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Learning about democracy: Democratic familyship and negotiated ICT users' practices

Maren Hartmann, Nico Carpentier & Bart Cammaerts

1. Introduction

This chapter will focus on processes of democratic learning within changing and becoming ever more complex family contexts. It is thereby assumed that democracy cannot be reduced to a formal legalistic system of ordering society, but that it also has a strong cultural component and is learned through discourses, everyday practices and performances. The family as a micro-system, or social sphere, is one of the places where learning about democracy and democratic practices can—or, from a normative perspective, should—take place. A distinction is therefore made between the family as a social system that can take very different forms—from authoritarian to radically democratic—and the inherently normative concept of *democratic familyship*. The latter can be understood as an ideal-typical concept to describe situations where conflicts are negotiated and resolved through dialogue embedded in semi-egalitarian power relations between all actors within the family. Within the notion of democratic familyship, learning about democracy, dialogue and negotiation keeps the dialectics of control, as well as the power relations that drives them, in balance.

To illustrate these processes, we use the case of user practices of ICTs by (North-Belgian) young adults. The focus is here on how these young adults deal with the conflicts that arise from those ICT practices and how they negotiate satisfactory outcomes. The emphasis is on the actual *practices* as the learning sites for democratic principles. As such, the *domestication* approach and some of its criticisms will be instrumental in providing a dynamic framework to contextualise these practices. The domestication approach is crucial to understanding media use practices as it, amongst others, specifically deals with household power-relations that refer to media technologies. For the purpose of this chapter data that had originally been gathered for the EMTEL2 project dealing with ICT user practices of North-Belgian youngsters (Hartmann, 2003/2004) was re-analysed. Our analysis aims to illustrate the (potentially) democratic workings of these Belgian families in the very specific situation of being confronted with ICTs. By looking at the way the family members deal with the conflicts related to the acquisition of, expertise of and use of ICTs, (at least partially) negotiated usages of ICTs are shown to be present.

2 The family as a site for democratic learning

2.1 Democracy, a learning experience?

As most ideologically (over)loaded concepts, democracy carries the burden of a manifold of definitions and meanings, and is being the subject of '*politics of definition*' (Fierlbeck, 1998: 177). Despite this diversity democracy remains nevertheless one of many forms of societal organisation that attempt to pacify basic social conflicts caused by the scarcity of resources and their unequal distribution. The ever-uneasy balance between the collective and the individual and between the universal and the particular is kept in check by a specific formalised system of power delegation (or representation), whilst maintaining a degree of popular participation and being supported by the presence of a democratic culture. Following Mouffe (1992), democracy is seen here as a project that can never be totally achieved, as new social conflicts and antagonisms will each time prevent its complete closure, rendering democracy a process and not a state. Moreover, the necessary presence of a democratic culture will require the support of processes of socialisation and/or enculturation, in order to construct citizen's democratic identities. To put it differently, from this culturalistic perspective citizenship is seen as a dimension of the individual's subjectivity, and needs to be learned and protected.

Democratic learning can be highly formalised and oriented towards the introduction of citizens-to-be in the polis. Kelly (1995: 101), for instance, argues that one of the major tasks of the educational system '*is the proper preparation of young citizens for the roles and responsibilities they must be ready to take on when they reach maturity.*' Gutmann (1987: 287) even calls this the prime task of the educational system: '*political education* – *the cultivation of the virtues, knowledge and skills necessary for political participation – has moral primacy over other purposes of public education in a democratic society.*'

But democratic learning goes well beyond the traditional educational system. Political participation as such can also be seen as an important part of this learning process. The pre-condition is of course that participation is sufficiently enabled within the political system, and that (in other words) the inequalities embedded in the power relations are not too demotivating. One of the early authors who focussed on the educational role of participation in the political system is Jean-Jacques Rousseau. According to Pateman's (1972: 25) interpretation of Rousseau, the participation of 'the people' will have educational, legitimising and integrative effects. The participatory process allows individuals to become responsible citizens that are sensitive to the general interest. As Verba and Nie (1987: 5) put it: '*Through participation, one learns responsibility.*' In a more present-day formulation citizenship is thus seen as constructed through a wide series of discourses, practices, performances and rituals.

This line of reasoning also brings the work of de Certeau (1988) into the picture, as he explicitly emphasises the importance of everyday practices (in contrast to textual representations or discourses). He stresses the importance of seeing everyday practices as non-discursive and unconscious forms of (illusory)

compliance and resistance – or in his words strategies and tactics. Applied to this discussion, this means that citizenship is also practised (or not) at the level of the pre-linguistic or pre-symbolic. This position also resonates with the idea that democracy is not always thought, but practised and performed. Disregarding or underestimating the importance of civic practices would rather impoverish any type of analysis aimed at the educational aspects of civic behaviour. At the same time the Spivakian problem of the subaltern (1985) arises: being able to be heard in a context of hegemonic discourses often creates a very difficult threshold to overcome. In other words, discursive framings translating these civic practices into discourses of citizenship that are able to structure and (re)direct these practices as tools for further learning, remain an important requirement.

