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Work and family practices in a digital age

Natasha Mauthner (n.mauthner@abdn.ac.uk)

Karolina Kazimierczak (k.a.kazimierczak@abdn.ac.uk)

University of Aberdeen Business School

Introduction

As we all know there is a lot of talk in the media, in academia, at work, in schools, and amongst parents about technology, work and family life. We often hear parents talking about the ever presence of technology in their children's lives and how to tear them away from their iPods and their Xboxes. Some mothers and fathers bemoan technology creeping into family times and spaces: the dinner table, the bedroom, the weekend, and the holiday. While some find it hard, even impossible, to imagine life without 'being connected', others are grappling with how to stop technology from taking over all aspects their lives. And different family members may have different views with some embracing the very technological practice or device that another is resisting. So one way or another, new technologies are pre-occupying many of us: they are making us think about how we work, live, play, and relate to one another; how these practices are changing; and with what effects. They are raising questions like: Are children spending more of their time online than outdoors? Are they leading more sedentary lives than they used to? Are we spending too much time snapchatting, facebooking, instagraming, tweeting and messaging and not enough time in face-to-face communication with family and friends? And are digital devices making it easier for work to creep into the home, and home to creep into work?

For the past three years Karolina and I have been thinking about these kinds of questions and we have approached them in three ways:

1. First, we've been examining how issues around technology, work and family are being *framed* within normative discourses and cultural conversations and what kinds of assumptions are being made about technology, work, and family and the relationship between these.
2. Second, we've carried out some empirical work within families to understand more about how digital technologies are used in everyday work and family practices.
3. Third, we've been exploring how we might *re-think* normative framings of the relationship between technology, work and family in ways that we think may be more helpful and productive.

So in our talk we want to say a little bit about each of these three issues.

Normative discourses about technology, work and family

As we reviewed academic research, popular media, films and books addressing the issue of technology, work and family it seemed to us that within an Anglo-American context our discussions have become stuck in certain normative ways of thinking about this relationship in which there is something called digital technology – smartphones, tablets, laptops, desktops, game consoles, along with all the software and applications that they use – that is having negative and/or positive effects on our work, our families and the ways in which we manage, or fail to manage, these areas of our lives.

So for example when we reviewed academic research we kept coming up against assumptions that technology, or people's use of it, is either good or bad, efficient or wasteful, a help or a hindrance in managing work, life and the boundary between these. For instance studies suggest that email interrupts work; that digital technologies disturb traditional family practices and rhythms; and that digital devices encroach on domestic time and space.

We see similar discussions in the media. See powerpoint slide.

Another example is a book by the journalist Susan Maushart called the *Winter of Our Disconnect*, published in 2012, which also tells a story about the damaging effects of electronic media on family life. In Maushart's words, the book is about "How three totally wired teenagers (and a mother who slept with her iphone) pulled the plug on their technology and lived to tell the tale." Maushart grew so concerned about her family's dependence on electronic media that she took them into what she calls 'rehab' and a 'digital detox' for 6 months. She concludes: "our family's self-imposed exile from the Information Age changed our lives indelibly – and infinitely for the better".

And there is also much talk about the damaging effects of technology on childhood. For example Beeban Kidron's 2013 documentary *InRealLife* tells a story about the dangers of the internet and what it is doing to teenagers: from cyber-bullying to suicide; from dysfunctional sexual and emotional relationships to spending too much time on the XBox causing young people to drop out of University. While Kidron makes some important points about the commodification of personal data made possible by the use of the internet and social media - which we will come back at the end of our talk - overall the film depicts technology as an evil force that does bad things to children who are passive and vulnerable, 'enslaved to just one more click', and addicted to technology. The message is that technology is replacing humanity and that we should be worried about this: 'Many children have a smartphone in the hand that we should be holding' says Kidron (in her Ted talk).

