DIGITAL LITERACY SKILLS AND PRACTICES IN THE EARLY YEARS

Family digital time:
Understanding contexts, emergent literacies and mediation

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INTRODUCTION

Interwoven factors including technological, biographical, societal and cultural changes led to new cohorts of digital media users and pervasive media assemblage socialisation processes to parents and children (Hasebrink, 2014), in which both groups are challenged by dualistic and powerful debates, underpinned by socio-technological determinisms (see Holloway & Valentine, 2003), where digital media are responsible for empowering versus betraying the essence of childhood. Assumed rather than tested, these recurring, emotional and deterministic debates, rooted in dichotomised representations of childhood (Clark, 2013), social pressures (Clark, 2011) and public representations on media, instil mixed-feelings that influence parents’ perceptions and mediation practices (Ponte et al., in press). Also, the interplay of other variables must be considered, such as income, education, parenting style (Livingstone et al., 2015) and views on media effects (Nikken & de Haan, 2015).

Moreover, as the paraphernalia of digital artefacts (including multi-platform apps, cloud computing, IoT) becomes progressively pervasive and embedded in the everyday lives of younger than 8 children’s core activities, requesting from parents new and “transcending” (Lim, 2016) responsibilities.

Considering both the lack of literature on parental mediation (Livingstone et al., 2015) and research on under 8 children’s appropriation and combination of old and new media (Hasebrink, 2014), we followed one family, with access to digital media and internet for 59 days aiming to understand interrelated processes shaping digital media consumption, parental mediation and emergent multimodal (multi)literacies.

An inter-methodological model allowed to gain an insightful perception of the family domestication of digital media and comprehend its influence on family’s everyday life and how it reflects on parent’s mediation - often paradoxical as Zaman el al. (2016) observe - and children’s activities and (multi)literacy skills around digital media.

Considering younger children’s digital practices and families mediation processes by parents who are themselves increasingly savvy and confident in the use of digital media, this study focuses on the complex dynamics and processes around digital media performed by a family at the crossroads of second modernity. In which, the societal and technological changes offer the context that undermines traditional assumptions of family and childhood and, consequently, the complexities enclosed in children’s use of their agency, parenting styles, and adult-child relationship.

With his exploratory study we envisaged to understand how a middle class family faces the fast-paced digital landscape in terms of socialization and mediation processes in an everyday life context.

To pursue this objective, we relied on a qualitative approach. In terms of research design, we privileged a methodological triangulation, using i) semi-structured interviews with parents to unveil their motivations and perspectives on mediation and digital media socialization; ii) participatory-inspired strategies to reach children’s personality, voices and
reach their digital practices and skills, prioritizing children’s rights in research; iv) observant participation to attain an holistic interpretation of the family environment and phenomena. This research is aligned with a structured, interpretative and holistic analysis of reality, and draws from social constructivist tradition. For the data analysis process we relied on the combination of two analytic methods: thematic and narrative analysis for their flexibility in organising the data in rich detail, as well as compatibility with participatory and constructionist research paradigms. Finally, with the empirical work we intend to offer grounded theoretical and empirically-driven information on the everyday context of a family with younger children, mediating and guiding their offspring(s) through the rapidly changing digital environment.

OBJECTIVES
The general objective of the study is to understand the interrelated processes shaping digital media consumption, mediation and emergent multimodal (multi)literacies. Thus, to accomplish this the empirical research aims to respond to the following specific objectives:

a. to gain an insightful perception of family’s digital media consumption habits;

b. to comprehend the internal and external factors influencing parent’s mediation;

c. to understand children’s (multi)literacy skills around digital media.

METHODOLOGY
The focus of the COST Action IS1410 STSM is to foster collaboration and perform empirical research in another participating COST country to develop a deeper comprehension of how young children’s literacy development is being shaped by changes brought about by the digitisation of communication. In line with this, a proposal was submitted to follow for two months one family with under 8 children, in Belgium, with the purpose of fostering collaboration between Portugal (Universidade Nova de Lisboa) and Belgium (KU Leuven) and to deepen understanding about family’s daily dynamics and emergent competencies around digital media in late modernity. This section covers the methodological, ethical and quality decisions that guided this qualitative study.

To gain insight into the complex, ever-changing and intertwined relationship of digital media in the everyday lives of late modern families, this study draws from a social constructivist tradition (Guba & Lincoln, 1998), in which the researcher used strategies to reach the participants voices and perspectives in order to interpret data and make sense of their lived reality. This section covers the methodological, ethical and quality decisions that guided this qualitative study.

To understand the interrelated processes shaping digital media consumption, mediation and emergent multimodal (multi)literacies in the scope of this family, dialogical, flexible, reflexive methodologies supporting participation and power balance were privileged:

1. to gain access to the family members voices, openness and collaboration;

2. to reach children’s personality and digital practices and skills;
3. to understand how this family faces the fast-paced digital landscape in terms of socialization and mediation processes in a daily context.

Ethical considerations took a crucial place in the study, which follows the research guidelines used by EU Kids Online Network to ensure that children’s rights and well-being are protected. To protect family’s rights to privacy and confidentiality, identities and personal information about the participants were concealed. Respondents’ identities were replaced by a pseudonym.

To meet the empirical objectives, with the accordence of the family and their expressed signed consent, the research took place in children’s home environment, because home is where children feel safe and comfortable. Parents themselves granted access to the children. The opportunity to do the research with the family in such intimate setting, communicates their willing to participating in the study, engagement with it’s purposes and trust in the researcher. This warm environment also enabled the researcher to observe real life as it was happening and family’s routines, dynamics and interactions between family members.