The above discussion already illustrates that democratic learning is not limited to the sphere that Thomas (1994) has called macro-participation. This expansion presupposes a definition of the political in the broad sense, not being restricted to a specific sphere and/or system, but as a dimension that is '*inherent to every human society and that determines our very ontological condition*' (Mouffe, 1997: 3). According to Thomas, the school, family, workplace, church and community remain equally valid spheres for potential democratic learning through (micro-)participation. Although not completely overlapping, Thomas' conceptualisation of micro-participation clearly includes civil society. From his perspective civil society and other localised spheres such as the family can form vital democratic learning sites—or '*educational devices*' as Pateman (1972: 35) calls them—for individuals to be enculturated into citizenship.

The pre-condition is of course the presence of democratic practices within civil society and other micro-systems. More specifically this implies the presence of dialogical forms of communication, negotiated conflict resolution and (semi-)egalitarian power relations that keep the dialectics of control—as Giddens (1979) phrased it¹—in check. In this context it is vital to stress that these micro-systems are not by definition democratic, participatory and just, and can sometimes be authoritarian, elitist and unjust. As Fran Tonkiss (1998: 256) remarks: '*The limits of the state [...] do not in any case represent the limits of power. Within civil society networks of [...] 'experts' trace diverse patterns of regulation and control.*' Katherine Fierlbeck (1998: 149) makes this point even more clearly by referring to '*less virtuous*' civil society organisations: '*the mafia, it has frequently been observed, meets the prerequisites of numerous definitions of civil society quite well.*' For this reason the process-related notion of democratisation is of vital importance, as it allows stressing the need to achieve more just relations and more equal power balances within civil society and other micro-systems, in order to achieve a democratic learning experience.

However, Pateman does stress that the importance of civic participation in these micro-spheres should not be restricted to their potential educational roles. Democratising these spheres serves a purpose on its own, as gaining control over

¹ Giddens (1979: 91-92) discerns in the dialectics of control two components: on the one hand the transformative capacity of power –which analyses power in terms of agency- and on the other hand dominance –which views power as a structural characteristic.

one's lives in localised and everyday structures is seen as an important realisation. Focussing on the workplace, she writes:

"Apart from its importance as an educative device, participation in the workplace – a political system – can be regarded as political participation in its own right. Thus industry and other spheres provide alternative areas where the individual can participate in decision making in matters of which he [or she] has first hand, everyday experience." (Pateman, 1972: 35)

2.2 *The family as a potential site for democratic learning*

When we now turn to one of these 'other' spheres -the family- a similar argument can be made. Additional support can be found in the observation that the family is now often seen as an integral part of civil society, in contrast to the older Hegelian and Marxist approaches to civil society. Cohen and Arrato (1992: ix) for instance explicitly include what they call the intimate sphere, next to the sphere of associations, social movements and forms of public communications. They elaborate further on the specificity of the family as being part of civil society:

"[...] it is precisely because the family is a core institution in and of civil society [...] that egalitarian principles can be applied to it to a far greater extent than to a firm or a bureaucracy." (Cohen and Arrato, 1992: 724)

Not surprisingly, especially feminist theory has focussed on the importance of the family as a democratic institution—or more specifically, its lack of democracy. The unequal domestic power balance, which had (and still has) an important impact on the family's division of labour in a household (Gerson, 1985; Okin, 1989), and which has led in some cases to domestic (sexual) violence, prompted second-wave feminism to identify the family as a site of oppression. Their demand was for a more democratic family and for the democratisation of everyday life, based on the assertion that the power imbalances in the private sphere needed to be politicised. Kate Millett (1970) for instance coined the term 'sexual politics' thus expanding the notion of the political into the sphere of the private. In her chapter on the 'theory of sexual politics', she introduces the sociological approach with the simple sentence: '*Patriarchy's chief institution is the family*' (Millett, 1970: 33). A few pages further she continues:

"The chief contribution of the family in patriarchy is the socialisation of the young (largely through the example and admonition of their parents) into patriarchal ideology's prescribed attitudes toward the categories of role, temperament, and status." (Millett, 1970: 33).

Although Pateman's (1989) critique—that democratic theory has forgotten the everyday realm—still remains valid up to a certain extent, some authors have conceptualised the family as a democratic institution. One of Giddens' lesser-known publications, '*The Transformation of Intimacy*', for example, contains a warm plea for the '*radical democratisation of the personal*' (Giddens, 1992: 182). Although being knowledgeable about the difference '*between ideals and reality*' (Giddens, 1992: 188), Giddens argues that a symmetry exists between '*the democratising of personal life and democratic possibilities in the global political*

order at the most extensive level (Giddens, 1992: 195-196) Again, participatory principles remain both the pre-condition for and result of democratic learning².

Interestingly, Giddens does not exclude children from the democratic family. When he raises the question whether the relationship between a parent and a young child can be democratic, he refers to James and Prout (1990) and kindly provides the following answer:

"It can, and should be, in exactly the same sense as is true of a democratic political order. It is a right of the child, in other words, to be treated as a putative equal of the adult. Actions which cannot be negotiated directly with a child, because he or she is too young to grasp what is entailed, should be capable of counterfactual justification." (Giddens, 1992: 191-192)

All the significatory expansions and re-articulations discussed above have provoked criticisms and resistance, also within feminist theory. For instance Nancy Fraser (1989: 76) has protested against the expansion of the political: *'when everything is political, the sense and specificity of the political recedes'*. Anne Philips has stated clearly that according to her, there are limits to the democratisation of daily life (Phillips, 1991: 85). Although we do not share these critiques, Philips' point that the signifier citizenship should be reserved to theorise the specific relationship between individual and nation-state, is well taken when she writes: *'Again, the point is not that we should stop arguing about who does the housework, just that citizenship acts on a different and more limited terrain'* (Phillips, 1991: 85). In order to be able to theorise the position of the individual within the family as a democratic institution, we prefer to introduce the notion of *democratic familyship*.

