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**AUTHOR VERSION**

**Doing Family Online: (In)formal Knowledge Circulation, Information-Seeking Practices and Support Communities**

**Abstract**

**Objective.** Drawing on the theory of polymedia, and on the role of information and communications technology (ICT) in (re)defining the articulation between the private and the public, this introduction reflects on what ICT does to and for families around the world.

**Background.** Through the development of networking platforms, video call applications, personal sites, and collaborative information platforms, ICTs changed the way people live, love, interact. They also afforded new ways to “do family”.

**Method.** By featuring studies from a variety of national and regional contexts (, Canada, Chile, Ghana, Greece, Moldova, the Netherlands, South Korea, Turkey, Ukraine, and the United States), it establishes a dialogue between disciplines and a fruitful cross-fertilization of research topics, methodologies, analyses and theoretical perspectives

**Results.** This special issue explores (a) the nexus between family life, relationships, and ICT; and (b) the relation between the everyday lived experiences of family members and the broader social structures that circumscribe the width and breadth of those experiences.

**Conclusion:** The contributions show the porosity of the boundary between public and private spaces. Alternative forms of expertise and parenting norms are emerging online. ICTs are integrated into parents’ information-seeking and sharing practices, and emotional support. They sustain relationships between family members across distance. However, inequalities regarding

access to the Internet and computer literacy still jeopardize digital citizenship and democratization.

**Implication.** The contributions highlight the need to better structure interventions and policies to support families by using up-to-date ICT systems, creating mentorship programs, and digital mediation for family professionals and beneficiaries.

**Key words:** connected devices, kin, kinship, doing family, good or proper parent, digital literacy, intensive parenting, Information Communication and Technologies (ICT), connected presence, ambient presence, affordance, information bulimia and obesity, information-seeking practices, information-sharing practices, emotional support.

## **Introduction**

Like many parents with young children, we tried to find solutions to minor health problems like skin rashes by searching the Internet (Simas et al., 2020). By then, the only thing that seemed important was our children's well-being. Entangled in the various urges of our daily routines, we did not realize the broader implications of our easy access to the Internet in our lives as parents. In December 2022, while coordinating this Special Issue on the entanglements of the Internet with couples' and families' everyday activities and modes of relating, we did a similar Google search, but this time, to examine the mechanisms behind the simple search for information. Before we even finished typing rash, the search bar proposed several options: "baby rash cream," "baby rash around the mouth," "baby rashes on face and body." Then, in a mere 0.50 seconds, Google suggested a list of online resources that amounted to "about 752,000,000 results". A response to the initial inquiry, framed and highlighted at the top of the page, immediately appeared on the screen, before a list of web links, ordered according to algorithms (Pasquinelli, 2009; Ziakis et al., 2019). Put simply, the search proposed responses based on the links that were clicked on the most. In the case of baby rashes, the highlighted definition read:

Many newborns develop a blotchy red skin reaction called **erythema toxicum**, which can appear between 2 days and 2 weeks after birth. Flat, red patches or small bumps often first appear on the face and spread to the body and limbs. The rash is harmless, not contagious, and will clear after a few days or a week.

This excerpt was taken from the website <https://www.pregnancybirthbaby.org.au/common-childhood-rashes>, a site produced and managed by the Australian government. The next several pages of links all referred to sites stemming from the UK, the US, and Canada. It is noteworthy to add that all of them featured babies who were White.

This example points to one of the manifold ways in which the Internet has contributed to shape information-seeking practices of parents who have access to a connected device and possess digital competencies; but also, how ideologies about “good” forms of parenting<sup>1</sup> (Faircloth, 2021; Pedersen, 2012; 2016), topics that should matter or not, and tips and tricks, circulate, are (re)produced, appropriated, applied at home by individuals, transformed, and normalized. If Google searches rely on informational hierarchies based on algorithms, users’ participation also contributes to ranking and structuring available content (Stenger & Coutant, 2013). Nevertheless, the facility and rapidity with which some parents can find online answers to their worries may compete with information gained through traditional channels and authority figures, such as their own parent or a family member who may have had a similar experience. Moreover, even though social disparities in access to the Web and information and communication technologies (ICT), and in digital literacy (the acquired competence to manipulate hard technologies and efficiently use their various applications) still exist around the world and across social groups (Cullen, 2001; Mardikyan, 2015), a multiplicity of connected devices, such as smart phones, tablets and laptops, is readily available in most environments (Park, 2013). It has the potential to further increase the reliance of individuals around the world on Web 2.0 for their daily activities and needs, of which information seeking practices are but one example.

