

Enhancing Family Cohesion through Web-Based Communication: Analysis of Online Communication Practices in Estonian Families

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Abstract

The article indicates some main trends in the field of intergenerational communication in new media environments, while exploring how new technological possibilities have been introduced and rooted inside the family.

The aim of the study was to investigate the reasons and motivations for why the representatives of three different generations belonging to the same family made use of different web-based communication platforms for everyday family interaction. Furthermore, we also aimed to understand to what extent the family members helped to mediate and shape each other's online practices.

The findings of semi-structured interviews (N=13) with the members of three Estonian families indicate that new media play an enormous role in supporting and, partly, also re-establishing intergenerational communication. Not only are such web-based communication platforms as Skype, instant messenger and Facebook used by family members who are physically apart, but also by family members living under the same roof. Using similar online environments gives family members an opportunity to share their values and attitudes, and to strengthen the ties between generations, all of which is particularly important for older family members.

Keywords: web-based communication, family, generation, intergenerational relations, Estonia

In the current highly mediated societies, various media (technologies) play an important role in forming common experiences among different age groups, leading to the formation of "media generations" (Bolin & Westlund, 2009). Furthermore, it has been argued (cf. Schäffer, 2003) that every generation grows up with its own specific style of media usage and culture, which helps to differentiate a generation from previous ones. In fact, the authors suggest that the "communicative affordances" (Hutchby, 2001) experienced by different generations during their formative years actually contribute to co-shaping these generational identities. Hence, we believe that the present-day information society's different technological affordances created by information and communication technologies (ICTs) have a bearing on the process of socialisation in contemporary society: the ways in which culture is transmitted from one generation to the next (McCron, 1976). Kalmus, von Felilitzen and Siibak (2012), for instance, have posited that four agents of socialisation - the family, the school (pre-school), peers and the media - play the most important roles in this process of socialisation. In the context of this paper, we focus on studying the possible roles of various new media environments as platforms for fostering intergenerational relations between family members.

Our study took place in Estonia, a country which provides an interesting case study for several reasons. First of all, there is a remarkably high Internet penetration rate among Estonians, with 77.5 percent of the population using the Internet (Internet World Stats, 2011). In fact, almost all persons aged 16-34 are using the Internet in Estonia, and in recent years we have witnessed a growing interest in the 65-74 age-group in starting to use the Internet (Three quarters of..., 2010). As, on average, children start to use the Internet at the age of seven in Estonia (Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig & Ólafsson, 2011), Internet use among the youngest age group is also remarkably high, reaching 99.9 percent among 11-18 year olds (Kalmus, Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt, Runnel & Siibak 2009). Furthermore, the recent findings of the EU Kids Online network reveal that 96 percent of Estonian 9-16 year olds use the Internet at home, and slightly more than half (54 percent) of the age group can access the Internet in the privacy of their bedrooms (Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig & Ólafsson, 2011). Considering that 38 percent of the children also make use of their mobile phones or other hand-held devices to access the Internet (ibid), we can see that the majority of Estonians from different age-groups have various opportunities to be constantly connected to the Internet and, hence, to each other.

At the same time, it is important to note that Estonian scholars have emphasised their concern about "the continued weakening of bonds between the generations (parents and children, grandparents and grandchildren)" (Kutsar & Tiit, 2003, p. 73). In fact, due to the implications of several important factors, e.g. average life expectancy for men in particular is rather low, women give birth at a later age, and young families prefer to live separate from their own parents, "many children are actually growing up without significant participation by their grandparents" (Kutsar, Harro, Tiit & Matrov, 2004, p. 85). In a context where less than 10 percent of Estonian children live in multi-generational families, including families with one or two grandparents (Kutsar et al. 2004), digital technologies may offer valuable opportunities for strengthening family bonds.

Previous studies of intergenerational communication in new media environments have mainly focused on analysing parents' perceptions of children's new media use (Livingstone, 2007; Livingstone & Helsper, 2007), and the possible roles of parental (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008; Kirwil 2009) and sibling mediation (Ponte & Simões, 2008) in guiding young people's practices in new media. Several studies (e.g. Madden, 2010; Weishar, 2010) have also focused on analysing the engagement of older generations, the "silver surfers", in new media. Although a few studies have explored new media usage practices among family members (Gentile & Walsh, 2002), for instance child-grandparent relationships involving different media options (Harwood, 2000), these studies have not dealt with the question of what motivates family members from different generations to use web-based communication channels for family communication.

To help to fill this gap in the literature, semi-structured interviews (N=13) with the representatives of three different generations belonging to the same family were carried out. All in all, the representatives of four distinct Estonian families formed our sample. The aim of the interviews was to analyse the reasons for making use of different web-based communication platforms for everyday family interaction, as well as to study the main motivations for communicating online. Furthermore, we also aimed to determine to what extent the family members helped to mediate and shape each other's online practices.

The first section of the article sets the subsequent empirical study in a theoretical context. First, we will give a brief overview of the different generations currently making use of the Internet and then move on to describe their preferences in terms of family communication practices. We end the theoretical overview by introducing some of the main themes connected with inter-generational relations occurring on networked publics. The second section of the article explains the methodological framework and the sample of the study. In the third section, we introduce and discuss our findings, which are presented as the sub-topics which emerged as the most prominent from our analysis. The paper ends with our concluding thoughts.

