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Mediatisation of Emotional Life

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10 Family relations

Emotional overload

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Introduction

With growing numbers of media and communication technologies available, many traditional family practices have been transferred to the digital sphere. Messaging applications are popular for family communication as they provide a constant connectivity, with an assumed liberating potential (Jansson, 2018: 101). Yet, we have little knowledge about the qualitative dimension of mediation, that is, the communication process and how the media affects families as a whole (Jennings, 2017) and what follows from "the mobile, multi-screen, multi-app, multimedia and multi-modal environment that surrounds families today" (Lim, 2016: 27). How these practices are connected to the long-term structural changes of the family as an institution is something that needs further exploration (Hjarvard, 2013).

The use of media to maintain family relationships has been a focal topic in migration research (Madianou, 2013; Nedelcu & Wyss, 2016), but mediated in situ communication practices are also relevant for within-country families (Abel et al., 2020). By including both parents and children and analysing how families that share the same household use media, we can not only gain a better understanding of the complexity of communication itself but also discuss the smallest unit of society in relation to the broader notion of a mediatisation process (Couldry & Hepp, 2017; Hepp, 2020; Hjarvard, 2013).

In order to discuss digital communication within the family, I propose the concept *digital family talk*, which points to a specific way of talking when using media (cf. Ochs & Kremer-Sadlik, 2015; Taipale, 2019). The concept is developed with reference to a more profound change in communication patterns that may even level out differences between family types (Madianou, 2013; Therborn, 2014). In this chapter, the digital family is approached with a particular focus on one technology that is relevant when talking about emotions (Ellis & Tucker, 2020), namely the messaging application WhatsApp. This chapter will present a detailed analysis of the digital family talk of six Finnish families. For this, two sources of data are used: intensive mobile instant messaging interviews (Kaufmann & Peil, 2020) carried out between

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me as the researcher and individual family members via WhatsApp, and ten authentic WhatsApp family chats that were donated to the project, the oldest of which dates from 2015 and the newest from 2020.

The chapter takes an institutional perspective on mediatisation, exploring the historical transformation of one institution, the family and how the entrance of media into the private is seen in the concrete, communicative practices (Hepp, 2020; Hjarvard, 2013; Jansson, 2018) of the private sphere. This research aims to fill a gap in mediatisation studies by offering a situated, bottom-up approach to mediatisation, carrying out a micro-level analysis and discussing the findings as an intertwining of two institutions, the family and the media. Recent developments in the platformisation of communication and society (Dijck et al., 2018) suggest that the media is now taking a stronger hold on the formation of both individuals and groups.

The aims of this chapter are twofold. Firstly, I will demonstrate the four categories of family communication practices found in the empirical data. Secondly, I will situate and discuss the findings in the context of a dominant, mediated and emotional communication logic, and as an example of the adaptation of the family as an institution to that of the media (Hjarvard, 2013). After presenting the concepts of family, emotion and mediatisation, I will describe the data and the methods. I will then present the features of the four categories of family communication, and I will conclude by discussing the mediatisation of the family institution.

Families and emotions

In mainstream media, the family is repeatedly presented as a well-behaved construct, free from flaws and disagreements. This idealisation is one feature of ritualisation, that is, strategic communicative actions that differentiate and transform the disparate into something uniform (Bell, 2009).

However, the lived family is said to be a complex and dynamic ecosystem that takes many shapes and forms (Andreassen, 2017). As a socialising entity, the family supports individual growth and teaches skills, such as talking one or several languages or taking responsibility and expressing solidarity (Nedelcu & Wyss, 2016). When analysing the formative processes of the family institution, the way families *talk* is said to play a vital role (Ochs & Kremer-Sadlik, 2015). In this chapter, I will treat the family as an institution, that is, an "integrated system of rules that structure social interactions" (Hodgson, 2015: 501).

Emotions are powerful resources, and the media industry has a long tradition of exploiting emotions for profit (Nikunen, 2019). The salience of emotions has been encouraged especially by social media, making the affective turn (Massumi, 1995) a very relevant concept. The reason why emotions have tended to be dismissed by many scholars may be that they are not easy to manage, regulate or control (Ellis & Tucker, 2020; Lemke, 2012). Also, emotions are viewed in sharp contrast to concepts such as intelligence,

cognition and rationality (Ellis & Tucker, 2020); in journalism studies, this is signified by a binary opposition between rationality and emotionality (Wahl-Jorgensen & Pantti, 2021).