The advent of the World Wide Web 2.0 (O’Reilly, 2005) in the early 2000s and its democratization have changed the way people live, love, relate, interact, seek and share information, and reflect, around the globe (Tettegah, 2016). The Web 2.0 is known for its

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<sup>1</sup> “Good” parenthood is socially constructed and is often linked to the intensive mothering ideology in Western societies (Hays 1996), where mothers are expected to be highly involved in the care of their children, putting their well-being at the center of their lives. If fathers can also be “good parents”, expected levels of involvements are not as high as for mothers.

dynamic interactive and participative possibilities and its “rich, responsive user interface” (Murugesan, 2007). The development of networking platforms, such as Facebook and WhatsApp; video call applications, such as Skype; personal sites, such as blogs; and collaborative information platforms, such as Wikis, have afforded new possibilities and ways to “do family.” Other technologies, such as tracing apps available on platforms like Facebook and on smartphones, also changed the processes of socialization, and the way family members connect, relate, and care for one another, but also how they surveil each other’s movements, “friends”, and opinions.

The global pandemic of COVID-19, and more specifically, the confinement measures and restrictions on physical contact implemented over prolonged periods in several places in the world – for example, the closing of borders, restrictions on international, regional, and local travel, the imposition of curfews, online schooling and work from home, online medical appointments – have increased individuals’ and families’ reliance on the Internet. The pandemic further contributed to the rapid technological improvement of meeting platforms such as Zoom, Teams, and Google Meets, which allow for more immersive modes of connecting online (Watson et al., 2020).

Apart from this rapid push to Internet-based communication, all levels of government, as well as the activities of other non-governmental and para-governmental organizations, have been gradually digitalizing their services and procedures. Individuals, couples, and families need to use the Internet to navigate bureaucratic and legal formalities and to get access to practical information regarding, for example, immigration, social welfare, healthcare and schooling. However, the apparent democratization of this digital turn has also revealed inequities in terms of accessibility (Nguyen et al, 2021; Sin et al., 2021) and use (DiMaggio et al, 2004), that

directly affect people's well-being and ability to successfully navigate social life (Büchi & Hargittai, 2022). Some social groups are at higher risk of digital marginalisation due to characteristics such as age, gender, disability, social class, and geographical location (i.e., rural versus urban; Global South versus Global North) (van Deursen & Helsper, 2015).

There is a growing interest in the impact of the Internet on social life and families in general (Hughes & Hans, 2004) in the social sciences. This special issue is thus a modest attempt at reflecting on the place, role, and usage of the Internet in the processes of “doing” family around the world. We ask: what do ICT do to and for families? In which situated, yet global ways are families reconceptualized in this digital era?

**Doing family in the digital age: Perspectives at the juncture of various disciplines and regional/ethnonational contexts**

As an anthropologist (Geoffrion) and a sociologist (Odasso) we understand that families vary in shape and form across the globe. Who qualifies as kin and from which point of view? How does one become a “parent”? How is love shown, how are practices of care enacted, and by whom? How are families managed, maintained, and sustained in time and space? These questions trigger considerably different answers from society to society; and ICTs impact kinship and family relations in manifold ways (Carvalho & al., 2015).

Families are social constructs in which kinship relations need to be recognized and maintained at multiple, interlocking levels. At the micro level, significant family relations are produced and maintained through kin work (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002; di Leonardo, 1987; Dossa & Coe, 2017; Miller, 2018), emotional labor (Bakuri, Spronk & Van Dijk, 2020; Brennan, 2004), and everyday care practices (Baldassar & Merla, 2013), defined by the specific roles and duties of family members. “Doing family” thus means putting efforts to sustain relationships

with people defined as kin in various ways such as keeping in touch or helping them perform their daily tasks. As such, following the lead of scholars before us, in this special issue, we focus on family *processes* by privileging the verb “doing family” to the less fluid concept of “the family” (Perlesz et al., 2006; Strasser et al., 2009). As Hudak and Giammattei contend, “doing family” also “creates possibilities for relating and parenting outside the bounds of heterosexual relationships” (2010, p. 109), and even in the absence of children (Blackston, 2014). In this sense, “doing family” contributes to expand the understanding of kinship bonds beyond the nuclear family.