Paraphrasing Held (1991)³ this notion connects the political and social with the individual aspects of family life, as it highlights the democratic elements of this specific societal setting. As a micro-system the family can be governed by a diversity of regulatory systems (a diversity which is similar to the diversity of possibilities for regulating the polis). Governance within the family can be built upon unevenly distributed (often patriarchal) power relations, instrumental communication and the suppression of conflict. In contrast, democratic families are governed by dialogical forms of communication, negotiated conflict resolution and (semi-)egalitarian power relations. Democratic familyship then refers to the practices, attitudes and ideologies that position individual family members within the family as a democratic system. In parallel to the different defining components of citizenship⁴, the importance of the protection of the rights⁵ of the family members, their participation in the (often implicit) family decision-making structures, their welfare and even the respect within the family for internal cultural

² Giddens (1992: 194) explicitly mentions a similar circular process: *'On this point we come round full circle. Self-autonomy, the break with compulsiveness, is the condition of open dialogue with the other. Such dialogue, in turn, is the medium of expression of individual needs, as well as the means whereby the relationship is reflexively organised.'*

³ According to Held (1991:21) citizenship *'connects in rather unusual ways the public and social with the individual aspects of political life.'*

⁴ Marshall's threefold distinction (1992/1950), expanded by the cultural studies emphasis on cultural citizenship (see Hermes, 1998).

⁵ This is partially supported by legislative frameworks at the macro-level.

differences, can be stressed. It should be added that the notion of the family should not be restricted to the nuclear family, as single parent families, gay and lesbian families, co-parenting, blended families and other family types cannot be excluded (Silva & Smart, 1999).

3. The family and the power struggle for technology

The ideal-typical notion of democratic familyship can of course not remain completely detached from localised and situated practices. In this chapter we explicitly focus on the introduction of ICTs in the family context, using the concept of democratic familyship as an analytical sensitising concept and a normative criterion for the evaluation of the actual family practices. In order to situate the power struggle of usages of technology within the family and the potential of democratic familyship we will first of turn to a theory of appropriation of technologies in a wider sense. In view of previous research in this field, it is useful to reframe the domestication approach in relation to a critical further development. Secondly, we will look at a research project on ICT use to provide us with a number of examples of conflicts and power struggles within a family context and subsequently at how these conflicts are (sometimes) resolved through negotiation.

3.1. Domestication

Families are confronted with technologies, especially media technologies, every day. These technologies are only one of many issues they face, but they often do play an important role in families' lives and are central to the question of democratic familyship. How families deal with the introduction and use of technologies, and whether democratic preconditions are met, are crucial questions in the analysis of media use in everyday life. One approach that has focussed on the family and their struggles with technologies has been the domestication approach. Important authors in its early formulation within the UK-context were David Morley, Roger Silverstone, Leslie Haddon and Eric Hirsch (e.g. Morley & Silverstone, 1990; Silverstone & Hirsch, 1992; Silverstone & Haddon, 1996).⁶ The newness of the approach at the time of its first formulation (mid-to late 1980s) was the concentration on media *use practices* and *context* rather than media *texts* (see e.g. Morley, 1995). The work of these authors was clearly influenced by an article by Hermann Bausinger, who formulated six general points concerning media use research in 1984. Amongst those were: '*The media are an integral part of the way the everyday is conducted*' and '*It is not a question of an isolated, individual process, but of a collective process*' (Bausinger, 1984: 349-350).

The domestication approach emphasises that media are both symbolic and material objects and should be analysed as such. They are objects of consumption both in a wider and in a narrow sense of the word. The domestication approach provided a detailed analysis of power relationships within different household structures (mostly families) as they were expressed in relation to media technologies. They also hinted at the interrelationship of these internal power

⁶ In parallel to these early British formulations, Norwegian researchers also developed a domestication concept. They do not focus primarily on the domestic sphere, however, nor do they concentrate on media technologies only. Therefore their approach will not be used here.

relationships with the wider set of external relationships beyond the immediate family sphere and underlined how families are embedded in these other structures, partly via their use of information and communication technologies.

Silverstone and Haddon (1996) concentrated on the general processes of media adoption into households. A model was developed showing a number of 'stages' that media go through.⁷ The different parts describe the move from the creation of the media object by industry and marketing experts to its appropriation into diverse household routines.⁸ Another aspect of the concept is the idea of a '*moral economy of the household*', in which the adoption process is framed in terms of the values and attitudes that are affected by the introduction of new media technologies into the households. The technologies clearly help to negotiate the relationship between public and private spheres and are thus crucial for every household. All of these briefly mentioned processes are discourses and practices that have consequences for the learning of democracy within the family.