Studies on mediated family practices (Christensen, 2009) have discussed emotions, but emotion has rarely been the core concept. However, studies have shown, for example, that emails make distant family members feel more closely connected to their families in the home country (Baldassar et al., 2007), while Skype evokes a desire to return more often (Nedelcu & Wyss, 2016) On the other hand, digitally connected families have expressed "concern" because they get involved in heated situations (Nedelcu & Wyss, 2016) and using technology puts pressure on the relationships, creating "tensions, frustrations and even unhappiness" (Nedelcu & Wyss, 2016: 215) among many other things.

Emotion has indeed become salient in the understanding of life in the digital age (Ellis & Tucker, 2020), but analyses and discussions would benefit from clearer distinctions between emotion and affect (Nikunen, 2019). Affect is said to reflect immediate and intense sensations, whereas emotions are cognitively processed and labelled (Alinejad, 2020; Massumi, 1995). There is a history of approaching emotions from either the individual or the collective perspective. On the one hand, as bodily sensations (Ahmed, 2004; Seyfert, 2012), emotions point to the individual and ways of engaging and experiencing the world in a meaningful way (Ellis & Tucker, 2020). On the other hand, as a cultural practice, emotions are the result of learning processes when we are informed by certain ways of feeling (Nikunen, 2019).

Given the prevalence of emotional communication in a platform society, the notion of the media as an emotional regime, a dominant force that recirculates emotional expressions in a hybrid media system (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2018) presents itself as a useful point of departure when discussing the relation between the two institutions, the family and the media.

Mediatisation of culture and institutions

Theories of mediatisation have offered new approaches to studying the role of the media in society and culture. Defined as a mid-range theory (Hjarvard, 2013), or a meta-process (Jansson, 2018), mediatisation has been discussed from social-constructive and institutional perspectives (Hepp, 2020; Hjarvard, 2013; Jansson, 2018).

As stated earlier, this study takes an institutional perspective on both the family and the media. As an institution, the media demonstrates its power by its dominance over other institutions; the media and its logic have become deeply interwoven with the very fabric of other institutions, such as the family (Hjarvard, 2013). The term institutionalisation in this context refers to communicative practices (Couldry & Hepp, 2017). Institutionalisation is an adaptive process that operates through naturalisation; what is new, odd and exciting today is "natural" tomorrow (Jansson, 2018). The

automation of media practices is exemplified by a predicting algorithmic culture that just "is" and "does" (Hepp, 2020) things, nominally on our behalf, but also to us.

The idea of each medium creating its own pockets of distinct culture is relevant here (Döveling, 2018). But to convey the relationship between communication, the family and the media, we need to start by looking at the empirical data as an instance of mediation, after which we can broaden the perspective and discuss the findings from a mediatisation point of view. We know that the media is impinging on almost every area of life, and that its logics, preferences, genres, formats and polarisation of expressions (Hjarvard, 2013: 3–4) are internalised by individuals and groups (Hjarvard, 2013: 44–45). This being the case, it is relevant to find out what kind of everyday practices the family has developed using the innumerable platforms of media.

The subject of this chapter, *digital family talk*, brings together two themes. On the one hand, I am interested in the digital family and its "technologically mediated communication practices and routines that take place between its individual members across generations and geographical spaces" (Taipale, 2019: 2–3). On the other hand, the family is understood as a result of its talk, which is "a medium through which families constitute themselves as a domestic, moral, and affective unit and bring children into social being" (Ochs & Kremer-Sadlik, 2015).

When talking about change in an institution, other phenomena such as globalisation, migration and ideology should not be neglected. So, when discussing families from a communicative perspective and, specifically, when looking at how people around the world use the messaging application WhatsApp and its specific, restricted affordances, there is a reason to believe, in contrast to Therborn (2014), that increasing diversity is not necessarily the dominant trajectory. Instead, media use may even be levelling out differences between families, leading ultimately to global homogenisation (Madianou, 2013).