Theoretical framework

Generations on the Internet

We have witnessed a growing interest in the topic of "generations" among media studies scholars during the last decade (cf. Colombo & Fortunati, 2011). Although, in the context of the present article, the term "generation" encompasses a more biological than sociological approach, we consider it important to give a short overview of the sociological debate on the topic.

It is suggested that one of main reasons for such a notable return of the topic of "generations" has been initiated by the rapid changes brought about by the development of ICTs, which "have radically changed the forms of cultural transmission and socialisation, stressing gaps and differences between social groups and between age cohorts" (Arnoldi, 2011, p. 52). In fact, present day young adults and children are often defined by their relationship to technology, as a variety of labels, such as "digital generation" (Papert, 1996), "net generation" (Tapscott, 1998) and "digital natives" (Prensky, 2001), are used to signify the preferences and supposed common characteristics of the generation who are growing up during a time of rapid technological changes in Western societies. In other words, numerous authors have developed technological (-deterministic) approaches (cf. Tapscott, 1998; Prensky, 2001) to emphasize technology as a defining feature in young people's lives that have brought about fundamental changes in the lives of young people and, hence, also have had a profound impact on forming a new kind of "generational semantics" (Corsten, 1999). Such labels, however, have not been accepted by all. Rather than attributing too powerful

a role to technology, some scholars (Buckingham, 2006; Herring, 2008; Siibak, 2009; Helsper & Enyon, 2009; Selwyn, 2009) have developed sociological (-deterministic) approaches designed to emphasize the overall changes in the socio-cultural atmosphere. For example, according to Gaylor (2002) the diminishing role of the family and the close relationships in the eyes of the present-day youth, in contrast to the growing importance of peers, media stars and personal agendas, should also be noted.

Although research indicates that the members of Millennials are the ones mainly involved in the whole "cyberkid discourse" (Holms, 2011, p. 2), the opportunities offered by the new media are actually also actively taken advantage of by the members of older generations. For instance, the findings of the Pew Internet and American Life Project study *Generations 2010* indicate that there are currently members of six consecutive generations online in the US: Millennials (ages 18-33), Generation X (ages 34-45), Younger Boomers (ages 46-55), Older Boomers (ages 56-64), the Silent Generation (ages 65-73) and the G. I. Generation (age 74+) (Zickuhr 2010). Still, previous studies indicate that Millennials are the fastest in adopting various new media technologies and, hence, often feel infinitely more comfortable with the new technologies than their parents do (Alch, 2000). Furthermore, as children usually consider themselves more expert at the new media than their parents, this expert status has also helped them to gain in social status within the family and has provided the young with a position of greater authority and control (Livingstone & Bober, 2005; Tapscott, 1998). In fact, studies indicate that the Millennials are often not only the instigators of the family's first foray onto the Internet but also end up teaching other family members how to make use of new applications. According to Lenhart, Lewis and Rainie (2001), for example, 40 percent of online teens report teaching family members how to use email and the Internet.

In recent years, however, the previous technology-knowledge gap between Millennials and the members of previous generations has been diminishing. Adults have become more and more motivated to learn basic skills of web-based communication (Lenhart et al., 2001) and, by doing so, have become more aware of the opportunities to access their children's online worlds and mediate their Internet use (Livingstone & Haddon, 2008). Studies indicate that the members of older generations have acknowledged that new media technologies may offer them an opportunity to reach out to the young, who otherwise seem to be out of reach (Smith, 2011; Taylor, Funk, Craighill & Kennedy, 2006). In other words, ICTs have become key elements in bringing different generations together and promoting the strengthening of family ties and experiences (Gonçalves & Patrício, 2010).

Getting together on the Internet

One of the main reasons why the members of different generations gather on the Internet is connected to increased geographical distance and thus the inability to actively communicate face-to-face (F2F) (Harwood,

2000, p. 62). Even though the members of Generation X and Baby Boomers both believe that F2F interaction is the best way to communicate interpersonally, they understand that, due to everyday activities, having interpersonal conversations through F2F is difficult (Taske & Plude, 2011). Although Millennials view the new media technologies as "primary mediators of human-to-human connections" (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008), previous studies indicate that older generations "continue to rely heavily on traditional, analog forms of interaction" (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008). Nevertheless, the relatively long distances between family members and differences in daily schedules have made F2F or phone contact sometimes difficult to organize. Furthermore, Turkle (2010) argues that, although online communication was first conceived as a substitute for F2F contact, it very quickly became the connection of choice. The asynchronous nature of the Internet, in which senders and receivers of messages do not have to be online simultaneously, supports interactions among people with different temporal rhythms (Boase & Wellman, 2006). Turkle (2010) claims that many people are actually afraid to interrupt family and friends by trying to get in contact with them by phone or face to face. In order to avoid intrusion, e-mails and messages are sent instead, both of which also help people feel less isolated (ibid).