Here, “doing family” is appraised as a specific approach to the daily affective and relational labor that allows individuals to (re)create, feed, perform and maintain their sense of belonging to a social – sometimes also biological – unit that contributes to their protection, well-being, and social recognition. Among other social relations, family ties partake in framing individuals’ social position and, thus, their sense of integration in society. From this perspective, the environment in which families evolve – even if de-territorialized and digitalized – is as much part of “doing family” as the individuals that compose it. Their relation to the social resources available contributes to constructing and performing families (Tissot, 2020); these resources include new media and other ICT. In this special issue, we pay attention to the manifold ways that the Internet thus contributes to processes of “doing family.”

*Co-presence, polymedia, and new normativity*

Social media allow family members to develop a sense of connection even when they do not talk regularly, a phenomenon that has been called “connected presence” (Licoppe, 2004), “digitally-mediated co-presence” (Madianou & Miller, 2013; Baldassar & Wilding, 2020) or,



“ambient co-presence<sup>2</sup>” (Madianou, 2016). In the case of transnational families, some scholars contend that physical co-presence (i.e. periodic visits) is essential to sustain and nourish long distance relationships (Mason, 2004; Urry, 2002). However, Baldassar and colleagues (2016) note that the synchronicity and sensory potentialities afforded by ICTs challenge this perspective (Baldassar et al., 2016). Social media platforms are often combined with other technologies to improve the quality and intensity of relationships (Sinanan & Horst, 2022). Family members text and call each other, and use video call platforms to stay in touch, they “like” each other’s posts on Facebook, whether these forms of communication are complemented by visits or not.

Research has shown that ICTs have changed the texture of family relations, interactions, and organization (Carvalho & al., 2015, p. 99). For example, when the ICTs are a part of and serve to maintain communication among extended and nuclear family members, they reshape family rituals, allow closer intergenerational relationships to develop (Barbosa Neves & Casimiro, 2018; Nedelcu, 2017), partake in redefining family cohesion (Joseph, 2018; Khvorostianov, 2016), and play a new role as family “kinkeepers<sup>3</sup>”. ICTs may even modify patterns of family care practices that were highly gendered (Abel et al., 2021). During the pandemic’s many lockdowns, families adopted rituals such as having a meal or playing board games online (Watson et al., 2020); rituals that were already part of many transnational families’ lifestyle before the pandemic of COVID-19 (Marino, 2019).

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<sup>2</sup> “‘Ambient co-presence’ is the increased awareness of the everyday lives and activities of significant others through the background presence of ubiquitous media environments. While most forms of mediated co-presence rely on mediated interaction, ambient co-presence results from a more peripheral awareness of distant others enabled by technological convergence and the affordances of social and mobile media” (Madianou, 2016: 183-184)

<sup>3</sup> This notion has been used by the sociology of the family since the 1980s to indicate “someone who works at keeping family members in touch with one another. [...] kinkeeping [*can be*] viewed as a position in the familial division of labour” (Rosenthal, 1985: 965).

If possibilities for communication are tremendously improved by ICTs, research shows that they may also disrupt family life and cause conflict between family members. For example, the pervasiveness of ICTs can blur boundaries between work and home, thus increasing work-to-home conflict (Gadeyne et al., 2018). Thanks to tracking technologies on smart phones, ICTs also provide opportunities for parents to increase surveillance and control over their teenage children (Lachance, 2020; Zhao, 2019). When parents' use of smartphones is important, the parent-child relationship and bonding are often negatively impacted (Gong et al., 2022).

With their theory of polymedia, Madianou and Miller (2013) propose that the different technologies available should not be analyzed separately in terms of costs and benefits for users. Instead, they serve as “a communicative environment of affordances rather than as a catalogue of ever proliferating but discrete technologies” (p. 169). The idea of “affordance” embraces here both the communicative opportunities offered by the media environment, and the social norms that shape its usage, and vice versa. Moreover, it emphasizes the social and emotional outcomes as people navigate between devices (hardware) and different information and communication platforms (software) to communicate with family members and friends. The concept of polymedia is useful as it allows us to reflect on how relationships to significant others, and interactions with social institutions, are managed, shaped, and signified. This new ecology of relationships brings to the fore interrogations, long denounced by feminist scholars, about the porous boundaries between the private and the public (Berlant & Warner, 1998).