To sum up, studying how families live *in* instead of *with* media (Deuze, 2011) requires several analytical steps, an interdisciplinary approach and the consideration of challenging concepts such as media, change and institution. I join Jansson (2018: 3) in his criticism that mediatisation has often lacked specificity, well aware of the problems that arise when conducting micro-level analysis of a small sample of families and generalising results in the attempt to contribute to the theory around mediatisation. This requires more space than articles or chapters normally allow. Consequently, this chapter serves as a starting point for the study of what appears to be a significant change in the family as an institution and of what kind of families we are becoming when using media. I argue that mediatisation is a unifying cultural logic that manifests itself as specific digital family talk that employs an emotional media logic which ultimately brings the family institution into line with dominant media practices, producing a globalised media family.

Data and method

The data were collected in relation to a larger, broader ethnographic project on language and digital practices within contemporary multilingual families in Finland (*What's in the App? Digitally mediated communication within contemporary multilingual families across time and space*). This sub-study included six middle-class family constellations, all of which included at least one child between 2 and 16 years old. Families enrolled in the project after a call made by the research team in social media for families interested in sharing their family practices with researchers. Being a multilingual project, the criteria for participation in this specific sub-project were that the family included at least one child of school age and that Swedish was used as one of the family languages. The parents were all well educated. In one of the families, the parents had divorced and the child was moving backwards and forwards between the homes.

The data collection was performed according to ethnographic principles, to gain a rich understanding of the families' digital communication. As the data collection was about to take place just when the COVID-19 crisis began and families were in lockdown, we had to stretch the methodological imagination. This meant that I as the field researcher could not visit the families in person but that the families themselves had to take active responsibility for collecting data. The families were offered a variety of possible ways of collecting and sharing the data, from among which they could make their own selection (remote or mobile interviews, taking photos, video or audio recordings, diaries, sharing instant messaging app conversations, etc.). It turned out that families particularly favoured the use of their own mobile phones and particularly the messaging application WhatsApp to produce data.

In the following analysis, I will focus on two types of data collected with WhatsApp. The first data set was generated by a modified version of the mobile instant messaging interview (referred to as MIMI) (Kaufmann & Peil, 2020). During one week in April 2020, I asked members of the families – nine adults and five children (8–16 years old) – the same question, *What are you doing right now*? six times a day. The participants were instructed to observe their media use in situ and report back in five minutes in whatever way suited them (written, images, videos or voice mail). The total number of text or media contributions sent by the participants during the week-long period was about 900, covering subjects from work and school to family-time and leisure-time subjects. Follow-up questions often resulted in long dialogues between the researcher and the participant.

The second data set consists of 10 authentic and longitudinal WhatsApp chats from five of the participating families, covering the time period from 2015 to 2020. Five of these are chats that involve all family members, three are parent-child chats, and two are chats between spouses. These data are *authentic*, that is, they are unaffected by the researcher, and they provide a diachronic perspective on the digital family interaction taking place in a

private and embedded media space. In more concrete terms, the data give us access not only to what families discuss but, more importantly, to *how* families talk when using messaging applications.

Both data are highly sensitive, and the research process included the signing of consent forms. Also, before exporting their chats, participants were advised to remove any data that they did not want to share with the researchers. A significant part of the audiovisual content, such as images, videos and audio clips, was removed. For this article, all words, names and signs were removed that could lead to individual identification of the participants.

For the data analysis, I adopted grounded theory (Bowen, 2006), an inductive, bottom-up research process that focuses on patterns, themes and categories as they emerge from the data. The four analytical categories thus stem from the data themselves, not from any preconceived notions of what might be there. Sensitising the data (Bowen, 2006) was an important initial phase, after which the data were read several times and then categorised and labelled according to their dominant communicative features.

Four communication categories

In the following, I will present the four categories of family communication. Each category consists of various, often contradictory practices. For example, the analysis reveals that the families were engaged not just in the scheduling of "practical routines" (Christensen, 2009) but in a plethora of controlling, gaming and entertainment activities and, above all, in expressing lots of love and devotion.