For the recruitment of the family an invitation form was prepared with information about the study (objectives, procedures and contacts) and a registration form to collect information about the family (Annex 1).

The family participating in the study (henceforth, Family B: ‘B’ stands for Belgium) was selected using personal contacts in KU Leuven University and considering the following criteria: children’s age (under 8); living in Leuven region; and being able to communicate with the researcher (in English or Portuguese). The researcher was able to communicate with the father, the mother and the older son in Portuguese. The father is Brazilian and the mother is Belgian, but they are used to speak to each other in Portuguese and Dutch at home. The visits were scheduled to meet the family’s time convenience. In between the beginning and end of the study, the email was the privileged communication tool used to stay in touch with the family, during which the mother was an important interlocutor. This family has three children. Three boys aged: 9, 7 and 5.

During the first meeting the researcher was able to give more detailed information about the family’s enrolment in the empirical study (study goals, design, strategies and ethical guidelines). Family’s informed consent was signed and collected (Annex 2).

The interactions with the older son (Julian, aged 9) were fruitful and very relevant (along with mother’s translating collaboration) to reach the younger boy’s voices. They understand Portuguese, but they had difficulties communicating with the researcher. Although the researcher and the family speak Portuguese, there are differences, namely the accent and vocabulary, which in the end prevented the researcher and the younger children (Liam and Noah) to communicate directly, without help.

Table 1 offers an overview of the family members (age, nationality, schooling, job):
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Who</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Job</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Belgian</td>
<td>Bachelor Languages</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Brazilian</td>
<td>Bachelor Psychology and Computer Sciences</td>
<td>Freelancer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julian</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Dual nationality</td>
<td>4th year</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liam</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Dual nationality</td>
<td>2nd year</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noah</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Dual nationality</td>
<td>Last year kindergarten</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Family composition

No monetary compensation was offered to guarantee participants’ active enrolment in the empirical activities. Taking advantage of the uptake of post-pc devices (Clark & Luckin, 2013), a tablet – Apple, iPad Mini, Wi-Fi – was the equipment selected to assist the research meetings. The data (audio and pictures) were collected using: Audio Memos Pro (https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/audio-memos-pro/id290160980?mt=8) for audio recording; and the camera for taking the pictures. The data were stored and identifying information removed from it; and is only accessible to the people responsible for the research (researcher and supervisor) and will be securely deleted after five years.

The preference for a tablet, instead of using more traditional technologies, certainly opened up empowering opportunities for collecting data in more efficient and flexible way, as it converged in just one easy-to-carry and easy-to-use tool with various possibilities (text, video, audio, image) that could be used in a less intrusive fashion.

For the study dialogical, visual and flexible strategies supporting participation and power balance were privileged with the aim of grasping this family’s daily dynamics and emergent competencies around digital media in late modernity. Qualitative strategies were applied in a participatory fashion (Boyden & Ennew, 1997) to involve the parents and the children and observe family dynamics: Media tour, semi-structured interviews that were a kind of a talk (Punch, 2011); a diary with tasks and instructions in Portuguese was prepared and distributed for completing by the younger (5 and 7) children (Annex 3); participant observation (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994) allowed to witness participants’ behaviour, routines and events occurring in their everyday contexts (Mack et al., 2005), offering interesting insights about the family’s digital habits and interactions.

The activities were proposed, not imposed, which means the family could decide to participate, negotiate or retreat. Sometimes, the mother took the lead suggesting things the children are used to do so the researcher could observe the children using digital media. However, the diary with activities prepared for the children did not reached its purpose completely. This was a planned task for children to do with parents. Though, just a couple of pages were completed. According to the mother they didn’t feel like doing the tasks, because they found it boring.
ANALYSIS

In the scope of the study, ‘data’ refers to transcriptions from audiotaped sessions, writing and pictorial materials. Table 2 summarizes the type of data collected.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data collection method</th>
<th>Type of Data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Media Tour</td>
<td>Pictorial material + Report</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview-Talk</td>
<td>Audio transcription</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diaries</td>
<td>Pictorial material</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant observation</td>
<td>Report</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pictures</td>
<td>Pictorial material</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emails</td>
<td>Written messages</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Type of data collected

**NVivo** was the software that enabled to organize, code, analyse and interpret the qualitative data gathered.

For data analysis two analytic methods were applied: Thematic Analysis and Narrative Analysis for their flexibility in organising the data in rich detail, as well as compatibility with participatory and constructionist research paradigms (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Riessman, 1993).

Using open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) a list of descriptive codes was generated. Drawing from Braun and Clarke (2006), ‘code’ refers to segments of information that appear meaningful within the data during the analysis, generating an initial list of ideas. This initial coding was submitted to a more interpretive process, along with more guided readings in order to structure, rearrange and reduce the information into more analytic and interpretive data-driven themes. A ‘theme’ represents a pattern within the data that is important to respond to the research objectives and tell the overall story of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Three final key themes structure the findings, offering information about family’s daily dynamics and emergent competencies around digital media in late modernity and answer the research objectives:

1. Digital media consumption;
2. Digital media literacies;
3. Digital media mediation/guidance.

To meet the quality criteria proposed by Guba and Lincoln (1998) – *trustworthiness* and *authenticity* – as a way to solve the quality issue from a social-constructivist research standpoint, the data was shared and discussed with experienced colleagues from KU Leuven, not involved in the research. This allowed to gain a deep and fresh insight on the empirical material; to consolidate the theoretical approach and the analysis of the data.
**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

![Family B, through the eyes of Liam, aged 7](image)

This is **Family B**, at least how the middle son, **Liam**, aged 7, sees themselves (Figure 1.). He has two brothers, **Noah**, who is 5, and **Julian**, aged 9. The brothers are represented on the right side of the drawing with different sizes, according to their age. The parents are represented on the left side of the illustration. Noteworthy is how he puts himself right beside his older brother, maybe suggesting he feels more close to him; and represents the father with a smaller head compared to the mother, maybe because the mother is “always around” as she states at some point. The father works as a freelancer and is more absent. Having time for the family is the most important thing for him and that he sometimes rejects work when companies do not comprehend this priority.

