Chapter 1
Introduction

Abstract In this chapter, the overall topic of the book and its rationale are introduced to the reader. The book develops an argument about the rise of digital families and examines how such families use different technologies to their diverse ends. Today, the lives of both their youngest and adult members are already highly 'connected' via portable and personal communication technologies. However, it is only now that the oldest family members are getting ready to engage in digital and online family interactions. The introduction ends with the presentation of the structure of the book.

Keywords Digital family · Extended family · Family solidarity · Generations · Information and communication technology · Linked lives · Technology adoption

Three Generations of Digital Technology Users

The digitalization of families started with their youngest members and young adults becoming early adopters of game consoles, personal computers and CD players in the late 1980s and 1990s. Later on, they did the same with MP3 players, mobile phones and many other tools and gadgets coming out on the market. North America and Western Europe were paving the way in this regard, although adoption rates and rhythms were notably varied even internally within these two regions. However, thanks to the steady advance of digitalization, the largest generational gaps in the uptake of most common personal communication and media technologies have continued to narrow everywhere in the Western world (e.g. for Finland, see Wilska & Kuoppamäki, 2018). Yet, at the same time, some new differentiating factors, bearing upon, for instance, the breadth and purpose of people's Internet use, have become more and more evident and apparently influential with time (Pearce & Rice, 2013; Taipale, 2016). As a result, scholarly attention has increasingly begun to be paid to the internal diversity of generational groups, when previously they were looked upon as basically homogenous by nature (Friemel, 2016; Hargittai & Dobransky, 2017).

Families of all sizes and shapes have become quickly saturated with digital devices, and today, the lives of both their youngest and adult members are already highly 'connected' via portable and personal communication technologies. However,

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it is only now that the oldest family members are getting ready to engage in digital and online family interactions. This, to be sure, is true in the first place of those among them who are male and have more education, higher income, a professional occupation and supportive family descendants (e.g. Friemel, 2016; Hargittai & Dobransky, 2017). Nevertheless, we can see a general trend that families consisting of up to three generations now become digitally increasingly connected.

This observation that families are quickly becoming digitalized is supported by statistical evidence from both Europe and the United States, even where the figures provided are typically household-based only (e.g. Kennedy, Smith, Wells, & Wellman 2008; Pew Research Center, 2017). The notion informing the data collection, that of a one-family household, fits poorly with the reality of numerous mixed and extended families made up of members regularly switching between households and belonging to many families at once. In the absence of more detailed family-level data, however, we must settle with conclusions and assumptions drawn from household and individual-level figures. In 2016, the share of households with Internet access in the European Union was already 85%, an increase of 30 percentage points from 2017 (Eurostat, 2017).[1] In 2016, only 14% of Europeans had never used the Internet, although there were pronounced country differences in this regard. The proportion of Internet non-users was still high in countries like Bulgaria (33%), Italy (25%) and Slovenia (22%), while it was significantly below the EU average (14%) in Nordic countries like Finland (4%).

The rates of adoption and use of basic digital technologies grow currently fastest in the oldest age group, especially among those towards the upper range of it. In Finland, for instance, the Internet use rates have continued to steadily rise among those aged 65 and older. As the figures for 2015 show, 27% of those aged 75–89 in the country had used the Internet in the preceding three-month period. Similarly, the proportion of Finns owning a mobile or a smartphone is already high across all age groups, except in the oldest age bracket; of those aged 75–89, no more than 5% possessed a smartphone in 2016 (Statistics Finland, 2017). Figures from the United States demonstrate a similar trend, showing that 65-year-olds now have caught up with their younger compatriots in their rate of broadband adoption (Anderson & Perrin, 2017). In 2016, 67% of those in the age group (65+) had used the Internet at least occasionally, compared to 90% of all adults younger than them. Any such differences between age groups tend, however, to be much more significant when it comes to ways of using digital technologies. While, in Europe in 2016, searching for information about services and goods and sending emails were the two most popular activities among Internet users aged 16–75, overall, the younger ones in this group were more frequently engaged in social networking (88% of those aged 16–24 did so, while the corresponding figure for the age group 55–74 years was 38%). Comparable differences were found in Europeans' Internet voice and video calling patterns as well as in their video watching and online content sharing habits (Eurostat, 2017).

In this book, I make the argument that, in the economically more developed societies, we are currently witnessing the emergence of digital families. In a dig-

[1] From here onwards, the term 'Europeans' is used to refer to the citizens of the European Union.

ital family, everyone from grandchildren to grandparents has at least some basic familiarity with information and communication technologies (ICT), knows at least some social media and has access to basic communication devices such as a mobile phone and the Internet, which one then uses to various degrees to stay in touch with other family and extended family members. In contrast to neighbouring concepts such as the 'networked family' (Kennedy et al., 2008) or the 'networked household' (Kennedy & Wellman, 2007), the concept of the digital family refers to the daily communication practices taking place within our extended and geographically distributed family relationships; that is, it covers not only child–parent but also parent–parent and child–grandparent relationships. While the concept will be subjected to a more thorough discussion in Chap. 2, it is worth noting already here that the emergence of digital families is an asynchronous and complicated process. It unfolds at different paces in different countries and regions, and the intensity of older people's participation in digital family life, using communication devices and social media applications, varies even greatly from place to place.

