Chapter 10
Towards a More Balanced Approach to Digital Families

Abstract The book concludes with the claim that the modes and frequency of intra-family digital communication cannot be studied separately from the social functions that the different technologies have in extended families. In digital communication, when problems related to the use of new technology arise, a caring relationship emerges between a carer, attentive to the expressed care needs of the cared-for, and the latter, expected to provide some response in exchange for the help received. Finally, avenues for future research to are outlined, with the future of the digital family briefly considered.

Keywords Caring relationship · Digital family · Digital technology · Warm expert

This book has explored intergenerational connections in digital families from various angles, comparing the situation in families living in Finland, Italy and Slovenia. As was found, various improvements in digital media and communication technologies, the spread of digital skills across generations, the digitalization of the home, and, especially, the more extensive employment of mobile communication technology and social media for the purposes of intra-family communication have had the joint outcome of allowing families to experience more connectivity, more togetherness and more unity across generational boundaries than before. In the digitally connected families participating in this study, this was largely experienced as a positive, although not entirely unproblematic, development.

Previous research highlighting the positive impacts of ICT on family relationships has mainly revolved around transnational family relationships, in which context both conventional ICTs (such as voice telephony and text messaging) and newer forms of digital media (social networking sites) have been presented as a lifeline helping people to stay connected (Pham & Lim, 2016). As studies have found, shared deployment of digital communication tools enables maintenance of a sense of presence in diasporic families (Baldassar, 2008; Yoon, 2016), allows parenting from afar (Chib et al., 2014; Madianou & Miller, 2011, 2012) and enacts what has been called 'friendly surveillance', or the performance of care rather than monitoring activities, within the family (Sinanan & Hjorth, 2018). The overall positive view taken in these studies of the role of ICTs stems from the fact that in transnational families, digital technologies are (rightly so) not regarded as a cause for the dispersion of the family;

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quite the contrary, they are seen as vehicles for compensating for the high price paid by the families for being physically separated.

More typically, however, research has presented digital technologies as something akin to a double-edged sword. On the one hand, especially personal media and personal communication tools have been seen as enablers of more individualized and mobile lifestyles, allowing more personalized daily agendas and schedules. From this point of view, family appears as an increasingly loose network of more and more individually networked members (e.g. Kennedy & Wellman, 2007). On the other hand, though, mobile and other personal communication tools have been shown to help the new, networked families to micro-coordinate and manage their daily activities on a constant basis (e.g. Ling & Yttri, 2002; Neustaedter et al., 2013). In other words, the technologies have been seen as both eroding the social coherence of families once fostered by physical proximity and the bounds of locality, and providing new means for managing family relationships irrespectively of time and space.

At the same time, however, there is also a large body of research presenting a more critical view according to which the growing dominance of new digital media, combined with the increasingly more individualized nature of communication, drains social relationships of emotions and intimacy. It has been proposed, for instance, that communication in virtual environments produces an illusion of companionship and trustful relationships with no presumption of any emotional or longer term commitment (e.g. Turkle, 2011). Especially, earlier studies of Internet use typically ended up lamenting the diminishing time spent together in families under the impact of digital technologies and media contents consumed in isolation (e.g. Nie & Erbring, 2002). Newer studies, however, have found very little or no support at all for this particular argument. Vriens and van Ingen (2018), for instance, were able to conclude that the decreasing number of strong social ties and the quality of online relationships were a far more serious concern than the time spent in interacting with one's close relationships. Along the same lines, Vilhelmson, Thulin, and Elldér (2017), examining the results of a Swedish time use survey from 2010 to 2011, showed that the time spent on ICT use was not directly away from the interaction with family members.

Compared to previous research, this book has attempted a more balanced view on the use of media and digital technologies in families. It has shown families to greatly appreciate their improved possibilities to keep in touch with more family members, along with the hard work carried out by the warm experts for the common good of all family members. In all three counties, Finland, Italy and Slovenia, extended families differently but firmly bonded together through, and in close connection with, digital media and communication technologies. While in Finland families used instant messaging applications and social media platforms to breathe life into their intra-family communication, in Italy families were still on the verge of adopting a more diverse set of digital communication tools for their intra-family interaction. In Slovenia, for contrast, families were tied together through notably close helping relationships, operative in technology use as well and made possible by the physical proximity of others in one's shared everyday life.