Studies indicate that, while Millennials prefer to communicate more interactively, making most use of texting and instant messaging (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008), the members of older generations consider e-mail to be the most essential tool for their daily communications (Dickinson & Hill, 2007). Overall, 91% of Americans between the ages 50-64 and 87% of those aged 65 and older send or read email, and around half of each group exchanges email messages on a typical day (Purcell, 2011). However, in recent years the usage of social networking sites (SNS) among the "silver surfers" (Bitterman & Shalev, 2004) has grown significantly. For instance, in the United States, 50% of the Internet users between 50-64 years of age and 34% of those who are 65 and older now use SNS (Zickuhr & Madden, 2012). These numbers illustrate the fact that parents and grandparents have started to view social media as one of the favourite communication platforms for present-day youth and, hence, many of them have created profiles on SNS in order to re-connect with their children and grandchildren (Simonpietri, 2011).

The impact of, and motivation to use, the Internet, especially for older people, is likely to be very different if it supplements communication with already established friends and family or if, instead, it substitutes for more traditional communication and traditional social ties (Cummings, Butler & Kraut, 2002). Making use of different web-based communication platforms has helped to increase the time spent communicating with family members. Studies (cf. Taske & Plude, 2011; Taylor et al., 2006) indicate that family members admit that they have started to communicate more with each other with the help of computer-mediated communication. It appears that, in addition to sending e-mails to each other, family communication has most profited from voice mail via Skype (Ames, Go, Kaye & Spasojevic, 2010; Ramsay, Hair & Saddique,

2008). The latter technology is most popular among geographically distant families, who have started to value the group nature of video chat, as it has helped to change the nature of interactions with remote family members (Ames et al., 2010). For instance, video chat options are most often used when grandchildren are involved in the call (ibid). Research indicates that, in terms of keeping connected, senior citizens also tend to prefer Skype over Facebook, as Skype better replicates the social interaction they were used to while growing up (Weishar, 2010).

Nevertheless, even though online platforms help people get together, it is easy for them to end up unsure as to whether they are closer together or further apart (Turkle, 2010). According to Turkle (2010), people are usually engaged in multitasking when communicating in online environments. Even though multitasking is declared to be the crucial skill for successful work and learning in the digital culture, Turkle (ibid.) takes a more pessimistic viewpoint and asks rhetorically whether this kind of communication habit has really brought us together or whether we are still on our own.

Inter-generational relations on networked publics

Active usage of various online environments for family communication also indicates that adults understand the potential of these platforms as places which allow them to gain access to their children's world (Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008). Considering the ambivalent status of young people, as both pioneers in developing online competencies and vulnerable, potentially at risk, active use of the Internet by adults can often be linked with parental mediation strategies designed to shape and guide their children's Internet use.

In order to keep an eye on their children's virtual life, parents have started to use different methods. For instance, according to the recent survey by the EU Kids Online network, most European parents (70 per cent) talk to their children about what they do on the Internet and try to stay nearby (53 per cent) when the child is online (Livingstone et al., 2011, p. 8), and by doing so engage in active mediation of the child's Internet use and safety. In comparison to active mediation practices, the use of technical mediation and monitoring practices is relatively low among European parents, indicating that parents do not frequently make use of technical tools, for instance monitoring or filter software, to restrict or monitor children's Internet use (ibid). Restrictive mediation, however, is found to be quite often practised by parents, e.g. limiting access, which involves restrictions on where teens go online, the time they spend online, the electronic forms they use, and how they use those forms (e.g. keeping blogs private, and not posting provocative pictures (Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008, Lenhart et al., 2001).

According to Livingstone and Helsper (2008), one of the most useful methods parents have adopted for controlling children's network behaviour is going online with their children. Studies report a growing interest

among parents in creating profiles on SNS their children use so as to control their postings and information shared on the sites (Sachteleben, 2011). Furthermore, on the one hand, adults are creating such accounts to control the virtual behaviour of their children (Livingstone & Haddon, 2005) but, on the other hand, many adults are also helping their children to get access to environments that are forbidden to young people below the age of 13 (boyd, Hargittai, Schultz, Palfrey, 2011). Even when they are aware of the age requirements set by several SNS (e.g. Facebook), numerous parents (82 percent) still break the Terms of Service set by service providers (ibid).

However, research suggests that young people are not as willing to interact with their parents via SNS, for example Facebook, as their parents are to interact with them (Simonpietri, 2011; Siibak & Murumaa, 2011). Although some studies suggest that children are quite willing to accept parental Facebook requests (Westermann, 2011), other authors (cf. Siibak & Murumaa, 2011) argue that parents are usually often perceived as a disturbing factor on such sites, as "nightmare readers" (Marwick & boyd, 2010), whose presence on the environment may cause young adults and children to readjust their privacy settings and disclosure practices. For instance, studies indicate that young people have made use of the privacy tactic called social steganography, which is essentially a strategy where information is hidden in plain sight (boyd & Marwick, 2011; Oolo & Siibak, forthcoming 2012). Decoding such posts can be extremely difficult for audience members without the appropriate "interpretive lens", and hence such posts are targeted and understood only by the members of the "ideal audience", i.e. their closest friends and online peers (Marwick & boyd, 2010).

Method and Sample

Given the objective of the study, the following main criteria were followed when compiling the sample: in every family forming the sample, at least one child, parent and grandparent had to be accustomed to using different new media platforms, e.g. SNS, blogs, instant messenger or Skype, to communicate with each other.