ICTs and Web 2.0 blurred this configuration even more. As Longo (2023) affirms, the Internet – via ICTs – should be apprehended as a social institution that produces new normativity. It has the power to regulate social relations by spreading ideologies that impact individuals and families. For this reason, we are skeptical about the use of the adjective “virtual”

that has formatted the way social scientists think about some of the collective consequences of the spread of ICTs, namely, through the concepts of virtual communities and virtual reality (Proulx & Latzko-Toth, 2000).

The dichotomy between virtual and real, as well as that between online and offline have been the object of debates. Despite nuances and frictions generated by and through the “electronic frontier” (Rheingold, 2000), the fact that online and offline modes of living are not necessarily in opposition, but should rather be understood as a continuum, is increasingly accepted (Vivienne, 2015). This continuum, which has the potential to bring the public into the most private spheres of life, impinges on the intimacy of individuals and families. The porosity of boundaries between the online and offline also impacts the public sphere when, for example, norms produced by parents circulate on the Internet and are reappropriated by other families. In such cases, the family and the Internet, as social institutions, feed into each other. Both institutions nowadays play a central role in establishing social, often affective, bonds between individuals, and through those social ties, participate in individuals’ social integration by creating a feeling of protection and recognition in society (see Paugam, 2008).

This conceptual detour allows us to better address the multiple and overlapping ways families are produced, reproduced, and transformed in the face of the rapid expansion of ICT in daily life. We understand that global phenomena do not operate in the same manner in all local contexts. The use of ICT among family members is no exception, as the very definition of what constitutes family, kinship relations, and modes of relating vary tremendously around the world. We therefore selected studies that were grounded in a variety of national and regional contexts: the United States, Chile, Canada, the Netherlands, Turkey, Québec, South Korea, Greece, Moldova, Ukraine, and Ghana. The palette of studies gathered here offers unique insights into

situated cases that examine the intervention of the Internet into family life and family relations, as well as how it affects the nexus between families and other institutions such as the school, the health system, or the immigration apparatus. However, families are not bound to place; they are increasingly de-territorialized, and/or happen simultaneously in different locations. The articles featured in this special issue thus show how the Internet complexifies the interlaced layers of space and time that shape daily family life as it is embedded in specific national, supranational, and transnational policy frames.

### **This Special Issue**

Drawing on the theory of polymedia, and on the role of ICTs in (re)defining the articulation between the private and the public, this special issue delves deeper into (a) the nexus between family life, family relations, and ICTs; and (b) the relation between everyday lived experience of family members and the broader social structures that circumscribe the width and breadth of those experiences. The articles are organized into two main sections: 1. Information-seeking and sharing practices by and for families and family members, including the development of new and alternative forms of expertise; and 2. Expressing emotions; providing support, love, and care. The themes discussed in those sections sometimes overlap, as caring for loved ones is often the main motivation behind information-seeking practices.

In the sections that follow, we will introduce the thirteen articles that compose this special issue by highlighting their contribution to the two broad themes described above. We opted for a multidisciplinary – and possibly interdisciplinary – outlook to better apprehend the multiple facets of “doing family” at a time when Web 2.0 has been fully integrated into the everyday life of most people on this planet. Establishing a dialogue between socio-anthropologists, psychologists, legal scholars, social work and family studies experts allows for

the development of fresh and fruitful cross-fertilization of research topics/sites; methodologies (e.g., online and offline ethnographies, in-depth interviews, surveys, scoping literature reviews, multi-method data collection), analyses (e.g., grounded theory approach, multi-data triangulation, narrative blog posts analysis, thematic content analysis) and theoretical perspectives (e.g., science, technology, and society – STS – ; critical studies on men and masculinities; transnational families; parenting culture studies; bioecological system theory and process-person-context-time – PPCT – model).

