often used as a 'babysitter': allowing parents to 'steal' some time to make tea, take a shower, do the cooking or washing up. Using media technology in this way, however, often comes with a huge feeling of guilt. As Tom shared,

> *'That's one of the things with kids, everyone says "oh when we become parents we will never do this", but we do use it [media technology] as a tool, because we need to get things done'* (25-34 years old, Norfolk, twins aged 5).

Furthermore, despite being a common reason for parents to encourage children to use media technology, 'convenience' is not, however, the only one, with the motivations behind this varying from family to family, and being quite diverse and complex, including educational benefits, socialization, valuable skills for the future, children's safety and parental pride.

As my study has shown, children are often encouraged to use media technologyfor its educational benefits. As Megan discussed in relation to letting her children watch television programmes and short videos, and play games on tablet and PC:

> *'I think it can be really educational if it's like framed in the right way and I think it introduces them to things that they probably wouldn't see... Introducing topics and concepts'* (35-44 years old, Norfolk, two children aged 5 and 2).

YouTube was often mentioned by parents as being especially useful, informative and educational for children, who were in turn actively encouraged to use it on a regular basis (in most cases purposefully, and under close supervision of parents). Deborah talked about YouTube assisting her son in doing his school homework:

> *'Arthur will come home with a project, like find out about Sri Lanka or something, and so he will watch something on there. Like if you need to find out about elephants, and there is an elephant video, that kind of thing'* (25-34 years old, Kent, three children aged 6, 3 and 1).

Some parents, however, find using an application on a tablet or a phone more educational and beneficial, than watching video content. As Abigail explained:

> *'...it depends on what they are playing with really. I suppose if they are using an app that was teaching them quite a bit I wouldn't be quite so bothered, than about something that was just... watching videos, you know'* (25-34 years old, Norfolk, one child aged 2).

Many parents mentioned doing 'research' into children's applicationsand downloading them for their children to use on a regular basis. Megan, whose 2 children are profoundly deaf, talked about how tablets assist her children in language development:

> *'Actually with iPads, there are some really brilliant apps for language development, because they are sort of linking the sound and action, and so this screen time is really, really good for their... for them learning to listen and learning to talk'* (35-44 years old, Norfolk, two children aged 5 and 2).

These examples show how media technology is deeply integrated into children's lives, with many parents seeing it as a vital part of contemporary childhood and children's development.

Media technology was also often perceived by parents as an important element in children's socialization process, due to it being *'a significant part of modern day culture'*(Mary, 35-44 years old, Norfolk, one child aged 1), something that can help children learn how to make sense of the world and specific social situations, and how to communicate with others.Emily was particularly discussing how television was an

important part of growing up and socialization with peers for children, starting from an early age:

> *'becausewhen they play, I know that they like to act out different characters, so being able to recognizecharacters is important... and again it gives them something in common with other children, that they have something that they all sort of like'* (25-34 years old, Norfolk, one child aged 1).

In this context television is seen as providing children with talking points among peers, and an opportunity to exercise imagination through role play. Nick and Annabelle used television references to teach their son about social situations, such as going to the dentist, using child-centered examples and language that their son could understand to make sense of what was about to happen:

> *'we've often invoked Mr Elephant, who is the dentist in Peppa Pig. We've used it sort of like a social exposure... When he has been anxious about things, we've sort of like referenced back episodes of particular programmes, we'll say like "Oh yeah you know how Peppa Pig is going to the dentist?", so that he knows, he can kind of remember that it's ok'*(Nick, 25-34 years old, Norfolk, two children aged 3 and 6 months).

Another common reason motivating parents to encourage children to regularly use media technology was their concern about children's future in the highly mediated and computerized world, that requires everyone to have good technical knowledge and skills to succeed. As James pointed out,

> *'...at the end of the day we all use computers in life, don't we, so if they are learning how to use iPads and tablets, it's got benefits, for the future, you know'* (35-44 years old, East Sussex three children aged 3, 6 and 10).