Our final study sample included 13 individuals from four Estonian families. The oldest family members interviewed were between 57 and 69 years of age, their children were between 27 and 42 years old and their grandchildren 9 to 20 years old. The majority of the participants in the study were women (N=11).

The living arrangements of the families, as shown in Table 1, indicate that in only one family did all the interviewed family members live in the same town. In all other cases, there was at least one family member who, due to work or study obligations, lived separate from the others. The majority of the

interviewees lived either in bigger cities (Tallinn, Tartu or Viljandi) or smaller towns (Kohila or Rapla) on the mainland of Estonia, while two interviewees from one family lived on the island of Saaremaa.

An overview of the sample and the usage of interpersonal communication platforms is provided in Table 1. To protect the confidentiality of the respondents, only codes are used to designate the interviewees.

[Insert Table 1 here]

The sample families were found by employing the "snowball" method. The first contact was located through a student organization list from the University of Tartu; the following sample chain developed from that. Forming the sample was complicated due to the fact that especially the members of older generations considered themselves to be rather passive social media users with no adequate experience or technological know-how. Therefore, it is important to note that the grandparents interviewed for the present study were more experienced and more active new media users than many others of their generation.

The qualitative method used for the study was the semi-structured interview. The method was selected as it allows for concentration on the content of relevant interviews, as well as subsequent interpretation thereof after reviewing the content and structuring, systematizing and coding interview segments (Laherand, 2008).

The style of all of the interviews was based on a qualitative interviewing technique (Patton, 2002). A prepared interview schedule with open-ended questions was used to help to guide the interviews. The interview questions were listed in three blocks of themes: reasons for taking up web-based communication channels as a means of family communication, usage practices of such web-based communication channels among family members, and the role of the online communication practices in intergenerational relationships inside the family. We were interested in finding out what kind of web-based communication channels the families preferred for keeping in touch with each other, as well as why they had started to make use of such new media options. Furthermore, we also asked our respondents to reflect upon their own motivation for using these web-based options and to analyse the possible impact such communication platforms had had on the intergenerational relations between family members from different age groups.

The interview questions were the same for all respondents regardless of their age. Interviewing was conducted individually with each family member so that the presence of other members of the family would not distract the respondent and responses would be as honest and complete as possible. As the sample families were geographically located across Estonia, both face-to-face interviews and online interviews (MSN, Skype and e-mail) were conducted. The selection of the mode of the interview was dependent on the preferences of the respondent.

The downsides of conducting interviews via channels of the new media included the time-consuming and laconic nature of such interviews, due to which the respondents needed more direction through additional questions. We also encountered difficulties in trying to motivate the respondents to concentrate on the online interview, and hence two of the interviews had to be finished via e-mail. Although e-mail interviews have been criticized for a lack of spontaneity in the responses received (Bampton & Cowton, 2002), they have also been praised for empowering participants (Bowker & Tuffin, 2004). Considering the fact that e-mail interviews gave our respondents an opportunity to control the flow of the interviews, we believed e-mail interviews to be the best solution for receiving carefully considered reflective replies from interviewees who were pressed for time.

While in face-to-face interviews the relevant information was obtained in approximately hour-long conversations, web-based interviews took approximately 2.5 hours. The longest interviews were conducted with the oldest interviewees, probably due to the fact that compared to the younger interviewees they were not as proficient in typing. While conducting the interviews via e-mail or instant messenger, it became evident that by giving written responses to our questions our respondents actually took time to think through their responses and to formulate them more thoroughly than they might have done in verbal interviews. All of the interviews conducted fulfilled their purpose and contributed to the study, giving a good overview of the web-based communication habits in the target families.

The interviews were analysed through a combination of qualitative data analysis and the procedures of the grounded theory approach, as described by Strauss and Corbin (1998). After the first and second stage of the empirical study – conducting and transcribing interviews – the interviews were coded line by line and analysed. During open coding - the comparison of each theme group with other theme groups – repeated responses formed dominant and discriminative codes, as well as items that were comparable in different interviews, thus making it possible to link the interviews in terms of similar questions. The selected approach enabled us to identify the major issues that related to the motivation and usage practices of web-based communication channels among family members from different age groups.

All the interviews were conducted in Estonian, the mother-tongue of the respondents. Extracts from the interviews were translated by the authors to illustrate the analysis.

Results and Discussion

Reasons for Using Web-Based Communication Channels

The results suggest that there are several aspects that motivate families to engage in online communication. Our interviews indicate that one of the most important motivations behind using web-based communication

platforms is the feeling of closeness and connectedness these platforms create. All our respondents, regardless of age, were motivated to make use of web-based communication channels, as these allowed them to feel a part of the group, the community. While the youngest members of the family saw web communication as an additional way of staying in touch with friends, older interviewees were mainly motivated by the opportunity to stay in touch with other members of their family.

Similarly to the findings of others (cf. Harwood, 2000, p. 62), it appears that the feeling of closeness was crucial to those family members who lived far away and hence did not get to see their loved ones very often. Our interviews indicate that web-based communication channels offer an especially important opportunity for those families whose members do not live under the same roof; i.e. they have moved out due to work-related obligations, studies or other life changes. Hence, as suggested by Hughes and Hans (2001), our results also indicate the potential of computer-mediated communication for empty-nest families.