Digital families make possible a social structure in which personal communication technologies can be employed to serve not only individual aims but also the goals of sustaining family connections, caring relationships and family solidarity (Taipale, Petrovčič, & Dolničar, 2018). The debates on the productive versus counterproductive effects of personal communication technologies and media on family unity are long-standing, with ardent supporters on both sides (e.g. Shove, Pantzar, & Watson, 2012). Concerns have, for instance, been raised about the negative consequences of ICT and social media for family coherence. Some, like Turkle (2011), have argued that ICT substitutes for genuine interpersonal relationships, making us feel connected yet emotionally empty. Worries about diminishing family time have often focused on a trend towards privatized solo use of new personal technologies (e.g. Livingstone & Haddon, 2009). Others have suggested that technology may lead to forms of 'paranoid parenting' (Furedi, 2001) or 'helicopter parenting' (Clark, 2013) whereby parents constantly monitor their children's doings online, to avoid their becoming victimized by bullying, abuse and the like there. Kennedy and Wellman (2007), for their part, have proposed that personal communication technologies undermine the cohesive power of family solidarity that is based on normative expectations and reciprocity, and that, as a consequence, family solidarity is being replaced by loose ties between increasingly individually networked family members (see Chap. 8).

In other connections, to be sure, scholars have also demonstrated the positive consequences that digital technologies can have for family life. As one survey study from the United States, for instance, shows, many believe families to be more likely to stay together than grow apart thanks, precisely, to the impact of ICT (Kennedy et al. 2008). Other studies have demonstrated how new communication technologies can help family members to stay in contact with one another despite geographical and generational distances, especially upon the younger family members' leaving the nest (Epp & Price, 2008; Mesch, 2006; Tsai, Ho, & Tseng, 2011; Wilding, 2006). Interestingly in itself, in countries with a strong tradition of filial piety and family care provision, like China and Taiwan, the number of ageing parents living alone is today

rising, making family members to more and more rely on online communication tools in their quest to organize family matters from afar (Tsai et al. 2011).

One the arguments made in this book is that the current-generation digital ICTs, in particular social media and various instant messaging applications, add to the range of technologies that can offer digital families new means for, and ways of, being together, providing care and maintaining emotional linkages beyond dyadic family relationships. The acts of community building that these technologies make possible can function as a balancing counterforce to the increasing prevalence of individual-centred networking via personal communication technologies, a phenomenon extensively studied and theorized in previous research (e.g. Rainie & Wellman, 2012; Wellman, 2001; Wellman et al., 2003). At the same time, however, new media and new communication technologies have also been shown to create tensions and frictions within families and between family generations (Taipale, Wilska, & Gilleard, 2018). The diversity and omnipresence of new ICTs and applications force family members to consider and discuss among themselves which digital tools should be utilized for their family communication, among which members, exactly, and to what extent, all from the point of view of how daily matters in the family can be organized and coordinated using new technology, from both near and afar. Without awareness of other family members' communicative preferences and digital skills, and without a shared agreement about which communication tools are suitable for just one's own particular family, disagreements and conflicts are inevitable.

To understand the digital connectedness of families, it is useful, though not enough in itself, to look at how 'generations' have been understood and conceptualized in classical sociology (see Taipale et al., 2018). Generation studies have sought to identify distinguishing factors that make one generation separate or different from another, in a process also known as generational 'othering' (e.g. Brown & Czerniewicz, 2010). In that context, generational differences are explained with reference to shared historical events experienced by members of a certain generation only. To study the intertwining of family members' lives, however, another kind of theoretical approach is needed. In response to that need, this book draws upon sociological theories of the life course and employs the concept of 'linked lives' (Cox & Paley, 1997; Elder, 1994; Elder & Kirkpatrick Johnson, 2003). Aided by these, it seeks to examine and describe how digital technologies can connect the lives of 'individually networked' family members, thereby shedding light on new kinds of interdependencies created among family members.