The early domestication research used ethnographic research methodologies (see e.g. Silverstone, 1990). In their research practice, this primarily meant qualitative interviews, coupled with e.g. drawings of the homes, time-use diaries and other such material. The ethnographic approach has been a crucial factor in the analyses, but also eventually underlined the limitations of the questions that could be answered through research conducted in this fashion. These questions become more pertinent in the context of new media technologies—and have not yet been entirely answered. When the times, places and contexts of media use shift to more diversity and complexity, many of these research methods—and also some other assumptions made in the approach—cannot adequately map the emerging use patterns.⁹ Thus it does not surprise that the concentration within much of the older research has been on television—despite all claims to be researching media use in context. One reason for this was the dominant role of the television set(s) in many households at the time. Morley, for example, managed to uncover the '*politics of the sitting room*' (Cubitt in Morley, 1995:178) in which many forms of communication and especially negotiation about family and other matters take place via the interactions with and about the television set.¹⁰ But certain arguments shift when it comes to other media. While television, for example, is often used as a medium that 'is simply on' without necessarily being watched, the computer affords a different engagement and therefore additional forms of research and interpretation (see e.g. Bakardjieva & Smith, 2000).¹¹ This becomes

⁷ The six (non-linear) stages are: a) commodification, b) imagination, c) appropriation, d) objectification, e) incorporation and f) conversion.

⁸ This move can also be a rejection of the technology and adoption patterns can change radically over time.

⁹ One question that can be asked is whether the ethnographic roots have been taken far enough.

¹⁰ Morley (1986), for example, showed that television viewing in the home is (or was at that moment in time) extremely gendered – at least in the lower middle class homes that he focussed on in his research. In these cases, the television was seen as an extension of existing domestic involvement for most women and thus did not provide the same 'relaxation' connotation as for the men. The reference is not to biological determinism, but to historical formation of such behaviours (Morley, 1995: 174-175).

¹¹ The computer was actually one of four media (TV, VCR, computer and telephone) that was meant to be researched in the original HICT study that formed the basis for the early formulation of what was later labelled 'domestication' approach.

clearer when we consider the role of the mobile phone and other interpersonal media, which do not at all provide the same emphasis on 'media consumption'. Another problematic issue, relevant to this chapter, is the concentration on family units living within one home.¹² Families today are increasingly fragmented, in terms of both their living spaces and their relationships. Thus some aspects of the original concept are not easily transferable to new media environments. The negotiations, however, remain crucial aspects of the relationships between families and ICTs and part of the democratic learning process.

3.2 North-Belgian youngsters negotiating ICT use

The emphasis in the here presented research project was not actually on families, but on young adults. The youngsters were interviewed about their use and especially their understanding of the role of information and communication technologies in their lives. The interviewees were between 18 and 25 years of age, were mostly living in the Northern (Flemish) part of Belgium and were interviewed by their 'peers', i.e. by people of their own age.¹³ These interviews were later analysed in terms of the characteristics of media uses by these youngsters and these characteristics were set in relation to discourses about the possible emergence of a 'web generation' (see Hartmann, 2003, 2004).

Re-analysing the data, it soon became clear in the analysis that families had been important in laying the foundations for later ICT uses and were crucial factors in the negotiation of uses of, as well as attitudes to, ICTs. On a more general level, the overall impression concerning parent-child-relationships in many of the interviews was rather positive. Many interviewees describe their parents as important people in their lives, maybe not as friends, but as very useful for support and guidance (and—not to forget—for financial support). Overall, the generational distance is not perceived as highly important. Most visibly this distance occurred in the negotiations concerning ICT expertise, as will be discussed later. A cultural specificity of Belgium is the 'closeness' of families in terms of the frequency of contact (at least within this age group, but not only). Children often live with their parents until well into their mid-twenties. Others, mostly the students, live in the place they study during the week and at their parents' home during the weekends and holidays. The parents' house remains to be 'home'. The geographical proximity within Belgium easily allows for this kind of closeness.

During the interviews the youngsters did explicitly talk about the (dis-)integrative role of ICTs, but much less of its connection to democracy in society and in the family. Moreover, Livingstone and Bober (2004: 7) point to the problems of discussing issues related to domestic regulation, '*for they concern the private, often unnoticed, sometimes secret or illicit practices of everyday life*'. In our

¹² One criticism has been that the concentration of existing research has been too much on the nuclear family. This, however, is not entirely true. Haddon and Silverstone (1995) at least have also interviewed single parents and stressed the particularities of their media use, for example for childcare purposes.

¹³ The interviews were conducted by communication studies students from the Free University Brussels (VUB). The interviews formed part of a research project on young people and new media conducted by Maren Hartmann, which again was one project within the EMTEL research network (<http://www.emtel2.org>). All quotes were translated from Dutch to English by Maren Hartmann.

analysis, we start with those parts of the interviews that explicitly deal with the perceived role of ICTs in society. This is the question of *what* is taught at home (and elsewhere) about this relationship between ICTs and democracy. In the second part of the analysis we will then address a number of (power) conflicts in the family, as during those conflicts elements of democratic practices come to the surface. This part concentrates on *how* democratic familyship is put into practice and *how* it is taught.