Actually, other people can find out through MSN when my husband is home from Finland; when I'm online, Mart's in Finland, and when I'm offline, Mart must be home /---/ It's [MSN] extremely important when it comes to my husband as well. We spend most of our time apart as it is and if we didn't have this opportunity to stay in touch, things would be pretty sad. (F34, Family 4)

Our interviews illustrate the fact that distance is not the only reason why families prefer to use web-based communication platforms to get in touch with each other. Our findings indicate that web-based communication channels are also in daily use in families whose members live under the same roof. In the case of the families interviewed, via the new media contacts were not made as actively with family members who lived somewhere else as with family members residing in the same household. In the interviewed families, various environments offering chat opportunities (Facebook chat, Skype chat, instant messenger etc.) were often used to organise practical daily matters (shopping, household duties, etc.), as well as for planning events.

/---/Actually I talk to my mum quite often on Skype, even when we're both at home in different rooms and she wants to tell me something. We're both quietly busy with our laptops and then I get a message from her like: "Hey, go get some food" (F20, Family 3).

With Tāta [aunt] we sometimes just play around. We sit in the same room, look each other in the eye and joke around as our avatars. But we're just kidding; we get along really well (F9, Family 1).

Our interviews indicate that such an active adoption of the new technologies by all members of the family has resulted in a situation where first contact with family members is sought via the "rapid communication channels", MSN or Skype. Due to the ability to engage in asynchronous communication, families often organise online "family meetings" which allow them to discuss and plan various matters both one-on-one

and in bigger groups. Such chat opportunities are also preferred due to their more private and individualized type of communication, rather than posting their messages to be viewed by the whole imagined audience of social media, for example. Furthermore, it appears that such new media applications are also used because of the ability to get almost immediate responses, as many family members are always logged onto these platforms.

In addition to the younger members of the family, who are constantly logged on to different web communication channels, web-based communication opportunities are equally important to the oldest members of the family, who see Internet communication as a substitute for F2F communication. Therefore, similar to the findings of others (cf. Morris, Goodman, Brading, 2007; Selwyn, Gorard, Furlong, 2003), our oldest respondents admitted that their families and friends were the main motivation behind adopting ICTs. Although the interviewed grandparents admitted that they still preferred telephone communication to online options, they all had discovered the wonders of Facebook, for example, which enabled them to be up to date with their children's and grandchildren's minute-to-minute activities, concerns and thoughts. Furthermore, being able to interact with others and hold onto their social contacts is essential for maintaining the quality of life of older people (Kanayama, 2003). In this respect, web-based communication platforms offer them the much needed opportunity to share their everyday events and to be aware of the daily happenings of their children and grandchildren. In fact, the grandparents we interviewed admitted feeling much younger because they were able to keep in touch with their children and grandchildren through new media.

Previous studies reveal that the main reasons why young people do not want to include older persons, their parents in particular, as their Facebook friends are related to feelings of embarrassment and social norms (West, Lewis & Currie, 2009). It appears that the youngest members of the families we interviewed also had mixed emotions when first encountering their grandparents on social media. Nevertheless, after discussing the matter amongst themselves, they soon got accustomed to having their family members in their online friends' lists.

/---/not half a day passed when my eldest daughter posted "Who showed grandma Facebook?" on Skype [laughs]. This was a truly perplexed and somewhat even an annoyed question. But then I explained the situation and she found that actually it's quite nice that grandma can communicate with other people and welcomed her to the computer environment (F42, Family 3).

Over all, our interviews reveal that, for most of our respondents, web-based communication channels were the most convenient, affordable and fastest way to share everyday experiences with their family members.

It's just so convenient: when I'm at home, I have my computer on all the time and when Skype "squeaks", it's easy to check out what's happening; this is also considerably easier on the wallet /- --/(M57, Family 2).

Hence, although Livingstone (2003) has claimed that technology has had a revolutionary effect in promoting individualization and privatization among young people as far as their family orientation is concerned, our findings also indicate that web-based communication platforms help to reunite family members from different generations. In fact, in the context of Estonia, where grandparents play a relatively small role in the everyday lives of their grandchildren (Kutsar et al., 2004), communication through various web-based communication environments can be seen as an opportunity which enables families to keep in touch and hence start to strengthen weakened intergenerational relations. Considering the above, we agree with Mesch (2006, p. 135), who claimed that "rather than serving to blur family boundaries, the Internet contributes to their preservation."

Choosing Web-Based Communication Channels and Forms of Communication

Being constantly logged onto different web communities has created a situation where more preference is given to online communication than to F2F communication. Our interviews indicate that even when all family members are simultaneously under the same roof, families find it easier and more convenient to interact with each other by online means, rather than F2F. Although previous studies (Smith, Rogers & Brady, 2003; Cummings et al., 2002) indicate that Baby Boomers and Generation X generally prefer voice conversation, either F2F or on the phone, the opportunity to use the cheaper options offered by Skype, for example, has also helped to change their preferences. Our respondents named the Internet phone service Skype, instant messenger MSN and the SNS Facebook as platforms which they most often used in order to keep in contact with each other. Although some of the interviewees were also bloggers, blogs were less often referred to as a platform for family communication.