As the findings above further indicate, digital families in all the three countries had accepted it as a fact that digital media and communication technologies had per-

manently made their way into family life. Regardless of whether the family bonding and unity were the result of intensified technology-mediated intra-family communication or could be attributed to engagement in cross-generational help provision in technology use, there were no signs of any strong resistance towards the digitalization of family life in any of the families considered, in any of the countries involved. This was so even when older family members' understanding of what constituted the 'proper' ways of using digital technology deviated from the views and perceptions held by the younger ones, which indeed was the case almost every time (cf. Colombo, Aroldi, & Carlo, 2018). Even such differences were not reported as having any significance as possible sources of family conflicts or disagreements. Even in families where there were members purposefully using only a smaller array of new technologies, or who deliberately limited the time they spent on technology use, no one was reported to yearn for the good old days, before digital technology arrived. In general, family members' in-depth knowledge of one another's desire and also actual tendency to adjust their technology and technology use to that of everyone else's was one contributing factor in the development of a sense of unity across family generations.

From Connections to Caring Relationships

What the findings and the discussion in this book suggest is that it no longer suffices to study family digital connections, or, the modes and frequency of intra-family digital communication, in isolation of the social functions that the different technologies have in extended families. The question should, however, also be asked as to why digital families invest so much effort in trying to have family members be able to reach one another to maintain and reinforce family relationships, as we have seen them do in this study. Why do family members help one another, sometimes notably altruistically, to acquire, take into use, and actually deploy new digital technologies, even when doing so may be experienced as not just tiresome, but also demanding and difficult, with no immediate benefit to oneself or guarantees of any long-term learning outcomes?

As soon as the focus of the enquiry is moved away from the density and frequency of intra-family connections to the quality and social functions of the intergenerational communication, it becomes obvious that the digital family is much more than the sum of its digitally connected individual members. From the latter viewpoint, it appears that the use of digital technologies in families is to a great extent about maintaining familial caring relationships, both across and within generations. Although to a large extent a still-unexplored territory, the question of the various uses of digital media and communication technologies is clearly entwined with the issue of intimacy and caring in family life (Baldassar, 2016; Sinanan & Hjorth, 2018).

In general, caring relationships serve people's daily life, helping them to meet their daily needs ranging from material and bodily to mental and social ones (cf. Fischer & Tronto, 1991). Accordingly, having a caring relationship entails listening to the other

person's needs, engaging in a dialogue, critical thinking and reflection, and showing responsiveness (Noddings, 2012). As we have seen, in digital communication and with problems related to the use of new technology, a caring relationship emerges between a carer (often a warm expert), who is attentive to the (sometimes rather implicitly) expressed care needs of the cared-for, and a cared-for, who is expected to provide some response in exchange for the help received. As was also suggested above, the two parties may also switch positions in the course of time and reverse their caring relationship. Although the role of the carer is often assigned to the young warm expert(s) in the family, adults and grandparents care for their children as well, for instance, by teaching them how to get started with their first digital devices and services and by looking after them and monitoring their online behaviour.

As this study found, in countries like Finland, where families are highly dispersed and individualized, caring relationships are increasingly played out and experienced through digital communication technologies. In families where this is so, opportunities for physically coming into direct contact with other family members' needs are more limited and infrequent. It also worth noting that the actual information content of intra-family online communications is often of secondary value only: the most important need that these communications serve is simply to know that others in the family are doing well. The exchange of seemingly unimportant messages (see Chap. 7), the making of short, trivial telephone calls and the liking of other family members' social media posts all serve to sustain caring relationships. Moreover, as this book has also shown, such regular and frequent digital connections with other family members are not the only, and sometimes not even the most important, way of expressing caring in the digital family. Taking care of others in it also manifests itself as readiness to provide hands-on help when others encounter problems with digital devices, applications or online services.

In a wider societal context, we might make the observation that caring relationships in digital families resonate with, and take shape in response to, the politics of re-familization discussed above (Chap. 9). Following Tronto's (1994) four phases of care provision, it could be argued that, for people living in such, the digital family provides a primary context for help provision in technological matters. There are several reasons for why this should be so. To begin with, an extended family provides a natural environment for *caring about*. Caring about refers to being attentive to the needs of others, whether the question is of basic needs such as for food and safety or, as in a more modern-day technological context, higher order needs arising from the use of ordinary digital technologies. Second, as we have already seen above, it is typically the warm experts in the family who *take care* of others, meaning that they often feel personally responsible for the proper functioning of the digital technologies in the possession of their family. Moreover, warm experts are typically in charge of *caregiving*, which, in connection with technology use, is about provision of technical assistance in problem-solving. In that role, warm experts serve to ultimately fulfil the digital needs of others. Lastly, caring relationships also contain the element of *care receiving*. As also observed above, warm experts, as the digital caregivers in the family, are very sensitive to the reactions of their help receivers. Correspondingly,

also the help receivers spend time and energy in thinking how their requests for help might be perceived and received by the warm experts whom they approach.