### **Information-seeking and sharing practices and the development of expertise on parenting and families**

As illustrated by our introductory example, seeking practical information on the Internet to tend to daily issues is something many parents have integrated into their lives. Some of them check for new information or validation (Russell, 2011) so frequently that researchers refer to this habit as “*infoboulemie*” (information bulimia) (Roberge & Bélanger, 2017, p. 18) and “*infobésité*” (information obesity) (Sauvajol-Rialland, 2013). However, the ubiquity of readily available information on any given topic online makes it hard for individuals to decipher between what is accurate, good for them, and verified by reliable sources, from what is increasingly called “misinformation” and “disinformation” (Karlova & Fisher, 2013; Keshavarz, 2014; Polleri, 2022) – information that is simply wrong, invalidated by experts, promoted by “trolls” to manipulate public opinion, or just does not apply to their specific situation. The capability of individuals to make informed decisions when they click on links and access information on the Internet, and their degree of vulnerability to misinformation, varies depending on their “information habitus<sup>4</sup>” (Davies, 2015; Lewis, 2006), namely factors such as their social

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<sup>4</sup> That is based on Bourdieu’s theoretical work.

group, social class, and level of education (McGillivray & Mahon, 2021). Informational practices refer here to “individual practices of consumption, but also to the production and circulation of content” (Latzó et al., 2017, p. 46). Information-seeking and sharing practices in relation to families, parents, couples, and children, and their social impact on informational behavior in the digital era have received relatively little scholarly attention.

*Social network platforms: a way to counter individual difficulties and persistent inequalities*

Six papers in this issue illustrate concerns over a possibly growing digital information divide. Vivion and Malo (2023) and Lee (2023) demonstrate how socially advantaged parents – respectively “informed mothers” in Québec, and caregiving fathers in South Korea – search the Internet in their quest to be “good parents”: parents who put their children’s well-being at the center of their lives, sometimes against social norms, like in the case of South Korea.

By contrast, Dworkin and colleagues (2023) studying parents of diverse backgrounds, including lower income families, found that more frequent calling, texting, and social networking were sometimes linked to child problem behaviors and Ducu and colleagues (2023) focusing on immigrants from Ukraine and Moldova, have found that parents use the Internet less or for different purposes. Due to a lack of digital and administrative skills, economic migrants who left their children behind in Ukraine and Moldova prefer to seek information offline, rather than online, even though some online administrative procedures were simplified by the authorities (Ducu et al., 2023). The quality and pertinence of parents’ information-seeking and sharing practices online are thus highly unequal and vary according to their social position and level of education.

Apart from using search engines to look for specific information on the Web, online communities and discussion forums have become crucial sites of information for families navigating through difficult or complex situations (Des Rivières-Pigeon et al., 2012; Maupas, 2019; Villecourt-Couchard, 2018). Online social networks also constitute a significant form of social capital (Komito, 2011) as they provide a “backstage structure of information” (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014, p. 404). Some users, most often the people who founded the groups and convene discussions on their platforms, develop a form of expertise on specific topics.

Presented in this *Special Issue*, Kolbasi and Tilic (2023) show how key members in a Facebook community occupy strategic positions as lay experts on spousal reunification for Turkish nationals. Thus, despite the fact that social media seemed to enhance more symmetrical and egalitarian interactions (Jouët and Rieffel, 2013, p. 14), Kolbasi and Tilic show that some users gain more prestige, and thus have more influence than others, and whom Dekker et al. (2016) have called gatekeepers, in the sense that they filter the information that circulates, which sometimes discourages information seekers from trying different strategies to overcome impasses and hurdles.

#### *Gender, social pressure and social control*

Online groups may also produce forms of social pressure and social control on their members that push them to conform to normative ideologies. As several articles in this *Special Issue* show, parenting is deeply affected by these new vectors of normative ideologies (see Vivion & Malo, 2023; Longo, 2023; Lee, 2023; Scheibling & Milkie, 2023; Lavoie & Côté, 2023). Online blogs addressed to fathers, mothers, or both parents reproduce and spread certain ideologies around “good” ways to behave as parents (Das, 2017), which are gendered and tied to

“intensive mothering” (Hays, 1996). Parenting is also taken to another level online, where (sensitive) information about children is shared on social media, including blogs and Facebook groups, as a way for parents to exhibit their pride and parental involvement, reduce isolation, and support other parents; a practice called “sharenting” (Steinberg, 2016; Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017).

Hence, searching for and sharing information online has become an essential part of “intensive parenting” and contributes to the persistence of attributing this care “burden” to mothers (Lazard, 2022). In fact, information-seeking practices are still greatly affected by gender inequalities and gendered *cliches* about the sexual division of labor. In this *Special Issue*, in their analysis of “the content and framing of parenting blogs by gender” in the United States and Canada, Scheibling and Milkie (2023) illustrate the prevalence and reproduction of gendered norms around parenting. By highlighting the presence of commercial sponsors in mommy blogs, the authors force us to reflect on the ways that capitalism intersects with parenting practices and ideologies online and contribute to shaping the institution of the family more broadly.

