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Ethnomethodological Media Ethnography: Exploring Everyday Digital Practices in Families with Young Children

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Abstract

New media have become an integral part of everyday life. In our research, we explore how media practices are employed in the mutual accomplishment of families and in the way young children grow up. This article considers the particularities of doing ethnography in this context: How can ethnographic research be conducted in a private setting and to what extent are family media practices related to practices of observing researchers? Revisiting our research process, we discuss challenges of establishing the field and maintaining relationships. Further, we focus on our media use in the field as well as briefly after fieldwork. We show how everyday family life involves ethnographers in various ways and how media practices in the field and in research interrelate and are cooperatively achieved. Rather than ignoring or correcting for these forms of involvement, our position is that they allow a better understanding of both everyday family life and media ethnography.

1. Introduction

Digital media have become an ordinary and integral part of everyday family life. Figure 1 shows a father reading a newspaper on his smartphone on a Sunday morning. Often it is difficult for him to actually get around to reading, thus, he gives the tablet to his daughter, allowing her to watch children's videos in the meantime. By sharing this picture

So viel zum Thema elektronische Medien 😂
So much for the topic of electronic media :-)
                                                         23:57

                                                  4.6.2017

Fig. 1: sent to Erik by the mother

with the ethnographer, the mother is giving us a glimpse into their private family life. She also commented on the picture, referring to our research interest: the mundane use of digital media. In our research project "Early Childhood and Smartphone. Family Interaction Order, Learning Processes and Cooperation", based at the collaborative research centre "Media of Cooperation" (SFB 1187) in Siegen, we are observing media practices in over 15 families with young children up to the age of six.

The emoji 'crying with laughter' included in the mother's WhatsApp message can be interpreted as attempting to normalise and bridge the gap to a potentially moralised situation. The message also implies that ethnographers are, of course, normally absent in such private family situations. By sending the picture, the mother is cooperating in producing observational data and, to some extent, involving us in the family context in which such pictures are shared. The example previews some of the interrelations between everyday family and ethnographic media

practices which will be the main focus of this article. Our key research questions are: how can ethnography be conducted in this kind of private setting and to what extent are everyday media practices related to our media practices as researchers?

Since the early phase of our research, which we will describe in the first section of this article, (new) media practices have been involved in organising and establishing the fieldwork. The second section illustrates how these relationships were maintained. In this process, mobile messenger apps, videos, and pictures were part of an ongoing communication and relationship work. In section 3, we will reflect on our media use during field research, focussing on the role of camera work. Before concluding, in section 4 we will briefly consider the time following on from fieldwork, which includes writing this article. Following the "unique adequacy requirement of method" (Garfinkel/Wieder 1992), research methods cannot be viewed independent of the practices we observe (cf. Bergmann 2006), meaning that they cannot be discussed as independent methodological principles, but are case-specific and have to be developed empirically. Adopting such an ethnomethodological perspective (cf. Garfinkel 1967), we use empirical material to lay a foundation upon which we argue that our involvement and interrelations with the field should not be ignored or seen as a hindrance, but rather reflected in their foundational importance for ethnographic research and practical theorising in this specific context. In the following, we will show how considering ethnographers' involvement allows a better understanding of both digital media ethnography as well as everyday family life.

2. Establishing the Field

I already knew Maria[1] and Tom from our mutual involvement in voluntary work some years back. A few months ago, I told them about our research project and my interest in doing fieldwork with them. We arranged a Skype call, in which I want to explain the research and ethical usage of video materials.