Liam’s mother is Belgian and met his husband, a Brazilian, nearly twenty years ago, during a period abroad in Brazil. The family speaks Dutch at home and Portuguese is the second language. The children learn and speak Dutch at school. Noah is in the last year of kindergarten (total of 3 years), Liam is the second grade of primary school (total of 6 years) and Julian is in the fourth grade.

The town where the family lives has areas for recreational activities, such as parks, ponds and playgrounds, where the children are used to play:

**Mother:** On rainy days, it’s not possible. But there is a forest nearby. In the forest there is a park. It’s really near the school. So they go there to play in the park. There are several parks in the surroundings with playgrounds. Bicycle paths too. There are lots of things they can do outdoors. And they enjoy it.
Both parents work and use digital media on a daily basis. The mother doesn’t like technology that much and it’s main use is for work reasons, she values ‘play’ over technology, and passing time together with the family. Besides spending time together, the parents also privilege spending time with each boy alone to get to know each of them: their interests and personality. When visiting the family for the last time, they shared that this year the children were not getting presents, “it’s this year’s resolution to practice ‘being’ over ‘having’”, said the father. ‘It’s the year not to buy, but instead doing things together, with family members’, observes the mother.

The father is interested in technology and uses it besides work requirements, for instance he uses the tablet for reading the news, the e-reader for reading books before sleeping (the mother prefers paper books instead), and a smartwatch for communication. According to him, the latter is far more invisible and quiet than his wife’s mobile phone. They had the first contact with computers in their 18’s and played video games during their late adolescence period. Both parents commented on how they now feel that the time they (as children) spent seeing television was not a major concern for their parents back then. In the case of the father, he even had his TV set in the bedroom.

These are parents are familiar with digital media in their daily lives, and early adopters of email, a tool they used since its beginning (1999-2000’s) to keep in touch when they were dating while geographically separated. They started the family in their late twenties-mid thirties, following the trend for women giving birth to the first child in Europe\(^1\).

This section permits to take a closer look at this two generations familiar with digital artifacts: their identity as a family, perceptions about parenthood and digital media, aspects which ultimately give us important clues about how they are upbringing three sons in a challenging digital media-saturated society.

1. DIGITAL MEDIA CONSUMPTION

Overview

As the passages in this sub-section illustrate, it is noteworthy how this family contradicts the bedroom culture paradigm that Livingstone (2007) refers to ten years ago. Probably because children are still young, Family B manages to remain attached to a model where domestic media, despite its portability, are still placed in collective spaces and make part of a communal experience. This scenario is in some way more related to parents’ own childhood experiences, resisting to an underlying process of individualisation, a consequence of risk society (and its anxieties) and a requirement of late modern societies as observed by Beck (1992) or Giddens (1990). The parents make an effort to provide children with outdoors activities and spend quality time with the children. The boys watch television together, and their TV preferences reflect that co-viewing.

The examples portrayed in this sub-section also anticipate adults’ concerns about education and delaying an early exposure of children to a media-saturated lifestyle, developed in the following two sub-sections.

In the context of this study, digital media encompasses: television DVD’s, video-game consoles, internet, computer, radio, mobile phone, tablet. Children-initiated access to the internet happens using their own laptop. This is an edutainment-driven practice, in which Bingel, Google and YouTube are central tools.

Figure 2. Drawing notes made after the first visit to Family B

This visual researching note (Figure 2) was made after the first visit to Family B. During the visit permission was asked to do a Media Tour through the house guided by the children. One can find toys on the first and second floor of the house, in the common spaces (kitchen, living room, office, backyard) and the boys’ bedrooms. In the boys’ bedrooms one cannot find digital media, instead there’s a huge presence of Lego building sets, and other playthings including, plastic soldiers, books, board games, playing cards and soft toys (Figure 3). Each boy has his own bedroom, in which one can find their drawings on the walls. The backyard is customised for children to play and is equipped with plastic playground equipment. Father’s office and parents’ bedroom is on the upper floor. In this household one can find old and new media in the living room and parents’ offices. At school, they have Digibord - a big screen computer, computer, television and radio. At home the technology available to the children is a laptop, television and radio (Figure 3).
Figure 3. Page from Liam’s (7) research diary

When meeting the mother for the first time, she gave the highlights on how they as parents privileged play over spending time in front of the screens, despite the fact that they also recognised the importance of computers and the internet. Overall, the father recognises the importance of coding and the development of logical thinking for children’s future professional life and they invest in buying toys that develop such cognitive skills:

**Father:** There are toys that favour logical thinking, Lego, for instance, is a great example. There are others (examples of toys). Children, can develop linear and logical thinking with toys they play with.

**Mother:** That’s what happens with our children.
Before the boys go sleeping the family gathers together for a reading routine in bed. Noah goes to bed at 7:30pm and the older ones at around 8pm as the following passage between the mother and Julian suggests:

Mother: They [children] go to bed at, 7:30pm (Liam and Noah). And they read a little in the bed. You (Julian) go to bed at 8pm. What do you do before sleeping?

Julian: I read.

Mother: Where?

Julian: In my bed.