3.2.1 Democracy?

Many families and youngsters suggest that participation in new media technology use can be seen as a learning process for participation in society overall:

"...the citizens have to be computer-literate. It is obvious that society is changing. I also think this changes democracy, as many have said, Internet is a mass medium. ...and you can say whatever you need to say on the Internet. ...But I think there will be long-term consequences and that it will become more democratic, because more people have the right to speak." (A2, female, 20, student).

The same attitude leads many parents to acquire the technologies for their children – they are supposed to get a chance in society: *'My mother once in a while gives me some ICTs; she thinks I have to go along with the developments, I don't know why'* (D1, male, 21, student). Without the skills or the general possibility for access, chances (for a successful career) are seen to decrease. This is reflected in the frequent reference to 'must go with the flow'-ideas in the interviews: *'And yes, well, in a certain sense you have to go along with it. Because society also develops and if you don't develop with it, then you will fall behind anyway'* (WD5, female, 20, administrative work). This is a major driving force behind families' adoption of ICTs in the first place and thus important. The underlying belief in the logic of progress could be interpreted as problematic, but this is not predominantly seen in this light neither by the families nor by the young adults. Instead, the dominant tone amongst the interviewees claims that social (as well as economic) participation will only be possible if one learns to use the technologies. This is often framed not as a chance, but as a necessary requirement:

"Yes, I say it, I've always said it. Technology is progress and you have to go with our progress. And not go back, because we will not go back anymore, only idiots pretend that we live in the times of the apes. No, we have the technologies. Use them." (WM1, male, 21, tram driver)

With regard to democratic concepts, the families' new media uses are not often explicitly described in these terms. If they are, it is in the sense of the first quote above: more communication leads to more democracy (and more communication is assumed to take place, since the new media offer this chance).

Mostly, one could see an underlying assumption that the relationship between ICTs and democracy is straightforward and unproblematic. Amongst the students within the overall set of interviewees, however, the danger of an increasing gap between the information-have and the information have-nots was regularly

expressed. This view of a digital divide was portrayed in diverse ways (of which we will only refer to one):

A.: *"How should people get information otherwise? If it continues like this, then the citizen really has to become an active citizen. People have to search for information themselves rather than that information comes to them. ..."*

Q.: *"Do you see the Internet as something where you get information or where you share information?"*

A.: *"It depends on what you do at that moment. I don't think you can talk in such general terms about the Internet. ... Since I don't have my own site, I am more a recipient than a provider of information."* (F1, female, 22, student)

Thus there is a split between production/provision and reception of information. This is partly related to the entertainment-education divide, which we discuss below. Some interviewees also made a division between material resources and democratic needs, but this clear-cut distinction was not the norm:

"Well, sure, there is a gap between people who are rich and others, but in terms of democracy, I don't think that this matters. Democracy according to my definition is the freedom of speech, to make your opinion known, and yes, well, that is defined in the Basic Law. I don't think that this has anything to do with information technologies." (D14, 18, male, student)

The apparent gap between the distribution of opinions and the use of ICTs underlines the fact that democratic practices within families might be fairly widespread, a critical approach to such matters is less frequently taught. Instead, the emphasis is on general negotiations about resources (and also about content, because content and different practices are differently valued and prioritised):

"Five [people used the computer], so quite a few. ...we had to agree 'now I'm on for an hour, then you're on for an hour'. That was necessary. And whenever my sisters had to use it for school, our games obviously had to stop." (V1, female, 18, student at school).

Games and playful uses are not valued in the same way as educational or work uses are. This is reflected in many of the interviews. This distinction, often expressed by parents and youngsters alike, is mostly expressed in the allocation of resources and implicitly appears in the way computer applications are described.¹⁴

Besides this, as indicated above, dealing with the conflicts surrounding ICTs that were hinted at in the last quote and negotiating an outcome that satisfies most actors involved, is inherently part of democracy and of democratic familyship. Especially these moments when frictions within the family take place are relevant

¹⁴ One question implied here is whether any use of new media should be interpreted as a form of participation in important social spheres. If we went along with this, overall use, rather than specific Internet applications, are a form of participation. In which case most of the young adults engage in the emerging cultural sphere. However, while use as such is important (especially in terms of skills and confidence), it leaves out possibly important distinctions between entertainment, education, information, communication and similar categories or genres of media use. However, for normative aspects of citizenship – and therefore also democratic familyship – these distinctions remain relevant.

to us, as they are the rare occasions when the mechanisms for negotiation and resolution come to the forefront. These moments allow us to see how democracy is performed and thus sustained (or not) in very concrete family settings. It also allows us to see how the ideal-typical notion of democratic familyship is enacted by family members and at the same time how it is transformed by the specificity of their actions.

3.2.2 Conflict and negotiation

Within the interviews relating to the use of ICTs by Belgian youngsters, as well as their views regarding ICTs, a number of conflicts within the context of the family were expressed. One of the more documented sets of conflicts (see Livingstone & Bober, 2004), relating to (avoiding) the exposure to unwanted content or contacts, is not present in this case study. This can be explained by the more mature age of the respondents. One set of conflicts that did emerge is related to the acquisition and especially to the general use of ICTs. Another important point of conflict is the expertise that is necessary for the use of these particular media technologies.