The practical family

The first communicative category that emerged from the data is signified by emotionally contradictory practices that follow from a mediated lifestyle in the home domain. Constant use of media required the participants to become masters at juggling between screens and apps. Especially, the WhatsApp interview data, the MIMI, revealed intense navigation between what sometimes appeared to be a completely chaotic mix of apps, screens, platforms and physical encounters. The first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic made visible the blurring of spaces: classrooms and offices were replaced more or less overnight by digital communication platforms such as Zoom, Teams, Google Class, emails. It was in this messy situation that families continued living their lives, using media at an increasing speed and with increasing emotional intensity.

Digital family talk emerged as a specific way of communicating signified by occasional moments when individuals made quick decision about steering their attention in either a digital or a physical direction. Most often, the intense media use in the home domain reduced the number of physical encounters: while one parent was having a virtual meeting, reading and

answering emails, the other one was preparing lunch, searching for clothes, or breast-feeding while reading the news from her mobile.

Home offices and schools drew attention to the prevalence of emotional behaviour in the home domain. Whatever the issue was, it was wrapped up in affect. Well-off populations such as Finland had access to communication technology which, on the one hand, offered a convenient way of carrying on with one's everyday life. On the other hand, this was a cause of continual stress and frustration. Here, an 11-year-old says what she thinks about using Google Meet for her social studies class.

[24.4.2020, 9:36] CHILD: It's boring.
[24.4.2020, 9:36] RESEARCHER: Why is it boring?
[24.4.2021, 9:37] CHILD: I can't do the assignments because then I can't concentrate on what the teacher says.

This example illustrates the illusion of digitalisation as a capacity to handle different processes simultaneously. When using media for professional purposes, digitalisation emerged as a culture of cognitive and emotional distraction that affected the private sphere, requiring individuals to adapt their routines to the functions of several different media.

[22.4.2020, 15:11] RESEARCHER: How would you describe your work on Teams? How is it?
[22.4.2020, 15:33] At first it was like stiff and weird. Now it's become everyday life!

During the lockdown, pupils could go on with their schooling, but it required parental involvement: parents had to redistribute assignments and instructions to their children, often using WhatsApp. This clearly shows how unprepared even highly organised societies were for everyday life in conditions of remoteness or distance. A lot of pressure was put on the family, which had to fix the deficit itself by using different media platforms. Indeed, family members' capacity to adapt and stretch their limits was often rather remarkable: a lot of effort was put into finding a balance between digitalised routines and family life, which emerged as an ongoing negotiation and a lonely endeavour. In the following, two parents describe how they met the requirements of working at home while looking after children of different ages:

[20.4.2020, 20:54] PARENT: I've cut back on requirements and improved routines. I'm a bloody good teacher live, but less good with learning-platform administration . . . but it is what it is. I do what I can, the rest will have to wait.
[22.4.2020, 12:13] PARENT: I'm writing an article in English and trying to get our older child to finish the last assignment while somebody else is yelling for mother all the time!

Digital family talk emerged as a mediated practice of everyday conversation (Christensen, 2009), resulting in *snippets of conversations*. The authentic family chat data rarely displayed a complete dialogue about anything serious, negative or conflictual, but instead showed the use of humour and joking to avoid difficult subjects; debate probably continued in another medium or face-to-face, where the social interaction allows for more nuances. This suggests that WhatsApp, or similar technologies are not ideal platforms for parenting, because they offer easy ways to avoid the conventional structure of hierarchy and power. The specific chat application does, however, encourage expressions of emotion, for example, of *indifference* and *disappointment*, as demonstrated in this short digital dialogue:

[25.4.2018, 13:44] CHILD: I got a 5+ in Finnish. 😂
[25.4.2018, 13:47] CHILD: But an 8 in English.
[25.4.2018, 14.44] PARENT: I want to talk to you when I get home.