In the linked lives of families, digital media and communication technologies play a highly particular role. First of all, personal communication technologies, and instant messengers in especial, are increasingly being used to coordinate and synchronize the lives of individually networked family members (Ling, 2004; Ling & Yttri, 2002; Tammelin & Anttila, 2017). In geographically distributed extended families whose members' lives are characterized by high mobility, they offer an alternative to in-person communication needed to sustain intimate family connections. Second, these technologies can be used for 're-creating altered rituals and everyday interactions across geographically dispersed family members' (Epp & Price, 2008). In the absence of shared meals or, say, family gatherings around the television set, family

members may share these moments with those physically not present via various technological means. Such small communicative acts may significantly contribute to the 'we' sense of families. Third, as Elder (1998) has reminded us, major events such as economic recessions that force families to change their lifestyles and spend money more sparingly, as well as important individual decisions needing to be made (such as about international work assignments or embarking on study abroad), affect family relationships. Also in such situations, digital families can resort to using new communication technologies to compensate for the lack of certain members' physical presence. Although new communication technologies cannot fully substitute for the physical vicinity of persons, it is good to also keep in mind that it is the very same technologies that enable individual and mobile lifestyles in the first place, and without them, the social costs of travelling and living apart would probably be much higher.

In developing its argument about the rise of digital families and examining how such families use different technologies towards their ends, this book draws upon data collected in empirical research, mainly qualitative but also quantitative. The principal research material consisted of written reports of observations and interviews conducted by key collaborators among their own extended families in 2014 and 2015, in three different countries—Finland, Italy and Slovenia. This material and the methods employed to analyse it are described in Appendix A.

The Structure of the Book

This book is organized into three parts, each consisting of two to four chapters. Chapter 7 and 8 are revised versions of a previously published book chapter (Taipale, Petrovčič, & Dolničar, 2018) and conference proceeding (Taipale & Farinosi, 2018), respectively. For Chap. 7, the analysis presented in the original article was extended so that it now covers also Italy, in addition to the original Finland and Slovenia. Chapter 8 reproduces the empirical analysis in the article on which it is based, but reframes it with new theoretical concepts and notions. Apart from some parts of Chap. 9 that have been published before (in Hänninen, Taipale, & Korhonen, 2018), the entire rest of the book consists of previously unpublished material.

Part I begins with a chapter dissecting the notion of the digital family, discussing its advantages and shortcomings to assess its usefulness vis-à-vis certain neighbouring concepts. In Chap. 3, the suggestion is made that the relevance and timeliness of this concept have to do with recent advances in personal communication technologies that, together with wider social changes in the developed world, facilitate older people's participation in a digital society. Next, in Chap. 4, the theoretical foundations on which the arguments in the book are built are developed. Particular attention is paid to the need here, based on the changes in the technological and social structure that we are witnessing, to have an approach that goes beyond strict generational dividing lines and is more sensitive to the ways in which individual lives are interconnected through the use of digital technologies.

Part II concentrates on empirical evidence of how the lives of individually networked family members are today in complex ways becoming increasingly interconnected with one another over the human life course. The analysis here focuses on family roles, responsibilities and practices that bind family members to, but also sometimes alienate them from, one another. Chapter 5 makes use of the insightful concept of 'warm expert', coined by Bakardjieva (2005) more than 10 years ago. Concrete examples of how the role of the warm expert is assigned in digital families, and how it is performed from near and afar utilizing different applications and mobile communication devices, are provided. In Chap. 6, the argument about the linked lives of the members of digital families is further substantiated, describing the way digital technologies have brought with them a need for a new type of housework: digital housekeeping. To sustain the functionality and reliability of the complex networks of personal technologies in the family (cf. Fortunati & Taipale, 2017), there is a new need to negotiate the fair distribution of the accompanying practices among the family members, taking into account each individual family member's digital skills, interests and other available resources such as money and time. Chapter 7 then takes a closer look at one specific mode of communication, WhatsApp messaging, used, especially in Finland and Italy, to facilitate communication in geographically distributed extended families. The benefits of the application are shown to be highest in countries where intergenerational linkages tend to otherwise be weak, loose or sporadic due to long geographical distances and early nest-leaving. Finally, in Chap. 8 an argument is made that the increasing use of new personal communication technologies and social media does not merely, or simply, erode family solidity: it can also be cohesion enhancing, strengthening linkages between family members and across generations. This cohesive force of digital technologies, however, stems in the first place from their association enabling and enhancing capability and the functional assistance that family members provide to those in need of help and support.

Part III then brings together and consolidates the empirical findings and theoretical constructs presented in Parts I and II. As is suggested in Chap. 9, in countries like Finland, in which families are geographically highly dispersed and rather loosely connected, digital technologies and social media, especially group messaging applications, can open up completely new avenues for family members to be more frequently in touch with one another, and thus for families to remain connected. The concept of re-familization, borrowed from the field of social policy research in which it refers to the growing responsibility of families to care for their loved ones on their own, is presented as an interpretative window through which to better understand this phenomenon. The book concludes with an outline, in Chap. 10, of a more balanced future approach that takes a more optimistic view of families and digitalization in our time. While digital media and communication technologies, undoubtedly, have some negative consequences for family relationships as well, personal communication technologies and social media are also something that individuals together can, and have already begun to, harness for their own, self-determined ends, to serve their common good as a family.

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