All of these communally used environments were mainly put into use on the initiative of middle-aged members of families, who were most daring in experimenting with technology and, hence, were viewed as the main role models for the youngest and oldest family members. Interviews with family members in their late 20s-40s indicate that all of our interviewees had gone through the "evolution" of social media, moving from the national language-based SNS Rate to the international SNS Orkut, and recently ending up using Facebook. The preference for Skype or instant messenger as a platform for family communication is dependent on the choice of other family members, as well as on the place and subject matter of the message.

I would love to use Skype as well but because everyone else uses MSN, my preference has grown out of that – since everyone uses it, I have to support it as well (F27, Family 2).

The interviews indicate that the preference for rapid communication channels for family conversations derived from the personal nature and privacy of such channels, which enables one to send messages to a select group only.

Skype, because it has a presentable, attractive and organized appearance and your conversations remain private not public (F12, Family 2).

This is due to the fact that imagined audience messages posted on Facebook usually contain more acute, substantive subject matters and statements that can be commented on by the general public. As the conversations on Skype and through instant messenger are considered more private, the topics under discussion are also believed to contain more daily and mundane matters, as well as personal joys and concerns.

On Facebook people exchange ideas and philosophize on an extremely wide variety of subject matters and those ideas and subjects remain posted for a fairly long time so everyone can contribute their two cents. We use Skype to talk about more mundane everyday issues (M57, Family 2).

The interviews show that, even though a number of web-based communication channels facilitate verbal contacts, families still prefer to communicate in writing. In comparison to the spoken language, our respondents preferred written contact not only because it gave them the opportunity to think through and formulate their messages better but also because it enabled them to send messages to a large group of people.

For personal matters with the family, we probably use the group chat function on Skype the most. It's good because everyone receives a question at the same time and everyone can also see the solution. You don't have to call 12 people one by one (M36, Family 2).

At times, the preference for web-based communication channels was sometimes also related to the desire to replace the intensity of face-to-face verbal communication with the more subdued and neutral expression of a written text. For instance an interviewed mother admitted that it was easier for her to communicate with her teenage daughter via MSN or Skype chat as she could better tolerate her adolescent daughter's emotional outbursts through technological intermediation.

My younger daughter is somehow extremely emotional, a teenager; her audible expressions can sometimes be very angry or depress me or something like that. It's easier to take it through a text that has been typed into MSN or Skype /---/ (F42, Family 3).

Inter-generational differences in content-sharing practices

According to our interviews, families tend to use online media to share information related to everyday daily matters: maintenance of the home, renovation work, event planning, the well-being of family members, finances, subjects related to what is currently happening etc.

Family members from different age groups are used to following each others' postings on Facebook. In contrast to the oldest family members, who do not as frequently share interesting content with others, comment on posts or click the "like" button, the two younger age groups are actually quite active in keeping the flow of information moving through this channel. In comparison to the parents and grandparents, who viewed the postings by the young mainly in a positive light, our youngest interviewees did not feel particularly interested in the links and posts uploaded by their parents. This slightly negative attitude was caused by the fact that the young admitted to being already familiar with the content - either the topic of the post or the content of the link shared by the adults - and, hence, did not consider the received information bits to be very important.

Although parents and grandparents claimed that they had often felt a surge of positive emotions when reading through the Facebook posts of the youngest family members, they also admitted sometimes being concerned and irritated by their children's apparently superficial and simple postings.

/---/ Sometimes it seems that I would like my younger daughter not to be such a typical adolescent or I find her postings and reactions there uninteresting or stupid, empty, trivial. /---/ That is what irritates me – these are my kids and I feel annoyed, wondering why this is happening to me, why my child is so trivial. Their environment is not like that, it shouldn't facilitate it (F42, Family 3).

Grandparents in particular find it difficult to understand young people's eagerness to create content in social media; they feel it is impossible to convey heart-felt emotions through postings in a web environment.

One person has to talk to another person, looking them in the eyes, enjoying their body language, listening to their tone of voice, and not just type into a machine with errors and without emotion (F57, Family 4).

A fully developed sense of criticism and the desire not to clutter the environment with postings that have no real substance are some of the main reasons why the oldest respondents see themselves in the new media environment as observers rather than active content creators. Furthermore, our oldest respondents were also the most critical of all the interviewees in analysing their own content creation practices and said that they would also like to see a similar sense of criticism and substantive content production in their grandchildren.

I'm very critical of myself and therefore follow the rule that if you have nothing meaningful to say, don't clutter the environment (F57, Family 4).

In this context, however, it is also important to note that the less active content creation of grandparents we interviewed might also have been connected to the possible technology-knowledge gap between the members of their generations and that of the young members. Hence, not all of them felt relaxed and at ease with the technology they used. Similarly to the findings of previous studies (Alch, 2000), our research suggests that adults often turn to their children when they need assistance on the Internet. The research of Tsai, Ho & Tseng (2011) reveals that young people are eager to teach the elderly to use the Internet, so as to have a new way to communicate and to enhance family cohesion. Our interviews also indicate that, as getting accustomed to the new environment was a stressful experience for grandparents, children and grandchildren often assumed the role of mentors and teachers. With the support of their children and grandchildren, the oldest members of the families gradually adapted to the peculiarities of new media.