3.2.2.1 Expertise & Dialogue

More often than not, a change of power relations becomes visible because of shifts in expertise. Rather than parents teaching children, these (older) children begin to teach their parents. While not necessarily seeing themselves as the 'web generation' type of users of technologies (fluid, easy-going, without fear – see Hartmann, 2004), many of the young people hint at the fact that they are more knowledgeable than their parents when it comes to new media:

Q.: *"Your parents... How do they use technologies? Are they open-minded?"*

A.: *"They're open-minded, but they don't really participate in it. ...My mother is quite interested in it all, but not my dad and I think it is for that reason that they don't buy many new technologies. I think. Thus I assume, if I was still living at home, then I would bring new technologies into the house and then my mother would be very interested and ask questions about them and in the long run she would sit and use the Internet. But since I'm not there now, they will never get it."* (WP5, female, 24, unemployed)

Many parents not only feel that they are lagging behind in terms of user-capabilities in relation to their children, but also sense that the power relationship is undermined through their lack of expertise:

"Well, I see it now with me personally when my parents come to ask 'can you help me with this?' Then I always say... well, I say yes, but actually I think 'Oh no, not again'. It is so easy for us and so difficult for them and sometimes this is impossible to understand and can therefore lead to conflicts." (F1, female, 22, student)

Q.: *"Who taught her [the mother] to work with the computer and the Internet?"*

A.: *"I think it was mostly a friend of hers and me when I'm home, my brother when he's home. We tell her how to do things... But we're not very patient all the time [laughs]."* (WP6, female, 22, intern at the European Commission)

While this difference in expertise does by far not apply to all families, it often plays a major role in the way the relationship between parents, (grown-up) children and ICTs develop. The power relations are not egalitarian in this respect, but become inversed. There is rarely an acknowledgement of a 'give and take' philosophy, i.e. that the lack of expertise in this area could be substituted by expertise in other areas. This shift in expertise is part of a general shift that takes place because of the child's transition from childhood to adulthood. Besides this general shift, the power relationship shift seems to be enhanced by the new technologies and their role in negotiations about expertise.

3.2.2.2 Use, time and space

The first conflict that emerges in most families relates to the initial acquisition of ICTs. This conflict later shifts to the issue of sharing the existing resources, at least in terms of the computer and of the sometimes central space it occupies within the household. When it comes to time, this conflict is often negotiated between siblings.

"...but there are lots of conflicts amongst us kids, me with my brother and my sister, because we always all want to go online at the same time to email and chat and so forth." (S2, female, 21, student)

"Yes, here at home, I have to share technologies. Sometimes that's a problem, because our computer is being used quite a lot and we only have one. That's why there's often a bit of conflict about using it, you have to share it. In the 'kot'¹⁵, I have a laptop and sometimes my friend uses that one, too." (D13, female, 21, student)

This kind of conflict is usually presented as solvable. Important aspects of the solution were the general recognition that the computer was an important resource, which needed to be shared. Another important aspect is the acceptance of certain content-related values that also have to be shared: the distinction between education and entertainment needs to be accepted in order for the conflicts not to escalate any further.

"The computer downstairs, the best one, there is sometimes a conflict about who is allowed to use it, with my sister and my brother. ... If you have something to do on the computer, school comes first. ... And then you have to agree who goes first and how long. Then it usually works out. In the beginning it was a problem, because the computer was then still new. And also the Internet..." (D2, female, 20, student)¹⁶

The distinction between education, work and entertainment ignores the potential that playing offers for the general acquisition of skills and competence:

"At home, we had computers ever since we were small. Simple things, such as games, they're not difficult, you just learn it. I have three older sisters and I

¹⁵ A 'kot' is a Dutch slang word used in North-Belgium to refer to a student residence, typically a room in a shared student flat.

¹⁶ More explicitly, the content of use has been a major concern in relation to younger children (see Livingstone, 2002: 3-8).

learned it from them. People in my family are busy with computers, they teach you things. ... When you're small, it's all great and 'cool', now I use it only for school." (V1, female, 18, student at school)

The distinction between education and entertainment is thus problematic, but useful when it comes to sharing resources. Overall, ICT use within families is usually not based on the children's individual needs and desires. Instead, patterns of use are prescribed. As in many other cases, a lack of resources is the reason for conflicts.¹⁷ Therefore an important shift in ICT use can occur when the level of independence changes:

"I now use it [the Internet] more than before, because now I have the possibility to buy things for myself, as, for example, having the Internet. I paid for it myself and therefore I use it more." (WD5, female, 20, administrative worker)

In this regard it also has to be noted that some of the interviewed respondents have started to lead their lives spatially and/or financially independent of their parents. This limits or liberates them from the control that parents, or indeed brothers and sisters, can exercise with regard to their (new) media usage.