Mother: In your bed. Everyone goes upstairs [bedrooms] at the same time. Then, we read a book to Noah, and then he goes to sleep. And you two (Julian and Liam) read by yourselves.

At home the word/verb that would best describe children’s access and use of digital media is: ‘sharing’. The boys share the screen time among themselves. And according to the mother, the rule is “if they start a war, nobody uses it”.

The children have one laptop for themselves. According to the parents, they only use the device with an adult around. The laptop is in the mother’s office (1st floor) and requires inserting a password to login (Figure 5), created by the father:

Mother: What do we have here? This is my office, but it has a desk for them.

Liam: It has a computer. A computer.

Mother: They have their own computer. This is mine. This is theirs. It has a password.
In this passage it’s noteworthy how Liam emphasises the existence of their computer (laptop), when the mother shows her office.

Figure 5. Liam entering the password to logging in the laptop

Julian and Liam share a laptop. Noah only observes his brothers using it. He is not allowed to use it, because he is too young. Julian and Liam use the laptop for school purposes and offline interests, as it will be explained further ahead. They both have an email account, which they don’t use. This happens, because one time another parent wanted to send them a party invitation by email. So the parents decided to create them an email account for them to receive the invitation. Following this, the father shared how at that time he got the impression the children were too young and not able to understand privacy and security issues. For instance they chose a very obvious password and shared it among each other and the parents without making of that an issue. And how they think of internet as something they can access like it’s ‘the family’s bike’s locker’, when one time Liam’s asked his father: “what is password of our family?”. According to the father, this example reveals that children do not understand what privacy and security are; and having these aspects in consideration, they do not concern about their security. Reasons why they still do not feel the need to use technical controls.

During an observation moment with the family, Liam was on the computer, surrounded by Julian, Noah and his mother. According to the parents the children do not use the computer without one of them being around. Asked by his mother, Liam demonstrated how he uses the platform, adopted by Belgian primary schools, named Bingel. The mother and Julian
explained more about this online platform where the two boys practice what they learn in school. 
Bingel (https://www.bingel.be/bingel/) is an online practice and learning platform divided between six different islands (Figure 6) corresponding to different grades (1 to 6), where every student has a login password and an avatar. On the platform children do exercises and play mini-games to test their knowledge.

Figure 6. Bingel’s islands

More about Bingel...
In Bingel each grade has a separate island with a unique atmosphere. Bingel makes online practice feasible and challenging due to the nearly 4000 exercises available to use for homework, contract work, free exercise both at home and in the classroom. Each story fragment challenges pupils to practice by making online tasks and exercises each student will receive a virtual trophy.
Each grade has its own Bingel Island to practice online. On their own island students can make online exercises for language, math, religious instruction, spelling and more. So they can get to work with fractions, tables, mathematical exercises, mental arithmetic, language exercises...
At a glance the teacher can see the progress of students and provide them feedback by sending a message, a virtual reward sticker ...

Liam and Julian use the platform occasionally to practice what they learn in school. The use of the platform is not mandatory as the mother asserts:

   **Mother:** So, Liam, what have you done yesterday on the computer? Explain.
   **Liam:** Bingel.
   **Mother:** Explain to Teresa what is Bingel...
   **Julian:** You use it to learn more about Maths...
   **Researcher:** It helps studying?
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**Mother:** Yes. But it’s voluntary. They have no obligation from school to use it. It’s for practicing. But they use a little... It has everything. Orthography. Calculus. Language. It has stories. It’s in the form of games.

Children’s interactions with the laptop and the internet are motivated by educational and edutainment purposes, besides Bingel, the boys go to **YouTube** for watching videos related with their offline interests, like for instance magic, a band or a theatre Liam assisted to at school:

**Mother:** Julian, for a while used to search videos about magic. How to do magic with cards. He searched for videos where someone explained the tricks.

**Researcher:** And how about Liam?

**Mother:** He looks for other things. What do you sometimes search for? ... The other day you both were searching for music. They wanted to watch a particular band. ... Related with things they do, for instance at home, at school. For instance a person did a theatre (school), so Liam came home and talked about it. “Can I go to the internet for searching videos about this person?” And he searches for it.

The one tablet existing in this household is restricted to parents’ use. However, they occasionally access a tablet: the grandparents tablet when visiting; and the babysitter’s tablet when the parents are not home. When in the care of the babysitter, they watch a cartoon before going to sleep, instead of reading a book. This is the one time they are allowed to use the tablet and take technology to their bedroom; and also works as a symbolic reward for not having their parents around. Parents tend to feel guilty when they are absent or take time for themselves, as Ponte el al. (2017) corroborate in a study with Portuguese families with younger children.

**Mother:** They don’t ask for it, but we have a babysitter, Brazilian. She brings her iPad and, before going to sleep, they watch a cartoon. When we are not home. They know they can watch an episode with her.

**Researcher:** Before sleeping?

**Mother:** Yes. Upstairs. In their bedrooms.

**Researcher:** A reward?

**Mother:** Yes...

**Researcher:** They have the iPad on their desk.

**Mother:** They do, but they don’t use it. It’s ours (adults).

In the living room one can find the only television set available in the house. Watching television in this family is a shared leisure activity, as the mother explains:

**Researcher:** This is where you watch television?

**Mother:** That’s right. We sit all together on the sofa. This is the only television we have. It’s digital TV (...) a paid service. We have several channels, but to tell you the truth, the boys rarely watch television.