However, despite the normative discourses put forward by parents on social media, the authors identified the emergence of counter-narratives that deconstruct, to some extent, taken-for-granted ideologies of the good mother and resist ideals of motherhood centered around a narrative of sacrifice. For example, in Québec, Facebook groups for “unworthy” parents are gaining in popularity, as attests the website entitled “*la parfaite maman cinglante*” (the perfect scathing mother), created in 2016, where stories of what would be considered “bad” parenting



practices are shared and liked by thousands of followers<sup>5</sup>. Blogs also contribute to the spread of new “fit fathering discourse” (Scheibling & Marsiglio, 2021).

Even though mothers are still considered the better parent when it comes to children’s care, online communities partake in fashioning “a new informational habitus based on the importance of being an informed mother” (Vivion & Malo, 2023). This process involves weighing the value of different resources and sources of knowledge that circulate online and selecting what corresponds the most to the mother’s values. Building on studies that attest mothers’ dissatisfaction with the information proposed by practitioners such as doctors (Simas et al., 2021), Vivion and Malo show how mothers use the Web as a way to gather information from a variety of sources, some of them alternatives to main authoritative channels, in order to make “informed” choices for them and their family. Through this process, mothers thus have greater control over their children’s health and perceived wellbeing (Lupton & Malsen, 2019). The importance of sharing what parents believe is relevant to their children’s well-being, especially in times of crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic, was also the focus of Hooper et al.’s article (2023). The authors analyzed 1,173 posts collected from a Facebook parents’ group and found out that “participants frequently offered informational support, typically reposting content from other sources.” The main topics discussed were about child development, remote schooling support, literacy, and adult mental health. The posts soliciting support were the most replied to, showing that in addition to seeking and sharing information, solidarity, and empathy, are also central aspects of such groups.

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<sup>5</sup> The platform was created to “convince all mothers that they don’t have to be perfect” (our translation). In 2018, the site had 90,000 fans and 875,000 monthly views (<https://parfaitemamancinglante.com/about-2/>).

Drawing on critical men and masculinity perspectives, Lee (2023) explores the harsh experiences of a few fathers who take parental leave to care for their children in South Korea. In a societal context that still perceives this choice as “abnormal,” these caregiving fathers create alternative communities of peers, support networks, and relationships online. However, they report confronting online resistance from female group members when they try to join digital communities focused on children’s care and parenting. Social exclusion and derision are thus experienced both online and offline. It appears that even though the Internet provides a space for fathers who care for their children at home to support each other, norms about forms of hegemonic masculinity prevail and are reproduced, impeding real transformations revolving around parenting and gender roles. In this issue, this argument is supported by Schiebling and colleagues’ analysis of dad blogs, in which fathers are portrayed as being constrained between their professional duties and the (im)possibilities of turning into more involved and nurturing parents.

Nevertheless, these papers also suggest that the Internet offers a platform for the development of alternatives to mainstream and official discourses about parenting and children’s well-being. New forms of expertise are being built online, at the margins of institutions, as counter-narratives or complements to official authority figures’ prescriptions (e.g., governments, doctors, social services, immigration services). If they sometimes follow and support governmental guidelines about nutrition, sleeping patterns, and health (Vivion & Malo, 2023), social media afford their members greater control over their decisions and a space free of institutional intermediaries (nurses, social workers). In this regard, Lavoie and Côté’s (2023) shows how parents of intention, surrogates and egg donors in Québec, often turn to Facebook groups to liaise and find a “match” based on trust, away from medicalized and juridico-legal

contracts provided by agencies. For surrogates, getting to choose the parents they will carry a child for means getting more control over their own bodies and the terms and conditions of the relationship, in a context of complex and inadequate parental recognition procedures. In the case of Turkish marriage migrants trying to be reunited in the Netherlands (Kobalsi & Tilic, 2023), a Facebook group of Turkish nationals serves as a platform to share legal and administrative advice in the context of the complex and lengthy European immigration landscape. Here, in addition to the information, personal experience, and support shared by group members, Turkish lawyers living in the Netherlands also help fellow nationals to develop strategies to bypass the hurdles of the system and debunk misinformation. Under this perspective, online migration-based communities represent an undeniable resource for understanding how international mobility, and its political treatment, intersect with family formation, intimacy, and the agency of actors.