/---/ And I didn't really learn or use it [the computer] even though I was stressed. Until the little ones, my grandchildren, came along – one was two years old and the other five or six – and for them it's something self-evident /---/ They told me to click this and click that and showed me how to switch it on and so forth. I wasn't familiar with any keys – they showed me what to click. Then I found my courage and found myself having to start writing as well /---/ Sometimes I'd call my daughter and ask whether or not and how I could do something, upload pictures, and she knew exactly how to do things. /---/ When I didn't know how to do something and it wouldn't work, I would hang up the phone and call back later when I had calmed down (F69, Family 3).

At the same time, interviews with the youngest family members indicated that the children often perceived faults in the content creation practices of adults in their family. For example, children mentioned that their parents sometimes posted private family photos on social media without their consent. In such cases, representatives of older generations themselves lacked the required sense of criticism and foresight as, evidently, they had not been able to foresee clearly enough the possible consequences of the practices described.

/---/the boys in my class have taken to following my mom's Flickr and then making fun of me at school. I once wrote an essay in school that we had to post in a blog; I added a picture to the essay and when you clicked on it, it took you to my mom's Flickr. Yes... and then they so to speak tunned my pictures and posted them (F12, Family 2).

The study reveals that adults often make use of such social media environments as Facebook to portray their family life as ideal. The interviews indicate that posts and photos uploaded on Facebook often can be

viewed as representations of the ideal family and reveal their own as well as other family members' developments and accomplishments.

We all want our families to be happy from the inside as well as out. And when the inside is not always good, we at least want it to look ideal (F27, Family 1).

Parents' online content creation practices, however, play an important role in shaping the youngest family members' web usage, including self-presentation and communication with peers. The conducted interviews clearly illustrate the fact that parents are aware of the responsibility that comes with being a role model.

Parental Mediation of Children's Web Communication

The interviews revealed that the parents were very clearly aware of the importance of parental mediation of children's Internet usage. Within the families, various agreements had been made between the children and grown-ups to monitor, control or restrict the web behaviour of the youngest family members.

For example, they have to have our permission before creating an account on a web site. Also, we limit the time spent online. From time to time, we look at what they have been up to, which web sites have been visited etc. They know we do that. In principle, I have access to their e-mail... Although I don't use it very often (F35, Family 2).

Well, my 12-year-old has been using it [SNS] for a couple of years. In the beginning, everything was under my supervision; I knew all of the passwords and codes. They knew I was monitoring them; that was our agreement (F34, Family 4).

The above-described parental supervision is mainly applied when monitoring the child's profile in rapid communication channels and SNS. The parents we interviewed admitted keeping a close eye on with whom and at what level their children communicated in online environments. Although the practice of monitoring is said to be quite rare (cf. Livingstone et al., 2011), our interviews with parents revealed that, when necessary, the child's SNS passwords were used for logging on and monitoring the child's activities in more detail. In such cases, a trusting parent-child relationship is of utmost importance, as the passwords need to be entrusted to the adult by the child. Our interviews indicate that knowing the child's passwords helped parents prevent unpleasant and, possibly, dangerous contacts that might harm the mental and physical well-being of their child.

I keep a close eye on with whom and how she communicates. I also have her Rate passwords. I looked at it once out of curiosity. It's a good thing I did – there was an older message from a considerably older man. /---/ Fortunately, my daughter had enough sense not to respond: I checked. Yet, it's important to keep an eye out. Better safe than sorry (F27, Family 1).

Someone with a very suspicious name had sent her a message on Rate; I don't remember the name but it was somehow related to reproductive organs and the message was connected to sex. I blocked the sender and, fortunately, my daughter never saw it – I discovered the letter when I checked her profile and have never told her about it (F34, Family 4).

It appears that parents may also have an impact on children's content creation practices even just by frequently logging onto social media. For instance due to the possible supervision by parents, children are often afraid to post certain messages targeted to their peers and try to behave and post on the site in a more responsible manner.

It definitely affects the quantity of my messages because I can't write just any stupid thing that comes to mind when my parents can see it. I do pay attention to how I write and formulate something because this leaves a better impression on my parents (F12, Family 2).

Parents have perceived that some of their children have also tried to avoid their active on-site supervision by engaging in the practice of social steganography (boyd & Marwick, 2011), i.e. sending secret encrypted messages to their peers. The parents in our sample, however, admitted that they rarely read much into the cryptic messages as they considered it an ordinary pattern of behaviour of the young.

/---/ I know she sits in front of her computer half the night and communicates there. But she also knows very well that I don't like it and that's why she has filtered me out so that I won't be able to see how much time she spends online. /---/ There are things that make me a bit nervous or certain insinuation games between girlfriends. Along the lines of "this lies buried in history and we shall not talk about it". But I don't consider that a problem for me; if they want to keep quiet about something and be secretive, so be it (WF42, Family 3).

Parents consider it to be important to supervise their children's online behaviour until they can be certain of the children's correct and responsible web behaviour. The interviews indicate that such mutual acceptance of each other's behaviour is reached mostly when the child has outgrown puberty. However, while in their teenage years children try harder to hide from their parents' all seeing eyes and are less than enthusiastic about their parents' and grandparents' Internet use, but when they get older family members as social media users are positioned on the same level as friends.