The family watches little television: usually by 6pm, after dinnertime and before going to bed. When the children went to bed, the parents watch the news or a crime TV series.
The contents children watch on TV are movies and cartoons on Netflix\textsuperscript{2} or DVD, and children’s news – Karrewiet – on ketnet, a public children’s television channel in Flanders, Belgium. Ketnet broadcasts a mix of locally produced and imported productions on the public channel from 6am until 8pm. In the watching television together “sometimes prevails Liam will. Other times, prevails Noah’s or Julian’s.”

Table 3 reveals Noah’s and Liam’s television/videos preferences:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Noah (5)</th>
<th>Liam (7)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles</strong> (Movie/Netflix)</td>
<td>Ninja Turtles save the world from evil plans of destruction.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Kong: King of the Apes</strong> (TV Series/Netflix)</td>
<td>In the year 2050, Kong and three children work together to save the world from robotic dinosaurs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ninjago</strong> (TV Series/Netflix)</td>
<td>When the fate of the world, Ninjago, is challenged by great threats, the ninjas: Kai, Jay, Cole, Zane, Lloyd and Nya do everything to save it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Oggy and the Cockroaches</strong> (French Comedy TV Series/Netflix)</td>
<td>Oggy is an anthropomorphic blue cat who prefers to spend his days watching television and eating. Joey, Dee Dee and Marky are the three roaches in the household, who make Oggy’s life miserable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karrewiet (Ketnet TV)</td>
<td>News program for children.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{2} Netflix is a streaming paid service that allows customers to access content using a device to the internet, including series, movies, and documentaries.
2. DIGITAL MEDIA LITERACIES

Overview

In this subsection by Digital Literacies we refer to skills (operational, cultural, critical) acquired through the access and use of digital technologies (Sefton-Green et al., 2016).

The accounts portrayed in here demonstrate how Family B struggles to find a balance in their child-rearing practices. Meaning that, despite favouring play, the parents are aware that coding and developing logical thinking are an important asset for their children’s professional future. We have to consider that the father’s profession may instil much of this conviction. Following this, they inscribed the older son, Julian (aged 9) in a code camp, where he will learn to code for a couple of days, next summer.

Digital media, inevitably, are changing children’s word, sound, visual experiences as well as the manner they access and assimilate knowledge, how they express themselves, or they reach and interact with others and the surrounding (im)material world. Critical thinking, problem solving and innovative thinking (Gee & Hayes, 2011) are competencies highlighted to succeed in these digital media fast-paced landscapes, where traditional and new literacies interconnect and rearrange. Regardless children’s level of autonomy in the access and use of screens at home, they acquire digital literacies either by observation, guidance or by chance. The following excerpts reveal children’s competencies: (de)(en)coding alphabetic print; understanding of affordances; operative use of hardware and software; knowing how to access contents; problem-solving.

The dialogues transcribed also disclose the family hierarchy in terms of digital competencies, in which the father is the most tech-savvy person in the family. How the boys get actively engaged in a shared experience with digital media gives clues about the digital media guidance used by parents and analysed further in the third sub-section.

The parents seem to be very mindful about the importance of logical thinking – the basis of computer science, helpful to solve increasingly complex problems, analyse facts and draw conclusions – in children’s future professional lives:

**Father:** I believe that in the future, it will be very important for the education of every child to develop logical thinking. The world is becoming more complex, more sophisticated, and jobs will increasingly require logical thinking and, yes, to know how does a computer works, why a software doesn’t run and how can it work. That will be important. But, above all, children's education, as I see it, requires logic training: learn to think in a linear way, and in a logical manner. That is my point of view not in coding terms, but in general terms.

As stated previously, Noah (aged 5) is mostly a passive observer and follows the lead and preferences of his older brothers when they are using the computer. He his very quiet and even when Julian and Liam are trying to sort out the name of a band they are searching for on YouTube (Figure 7), he keeps very quiet and attentive to what they are doing, holding the Uno playing cards on his hands.

Julian on the other hand, is the one that, after his father and along with his mother guides and teaches Liam using the computer and the television. According to the mother: “Julian
knows everything”; “It’s his big role, as a big brother”. A role he assured me liking to have near his younger brothers (Figure 7).

During the observation moments, it was enlightening to witness interactions promoted by problem-solving situations involving the mother and the two older sons: Julian and Liam when entering the password to enter in the Bingel platform, solve its educational challenges together, or trying to find a video on YouTube. It is not possible to transcribe the entire excerpts because the interactions happened in Portuguese and Dutch.

In a first moment, the mother asks Liam to show Bingel. He logs in with the help of a post-it in which the mother wrote down his password. He does not know it by heart. With mother’s and Julian’s help he is instructed to select and complete an exercise. However, it was interesting to note that, afterwards he seemed very confident and managed to personalise his avatar (Figure 8) without help. Possibly he feels more self-confident when he does not need to read or write to complete the tasks, or when he is doing things that interest him best, and at his own time, not being pressured.
Afterwards, the researcher asked Liam to search for videos he likes to watch. Once again the mother gives Liam instructions. Liam for several times requests validation for his performance: “Here?” [translated], he asks in Dutch, revealing his lack of confidence. Moreover, it reveals his low digital fluency as user. Since he is learning to write, the mother helps him by spelling the letters: “Rrrrrr”, she verbalizes. Liam rewrites several times the words, now with Julian’s help. Meanwhile, he faces other operational constraints: “It’s still difficult for him to distinguish between these two keys (Backspace and Enter) ... Julian knows it.” Mother’s account is revealing in the sense it suggests the parents’ digital mediation considers and adapts cognitively to children’s development in terms of age and maturity: protective with younger children – “he is still learning” but “he gets there (in his own time)”, as the mother observes about Liam; more confident and recognizing skills and digital responsiveness acquired by the eldest son. During the last visit to the family it was possible to validate with parents this conclusion. The mother explains, they search for videos using the browser (Google Chrome) and when on YouTube they watch other videos by following YouTube suggestions on the right side of the website page. This is also mentioned by other families in the study “Growing Up With Screens” led by Ponte et al. (2017), in Portugal. When Liam finds the video he was searching for, he confidently avoids the ads and maximizes the video, without help or anyone instructing him (Figure 9).