On the morning of the planned meeting, Tom rings me up and says that he will not have any time on that day due to work commitments. He adds that it would be okay to explain everything to Maria. Shortly before the call, Maria sends me a text message informing me about a ten-minute delay and asking whether it would be okay to eat during our video call. Therefore, after bringing Frederik – their 18-month-old toddler – to bed, Maria eats some pasta, while I explain my techniques of filming, the importance of writing protocols and data security issues. We also talk about the difficulties I face as both an observer and a friend of the family. Eventually, we arrange for me to stay for one week at their flat in early April and to send a consent form by post. (Fieldnote 1, Jan, February 2017)

At the beginning of any ethnographic study, researchers have to handle the where, when, and how of accessing their fields, assessing the boundaries and subject area of that field, as well as building relationships and trust with their members (cf. Wolff 2000; for ethnographies in families cf. Müller/Krinninger 2016; and with children cf. Schulz 2014; cf. also Goodwin/Cekaite 2018). Building on the existing friendship with Tom and Maria in the example above made this much easier. However, the process of positioning oneself in the young family's everyday life nevertheless felt unfamiliar to the ethnographer, as the relationship with the parents originally developed before they had children and was unrelated to any research.

The short example highlights some of the shared media practices established before entering the family home, such as chatting via in-

stant mobile messaging, email, video calls, and even conventional letters. These practices relate to the family's own ways of communication and to some of the organisational problems of everyday life itself. Tom has to cancel the Skype meeting due to work commitments, which is framed as unproblematic. In this 'family', as a social collective, one person may speak on its behalf. The requirements and organisational issues of everyday family life also become apparent when Maria postpones the call as she has to bring her child to bed, and uses the time to eat her dinner. This shows that family life is demanding even without an additional observer whose presence and questions need to be fitted into the "daily round" (Goffman 1961: x). These everyday demands can become relevant at any moment during the entire research process and will be reflected throughout this paper. The fieldnote below gives an example from day 4 of the research stay:

> *In the evening, Maria suggests that I take time for writing my fieldnotes in the morning, while she heads off to the playground with Frederik. Around 7:30 am, I get up, while Maria, Tom and Frederik are already in the kitchen. I retreat to the living room to finish writing my observations from the day before. At 9 am, I send a WhatsApp to Maria asking where they are. A few minutes later she replies that they are still at the playground and asks, if I could bring a new nappy. So, I go to the changing table to search there. Equipped with the requested item, I leave the house. When I arrive, I hand the nappy to Maria, who immediately starts changing her son on a bench next to the sandpit. (Fieldnote 2, Jan, June 2017)*

The fieldnote relates to the requirements of making time for writing practices in ethnography while staying with a family for a whole week. However, it also reveals the requirements of everyday family life, which include mundane practices such as eating, cleaning, playing, driving, cuddling, sleeping, joking, scolding, or changing a nappy (cf. Jurczyk et al. 2009). In accordance with Goodwin and Cekaite (2018: 3) we un-

derstand families as "ongoing, unfolding organization of activities."
The fieldnote illustrates how – also via media practices – the ethnographer is included in such activities of everyday life. Living in the family house, the ethnographer becomes an active participant, perhaps akin to a babysitter, who the family also contacts via WhatsApp to organise appointments and procedures. In addition to WhatsApp being used as a medium of cooperation, the nappy – like cooking dishes, keys, or a crying child in other situations – also can become a kind of boundary object (Star/Griesemer 1989), along which goals, means, and procedures are mutually accomplished (cf. Schüttpelz 2017).

3. Maintaining Relationships

Fig. 2: *Eva's Hearts*; WhatsApp conversation: mother Martina and Clemens (Dudu)

In the chat log, Martina says that her daughter Eva wants to write to "Dudu" – her nickname for the ethnographer Clemens – to ask him to come and visit. However, for the two-year-old Eva writing is cooperatively achieved with her mother and means selecting different icons and emojis in the opened Chat window. Via WhatsApp, Dudu can receive 'utterances' from Eva, that are framed and commented on by her mother. The chat log includes the response (on the right-hand side), in which the ethnographer also chooses a variety of icons in a single mes-

sage directed at Eva, and then separately addresses the mother. Eva actively participates in WhatsApp family communication and is positioned as initiating the contact on her mother's phone. Her request for a visit also highlights the importance of reflecting on relationships with small children: producing desires and expectations, which do not necessarily fit into the timetable of planned research stays (cf. Coffey 1999 for an extensive reflection of fieldwork relationships and self).