### **Expressing emotions; providing support, love, and care**

Social networking platforms and blogs not only serve to circulate information. They are also platforms where people who share similar situations or interests connect, support each other, and even become friends offline. This section sheds light on how the Internet and ICT facilitate the circulation of emotions, care, and love, and thus contribute to the redefinition of families and family relations.

#### *Online communities and groups of peers*

According to Sade-Beck (2004), the relative anonymity provided by online groups – where members often use pseudonyms – allows for a higher degree of self-disclosure compared to offline interactions. Emotion-sharing and emotional support are central to online groups and discussion forums in general (Bar-Lev, 2008; Hidalgo et al., 2015; Savolainen, 2015). The

articles featured in this issue show that online communities for parents or that focus on family matters are also spaces of support, guidance, and empathy. Emotions are expressed in writing, and through the use of images, likes, and emojis (see Geoffrion, 2021b; Gibalsi & Tilic, 2023; Moyano Davila et al., 2023).

However, even emotional content shared online may be subjected to social control. Communication behavior and modalities of interactions mold the treatment of emotional topics on online groups. For example, Moyano Davila et al.'s study of WhatsApp groups for parents in schools in Chile (this *Special Issue*) shows that disagreement between members can be expressed, but only in a toned manner, using a lot of positive emoticons such as smiley faces to attenuate the emergence of any possible negative emotions. This study also shows that parents tend to apologize to each other a lot in order to avoid conflict. We know that while online communities may respond to a need to discuss with peers, they are not free of tensions between members (Fernández-Amaya 2021). Though, in Moyano Davila et al.'s study, the only display of frustration and anger possible is toward the school and teachers, if they are not part of the group. This example points to the fact that the asynchronous written modes of communication that prevail online and in other forms of digital communication allow people to edit their posts, and self-censor, which creates forms of standardization and accentuates social control. Surveillance online and the normalization process that follows can reduce the benefit of having open discussions about disagreements, namely about different ways of conceiving care in educational spaces (Moyano Davila et al., 2023).

Nonetheless, despite possible conflict and divergence of opinions, online spaces may also lead to a feeling of cohesion resulting from a common struggle. Turkish couples confronted with immigration laws, policies, and bureaucracies, and who turned to online communities to look for

solutions to build their life together in the Netherlands, are a case in point (Gibalsi & Tilic, 2023; Geoffrion, 2021a; Odasso & Fogel, 2022). When possible, people in such communities meet physically to provide emotional support to each other, or develop stronger bonds, as Lee, Lavoie & Côté, and Kobalsi & Tilic's studies all show<sup>6</sup>. In so doing, online support groups create new solidarities.

### *ICT usage within families*

Social networking platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp groups are also used by families to keep in touch, follow each other's whereabouts and accomplishments, organize family gatherings for holidays or special occasions, such as weddings, graduations and funerals, and connect for private discussions. Social networking platforms also serve to keep track of and collectively shape who is part of the family and who is not, by granting membership into the online family network (Tariq et al., 2022; Matassi et al., 2019). Many families now have family WhatsApp groups where news relevant to the family is shared, family affairs are discussed, and decisions are made (Fernández-Amaya, 2021; Porcentese et al., 2006). Research shows that networking platforms have transformed the roles and place of family members within families (Gherghel & Le Gall 2016; Lopez et Cuarteros, 2020). Several papers included in this Special Issue highlight these processes. The effects of the integration of ICTs in family configurations and relations turn out to be materially and emotionally diverse depending on context, family history (migration, domestic violence, divorce), individual digital literacy, choices, and preferences.

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<sup>6</sup> The same is true of separated family members (see Baude et al., 2023; Bakuri & Amoabeng, 2023; Ducu et al., 2023).

In their article, Hessel and LeBouef (2023) explore young adults' perceptions of technology use with extended family members in the US. The authors show that ICTs increase the intensity of communication exchanges with extended family members but not necessarily their depth and intimacy. Young American adults used ICTs to give and receive support, bond, and discover aspects of their family history. Conversely, they also perceive intergenerational barriers more acutely, feel overwhelmed by information overload, and somehow complain of a lack of privacy. Hence, ICTs complicate the balance between distance and closeness among extended family members. It is noteworthy to say that digital practices within families also tend to operate along gender lines. For example, men use emails more than social networking platforms, and gaming and sport as a means to connect; while women preferably use social media to maintain ties.

