Digital families across the lifecourse:
Briefing from Seminar 2
Digital families are here to stay

Digital families across the lifecourse is a knowledge exchange project from the Centre for Research on Families and Relationships, funded by the Scottish Universities Insight Institute.

Background

There is increasing interest in the influence of digital technologies on everyday life. The Scottish Government's ambition is to increase the use of broadband across all communities in Scotland. Aims to improve the digital health of our population, to promote internet safety, and use technologies to support learning are well established. The digital families programme aims to add to this growing body of knowledge by providing opportunities to explore the increasing presence of domestic digital technologies within family life, and to debate both the benefits and pressures these technologies bring. Organised within three groupings – childhoods, family life and older age and caring – the programme will address a range of issues, including:

• the different experiences of rural and urban families;

• the role of digital communication in the lives of trans-national families;

• the impact of digital technologies on cross generational relationships within families;

• the contributions that digital technologies can have in maintaining and developing social networks across the lifecourse;

• the effect of digital technologies on education, work/life balance, lifelong learning and wellbeing; and

• the social and economic inequalities that arise from different access to, and adoption and use of, technologies across the lifecourse

• the differential experiences of 'digital natives' vs 'digital immigrants'

The digital families programme aims to consider these issues within a broader political and social context, to focus our understandings of the impact of domestic technologies on family life and to create a vision for research, policy and practice in Scotland in 2016 and beyond.

Key aims of the Digital Families programme:

1. Understand how digital technologies are impacting on family life and personal relationships in Scotland.
2. Identify the issues that families are grappling with in relation to digital advances, and stimulate new ways of addressing these.
3. Foster innovative collaborations between academics and non-academics with the potential to both raise new questions and inform policy and practice.
4. Establish a 'digital families' research network.

Seminar 2: Digital families are here to stay

62 people attended the Seminar, held in Glasgow at the Scottish Universities Insight Institute on 26 February 2016. Delegates included academics, practitioners, policy makers and voluntary sector representatives from a wide range of organisations.

The aims of the seminar were:

- To explore how digital technologies are used to manage family life and work-life balance and how technologies are shaping family relationships, communication and practices
- To identify key issues in relation to digital technologies and family life, and how to address these
- To develop new collaborations between researchers, practitioners and policy-makers interested in taking issues forward

Speakers and presentations

Professor Sam Punch (Professor of Sociology) from the University of Stirling introduced the seminar and outlined the aims of the programme.

Download the presentation here

The Seminar began with the showing of a short film, commissioned by the Programme Team to stimulate discussion about how digital technologies are having an impact on family life. The film was produced by Strange Boat who visited 2 shopping centres in Edinburgh to capture the views of members of the public.

View the film here

Alyson Mitchell, Head of Digital Participation at the Scottish Government provided some perspectives from the Scottish Government. She highlighted why, in an 'on-line' world, it is important for everyone in Scotland to have access to the Internet. 17% of adults in Scotland do not have access. This proportion is higher in Glasgow, particularly amongst social housing tenants. The Scottish Government have been working with a range of partners to improve

digital inclusion and have funded 58 Digital Inclusion projects, reaching 8,500 people. In addition, their Let's Get On campaign provided internet taster sessions for 23,000 people across Scotland in 89 locations. Alyson highlighted the importance of peer support in communities to develop digital skills. To support digital inclusion amongst young people, the Scottish Government has funded a programme of coding clubs with the aim of engaging young people with digital technology beyond social media. The clubs have been targeted at young people living in areas of multiple deprivation and some are for girls only.

Download Alyson's presentation here

Questions and comments from participants

'Access' to the internet is complex – you need to understand how access the internet on a phone, tablet or computer and be able to navigate the complexity of dealing with internet suppliers, negotiate wi-fi etc.. This makes 'access' difficult for many people.

Is there a need for more coding in the Curriculum for Excellence? (Alyson's response : An understanding of the principles of coding and problem solving abilities are important skills for Scotland's future workforce, not just for those working in the ICT sector. However, the extent to which this can be introduced into the curriculum depends on the skills available in individual schools. Amongst primary school teachers, for example, there is a huge range of skills and interest in relation to digital technology. Both trainee and existing teachers need more training on using digital technology effectively in education. This is being taken forward by Education Scotland.)