The chat log is an excerpt of ongoing communication with the family and also includes pictures and small videos, which are shared with close friends and family members in a similar way. In a short video from the family's holiday in India, for instance, Eva greets the ethnographer in Hindi with, "Hari Om Dudu". The ethnographer replies, "Hari Om Eva, how is India?" Short videos like these are not only sent, but both mother and daughter repeatedly watch them and the replies they receive. These media practices play an important role in building and maintaining relationships with family and friends, a process in which the ethnographer is included and actively participates. This becomes apparent during the next visit, which takes place a couple of days after the WhatsApp messages.

Eva and I are reading a children's book, when her mother Martina comes back from the kitchen, sits down on the sofa with us and places her smartphone next to mine on the table in front of us. After closing the last page of the book, Eva reaches for the two smartphones and starts comparing them. She is holding both displays next to each other when I open the WhatsApp chat with her mother and the chat log becomes visible. Martina asks: "Who was sending Dudu all these beautiful hearts?" Eva looks at her mother and back to my smartphone, on which I start playing the video: "Hari Om Dudu." She watches the video, then looks at me and her mother with her eyes wide open. Her mother asks with a smile: "Where did he get this video? On his phone?" Eva looks at the video again and seems very impressed. (Fieldnote 3, Clemens, March 2018)

Eva recognizes both herself and the "Hari Om Dudu" video, which she has seen many times on her mother's phone. Sending videos or emoticons to friends and family members and receiving responses are familiar and frequently employed practices for her. At the age of just two years, Eva can be seen as a competent member of the family's media practices. However, these practices usually involve the physical absence of the individuals and smartphones to which the messages are being sent. Being faced with the receiving device constitutes a new and different situation. Eva's assumed competency is called into question by her mother's interpretation of her astonished facial expressions, asking her: How can this video be on *his* phone? How is this even possible?

So far, we have discussed the role of family media practices primarily with regard to the 'content' of media communication. This fieldnote also shows that this communication is not intelligible on its own, but only becomes meaningful in social situations and practices (as McLuhan (1954: 6) already illustrated). The unique perspectives of young children challenge our everyday common sense understanding of media technologies, raising new questions and offering new insights into how meaning is achieved cooperatively. Thus, one could say that the child's perspective almost serves as an ethnographic tool providing insight into the mutual making of our common understandings of (digital) media practices. These media practices also play a key role in maintaining relationships with and within the family.

4. Using Media Practices to Discover Media Practices

Diana and her two children are sitting on the living room sofa, eating fruit and looking at a children's book. The 'comic-strip' (figure 3) illustrates three minutes of this scene. The camera use and the presence of Claudia, the ethnographer, become visible in the material when the older daughter turns around and switches her focus to Claudia. Pointing to her camera, the girl says she *also* wants to take a picture. Guided by her mother, she disconnects the phone's charger to take a picture.

Fig. 3: *Want to take a picture*; film by Claudia Rühle, 'comic-strip' by Erik Wittbusch

Meanwhile, her younger sister watches her attentively. Young children in particular can shift their focus rapidly from one activity to the other and may potentially involve all people present, irrespective of their personal preferences. Although it is sometimes possible to withdraw into a purely observational role (with a camera) in the background, ethnographers and their media are always participating. Their presence is normalised by young children in a specific way, since they rarely differentiate between researchers and other visitors or at least do so in a different manner than adults.