EstherDermott and MarcoPomati argue that with electronic media becoming so omnipresent, children's media education has become a major concern for parents, who are now under a lot of pressure to ensure that children become skilled and active citizens of the future, something they start working towards from when their children are still infants (2015, 1). Participants in my study often talked about how important it is for their children to be using media technology, as this will help them develop valuable IT skills. Deborah compared using media technology with crossing the road, something that is very worried about as a parent, but something her children have to learn and cannot live without:

> *'I think it's a bit like a road. Yes, it's going to be dangerous, but they have to know how to cross them. So, yes, we are concerned... about the amount of content that is out there... But I don't think that shutting them away from it is any use, they have to learn how to use it'* (25-34 years old, Kent, three children aged 6, 3 and 1).

Deborah's point about the impossibility of avoiding media technology and children having to learn how to use it from an early age leads to the next motivating factor that parents often mentioned, that of children's safety. For a lot of parents, encouraging children to use media technology, while also supervising them when they do so, was a way of teaching their children how use it safely, preparing them for safe independent use in the future. For instance, many parents talked about teaching their children to use smart TVs and DVRs to be able to find 'appropriate' and 'safe' content themselves, and skip through the adverts, which were commonly perceived of as 'risky' and 'harmful':

> *'We showed them, and now they can fast forward the commercials themselves...'* (Samantha, 25-34 years old, Norfolk, twins aged 5)

> *'On Netflix, they will just use the remote and surf around and will look at something. We've got an account which is set up as kids profile so everything he can look for we know it's like age appropriate content'* (Megan, 35-44 years old, Norfolk, two children aged 5 and 2).

Deborah also actively encouraged her son to search the internet for information, while at the same time *'teaching him that there are safe sites and there are not safe sites'* (25-34 years old, Kent, three children aged 6, 3 and 1).

Children's ability to use media devices and their multiple functions, such as speech recognition, search for information and applications, is also often a source of pride for parents.It became obvious from the way parents talked about their children using media technology, providing detailed description of what their children can and cannot do and at what age. For instance, when I was interviewing Mary and Stuart, their daughter was constantly trying to reach for their phones. One time, when she finally succeeded, Mary pointed my attention to it:

> *'You are just about to see an example of... I will just see what she does with it. She knows how to turn it on. She doesn't know the code. But she presses the buttons so you get voice activation, you know? She knows how to do that. Yes, look, she does it!'* (35-44 years old, Norfolk, one child aged 1).

Similarly, William and Megan were describing to me what their young son can do on a computer or a tablet. Megan said: *'He can turn it on himself!'*, to which William

responded: '*More than that, he can Google! He loves computers, it's his favourite thing in school, ICT, so...*', then Megan continued: '*... he knows how to go to the Google bit on the tool bar and put in "Lego" to find like Lego movies and things like that. Or he chooses something if he likes the look of it... He is really good with technology, he can just find what he wants and put it on*' (35-44 years old, Norfolk, two children aged 5 and 2). In both these families, children's ability to use media technology from an early age was encouraged and celebrated, being seen as an achievement and an important valuable skill for the modern world.

Introducing media technology into family's interpersonal relationships

There is, however, a whole other cluster of reasons for why parents might potentially encourage children to use media technology and maintain an ongoing relationship with it, the one that is closely connected with the issue of family interpersonal relationships. Media technology and family relationships has always been a highly controversial topic. A lot has been written on the potential negative affects of media use on family relationships and communication, for example, it substituting for parent-child interaction or leading to individualization and family fragmentation, in both academic (Groening 2010; Livingstone 2010; Mackay and Ivey 2004; Nathanson 2015) and public (Dunn 2014; Shelleyand Stanford 2013) discourses. A few of the participants in my study indeed had very negative attitudes towards media use in the family context, considering it to be less 'quality' or 'intimate' family time. The vast majority of the participants, however, had much more positive views on media technology, providing diverse and rich examples of it benefiting and enriching family leisure, the side of the debate in media use and family relationships that is once again not covered as extensively, as 'risks' and 'negative consequences' surrounding family media use.