Academic perspectives

Professor Natasha Mauthner, Personal Chair at the University of Aberdeen Business School and Dr Karolina Kazimiertzak, Lecturer in Management Studies at the University of Aberdeen gave a presentation on 'Work and family practices in a digital age'. This covered some of the issues uncovered in their research project 'Digital Epiphanies' , which aimed to understand more about how digital technologies are used in everyday work and family practices.

Download Natasha and Karolina's presentation here

Key points from Natasha and Karolina

- There is a need to move away from the 'binary' discourse about digital technology being 'good' or bad' – having benefits, or challenges – towards re-thinking the normative framings of the relationship between technology, work and family in ways that may be more helpful and productive.
- In the same way that the introduction of print media caused a 'moral panic', there are many concerns about the negative impact of digital technologies on our lives. But as the title of this seminar states 'digital families are here to stay' and we must learn to navigate this.

- Through their research with families in Scotland, Natasha and Karoline found that technology has become embedded in everyday work and family practices, and in some cases is transforming the very nature of these practices. They suggest that new practices are both departures and continuations of the older ways of 'doing things'.

Read Natasha's blog for The Conversation April 2015 ['We don't need digital detox, but there is a need to rethink our relationship with technology'](#)

Dr Juliet Jain, Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for Transport and Society at the University of the West of England gave a presentation on 'Mobile working and digital glimpses into family life'. This research comes from the project [Family Rituals 2.0](#), a multidisciplinary research project which aims to explore the evolving nature of family rituals within the digital age to support work-life balance for mobile workers.

[Download Juliet's presentation here](#)

Key points from Juliet's presentation

- Communication between family members while one parent is working away from home or working shifts is facilitated through a range of digital technologies and can be synchronous (phone, skype, facetime conversations) or asynchronous (text, email, Snapchat).
- People communicate whilst away for a number of reasons including a demonstration of belonging whilst absent and sharing of experiences and care.
- Technology affords 'glimpses' of home life/routine.
- More expressive communication appears to help improve work/life balance. However, communication through technology is never a full representation. Although frequently positive it can also be dissatisfactory or frustrating and can never replace face-to-face 'togetherness'.

Dr Sophie Bowlby from the Universities of Reading and Loughborough gave her presentation 'Letting them know, thinking of them, loving them: family and friend relationships in the real and virtual worlds.' This research aimed to explore the personal communities of women in their 50s to establish how they kept in touch with the people important to them.

[Download Sophie's presentation here](#)

Key points from Sophie's presentation

- Phones and texting were the most common form of technologies used by women in their 50s.
- Their choice of technologies reflects socio-economic contexts and discourses though which they are understood e.g. 'Facebook is evil!'

- Face to face meetings were regarded as more important than virtual contact for maintaining relationships with family and friends.
- The relationship 'work' carried out using technology can be described as the '4 Ps of text and phone use': **Planning** (to plan face-to-face contact and other tasks), **Pats** (to signal caring about others), **Postcards and Pictures** (to share experiences and achievements) and **Precautionary** monitoring (e.g. of elderly parents, checking that relatives are ok).
- New technologies have not fundamentally changed practices of intimacy within women's personal communities during 'midlife' – although they have intensified contacts.

Questions and comments from participants

Are there examples of increased contact using digital technology causing increased anxiety?

One participant pointed out the difference between women in their 50s, who use technology to maintain existing friendships, and younger people, who often use technology to find new friendships and relationships, not just finding partners through online dating but also making new friends through online gaming or other shared interests where technology makes it easier to bring people together) How much of this is explained by technology and how much by age and stage of life?

How much do we know about the use of technology by and between parents parenting separately? How do children use technology to communicate with the parent they are not living with at the time and what are the implications of this for family relationships?

Digital families: third sector perspective

Clare Simpson, Project Manager for [Parenting Across Scotland](#), a partnership of children's charities and adult relationship organisations working together for families and children by providing information and support for parents, families and practitioners in Scotland. Clare provided some perspectives from the voluntary sector organisations working with children and families.