The scene also highlights some interrelations of everyday media practices and the challenges their study presents. The older daughter wants to "take a picture, *too*". Taking pictures and filming are part of her everyday family life and therefore familiar media practices. However, similar to the examples given in the last section, it seems that the ethnographer triggered this situation. It could be argued that the observation is intervening, disrupting, or even corrupting 'natural' family life. However, we view this differently. In our perspective, there is

no objective or natural observation in the first place. Conducting research, particularly with participant observation, always involves the researcher. This applies to our own participation in everyday life and also in "lay sociological reasoning" (Garfinkel 1967: iiv). With reference to Schütz (1971 [1953]), we are interpreting a world already interpreted by its participants and therefore an intersubjective social world. Furthermore, when exploring the everyday activities of family life, participation and personal involvement become necessary as a means of getting access and as situational demands, but also to provide an understanding of the activities in view. The *unique adequacy requirement* (Garfinkel/Wieder 1992: 182) of ethnomethodology stresses this point and uses the field's practices as a methodological foundation. In the example given above, the situation could even seem to be reversed with regard to the 'usual' concerns of fieldwork: it could be argued that we are observing the *adequacy* of the child concerning some of the ethnographers' research practices. The situational context prompts the girl to engage in established media practices of family interaction. Filming, in this sense, is not an independent activity or reserved for ethnographers (cf. also Tuma 2017), but an everyday practice. During research, it therefore can be viewed as a mutual accomplishment with the participants. This is also the case in everyday situations, when parents face the challenge of taking pictures of their children who ask to see the final picture on the phone even before the shot has been taken. However, with digital hand cameras the display can be flipped around allowing the researcher to show the children what is being filmed, as is the case in the following fieldnote.

> *Anna is playing in the garden. Sitting on a small bench with a table, she is using large pieces of wood to build an 'office'. She uses one of the pieces as a 'laptop' and pretends to type. Suddenly, she looks at me and tells me to stop. When I ask her why, she responds: "Maybe I'm on it?" and leaves the 'office', comes around the table and looks at the screen from where I*

am standing. I try to explain that, now, when watching the screen from her current position, she is "out of the frame". She goes back in front of the camera and asks: "Can I see? Am I on it again, now?" I turn the screen towards her, and she seems happy to watch herself and starts typing again. The screen now becomes a kind of mirror for her and her activity. When I ask whether I could use the screen for filming again, she responds: "But I want to see!" and continues to watch herself. (Fieldnote 4, Erik, July 2017)

At nearly three years old, Anna addresses the ethnographer's filming and questions whether she is being recorded. She takes a position alongside the ethnographer to have a look at the screen, seemingly checking whether she is on camera. When she receives an explanation, she goes back in front of the camera and wants to see herself, which is possible by 'flipping' the camera screen. The scene raises ethical questions in relation to filming young children, who assess situations differently and require a lot of sensitivity and patience. Here, however, we will not dwell on these otherwise highly relevant concerns, but on how Anna becomes actively involved in the filming and modulates the ethnographic practice into a part of her game. Erik becomes drawn into her play and finds it difficult not to participate. Participant observation here also includes a participating and interacting camera (cf. Mohn 2013: 176) that plays an active role in the situation. Its use is negotiated and the 'participating camera' can be seen as Erik and Anna's cooperatively produced medium of cooperation. Their shared media practice can be viewed as *playing filming* and constitutes both: conducting media ethnography *and* joining in everyday family life. Using a camera with children can also symbolise something different for parents: instead of play, it can evoke forms of remembering, showing, representing (for example their style of education), and reflecting, which also interrelates with ethnographic questions and practices. This also refers to parents documenting activities, for instance when they send a picture via WhatsApp to the ethnographer, reminding him that he has been filming exactly one year ago.