WhatsApp turned out to be a technology that accentuates the so-called class project, here observed as intense parent–child dialogues around the theme of personal improvement (Ochs & Kremer-Sadlik, 2015). Applications such as WhatsApp turned out to have an institutionalising effect on fostering: in the mediated space, it was wrapped up in an abundance of emotional expressions:

[9.6.2020, 15:29] CHILD: Byebye I love you
[9.6.2020, 16:04] PARENT: And I love you Be on time at 7 PM at the latest so that we can produce a simple, good-looking cv

In short, WhatsApp provided a handy tool, a quick fix, so to speak, for doing family, but at the same time, it meant that families became enmeshed in the attention the technology demanded, as constant messages kept dropping in. The fact that WhatsApp was just one media with specific affordances meant that families adjusted themselves to several different technologies, internalising the affordances (Hjarvard, 2013) of each medium to the private sphere, which required several demanding communicative operations.

The dispersed family

The second communicative category is that of the dispersed and controlling family. This category consists of contradictory practices when parents sought to monitor and limit their children's actions. Restricting gaming hours and getting children to do something more useful was a practice that occurred via the app, interestingly, even when families shared the same physical space.

[28.12.2017, 23:22] PARENT: My dear, you have to stop otherwise I will have to come upstairs

[5.11.2019, 15:08] PARENT: NOW 2 HOURS OF PLAYING. Do your math homework and take a break
[10.12.2019, 13:21] PARENT: Ok. Don't play too long. I am watching :)

What has been called "surveillance capitalism" (Zuboff, 2019) speeded up by platformisation and algorithms, is entering the home domain: constant controlling appeared to have found its equivalent on the micro-level, enabled by technologies and used for tracking individual family members. One example of such a prototypical control ritual was the recurring practice of the parent asking the child where she/he was.

[23.1.2018, 14.37.15] PARENT: Where are you NN?
[23.1.2018, 14.37.37] CHILD: At home
[23.1.2018, 14.37.54] PARENT: 👈

The practice of mediated control was extended to other activities such as homework, dressing, eating and resting.

[19.3.2019, 13.28.16] CHILD: Math homework
[19.3.2019, 13.28.46] PARENT: Yeah, and write an answer for 7B and then the answer is there :)
[19.3.2019, 13.29.24] PARENT: And correct 8A, it should probably be 70–55.
[11.12.2019, 13.36.46] PARENT: Have a snack, have a good long drink, and close your eyes and have a rest.
[19.2.2019, 13:38] PARENT: Read a book instead! Go out and run!!

A constant connectivity (Dijck et al., 2018) in the family domain caused feelings of impatience when a specific technology was *assumed* to enable continuous interaction but did not fulfil its promise. Consequently, a lot of energy was put into getting the attention of other family members. Here, an 11-year-old starts to feel desperate when their father does not write back:

[21.11.2019, 20:08] CHILD: Can I come to your work/office?
[21.11.2019, 20:09] CHILD: Helloooo
[21.11.2019, 20:09] CHILD: Aaaanswer
[21.11.2019, 20:27] CHILD: Could you answer me now
[21.11.2019, 20:31] CHILD: Helloooo
[21.11.2019, 20:46] CHILD: Daddy!
[21.11.2019, 21:08] PARENT: Yes!

WhatsApp and similar media are said to spur cosmopolitanism and a mobile, middle-class lifestyle (Jansson, 2018). In the family chats, longing for distant family members was repeatedly framed by expressions of both control and affection.

[18.2.2019, 7:22] PARENT: Good morning ❤ Soon at work 😟 Put away your mobile phones for today and do something together 😉 See you when you wake up and later in the evening. How is NN? HUGS! ❤❤❤ to all three of you, have a nice winter's day.

While WhatsApp offered a technology for strengthening social relationships, it also enforced a family culture of parental control, often resembling a mediated surveillance culture. Reaching out to dispersed family members over a distance caused anger and frustration and created a practice of mixed messages. Though parenting was done politely and with the best of intentions, the digital technology could easily result in undermining the autonomy of individual family members, shaping a culture of distrust that might even be an obstacle to personal growth and the development of a sense of personal responsibility.

The entertainment-oriented family

The third communicative category that I found was centred around gaming and entertainment. In both sets of data, a substantial part of the conversation was about media itself, with all its enticing content. What emerged was a clear example of the merging of the two institutions, the media and the family. Contemporary, middle-class homes harbour innumerable media technologies, a condition that is constructing an emotional relationship between the family and entertainment media: our case families simply seemed to love their media.