We think that these kinds of normative discourses are problematic because as we know from the invention of previous technologies – from writing, to the printing press, to books, television, and comic strips – despite the moral panics about new technologies these inventions may change and evolve but they rarely go away. So blaming new technologies for their supposed damaging effects seems ultimately fruitless and unhelpful because as the title of today's event suggests *digital technologies and families are here to stay*. At the same time we also think that celebrating new technologies for their supposed transformative potential – for example by making mobile and flexible working possible - is equally problematic

because it overlooks how these new working practices may be changing more fundamental aspects of work, worker identities, and employment relations.

So the problem, as we see it, with these normative discourses is that they assume a separation between technology, work and family – that we have technologies over here that impact on something altogether different called work and family.

In our research we draw on insights from the field of science and technology studies in which researchers have explored how technologies don't simply impact on human practices but become embedded within, and change, them. One obvious example of this is how email, and the internet more generally, have become embedded within our working practices to the extent that for many people it is inconceivable and indeed impossible to work without these technologies. So it's not a case of email or the internet *impacting* on work – rather they allow it to happen in the first place and in the process also transform its very nature.

Studying technology, work and family

So it was this way of thinking about the relationship between technology, work and family that informed our own 18 month empirical study of technology use in everyday work and family practices. The study was funded by the UK's Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council and was part of a larger grant called *Digital Epiphanies* which was in collaboration with cognitive scientists at University College London, computer scientists at Bristol University and a mathematician at Anglia Ruskin University.

The study involved working in-depth and in partnership with 3 families with children under the age of 18 living in North-East Scotland: one living in the Aberdeenshire countryside, one in a rural village, and one in a suburb of Aberdeen. We visited each family at least three times. The focus of these visits was on how families used digital technologies in their every day work and family practices. And in order to get at these practices we used various methods:

- We asked the families to make a visual map of their home and indicate on the map where and how they used different digital devices
- This was followed by a video tour of their home during which the families took us around the house again showing us how the different spaces were used including how technologies were used in these spaces
- We also took photographs of home settings and activities
- We spent a day with each family, and recorded whatever activities they happened to be doing that day ('a day in the life of')
- We also asked the families to use a scrap book to record their practices
- And throughout each visit we had individual and family interviews or conversations that we recorded

Our interactions with these families also extended beyond these visits – for example one of the families helped us make a film about the project and participated in a public event that we ran as part of the University of Aberdeen's May Festival and during which we screened the film; we worked with another participant in an exhibition of her artwork and wrote a short preface for her catalogue; we have used one of our participant's Facebook pages as a source of information about her work and family life; and we are still in touch with all three families.

Re-thinking technology, work and family

So what did we learn from our study? And how has it helped us to re-think the relationship between technology, work and family life?

The first thing to say is that the families we spoke to also told the kinds of normative stories of technology that we highlighted at the beginning of our talk. For example, one mother explained how she hid cables and chargers in various places in the house, as well as in the car, to limit her children using various digital devices; another parent described how she slowly and deliberately tore apart her ten year old daughter's Nintendo DS; another mother told us that she regularly switched off the router to disable her son's xbox and restrict his use of it; one of the mother's complained about her partner spending too much time at the weekend on his ipad, and letting the children also play with their electronic games, rather than taking them outdoors or

involving them in physical activities; and a teenager complained his mother spent too much time on her iPhone. So we did hear these kinds of stories and we could have focused on them.

But as we have suggested we came into this study with a different set of assumptions and questions. In particular, we wanted to explore how technology has become embedded in everyday work and family practices, and how this is transforming the very nature of these practices.

So how is technology embedded within, and making possible, work and family life?

We give two examples here from our research:

The first is Stephanie who is an artist and for whom digital devices and applications have become part and parcel of the tools and materials that make her artistic practices and artwork possible. (1) One example of this is the way that her paintings require digital photographs just as much as they need paint, brushes and canvas. During one of our visits we watched Stephanie at work and observed how she started, what was to become one of her paintings, with a digital photograph which she drew on some parchment paper. As she did so, she modified the lines, elongating and straightening some shapes while shrinking and curving others. She then started making a grid and, using a calculator, she scaled up the tracing into a larger sketch. (2) Another example is how Stephanie used social media to support and document her creative practices. She used Facebook to raise funds to buy materials for an exhibition of her work; she also used it to share the processes of making her art, and to share the ups and downs of family life where these ups and downs were not an *interference* to her work but actually helped *constitute* the brushstrokes that shaped the look, feel and texture of her paintings.