Viewing filming and its interrelations with family media practices as a mutual accomplishment in a social context also considers frequent situations, which make it 'natural' for the researcher to put the camera aside. For example, when children demand immediate attention, want to be picked up or endanger themselves, for instance, when their head could potentially hit a table. This perspective can also deal with situations when the *field is filming back*, like in the picture taken of Claudia in figure 3. This is also the case in the transcript below, in which Martina and Eva are filming "Dudu":


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2 M: wEr Isch da; (-) (who's there?)
3 H: dUdU: (Clemens)
4 M: jA: [((laughing))] (yes)
5 C:     [((laughing))]
6 M: was siehst du? (What do you see?)
7 H: dUdu: (Clemens)
8 M: Ja (.) genAu (.)(Yes, exactly.)
     da hInten isch da dUdu unD dA isch da dUdu.
     (Over there is Clemens and here is Clemens.)
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Fig. 4: *Filming back*, Martina and Eva filming Dudu/Clemens

A few moments earlier, the ethnographer was filming Martina and Eva dancing to music playing on the smartphone in Martina's hand. Accidentally, she activates the filming function, which in turn becomes a kind of game: *filming the filming ethnographer*. Sitting on the floor in a "nested formation" (Goodwin/Tulbert 2011; Cekaite 2010), Martina starts commenting on the unfolding media practice: "Who is there?", "Dudu", "Yes!" These three lines, accompanied by laughter, end the first sequence. With Martina's comments and Eva's participation, a learning situation is established, which continues as follows: "What do you see?" In this situation, the ethnographer is present in two forms: Dudu is real "over there", but he is also present "here" on the screen, which Martina emphasises by pointing her finger in both directions, as shown in figure 4. Even more is revealed when we take a detailed look at the sequential unfolding of the multimodal order. From the outset,

Eva switches her focus from the screen to the physically present Dudu "over there" and establishes eye contact with him, while answering her mother's question and loudly stating that she sees "Dudu".

Participating in social situations and being in contact with children constitutes doing ethnography in a private family setting. There are no roles that are completely uninvolved, such as internships or high seats, as portrayed for instance in the film Kitchen Stories (2003: *Salmer fra kjøkkenet*). Evidently, we film and analyse a large amount of material, in which the observer seems invisible. However, reflecting on our own media practices as researchers in this article, we argue that these *scenes of involvement* should not be filtered out, ignored, or even viewed as the corruption of data, but rather they enable us to learn about the specific setting of everyday family life with young children.

5. After Fieldwork

While I am typing section 4, I look up over my laptop screen and smile at a little girl sitting opposite me at a table in the ICE high-speed train. She is looking attentively at an iPad in front of her, while her father next to her is typing on his smartphone. (Fieldnote 5, Clemens, August 2018)

The mobility and ubiquity of digital media come into play, when we take a closer look at everyday media practices over the different phases of our research. A few weeks earlier, we wrote a 'fieldnote' of our Skype meeting:

On the left side of my screen, I see Eric, Jan, and a small version of myself in the Skype window. On the right, I have my PowerPoint presentation from the CRC workshop in Siegen – "Media Ethnography – Where Is the Action? Cooperative Media Practices in Ethnographic Fieldwork" – with an early draft of this paper open. We are talking about our WhatsApp communication with families, and I refer to the exchange of hearts and

emojis with Eva (figure 2, above). Jan and Erik relate similar phenomena from their research. Erik mentions a picture of a father and son the mother had sent to him. He sends us the picture, and we discuss whether we could include it in the article (figure 1, above). The father is not wearing a shirt, and the picture also does not fully do justice to the family, whose members use smartphones and tablets in a moderate and considerate way. Could the picture convey a false impression? There are also ethical considerations; we need to obtain consent to use the picture. We conclude that we would like to use the picture, as the absence of the ethnographer raises relevant issues for media ethnography and may even be a good opener. Therefore, Eric will call the family and ask for their permission. Alternatively, we could write an ethnographic description or make a drawing. Meanwhile I drag and drop the picture into the draft and crop the lower quarter of it, so that the bare torso becomes less visible. At the same time, Jan is typing a detailed protocol of our conversation. (Fieldnote 6, Clemens/Jan, June 2018)