While in the previous category, we found parents who were trying to prevent their children playing too much, in this category, we found the opposite: keen, positive, even happy media consumers, people who embraced media. What really united families and generations was the entertainment, excitement and engagement that media offered; this was the main attraction for individual family members.

From the following extracts, we can observe the saturation of everyday life with entertainment: playing video and console games, watching broadcast television and streaming service television, listening to music on Spotify, scrolling through Facebook, Instagram, or YouTube and reading newspapers on screen. The first extracts here come from the MIMI data, which revealed the intertwining of media consumption and real-life activities.

[26.4.2020, 19:10] PARENT: I am stretching, watching the Hobbit movie and waiting for the cookies to be baked in the oven.

[23.4.2020, 20:11] PARENT: Cross-training in the warehouse, watching The English Game-series on Netflix

[24.4.2020, 18:59] PARENT: Listening to spotify and clearing up after dinner, the TV has been commandeered by NN and his two friends who are playing Fifa.

[24.4.2020, 17:07] PARENT: Scrolling through instagram, NN (child) is playing fortnite. We're alone in the house.

Entertainment media became like an extra, but close, member of the family with whom both parents and children socialised. Within this communicative category, the various media were not regarded as a force for evil but, on the contrary, a good pal with whom families spent time, at all hours. In many comments, parents recommended their children to check out some new game, programme, or music.

[7.6.2019, 8.20] PARENT: Now this you should listen to – Avici's whole album! It's really hard stuff – you'll find it on Spotify
[6.3.2017, 17.32] PARENT: They have wii in the library!

In the authentic chats, children asked their parents for help with their media-related problems.

[4.6.2018, 19.41] CHILD: My screen time has ended and now you could help me so that I can play Weave the line
[25.12.2018, 16.20.29] CHILD: By the way I would like to play sims on the PC
[4.2.2019, 19.04.24] PARENT: What name will you have in your game? I must create a steam account for you.

The entertainment-oriented family was a unit that sought pleasure and sought to kill time with media *while* constructing their social relationships, a feature that probably was spurred on by the COVID-19 crisis and lockdown. The proliferation of entertainment practices came as something of a surprise to the researcher; the crisis seemed to have normalised a radical form of mediatisation in which digital media has colonised almost all spheres of life (Luthar & Pušnik, 2020), in this case seen as a non-stop interaction with media platforms, filling more or less every available hour of the day with entertainment.

The loving family

In the last communicative category, we find the loving family, people who used their chats to declare their affection repeatedly, openly and explicitly. Digital family talk unfolded as a loving regime signified by expressions of compassion and caring, very different from the general hostility that is alleged to have caused by polarisation of politics and public debate (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2018).

When physical meetings between nearest family members are prohibited by politicians or authorities on account of pandemics or climate change, the emotional needs of families are channelled through communication technologies. This became quite evident during the COVID-19 crisis. Being separated

from your family emerged as a ritualisation of emotional needs, leading to a reproduction of patterned interaction that circled around affirmation, and which turned users to producers of their own needs (Jansson, 2018). Subjecting the intimate family sphere to the world of the media seemed to lead to an addictive relationship between the two.

The first type of emotional practice to which I would like to draw attention is the short, simple, straightforward words of affection exchanged between individual family members.

[17.1.2018, 18:04] CHILD: Thank you daddy, you are besttttttttrrrtt!
[9.2.2018, 7.15.26] CHILD: I like you daddy!!!
[6.4.2018, 8.10.40] FATHER: Have a nice Friday, I love you. Let me know where you're going.
[24.5.2018, 20:48] CHILD: Good night daddy! I love you 💖
[3.1.2018 20:19] CHILD: Hihi kiss kiss kiss kiss kiss kiss kiss kiss kiss kiss kiss kiss kiss kiss kiss kiss

It is very doubtful whether anyone would express themselves in this way in a face-to-face situation. In fact, it is not even possible. Showing love and affection is generally a sign of a healthy, functioning family, but what emerged in the family data was the entry of the thumb, "liking," a practice fuelled by an emotional media culture that has no equivalent in the physical family domain. Family chats on WhatsApp manifested an intimate discourse, expressed by the profuse use of emojis. While it has been claimed that media use divides generations (Bolin, 2016), in these data sets, we found no actual proof of this, nor were there any differences between the sexes (Christensen, 2009) when expressing love and affection remotely. The construction of meaningful social relationships digitally circled around an active production of emotional language and many heart emojis.