The different approach parents use for Liam and Julian is explained by Padilla Walker et al. (2012), in which they observe that according to family developmental theory, parents tend to adjust their approaches over the course of time with adolescent children, in which
monitoring strategies tend to fade and cease over time and be replaced by deference as the child becomes more independent and mature.

Figure 9. Liam maximizes video for watching in full screen

Liam is more autonomous and confident when using the television remote control. According to Julian, they learned from their dad. Liam turns on the television, chooses the channel and they watch a French cartoon – Les Lapins Crétins (Figure 10). They don’t speak French, but they watch it despite the language constraint. Julian states they saw this cartoon in the Netherlands. The mother explains they saw it on television and they wanted to follow the series back in Belgium. However, Netflix only broadcasts it in French. Later, through an email exchange the mother noticed that this is not the only TV-series they watch in a language other than Dutch: “It seems that now it is possible to see programs in Portuguese on our Netflix account, I don’t know how but, Kong: King of the apes (Figure 11) is in Portuguese!”
Nevertheless, this may not imply they may be acquiring vocabulary or learning a new language, because language is not as important to understand the cartoons. When talking to parents, it was noticeable that using contents for learning another language is not a concern for them, because as they told me, children will be able to learn French and English in school and Portuguese at home in the course of time. These findings contradict outcomes from the Portuguese study (Ponte et al., 2017), in which some families privileged this aspect when selecting contents for children younger as 3 on YouTube.

3. DIGITAL MEDIA MEDIATION

Overview

According to a transmedia perspective, family is a communicative figuration in which actors, old and new media altogether sustain an interweaving and networked frame of processes of social construction (Hepp, 2014). In the case of Family B, the digital media environment is sustained by: watching the television together, sharing the computer for learning and entertaining activities, computer for working, mobile phone for searching for information and communicating with relatives; smartwatch for communication; and tablet for searching information and reading.

The accounts depicted in the previous and in this subsection provide insight into the context and dynamic nature of parental mediation, in accordance with child development theory (see Nikken and Schols, 2015) and glue together the three themes emerging from data analysis, two of them discussed previously.

By Parental Mediation we refer to the tactics parents use to help children navigate digital media world (Padilla-Walker et al., 2012). In this family parents follow a sheltering approach (Padilla-Walker et al., 2012) characterised by rules to limit media usage, by stipulating ‘how
long’ and ‘when’ (Zaman et al., 2016) children are allowed to use screens; and warm responses to children-initiated requests, as the excerpts prove.

This subsection additionally offers information and positive examples on how these computer literate parents use digital media during family-fun-time and family bonding (Zaman et al., 2016) for shared learning and entertaining intergenerational experiences.

Parents in Family B present themselves as parents-who-control-the-media (Hoover, et al., 2004), who favour play over screen time as part of a balanced life and family’s philosophy, but they are also aware digital media is a growing part of children’s lives as they grow up. This parenting approach is consistent with the family digital media consumption and children’s digital media literacies observed and analysed previously, as well as the first impression collected:

[Researcher’s notes]: When I first met the mother, she very promptly told her children didn’t use much technology. That she privileges the playing, in the first place. That she is aware that families sometimes use technologies as babysitters, but that doesn’t happen in her family.

The mother confirmed she is influenced by her childhood and how her parents raised her up. Nonetheless she does not follow her parents’ parenthood style straightforward. The father shared the same feeling, yet much more reflected on his German grandmother’s strict legacy than his absent father. In their parenting style they try to bring together this inheritance and their own parenting style. They sustain that they do not want to use the screens as babysitters. They often see other families doing it, at home, or at restaurants; and for them it is ‘ok’ for children to have boredom moments, they will find out how to overcome it, “the solution is not to watch TV all day long.”

Parents’ accounts is of paramount importance as it provides information about Family B’s mediation style, gives hints on their expectations about what is a healthy family and assumptions about being a “good” parent, with not much space for negotiations around how much digital media can be consumed.

Time spent in front of the screens is of major concern for the parents. ‘Addiction’ is the mother’s fear. To note that Belgium is in the country cluster of parents who mediate through restrictive measures, according to recent EU Kids Online report (Helsper et al., 2013). Nevertheless, the father’s account reinforces the idea that they “are not too restrictive and provide the necessary opportunities” (Vandonick et al., 2016). In the next transcript the father’s perception of ‘use’ and ‘technology’ is noticeable:

**Father:** Our children do not use computer or tablet. They use the computer for school purposes. And they use Netflix, but this has nothing to do with technology. It’s just about seeing a movie on TV. So, I don’t see that as a use of technology. It could be a DVD. In the end, it’s technology, but is transparent (it’s like it does not exist) for the children. The use of computer for the school is unconditional. When they need it, they use it. It sometimes happens they use the computer, for instance in the case of Julian, he uses YouTube for learning magic tricks. He searches for videos for learning how to do a specific magic trick. The recreational use for learning magic or seeing a movie on Netflix is conditional. It is linked to them behaving good, finishing their daily tasks. For instance to
eat properly, having a bath, wash their teeth, put their pyjamas on, be ready in time. Then, they can watch a movie. We let them watch a movie for 20 to 30 minutes if they do their tasks. And it doesn’t matter if it is a week or weekend day. It doesn’t change a thing.