Sometimes it's funny how my mum lists my friends on Facebook as hers. But, well, it doesn't bother my friends either that she does it. I think I've grown up enough for it not to bother me. I might be more accepting of my parents (F20, Family 3).

In this respect, similar to the findings of Karl and Peluchette (2011), the young adults in our sample did not have any negative reactions to their parents and grandparents being on Facebook and were happy to accept their friend requests.

Conclusion

The goal of the study was to discover the reasons and motivations family members from different generations have for making use of new media environments for family communication. The article focused on studying the experiences of four Estonian families whose members make daily use of different web-based communication platforms for family interactions. We also aimed to understand the role of such online interactions on the intergenerational relations between family members.

Based on our interviews, we believe that the Internet and new media play an enormous role in supporting and, partly, also re-establishing intergenerational communication. Active use of various web-based communication platforms by the young has also motivated members of older generations to adapt to the new environment. Although older family members prefer more traditional forms of communication, by moving onto online environments adults have tried to diminish the apparent distance between "digital natives" and "digital immigrants" (Prensky, 2001). Despite the technology-knowledge gap, which is mainly perceived by grandparents, family members from different age groups are motivated to learn and actively engage in using the same online platforms. Hence, our findings support the view of Madden (2010), who has claimed that engagement on new media platforms, especially on social media, bridges generational gaps, pooling together users from very different parts of people's lives and providing the opportunity to share skills across generational divides.

Our findings also support the idea of two-way socialization (Kalmus, 2007). On the one hand, younger members of the family play an important role in acquainting the older ones with various online platforms and suggesting ways to make use of these new technologies. On the other hand, as the older members of the families have considerably broader knowledge of the overall societal context, along with its values and norms, their experience proves invaluable in actively mediating children's online communication habits. In doing so, as our findings suggest, parents have even managed to prevent their children from encountering potential online risks. At the same time, our interviews indicate that parents may sometimes unknowingly be responsible for causing potentially harmful experiences for their children. Hence, we consider it crucial for both the older and younger family members to improve their digital literacy.

Our results suggest that Skype, instant messenger and Facebook are the most popular methods for maintaining contacts between family members. These platforms are particularly valued because of the relative intimacy they offer due to the privacy settings that can be modified by the users. Furthermore, our respondents valued the opportunity to be able to choose between synchronous or asynchronous communication and, hence, to think through their messages before posting them online. Our findings indicate that web-based communication platforms are used not only by families who are physically apart, but also by family members living under the same roof. Therefore, rather than taking the opportunity to

communicate F2F, our respondents admitted preferring to use text-based, web-based communication channels.

Although the present study has provided some interesting findings on the reasons behind using web-based communication channels for family communication and the intra-generational relations on these platforms, the study has a number of limitations. The small size of the study sample does not allow us to make any generalizations from the findings. As the target group of our study included three generations from one family, finding families in which all three members from different age groups would be willing to participate proved to be a more difficult task than expected. This is also the reason why we were unable to conduct face-to-face interviews with the respondents but had to rely on the preferred mode of communication suggested by the interviewees. Although using a mixture of different data collection tools - Skype, instant messenger and e-mail - revealed the overall communication habits of the respondents, it meant that we were unable to provide similar conditions for interviews for all our participants.

Despite these limitations, we believe that the study enhances the knowledge of the current forms of family communication. In fact, our results give us reason to believe that traditional forms of family interaction are going through a dramatic change. Although some authors (e.g. Turkle, 2010) have taken a very critical stand against the preference for web-based communication platforms, others evaluate the undergoing changes in a more positive light, indicating that the Internet helps to expand family boundaries (Mesch, 2006). Nevertheless, in this context additional studies are needed. Not only are we in need of studies that analyse where the traditional forms of communication are heading, but we also need to gain a more thorough understanding of the possible impact ICTs have had on inter-generational relations. For instance, future researchers should consider studying how the phenomenon of "context collapse" (Marwick & boyd, 2010), which occurs on social media platforms, has affected the inter-generational relations between family members.

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APPENDIX 1

Table 1. Description of the sample

	Code (gender + age)	Place of living	Usage of interpersonal communication environments
Family 1	F9	Viljandi	MSN, Facebook, SNS Rate
	F27	Viljandi	MSN, Facebook, inactive user of SNS Rate, e-mail, inactive user of Skype,
	F59	Viljandi	MSN, Facebook, e-mail
Family 2	F12	Kohila	MSN, Facebook, e-mail, inactive user of Skype, Twitter, blog,
	F35	Kohila	Facebook, e-mail, Skype, blog, Twitter, Flickr
	M36	Kohila (with frequent trips abroad)	Facebook, Skype, inactive blogger, Twitter
	M57	Rapla	Facebook, e-mail, Skype, Geni
Family 3	F20	Tartu	MSN, Facebook, e-mail, Skype, Google Talk, inactive blogger
	F42	Tartu	MSN, Facebook, e-mail, Google Talk
	F69	Tallinn	Facebook, e-mail, Google Talk, Picasaweb
Family 4	F19	Tartu	MSN, Facebook, e-mail, inactive user of Skype
	F34	Saaremaa	MSN, Facebook, e-mail, Skype, inactive user of SNS Orkut
	F57	Saaremaa	MSN, Facebook, e-mail