[9.12.2019, 21:53] CHILD: I love you! I love you! ❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️ (in both Swedish and Finnish)
[3.1.2018, 21.45] CHILD: I love you 💖 daddy
[3.1.2018, 22.32] PARENT: And I love you my dearest.

[2.12.2018, 11:01] SPOUSE 1: Love you. Kisses! Nice to hear about your thoughts. Love you.
[2.12.2018, 11;03] SPOUSE 2: I like sharing my thoughts with you.
[2.12.2018, 11:03] SPOUSE 1: ☺😘
[2.12.2018, 11:04] SPOUSE 2: ❤️

Reproducing the most popular emoji, the red heart emoji (Ellis & Tucker, 2020), emerged as a prototypical example of digital family talk, an emotional practice constructed around mediated intimacy, and thus joining a dominant

media culture of cuteness, especially well represented in social media. What we witnessed in the data was a new kind of emotional work that indicates a sudden leap in the history of modalities: instead of the former handwritten, personal letters or the intimate human voice when we telephone family members (Madianou, 2013), we now see a *passionate family communication expressed with graphic signs*. People seem to believe that emojis are very personal expressions (Ellis & Tucker, 2020), offering unique ways of speaking, while in truth they are actually impersonal and the same for all of the other families who use these same graphic affordances. With emojis, families are all situated on the same ground, constructing themselves globally in the same way. Managing interpersonal relations (Christensen, 2009) in a media context is thus condensed into one specific graphic sign, a short and efficient way of saying, "I love you."

Secondly, the data showed that besides explicitly attesting their love, the families also used WhatsApp to greet each other online, typically in the mornings and evenings. Greetings are highly ritualised (Bell, 2009) ways of affirming social relationships and therefore not "meaningless" rituals (Abel et al., 2020). When greeting in WhatsApp, the families made a digital performance using a structure that has already been framed (Goffman, 1990), in this case by a specific technology. Greeting one's closest family members on WhatsApp not only affects social relationships, but it also confirms a specific kind of existence. These rituals took place several times a day, often complemented by short in situ comments, illustrating that families did not want to miss out on moments of togetherness.

[9.4.2018, 8.14] PARENT: I slept well! Have a fun school day, dear.
[24.12.2016, 22.59] PARENT: Merry Christmas my dearest piglet!
[7.3.2016, 16.08] PARENT: Hi, daddy's girl. Hope you had a nice day at school and that you were there in time with NN.

Sometimes, the greetings rituals went wrong and caused minor disputes. Following are two examples from a parent–child interaction. The first is a short debate about who should come and give an "IRL good night hug," the latter an example of the fact that WhatsApp and the written modality were not always enough to perform the ritual, but it had to be physically confirmed in order to be satisfactory.

[8.1.2017, 20:16] PARENT: Can you come and give me a good night hug . . .
[8.1.2017, 20:19] PARENT: I'll go to sleep now can you come???????
[8.1.2017, 20:25] CHILD: You come and give me one.
[3.6.2019, 18:50] PARENT: I just wanted to hear your voice ❤
[5.6.2019, 09:42] CHILD: I'm fine and having a good time not calling

Expressing longing for remote family members was a common, ritual practice that could also be found among these within-country family members

when they were temporarily separated because of work, leisure activities or divorce.