3.2.2.3 Acquisition, Expertise & Negotiation

However, parents do not just regulate their children's behaviour, they also enable their children's ICT use. Parents often play a crucial role with regard to the introduction of new media technologies into their children's lives. For the here researched age group, this applies particularly to mobile phones, but also to computers. The interviewees did not necessarily grow up with widespread computer use in their early school years.¹⁸ Computer use is therefore often more problematic than mobile phone use, since they were definitely caught up in the emergence of widespread use of the latter. Not all parents can afford to buy computers or see the need to buy them, nor are they always able to buy individual computers for each child. Access, as has been shown above, has to be negotiated and can be a reason for conflict. Mobile phones, however, are personalised communication technologies.¹⁹ They also have a conflict potential, but this is primarily based on costs (rather than access as such or content or knowledge), especially when parents pay the bills (often the case for students in our study). In terms of the acquisition, parents and other family members are clearly portrayed as important.²⁰

"Since I study, I think, I have a mobile phone. My mother bought it for me, and for my sister, via the Coca-Cola-quiz, which was really cheap. Since then I got a new one for Christmas." (D1, male, 21, student)

¹⁷ Resource-related conflicts also emerge in terms of (mobile) phone and other technology usage.

¹⁸ This has considerably changed in recent years and is still in the process of changing.

¹⁹ Other new technologies, such as Playstations or CD-writers, were also mentioned in the study, but play a less important role in the question of information and communication. These and other new technologies should, however, not be underestimated in their role as communication *topics* and as signifiers for belonging to specific consumption groups.

²⁰ But this begins to change as well – and not only when the children begin to earn their own money (see discussion above): some begin to buy technologies for their parents so that they, too, can participate (see e.g. WV4, male, 23, unemployed).

Q.: "How did you get this? [In reference to the Internet]"

A.: "Well, actually through my brother. He studied at the time and sort of needed it, therefore we got it." (WD10, female, 21, hairdresser)

The role of these support networks obviously extends beyond the material realm. Especially siblings and friends play an important role in providing the necessary expertise rather than only the technologies as such:

"I also have an 11-year-old sister, who I try to introduce to the Internet ...I made an email address for her so she can mail with her friend. She is getting quite independent in it lately. ...Oh, I think that they [the friends] play an important role in this, because in the end you see them with it, you get to know the technologies through them. Apart from my mobile phone – that came entirely through my parents. My father had one for a long time, but I didn't think much about them at the time. As for the rest there are also my friends who teach me how to use them." (D10, male, 22, student)

Overall, it becomes clear that family and friends are often role models in terms of the way they acquire and use the technologies:

"I wouldn't mind having a computer again now that lags behind the newest models by one or two years – or maybe five –, at least if I didn't need new software for some time. This is just like my dad and others in my family – all of them clever people [laughs], who think before they go along with the hype and a fashion that does not serve them at all. [You have to ask:] What do you really need to do with a computer?" (WV3, male, 25, cyber café-owner)

"My mother, on the other hand, she is, well, one can actually probably say that she is addicted to computers, yes, so actually we all three have a computer: I have my own, my mother has her own computer and my father has his laptop, which my mother or I use whenever we need it." (W1, male, 24, student)

However, as the quote below suggests, negative role models get inherited as well:

"Yes, a computer, that was always my opinion, a computer is for clever people, I believe. At home there is no one who understands much about them, only my dad a bit. I also know a tiny bit, but I think that, well, you have to be really clever for them. To understand what's going on. I find that difficult." (WD4, male, 20, works in supermarket)

Although still young, this interviewee does not suspect that many changes will occur in his ICT use in the future. Nor does he actually recognise that his successful use of the mobile phone (only bought after a longer period of resistance) or his participation in gaming could be perceived as ICT expertise. This case underlines the importance for a shift in public new media discourses (cf. education-entertainment divide discussion). More specifically, computer use is clearly related here to general issues of self-image – and the family's role is in this case unfortunately not a helpful one. Computer use is perceived to be part of skills and knowledge that are not generally available for all.

The adoption of role models – be they positive or negative – can also be understood as striving for consensus within a conflictual situation. This equally applies to a differentiated role model:

"I actually come from a critical family and my friends are also not always as positive [about ICTs] as young people in general. ...Well, they [parents and sisters] don't take ICTs for granted and we talk about them. ...We all have mobiles and we all use the Internet, but we also see disadvantages. The general disadvantages, for example, the evolution of society that this can bring about. ...Overall, I think, I live in a fairly critical environment regarding technologies, although we all use them." (V2, female, 20, student)

More frequently than this reinforcement of existing values within the family, as shown in the example above, one finds resistance towards the families' way of evaluating and using (or not using) technologies. This is thus a threat to the existing moral economy. This moral economy is an important aspect of the domestication concept. It underlines that the introduction of ICTs into specific contexts (such as families' home lives) threatens or challenges existing power balances, boundaries and balances of values and beliefs. Sometimes, ICTs are used to reinforce these values and beliefs. The moral economy thus helps to negotiate the introduction of ICTs into families' everyday lives. This is in part a negotiation of the boundaries between the public and the private lives of families. In the cases where resistance to existing values and uses arises, the moral economy is threatened and might become rearticulated during the conflict, but at the same time it provides a discursive structure that potentially helps the family to deal with resistance and conflict.

3.2.3. Dealing with conflicts

All in all, families each find their own way of introducing and using technologies. In terms of discourses surrounding such adoption procedures, many families follow the general assumption that adoption is useful and necessary. This process is easier if the parents themselves are somewhat involved in using the technologies, as this increases the likelihood of consensus within the family.