Families Outside support families affected by imprisonment. Contact with family whilst in prison is a protective factor in reducing reoffending but mobile devices are not allowed in prison.

Scottish Adoption and other adoption agencies are facing very particular issues, where social media makes it much easier to find and keep in touch with birth family members. There positives and negatives to this and it can be very difficult for families to manage this process.

Relationships Scotland state that social media is mentioned in a large proportion of relationship counselling sessions as causing problems in a relationship. Where there has been an acrimonious break-up, digital technology can facilitate communication when face-fact contact is not possible or desirable, but can also be fraught with difficulty.

For children's organisations there is widespread concern about over-use of digital technology, lack of 'real' or outdoor play, bullying through social media and other risks associated with online activity. Interestingly, we want to encourage children to take risks in the physical world e.g. 'risky outdoor play' but want to minimise the risks to children in the digital world.

Clare concluded that parents should be supported in using the digital technologies available to enable the type of family life that they want. This should apply to all of us.

Digital families: industry perspective

Alex Stobart from Mydex CIC, a Scottish Community Interest Company whose social purpose is to empower individuals on the web gave some perspectives from the business sector. His presentation 'Life and times in a family-centred digital Scotland' covered some of the issues around identity, power and control. Alex posed the question – is there an opportunity to promote a 'Scottish approach' to the internet? An approach that could be more person-centred and respectful?

Alex mentioned the iRights campaign, which provides a framework of five simple principles for how we should engage with children and young people in the digital world.

The five principles are:

- The right to remove. Everyone under 18 has the right to easily edit or delete content they have created, and access to simple and effective ways to dispute online content about them.
- The right to know. Everyone under 18 has the right to know who holds and profits from their information, what their information is being used for, and whether it is being copied, sold, or traded.
- The right to safety and support. Everyone under 18 can be confident they will be protected from illegal practices, and supported if confronted by troubling and upsetting scenarios online.
- The right to make informed and conscious choices. Everyone under 18 is free to engage online but also to disengage at will and not have their attention held unknowingly.
- The right to digital literacy. Everyone under 18 is taught the skills to use and critique digital technologies and to be confident in managing new social norms.

Download Alex's presentation here

Discussion

1. How are digital technologies used to manage family life and the work-life balance?
2. How are they shaping family relationships, communication, and practices?
3. Are new technologies changing the nature of the family and family life?

Discussion 1 – delegates participated in roundtable discussions and were asked to consider the following:

1. Reflect on what you have heard so far. What do you recognise? What is new to you?
2. What are the issues associated with digital technology and family life?
3. What are you top 3 issues – for action and/or for further research?

From these discussions, the following topics were identified for further discussion.

1. Does digital technology lead to less independence, deskilling & disempowering of children?
2. Is there a gendered use of tech? Is digital technology leading to more intensive emotional labour especially for women/ mothers?
3. Are there generational differences – in use & knowledge of digital technology? Does digital technology bring together generations?
4. Is digital technology leading to intensification of attention on the family & on parenting practices? Or is this happening anyway?
5. What are the gaps in research? How can we make more effective links to policy & practice?

1. Does digital technology lead to less independence, deskilling & disempowering of children?

   Is there any evidence to back-up the question above?

   How do we find the balance between accessing instantaneous information with taking initiative and seeking information from other sources in the outside world?

   Are parents underestimating, or overestimating the impact of tech on children and young people?

   There is a huge variation in terms of what children are taught in school (see SPTC evidence)

   We need to hear the views and voices of children and young people. We need to know more about younger children e.g. under 10, under 8.

Children and young people should be empowered to use the digital technology in their best interests/ to make the online work for them – everyone will be different.

2. Is there a gendered use of tech? Is digital technology leading to more intensive emotional labour especially for women/ mothers?

   To what extent has digital technology changed or reinforced traditional roles and responsibilities of parents?

   Technology has helped to manage work life balance but has also blurred the home-work boundaries – has facilitated mobile and flexible working (for example, Health Visitors are now doing work in the evening on their NHS tablets when before, without this technology, this wasn't possible) Need to explore employers' understanding and response?