[5.1.2018, 7.21] PARENT: Good morning my darlings! We will see each other tonight! Hugs and kisses from Mummy and Daddy ❤
[20.5.2016, 11.15] PARENT: My prettiest little child. Are you all right? It will soon be the weekend!
[20.5.2016, 11.16] PARENT: I miss you so much
[20.5.2016, 21.44.12] CHILD: Ok 😀😊😊
[29.6.2018, 20.56] PARENT: Sleep tight and have beautiful dreams, love you ❤ and we'll talk to each other tomorrow
[22.7.2018, 14.46] PARENT: On the bus, miss you already ❤ Hugs and kisses to you all 💞💟💗💝💖

The third practice of the loving family communication category is the showing of support and solidarity, a kind of digital family "pep-talk," that relates to individual development and the career-oriented "good middle-class parenting" mentioned previously (Ochs & Kremer-Sadlik, 2015). However, in a digital space, this practice too is intensified, as parents show their commitment to ensuring the future of their children in an uncertain world (ibid.). Mobile applications such as WhatsApp were used 24/7 by these parents to spur their children on in the "race" and competition of contemporary middle-class life and to ensure the long-term well-being of their children.

[2019–12–20 14:00] PARENT: My darling I'm really super proud of your grades – that you succeeded in getting higher grades this last year, which is the most difficult one 👏🏆 You're really good
[16.2.2019, 12.02.09] PARENT: Who cooked the food!! WHAT! Just splendid, my little man.

In sum, expressing love and devotion in the family sphere not only requires the investment of time, effort and emotion (Ochs & Kremer-Sadlik, 2015). The middle-class families in this study used their family chat to support, even "drill" their offspring. Many discussions were concerned with the children's education and their development, a practice illustrating the interconnectedness of the media, the capitalist system and the class system and a constant concern for one's children's future, turning family talk into the social crucible of the political economy (Ochs & Kremer-Sadlik, 2015). When technologies such as WhatsApp are used, the class project seems to strengthen by the abundant expressions of emotions. Applauding each other's achievements with digital pep-talks was analogous to a devoted fan club or TV show in which the family constructs itself as an idealised and mediated version of a loving family.

Conclusion

I will conclude by discussing the mediatisation of the family institution as it emerged in the mediated communication of six Finnish families, analysed from private family chats and in situ interviews with parents and children. The four communicative categories – those of the practical, the dispersed, the entertainment-oriented and the loving families – makes it clear that the proliferation of media use in the home domain and for intimate family relations has led to an intensification of the transformative mediatisation process taking place in contemporary families.

With the bottom-up approach to the mediated, everyday practices of the family presented in this chapter we have hopefully gained a better understanding of the typical features of the proposed concept, digital family talk. It is what I like to call the institutionalisation of a new language that is not primarily informed by the speech community, like traditional languages, but by the media and its constantly shifting yet powerful logics. For example, emojis appear to provide users with unique ways of combining visual signs, but they are in fact extremely limiting and simplifying (Ellis & Tucker, 2020: 76, 71). Given the salience of language for how families are constituted, one could even voice concern for the limitation of expression that individuals use when constructing the family in a mediated environment.

Mediatisation of the family institution is signified by a dichotomy of competing forces, struggles that are often fought alone. What becomes evident in the analysis is that the media is both the provider of solutions and the creator of new problems. The media is a convenient way of dealing with our professional lives and "family business," but it causes distraction and exhaustion. The media enables parenting at a distance while at the same time developing a culture of control, a reduction in agency and a limiting of personal growth. Media is an attention-seeking apparatus that limits people's self-determination and freedom. Also, the media's offer of non-stop entertainment extends so far that it becomes decisive even for the experience of intimate relations.

Finally, mediatisation of the family institution means that as individual family members we communicate according to the terms of a dominant, emotional regime. It is possible that using media may provide more opportunities for people to show and experience love, but the emotional regime of the media is a polarising one. In this small sample of middle-class families, we found a plethora of positive emotions; in other family samples, we might well find the expression of quite opposite emotions.

Despite its admittedly limited sample of families, this study has shown the mediatisation of the family institution unfolding as an everyday power struggle. Constructing itself through the prerequisites of the media makes the core social unit in society, the family, not only dependent on but also quite vulnerable to the constantly shifting logics of the media. Being mediatised means that both the individual and the family are inevitably altered, as it is the media that has the power to determine the features of a meaningful

relationship. It remains for future researchers to find out whether the infinite rows of exclamations marks and heart emojis that now circulate around the mediated universe when families construct their intimate sphere will actually lead to the homogenisation of the family and to the emergence of a generative, mediated family type.

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