If this consensus is lacking, differences in opinion or in knowledge arise. Being taught by their children is usually a problematic but interesting process. It shows that within families the knowledge balance can be quite flexible and change over time. On the one hand, educating the other is not necessarily the prerogative of the parent, but can become inversed. On the other hand, the practice underlines the conflictual nature of such power shifts. Where it goes wrong, it shows that democratic familyship affords conscious efforts. With peers and siblings, these exchanges tend to be much easier, since a more or less egalitarian stance is taken for granted.

But when it comes to the time and spatial constraints and to acquisition, the situation becomes more complex. Some of the democratic preconditions (in terms of dialogical forms of communication, negotiated conflict resolution and at least semi-egalitarian power relations) we mentioned before are only partly met. There is room for negotiation concerning the moment and places of use, and children can argue for the purchase of ICT material. Those that have already left the

parental home often purchase the material themselves and thus avoid conflicts. Others manage to pay for smaller acquisitions (or at least their ongoing mobile phone costs). When it comes to the larger acquisitions, however, the final decision rests with the parents.

Returning to Giddens' (1992) work on democracy and the family: the need for '*counterfactual justification*' remains. In order to do so, parents rely on the educational discourse. They assume that only acquisitions and uses that are directly linked to education are really useful in a utilitarian sense of the word and therefore have priority over other uses. Similar discourses can be observed with regard to the use of ICTs other than computers, such as mobile technology or game consoles. Only certain media – the computer – and only certain applications or services – educational – are seen as relevant for the successful participation in society (see also Buckingham, 2002; Livingstone & Bovill, 2001; Livingstone & Bober, 2004; Turow & Nir, 2000). This preference is also often made in academia (and society overall): only the educational new media applications are labelled as useful while the entertainment aspects are often regarded as a threat (Buckingham, 2002: 77-78). The interviews seem to suggest that both early exposure to new media and especially the playful experience of it leads to a much more comfortable use in later life (playful is obviously not per se entertainment, but it can be). Their discursive strategy allows parents to partially regulate and justify acquisition and usage. The moral economy is temporally challenged and then potentially reinforced (or some household members begin to opt out on certain issues). At the same time, once the material is made available, children still have the opportunity to introduce new (non-educational) usages, again showing the flexibility of the power relations in the family and the complexities of domestication processes.

4. Conclusion

Limiting the floating signifier²¹ 'democracy' to the realm of politics is wrongfully built on the assumption that 'democracy' is a stable concept with a fixed signification. This way, not only the distinction between the narrow-political system ('politics') and the broad-political dimension of the social (the 'political') is conflated, but three other essential elements are ignored: the variety of democratic manifestations and variants at all levels of the social, the distinction between formal democracy and democratic cultures and practices, and the constant socialisation and/or enculturation of members through democratic learning.

Focussing on the family allows us to see democracy in one of those realms of the social at work, and allows us at the same time to focus on democratic practices and democratic learning in an everyday life context. At this micro-level, democracy is constantly being practised and performed, as this highly accepted form of human co-habitation unavoidably requires constant negotiation between the different members of the family, however difficult this sometimes gets. This setting for social learning²² potentially strengthens our much-valued democratic culture and offers the members of the family an acceptable living context.

²¹ Based on Laclau and Mouffe (1985: 112-113).

²² Here referring to Bandura's (1986) theory of social learning.

However, it cannot be presupposed that this negotiation will be based on dialogical forms of communication and (semi-)egalitarian power relations. In parallel to the discussions on citizenship, the presence of democratic familyship becomes the key condition to assure that this ideal-typical situation is embedded and materialised in family practices. As on all levels, this specific approach to conflict-resolution remains extremely demanding for all members involved and requires constant care. Feminist theorists as Millett (1970) have made us attentive towards the innumerable derailments and inequalities within the private sphere that often remain implicitly accepted but might erupt at any given time, when the apparent stability is ruptured by an internal conflict.

Our data imply that conflicts in the family with regard to ICTs are indeed at least partially resolved through negotiation, dialogue, consensus-seeking and counterfactual justification, although this situation is not always clear-cut. Domestication shows us that power relations within the family are also articulated through the acquisition, usage and learning of (media) technologies. Performing democratically within the intimate sphere as a continued learning process then also becomes dealing with conflicts that arise out of the negotiative processes that surround the acquisition, usage and learning of ICTs. Interestingly the circulation of ICT knowledges within the family context reverts the traditional educational process, and increases the power-base of these youngsters. The acquisition and usage remains the (budgetary) responsibility of the parents, although these decisions also become part of rather complex family negotiations. Quite often parents here refer to educational discourses to justify their decisions on acquisition and usage, without having the (ICT) expertise to implement or control them. This leaves the parents quite vulnerable to their children's resistance, as it is their ambition to combine educational usages and usages related to entertainment.

The family remains one of the areas of the social and the political where the presence and importance of performing, sustaining and learning democracy is highly undertheorised and where empirical research is lacking. The family spaces also illustrate how (in a very de Certeauan sense) democratic practices are performed without necessarily being translated into democratic discourses, rendering them 'underdiscussed', underused and undervalued as both normative guidelines and tools for learning. This modest case on ICT opens extremely interesting perspectives on democratic learning in the family (in their many different forms and stages), and raises more questions on the long-term effects than can be answered at this point in time. Nevertheless it clearly shows that we tend to underestimate the presence of highly sophisticated negotiative processes and the need for them to be embedded in and translated through the notion of democratic familyship.

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