In another visit, Julian corroborates the time they are allowed for watching television:

Mother: When does Daddy let you watch the television?
Julian: After we eat, have bath, wash our teeth. Afterwards we can watch television.
Researcher: For how long?
Julian: Not much... Twenty minutes. After dinner.

As previously stated, in this household, digital media manageable by the children are placed in common areas: the laptop is in mother’s office; the television is in the living room, where the adults’ can ‘keep an eye’ on what children are doing and seeing, as the father declares. And, as Figure 4 depicts, watching television is a shared activity (Figure 12).

![Figure 12. The boys watching television, from left to right: Julian, Noah, and Liam](image)

Nonetheless, as previously reported, observing how the family behaves when using the computer together, for instance going to Bingel or searching for videos on the YouTube, one can notice that, despite parents’ **restrictive/active mediation**, both generations seem to feel comfortable and safe with these boundaries (Figure 13). Despite that both, parents and Julian, confirmed that children wouldn’t mind using the screens more on a daily basis. As an illustration, in one of the moments with the family, the mother asked the children to turn off the television and they protested in Dutch for a minute. She didn’t pay them attention and...
they went upstairs to their rooms to play, while she observed: “At the end, it’s pretty much like this too.”
The interactions (cf. subsection 2. digital media literacies) where both generations get cognitively involved in problem-solving situations revealed a sense of trust, open communication and warmth that is more close to a cocooning/authoritative standpoint, as explained by Padilla-Walker et al. (2012), in which parents rely on rule-based approach to shelter children from negative digital media influences.

![Figure 13. Family interactions around the laptop](image)

Overall, the parental mediation approach may suggest a response to the influence of how public debates, when combining childhood and digital media, often express emotional perceptions about how digital media may be responsible for liberating and empowering (Papert, 1997; Prensky, 2001; Tapscott, 2009) versus destructing and betraying the essence of childhood (Postman, 1994); or very popular theories among parents on how media have negative effects on children (Hoover et al., 2004).

Family quality time is one core value that guides parenting. Yet it does not mean to always dismiss digital media. Digital media are embedded in daily family life and learning together activities. For instance, in one father-son quality time together, when walking in Leuven city centre, they used father’s mobile phone and Wikipedia to learn more about Gothic letters observed in a product. During a family visit to Hallerbos, ‘The Blue Florest’³, the mother used

WhatsApp to ask for aid to her father who knows all about flowers and plants and turned that visit into an intergenerational learning experience. Similarly, when in need of help, the children ask parents for support in the computer. According to parents themselves, they do not discourage child-initiated requests. But they do not encourage them to use the computer or the television “without asking permission” either, as the mother explained and I was able to witness. The parents stimulate their children to have a voice and express their opinion and perspectives. As an example, the father observed that his side of the family, in Brazil, is not used to give voice to children. When they spend family time together he sometimes calls their attention to this, as he stresses: ‘the children have a voice in this family’ finds himself getting their attention to this.

Despite being a family with roots in another continent, this is not the major reason for the adoption of technology, as pointed out in Gonzalez and Katz (2016) in a study with Latino families. The preferred mean the father uses for communicating with the Brazilian relatives is through WhatsApp. And according to him:

“when my family calls, and the boys are awake (different time zone), they get too excited, wanting to show up, wanting to talk, wanting to have contact with them. That happens. But besides that, they don’t ask to contact them”.

The boys do not ask to call the father’s or the mother’s relatives, but they are used to talk with Brazilian relatives using video-calling and audio-calling to communicate with Belgian relatives.

As explained before, the parents do not feel the need to use technical controls to monitor children’s digital steps in the internet, though, the father does not disregards this possibility as the boys get older and become more active online. He is aware that they are far more restrictive than other families they are acquainted with. Also grandparents and the babysitter tend to be less strict with the children:

Father: When we have a babysitter, they tend to be less rigid than us, but we see it as a reward for them, since their parents are not at home. We don’t make a fuss about that, and also when they visit the grandparents. Over there (grandparents) is also less rigid than here (home), but also, just for a while by the end of the day. Not about watching television or playing computer games during the day. During the day is about playing outside: running, seize the day. By the end of the day, maybe they are allowed to watch a little of TV. But at the grandparents a little bit more than here, we can say that.

Before thanking this family for their collaboration and leaving the house, the father confided me he is thinking of buying a game console soon not only for the boys, but for the family, but that he had to think more about it as he considered it ‘a challenging acquisition’.
FINAL REMARKS

This report is the result of a two-month exploratory study with a family with younger children, which empirical focus was to get a deeper understanding of interrelated processes shaping domestic digital media consumption, parental mediation and children’s emergent multimodal (multi)literacies. Despite brief in time and limited to just one family, this qualitative study enabled to reach some important aspects of a middle-class family composed by parents in their late thirties-early forties, in which the mother is European and the father is an emigrant with Latin-American roots. Both with higher education background, digitally literate, and parents of three boys aged between 5 and 9.

The philosophy behind their parenthood cuts across each key theme identified in the data analysis and is anchored in a moderate use of digital media. Considering that the domestic media has changed, this family tries to adapt to its challenges by incorporating what they recall as good practices from their childhood memories and what they consider examples not to follow they observe from other families. Using an authoritative parenting style the parents main concern is to raise their children by encouraging them into community and healthy lifestyle habits: play over screen time; outdoors activities when the weather permits it; sharing over individual use; privileging being instead of having; restrict ‘where’, ‘when’ and ‘how much’ screen time children are exposed to; and spend quality time together. Aware of the challenges posed by modern societies, namely children’s education and their professional future success, the parents make efforts to support children’s learning by fulfilling their “material role” – giving access to the internet and to digital media; and their “symbolic role” guiding the digital media usage by implementing boundaries (Valcke et al., 2010).