   Who accesses digital resources? Who has the control/ knowledge/ skills?

   Are there gender differences in the use of different types of technologies?

   Technology can reduce the isolation of women and mothers but can also increase 'competitive' parenting/ feelings of inadequacy (Smugbook)

   Parent are using multiple communication platforms to manage family life – this requires complex skills.

   Has technology led to parents (esp mothers) being 'always available' – more intensive parenting?

3. Are there generational differences – in use & knowledge of digital technology? Does digital technology bring together generations?

   Overall theme – there are differences in how the generations access and use technology but it can bring people together. Technology can lead to open communication between the generations and a sharing of skills. We should find new ways for younger and older people to work together.

   There is a need to break down technology 'terminology' so that all age groups can understand.

   Has tech led to greater parental insecurity e.g. parents worrying if children do not answer their phones?

4. Is digital technology leading to intensification of attention on the family & on parenting practices? Or is this happening anyway?

   For parenting, communication is key, whether in the real or virtual worlds - on and offline.

Is the media causing unnecessary fear about the internet? Do we have more fear in general? There is a balance and we need to manage risk. Children and young people also need to know how to manage risk and they need a vocabulary to be able to do this.

There are many resources available for parents but how do parents know where to find these resources? Should there be more guidance about how much screen time is 'healthy'? Is there conflicting evidence about this?

Shared time, family time – can be digital – gaming, or watching films.

5. What are the gaps in research? How can we make more effective links to policy & practice?

   Methods – Social Work use 'Viewpoint Interactive' – a software package to collect views from looked after children. This can be used for very young children/ children who can't read.

   Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People would like to do more research in this area.

   There is a need for places where the relevant research is available and accessible (similar to the Briefings produced by Christine Stephen and Lydia Plowman). These sorts of Briefings would be very useful for policy makers)

   There should be a focus on education / pedagogy – materials were previously put on platforms that nobody used.

   Issue with research timescales – takes too long to produce and publish and often, the technology moves on.

   Research should have more focus on social and digital disadvantage?

Conclusions

Natasha concluded the seminar with her own reflections and a summary of the discussions. Key points:

1. Technology is ubiquitous. It is embedded in everything that we do.
2. Inequalities – it is not just about who has access and who doesn't but about the kind of access, plus knowledge and understanding. Some people are more wary than others about what happens to our personal data. This can affect our participation in society.
3. Education
4. Communication and technology. How do we know what our children are doing on-line and how do we learn to participate in our children's digital lives?

Key questions and action points from the discussions

Ideas for future research topics

- Parenting separately using digital technology
- Similarities and differences between the generations in their use of technologies to create, manage and maintain friendships and relationships
- Children/ young people and risk-taking in the real and virtual worlds.

Post seminar film

The film highlighted earlier was edited after the event to include a summary of the speakers' key points and their reactions and reflections on the initial film.

View the longer version of the film here

At least 2 people who attended the seminar have stated that they plan to use the film for teaching purposes, as a means to encourage students to think about the changes that technology has brought to family life.

Twitter

A number of delegates tweeted throughout the day using #digifam1516. Following the seminar, this hashtag has been used to highlight further items of interest in relation to the digital families agenda. A Storify record of tweets on the day was produced to record the proceedings and the views expressed as Tweets.

Link to Storify record of the seminar

Feedback from delegates

Selected comments from SUII feedback forms:

Very engaging

Great opportunity to network. Table discussions were very interesting

Found it thought provoking and interesting'

What will you take away with you?

A better understanding of the issues facing families in respect of the sue of digital technology

Recognising different perspectives on the positives/ negatives on families. More positives if we get the balance right.

That there is a need for a research programme to explore the issues further

Ideas for research. Knowledge to inform teaching

This seminar highlights some gaps that need researching

Project team

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Project webpages

http://www.crfr.ac.uk/digital-families-across-the-lifecourse/

http://www.scottishinsight.ac.uk/Programmes/Programmes20152016/DigitalFamilies.aspx