This example of ethnographic work 'at the desk' gives a short impression of the media practices involved. In our everyday life, we also rely on WhatsApp and email for organising meetings, phone and video calls; we send and edit images, sort, select and ponder whether we should use some of them for publication. There seem to be many similarities with organising family pictures on a smartphone and considering posting them on Facebook or sending them to friends or even to the ethnographer as in the opening example. Being involved in the private life of these families also implies a responsibility for conveying an adequate image of our participants. By publishing, we are making private affairs public. By including our concerns with the picture as a 'fieldnote' above, we indirectly achieve an appropriate framing and make space to discuss our considerations. In addition, the pictures, films, and sometimes also the written papers are channelled back into the families. In this sense and in our own everyday life, as shown in the example of the

train above, we have to consider that "in an interconnected world, we are never really 'out of the field'" (Gupta/Ferguson 1997: 38).

6. Conclusion

In this article, we have focused on the particularities of ethnography in our research field, whilst exploring the role of digital media in families and in the way young children grow up. We have considered the interplay and interrelations of our ethnographic and familial media practices. In this way, we can empirically show the relevance of new media when becoming and being involved in everyday family life. From making the initial contact with families to maintaining and cultivating relationships at a later stage of the research process, we are actively participating in family media practices. The same applies during fieldwork and not only in cases, in which ethnographic camera work develops into a form of playing filming with children. Conducting fieldwork, in our understanding, can be viewed as an ongoing cooperative accomplishment, in which we and the families "participate in the detailed organization of each other's action" (Goodwin 2017: 7). The various ways in which ethnographers get involved in everyday family life should not be filtered out or ignored, but instead they enable us to better understand this specific field.

Our methodological considerations are grounded in our empirical material which we have examined by focusing on similarities and interrelations. Obviously, our material also shows marked differences to everyday life when conducting ethnography. As Schindler (2018: 103) has argued, observations are "de- and re-contextualized, while they are taken into the sociological field(s)." In the short section "After fieldwork", we did not describe the whole range of rather different sociological sites: situations like reading at a desk (cf. Engert/Krey 2013), presenting at conferences, analysing in data sessions (cf. Meyer/Meier zu Verl 2013), writing texts etc. (for an ethnography of ethnography cf. Meier zu Verl 2018). Our paper has shown, however, that the idea of transfer-

ring "knowledge from one social practice (the observed one) to another (sociology)" (Schindler 2018: 2) can be viewed with a certain amount of scepticism. This also applies to our own research question raised at the beginning of this article, which we can now re-formulate. As participants of everyday life with ubiquitous media practices, rather than insinuating specific differences between family and ethnographic practices, we should ask about their cooperatively achieved embeddedness in social situations. Considering the mediatisation of these forms of cooperation also leads to further reflection on the forms of presenting research results – an issue on which we can only scratch the surface here.

In conclusion, an ethnomethodological media ethnography does not stem from preliminary theoretical or methodological considerations alone, but has to be viewed as the case-specific and context-sensitive result of empirical research. Firstly, the relations of research and everyday media practices should be thoroughly reflected upon, thus taking the continuum of "lay and professional sociological fact finding" (Garfinkel 1967: 76) into account. As we have shown, media practices such as filming and documenting in families are not reserved for video ethnographers, but are also common everyday practices of cooperation. Further, by means of these practices and via photos, films, and text messages ethnographers become involved in the everyday media life of families. Consequently, the practices of the field can be seen as the methodological foundation for an ethnomethodological media ethnography. Secondly, in the context of everyday family life researchers have to deal with the situation that family privacy is partly constituted by the absence of external observation and that adults only have very limited access to an early childhood perspective, with which interviews or what one would usually frame as 'impartial observation' can barely get to grips. Thus, researcher's involvement can be seen both as a field-specific prerequisite and outcome. This is the case both for exploring everyday media practices in families and for employing a child-centred and interactional perspective. In this sense, thirdly, an ethnomethodologi-

cal media ethnography of everyday childhood views these forms of involvement as well as practical research situations as cooperative accomplishment in concerted activities with the parents, children, and everyday media practices involved.

Notes

1 All names have been anonymised.

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