There are many avenues for further research to investigate how caring relationships are played out in practice in the digital family. First of all, there is a need to clarify what, in extended digital families, facilitates the recognition of others' needs in technology use. We appear to know already now, however, that the members of digital families are, on the whole, relatively well aware of the other family members' preferred modes of contacting one another and of their ability to employ different types of communication devices and applications. In this particular regard, locally and nationally distributed digital families have an advantage over transnational families characterized by a more permanent physical separation of their members: the better opportunities they offer for in-person encounters and family reunions allow for closer monitoring of the development of family members' technical skills and communicative preferences. While remote provision of technical assistance, such as by telephone or via video link, is often considered awkward, regular or even occasional visits instead make it possible to request and provide hands-on help in technological matters in person, and without prior consultation or major arrangements.

Second, to date only very little has been studied regarding the responsibilities felt for helping other family members in technology use. In this book, we saw that warm experts, the persons considered also by other family members as responsible for the proper functioning of digital technology in the family, are quite expressly singled out in families. Nevertheless, warm experts themselves experience their responsibility not solely as a burden but also as something rewarding to them. It is, moreover, also worth keeping in mind that the responsibilities of the warm experts are not fixed but subject to change and redistribution as families age. Furthermore, with older family members busy becoming digitally more versed, yet not any more immune to the physiological and cognitive effects of ageing than before, we also need to learn more about how, and to what extent, warm experts' responsibilities are passed on from one generation to the next as digital families grow older.

The third question that has largely fallen under researchers' radar concerns any possible positive long-term effects of the help and care provided by warm experts. In some studies, the use of smartphones for caring for others was associated with lower levels of loneliness and depression and higher levels of self-esteem in the caregivers (e.g. Park & Lee, 2012). It might therefore be that digital families benefit from more intensive, intimate and caring family relationships in more diverse and nuanced ways than what research has so far been able to find out. At any rate, what remains obvious is that any positive outcomes in helping relationships are, in general, only possible insofar as both of the parties to that relationship, that is, both the carer and the cared-for, experience the relationship as mutually beneficial and rewarding.

The Future of the Digital Family

The digital family is already reality in some countries like Finland that led the way when mobile and personal communication technologies were first introduced and began to be appropriated on a large scale. In countries that are latecomers to digitalization, it will still take some years before the oldest members of extended families will be able to embrace smartphones and mobile Internet connectivity in such a large scale as to enable their entire large families to benefit from everyone's being online and digitally connected. As already noted, moreover, it also needs to be kept in mind that extended families in Europe (and beyond) are transforming into the digital families at a different pace and following different paths. While a certain particular technology or application may serve the everyday needs of families in one country, it may be experienced as impractical or entirely inappropriate in another. What remains uncertain for the time being is, furthermore, whether there will be some leapfrogging technologies or applications that can help digitally less equipped and less versed families catch up with those ahead of them in the developments.

Regarding the future of the digital family, it is the oldest members of families who are in a crucial position. First of all, although older people are often considered as reluctant technology adopters, there are many in that group who are even now busy taking up new digital technologies. Research on the subject should, accordingly, be prepared to acknowledge that any connection between age and technology adoption or use is rather nonlinear than linear. The kind of post-Mannheimian approach to technology user generations as outlined in this book (Chap. 4) offers one theoretical framework for doing so and using the insight for the benefit of future research. Second, as previous research has shown, older technology users are a highly diverse group, in terms of individuals' functional characteristics, skills levels, personality traits, personal history of technology use and support networks available—indeed, more notably so than the younger groups of users (see, e.g. Sourbati, 2015). With the almost inevitable increase in physical and cognitive impairments with age, however, almost everyone in that group nevertheless undergoes changes in their functional abilities that impact their facility in using digital technologies and applications, given that the latter typically require good vision and hearing as well as steady hands and fine motoric skills for their operation. Indeed, studies have already shown poor health condition to be a stronger determinant for older people's low engagement with intra-family communication than their generational membership per se (e.g. Peng et al., 2018). Third, as evident also from this book, almost all of digitally mediated family communication, whether dyadic or group-based, occurs between two consecutive generations. Thus, it would seem to be of pertinence to study factors promoting the kind of skipped-generation communication noted earlier, or, interaction that brings together children and grandparents without parents' involvement. The absence of such skipped-generation communication does not, however, indicate a complete lack of direct interaction between children and grandparents. Yet, as the results of this study suggest, any such interaction is likely to be about face-to-face type of assistance given in technology use contexts.

To conclude, the future of the digital family is not simply shaped by technologic advancements and innovations alone. It is much more dependent on the ways in which increasingly varied families appropriate and make use of the rapidly changing landscape of digital devices, programmes and applications. Depending on cultural expectations and the prevailing social norms, digital families may either end up reproducing existing social inequalities in family life, such as those based on gendered practices of family communication or unequal division of household chores, or, at the best, promoting a more democratic and inclusive family culture through new technologies that are supportive of re-familization.

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