The second example is the way in which new technologies have become integral to the ways in which children make and sustain their friendships. In the families that we worked with, children were using the Xbox, smartphones, tablets and other devices to speak to their friends, send messages, FaceTime, play online games, arrange outings, and so on. And for the family that lived in the countryside, this made it possible for

the children to socialize and ‘hang out’ with their friends on a daily basis in a way that would otherwise have been impossible given their rural and remote location.

In giving these examples we are not just putting forward a set of positive stories about the use of new technologies to counter the negative ones. So we are not showing how digital media can be integral to art and its production to try to counter the notion that digital, or digitally-assisted, art is not ‘real’ art. Nor are we saying that children can benefit from the use of digital devices in an attempt to challenge the idea that spending time on digital devices, rather than climbing trees and roaming the countryside, is not a ‘proper’ childhood. As we have already indicated, we are trying to get away from these black and white, good vs bad, ways of thinking about these issues. We want to move away from making these kinds of normative judgments about how technology affects the ways in which people conduct their lives where past ways of working and living are either glorified into a golden age or berated as a dark age; and where current practices are seen to represent either a decline or progress in the quality and moral integrity of our work and family practices.

Instead, what we are suggesting is that new practices are both continuations and departures from older ways. They are continuations in that they build on older traditions of, for example, the use of photography in art, systems of patronage to fund art, and the role of letters and landlines in friendship. But they are also departures. Not simply in the sense that they are *newer* ways of doing old things. But rather in the sense that a whole range of new and *seemingly unrelated* practices also become possible.

We’ve only got time to give one example of this here and this relates to the ways in which when we digital devices and applications such as xbox and Facebook we are doing much more than just using them - *we are using them on specific terms and conditions* - that we usually have no choice but to agree to - and that allow third parties to access and use the data that we generate through these digital activities.

So for example, signing up for a Microsoft Xbox account requires several pieces of information: gender, country, birthdate, postal code, an email account. When we sign in, however, Microsoft also collects our IP address, our web browser version, and a

time and date. Once we log on and start playing games on the Xbox, Microsoft then collects information regarding the number of times we sign in and sign off, games we have played, and game-score statistics. Microsoft may also collect information about what we have watched using the Xbox One's television service, and what music and videos we watched or listened to using Xbox Live. These data are then used to create a profile that Microsoft can sell to advertisers, who will then send us personalized advertisements.

So as we see it, the issue is not so much the use of xbox, Facebook and other devices and apps, but how the use of these technologies can allow third parties to shape the terms on which we engage with these technologies, and to use the information they collect for their own commercial gain, and in ways that are changing the nature of privacy and confidentiality. So the issue is not only that users have limited knowledge and understanding of how all of this works and even less ability to influence it; but more generally that these kinds of issues tend not to be debated beyond the kinds of moral panic discourses that we have alluded to. And what we want to suggest is that addressing these wider and more deep rooted issues might be a fruitful and productive direction in which to take forward conversations about technology, work and family life.

For further details:

Digital Epiphanies project website:

<http://www.abdn.ac.uk/business/research/epiphanies/index.php>

Mauthner, N. S. and Kazimierczak, K. (2014) Technology and the (re)making of work and family. *MobileHCI '14: Proceedings of the 16th International Conference on Human-Computer Interaction with Mobile Devices & Services*.

Natasha Mauthner, 'We don't need digital detox, but there is a need to rethink our relationship with technology', *The Conversation*, 20 April 2015. <http://theconversation.com/we-dont-need-digital-detox-but-there-is-a-need-to-rethink-our-relationship-with-technology-40346>