Many of the parents, who took part in my study, talked about the importance of shared family viewing, whether it is broadcast television, on demand television, online short video content or films. As Annabelle shared, '*TV in the living room is a way of insuring that you have some family social time*' (25-34 years old, Norfolk, two children aged 3 and 6 months). My research has shown that television set, which was originally advertised and promoted as a 'force for family togetherness' and a 'new common bond' (Briggs 1998, 110), still holds its position at the center of home entertainment, with the majority of families, who took part in my study, having a television set in the living room and attributing great importance to family television viewing:

> '*We like to watch TV with sky, it's in the family room where we can all sit together and watch stuff*' (Bethany, 25-34 years old, Norfolk, one child aged 1); '*We watch TV together on a television set as it is central in the house, so a social environment*' (Hayley, 25-34 years old, Norfolk, one child aged 5).

Participants have highlighted the importance of the television set as a shared, family-oriented media technology, which can be jointly used by the entire family for shared entertainment and spending time together, reinforcing 'intergenerational family interaction and communication' (Schaan and Melzer 2015, 60). Some families discussed building rituals and traditions around shared viewing, making it an even more personal, special, bonding experience for the whole family (Lull 1988). As William described his family weekend viewing,

> '*We have movie night on weekends, so we make popcorn and we get all the chairs around the TV set, and maybe we'll invite some friends over, we just rent a movie off iTunes, like a Despicable Me, or you know, kids movies. And Daniel will make little tickets, like cinema tickets and draw posters, you know, pretend we are at the movies, which is quite cute. That's good family fun*' (35-44 years old, Norfolk, two children aged 5 and 2).

Similarly, Nick talks about his plans to have a regular movie night on Sundays, when his children become a bit older:

> '*Yeah, like a movie on a Sunday, that's what I always remember from my childhood. That was actually a fairly social thing, you know, you kind of get together and then you talk about, it's a kind of like a shared experience*' (25-34 years old, Norfolk, two children aged 3 and 6 months).

Similar to Nick, many other participants also nostalgically remembered their own childhood and tried to replicate that family viewing experience, which they once shared with parents, with their children. Devices other than the television set were also used for the same purpose of watching video content together as a family, sharing the viewing experience with each other and generating topics for discussion. A few of the participating families did not have a traditional television set at home and /or a television license, so other devices, such as laptops and tablets, were used for shared viewing of on demand television programmes, films and shorter clips. These findings offer an important context and balance for the works that emphasize individualization of family viewing and time together to the extent of 'living together separately' brought about by technological developments (Andreasen 1994; Flichy 2002), showing instead how new media technology, such as Smart TV, PC, tablet, DVR, online television services, YouTube and so on, can still be used for very traditional purposes of bringing the family together.

While the use of media technology in the context of family life is often discussed in relation to parent-child relationships, the question that is addressed less often is how media technology is used to facilitate and maintain relationships with other family members, such as grandparents, who often live in geographically or even culturally

diverse locations. My research has shown that media technology can not only help to connect parents and children, allowing for shared activities and family time together, but it can also be vital for maintaining relationships and connections with grandparents.Many participants mentioned that their children literally grew up with Skype, FaceTime and similar applications, which were used to contact grandparents on a regular basis starting from day one of a child's life,to make sure that they can see their grandchildren and takean active part in their life. As Mary explained:

> *'We use the MacBook for Skyping and FaceTime, her grandparents, they live about 3 hours drive away, so we don't see them in person very often but we do Skype regularly, so she is used to seeing them and talking to them on the MacBook'* (35-44 years old, Norfolk, one child aged 1).