The rules-based approach the parents’ use to shelter their children through digital venues are based on age and children’s cognitive development; and expressed in a rule-based but warm relationship with the children. Nevertheless, children try to exert their agency by challenging the asymmetric adult-children relationship when they reclaim more screen time. Screens seem to fulfil different purposes in children’s lives. The television is reserved for leisure moments by the evening and the computer and the internet serves useful purposes in the intersection of entertainment with education, in line with results from a recent study with Portuguese families (Ponte et al., 2017).

Despite our methodological efforts to circumvent language constraints it was not possible to communicate with the Liam and Noah without Liam’s or mother’s help. The diary with activities for the children to complete with parents’ help did not produce the amount of information it was expected. Nevertheless, it was very useful being able to visit the family one last time, during the writing of the report to validate interpretations of the data.

Finally, this empirical mission gives a contribution to the body of research on parental mediation, by parents who are themselves digitally literate and provides information on younger children’s digital literacy practices at home and younger’s children’s engagement with their interests through digital media.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Punch, S. (2011). Negotiating autonomy: children’s use of time and space in rural Bolivia. In V. Lewis, M. Kellet, C. Robinson, S. Fraser, & S. Ding (Eds.), The reality of research with children and young people (pp. 94-119): SAGE in association with The Open University.


CALL FOR PARTICIPATION IN THE STUDY

Family digital time: Understanding contexts, emergent literacies and mediation

Dear parents with children aged 3-8 years old,

Digital screens have progressively entered our lives, homes and the lives of our children, at increasingly younger ages. From television to handheld devices, pre-schoolers surprise parents, and adults in general, with the ease they connect and discover how to use these devices with creativity, confidence and autonomy.

The present study, held in the context of a European research network (DigLitEY) – focused on understanding how young children’s digital literacy and multimodal practices in the new media age – seeks to know how are younger children, aged 3-6, using digital screens at home.

To address this objective, and considering the Portuguese nationality of the researcher, we are searching for a Portuguese speaking family, with children aged 3-8 and with access to digital media and internet, willing to participate in the study. The participation in the study is voluntary and consists in receiving the researcher at the family home in prearranged meetings.

1. The meetings will be organised to collect information about
   a) Existing digital media in the home and its use by the family, with a particular focus on the child/children.
   b) Digital media socialization and mediation processes within the family.

2. The study will be held between the 22nd of February and 10th of April
   We designed a qualitative methodological approach, which comprises:
   a) semi-structured interview with parents to gain a grounded angle of family media processes (domestic scenario, perceptions, mediation, and practices).
   b) ethically appropriated participatory and visual strategies and talks with the child/children about digital interests and activities.

3. Ethics
   a) Sessions will be recorded in audio. Photographic non-invasive records may be collected (avoiding identifying the child). The anonymity of the family and the total confidentiality of the answers are guaranteed. The information collected will be used for research purposes only.
   b) Family participation in the study is voluntary. Parent’s signed consent and child’s oral consent will be requested beforehand. In the cases in which the child is not willing to engage in the research activities, the child’s right not to participate will prevail.

If you would like to take part in this study, which we would very much appreciate, please complete the following application form. If you have any inquiries please send me an email: tereza.oofia.santro@gmail.com.

You can find more information about the researcher following this link:

http://soc.kuleuven.be/minilab/blog/researcher71960/
Family digital time: Understanding contexts, emergent literacies and mediation

REGISTRATION FORM FOR PARTICIPATION IN THE STUDY

Family digital time: Understanding contexts, emergent literacies and mediation

1. Age of the child living in the family household

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<th>Gender</th>
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2. Who lives in the family household:

- Mother
- Father
- Stepmother or foster mother
- Stepfather or foster parent
- Siblings
- Grandparents
- Other

Thank you very much for your interest. For further contact, please indicate your family contact:

Email:

Other contact:
INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPATION IN THE STUDY

I was informed of the objectives of the study Family digital time and my family is available to voluntary participate in this study. I also confirm that my child/children can participate in the study activities.

I understand that the answers will be kept completely confidential. The study is anonymous and no element of my family will be identified in the results or reports that will be produced.

Signature
Caderno de Atividades

Diverte-te!

Este caderno pertence a:
Nome: ........................................
Idade: ... anos

Desenha aqui a tua família...
Onde e com quem usas os seguintes objetos?

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Objetos: Computador de mesa, tablet, portátil, telemóvel, consola, Wii, televisão e rádio
**O que gostas de ver... Vê o exemplo.**

[Num dia de semana]

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**Desenha também os ponteiros nos relógios para indicar a hora.**
O que gostas de ver... Vê o exemplo.

**[Fim de semana]**

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Vídeos música

Onde?

**Televisão**

Onde?

Desenha também os ponteiros nos relógios para indicares a hora.
O meu Top 5.

O meu top 5 de programas/vídeos que gosto de ver

1
2
3
4
5

O meu top 5 de jogos e aplicações

1
2
3
4
5
Family digital time: Understanding contexts, emergent literacies and mediation
Family digital time: Understanding contexts, emergent literacies and mediation
O que gostas de fazer neste ecrã?
Preenche as nuvens com as tuas atividades preferidas.
Imagina que tens o superpoder de voar. Como vês o teu quarto?
A minha opinião sobre este caderno.
Escolhe uma das seguintes emoções:

Like  Love  Haha
Wow  Sad  Angry