Communication via various media technology allows to maintain family ties, with parents mentioning that often children don't see a difference between 'seeing' and 'talking' to grandparents online and face-to-face. Mary further discussed that she finds it fascinating that her daughter is so interactive when talking to her grandparents on FaceTime, *'talking and reacting'*, showing her grandparents her toys, what she has learned and so on.

Grandparents were also often the ones to buy children their first personal devices, with popular choices being tablets and iPod touch. As Samantha explains,

> *'They have a device each [iPod touch]. It's more to use for games and talking to... because my mother lives abroad, back in the States, my mum bought them for them, when they were around 3, and she bought them so that they can FaceTime her and message her'* (25-34 years old, Norfolk, twins aged 5).

This 'gift' was then followed by both grandparents and parents teaching children how to use the device for communication purposes. This was in turn followed by establishing specific routines, when days of the week and times of the day were negotiated and chosen to make 'contact' with grandparents to ensure that communication is maintained on a regular basis.

In multilingual and multicultural families, where grandparents did not live in the UK and did not speak good English, media technology was also often used to make sure that children do not forget their grandparents' mother tongueand culture in order to be able to communicate with them and maintain close relationships. Sonia explained how she is using educational cartoons in Russian found on YouTube to make sure that her boys can understand and speak both languages, to be able to communicate with grandparents still living in Belarus: *'They don't have that much interaction with Russian speaking kids of their own age, and we only speak English at home, and my family lives so far away... so*

I show them videos in Russian and I think it's important' (Sonia, 35-44 years old, East Sussex, three children aged 3, 6 and 10). While foreign books or toys that promote language development are difficult to find and are often expensive, YouTube offers an easy to access alternative, as well as being an application, which Sonia's boys already use, like and understand.

My research has shown that children can be very creative in their ways of maintaining relationships with extended family, going beyond 'just' making a call on Skype or FaceTime. Tom discussed how his daughters write to their grandmother and even send her their drawings and crafts. They will either take a picture of what they have created or draw it digitally on the iPod and '*email it to grandma'* (Tom, 25-34 years old, Norfolk, twins aged 5). In this context media technology allows for establishing even closer connections with the family, maintaining geographically diverse networks, making it easier to stay in touch, while at the same time allowing families to experiment with means of communication and find new ways of sharing the intimate and personal details of their lives with distant relatives (Peng and Zhu 2011).

Conclusion

As Leslie Haddon has argued, it is very important to appreciate how media technology and media practices 'have appeared gradually because there are often claims about the unique experiences of the current generation of children when in fact practices developed… over time by different generations of children and youth' (2013, 89). The aim of this article was therefore not to say that family's experience of media technology in the home is ultimately different from what has been observed before. However, as Maire Messenger Davies points out, 'the swiftness of many of the changes in the development of 'new' digital technology in people's lives has a tendency to outpace the rate of academic research on the phenomenon' (2010, 173), which makes it ever so important to examine and document diverse individual stories about the contemporary use of media technology in the home in the context of interpersonal relationships.

This articles aimed to highlight the importance of broadening the debate around the use of media technology in the family context, to include the exploration of the factors that motivate parents to see *value* in their children's media use, and to *encourage* children to use media technology and maintain an ongoing relationship with it. The article has demonstrated that moving away from the 'risk' versus 'benefit' discourse, as well as the analysis of parental encouragement of the use of media technology in terms of the 'lack' of parental skills, attachment and interest, can allow a deeper, more comprehensive exploration of *how* and *why* media technology is introduced into children's lives and family interpersonal relationships from the early months of infancy. This article significantly adds to the understanding of the facilitation of children's use of media technology in the context of the family, by recognizing the diversity of the motivating factors and the active role of parents and other relatives, such as grandparents, in this process.

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Ksenia Frolova is a second year PhD candidate at the University of East Anglia, working in field of television audiences. Her current project is a qualitative study of families, which focuses on how digital television and its technologies are used in the home, and in what ways they affect the contemporary experiences of being a parent and being a child.

Email: K.Frolova@uea.ac.uk