For transnational and migrant families, material constraints (e.g., access to the Internet, international time difference) can make connecting and communicating with loved ones more complex. Ducu and colleagues' article (2023) shows that access to ICTs is not always enough to maintain regular ties with children left behind in the country of origin. One should consider, for example, the difficulty of balancing work-life schedules for migrant parents in precarious situations abroad. Despite barriers to access and use of technologies by migrant family members and dire financial straits, the economic investment in ICTs and its daily uses afford moral and emotional support to geographically distant family members (see Ducu et al., 2023; Bakuri & Amaboateng, 2023). In cases where distance does not allow regular visits, doing family online is compulsory to preserve a sense of unity. For example, in their study of transnational Ghanaian families, Bakuri and Amaboateng show that when parents are separated from their children, attending online Bible classes together can be experienced as a bonding experience through

video-call technologies. Technologies are thus seen as tools to enhance the quality of relationships and live a somewhat “normal” and fulfilling life despite the distance.

In their study of Ukrainian and Moldavian parents who migrated without their children for economic reasons, Ducu et al. (2023) use a fundamental children’s rights’ perspective to discuss how ICTs facilitate regular contact between left-behind children and their far away parent(s), as well as children’s say in family matters. Rarely apprehended as agents in the dynamics of transnational families, children are portrayed here both as interlocutors of their migrant parents and as the object of their concern. If on the one hand, the transnational migration of one or both parents leads to the creation of new family patterns (i.e., a child raised by a grandmother or father; inclusion of non-kin caregivers into family dynamics), the paper interrogates how the intersection of different family situations and the maintenance of family unity through ICTs safeguards children’s rights. However, in cases where a parent must speak with their children in the presence of another adult, whether it is a guardian, social worker, or the other parent, several issues may arise, ranging from a sentiment of discomfort (Ducu et al., 2023), to possibilities for increased surveillance, manipulation, and even abuse of children, for example, in cases of divorce and children living in foster homes (Baude, 2023). In other cases, the overuse of digital devices by parents in the presence of children seems to correlate with an increase in behavior problems (Dworkin et al., 2023).

### **Doing family online: Implications for research, practices, and policies**

By attempting to answer the complex question of what ICTs do to families, this special issue offers new insights in “doing family online” from a variety of perspectives and social contexts. ICTs’ disparate uses by family members appear to be at the core of fundamental

changes in contemporary families' daily micro-practices (Morgan, 2020). This new online ecology has become part and parcel of individuals' daily, embodied life, and as such, produces new geographies of intimacy (Harker & Martin, 2012). In this issue, we have focused on two aspects of the digital that affect families worldwide in new and significant ways: the processes relative to seeking and sharing family-related information; and the expression of emotions, love, care, and support online or via technological tools.

First, the articles show that the ever-evolving interface of polymedia and the possibility for constant connectivity transform and reshape family life and rituals (Fiese et al., 2002) in ways that may affect, positively and negatively, feelings of belonging and cohesion in families, or at least, reconfigure kinship relations. In addition, we have seen the multiplication of opportunities for contact with kin and non-kin alike; and a diversification in the types and significance of kinship relations, which have contributed to creating new types of emotional bonds and solidarity networks, sometimes among distant kin.

Second, ICTs contribute to blurring the boundaries between family and work, education, and other institutions such as health and the State. With information on a variety of topics readily available online, parents feel increasing responsibility to be informed and intervene in lieu of professionals. In this regard, online groups or communities of peers have become a source of precious information, a site to share experiences, and seek and provide forms of support, including emotional assistance. However, the intensification of information-seeking and sharing practices may increase the potential for dis- and mis-information. These groups also intrude on the everyday lives of families and influence parental practices and ideologies – such as intensive parenting – surreptitiously.



The contributions gathered in this issue thus show that the boundary between public and private spaces is more than simply porous; they confirm the interpenetration of ICTs into the very definition of the family as an institution, as a social construct, and as a site of meaningful relations between members. Whether it is by sharing relevant information on Facebook support groups, by collectively developing strategies to overcome hurdles, or by allowing intergeneration or long-distance relationships to flourish, the thirteen articles of this special issue all show the immense potential of “doing” family online. The time-space flexibility afforded by ICTs, asynchronous modes of relating online, and the possibility of connecting without intermediaries, allow users to choose when and how connect, respond, and be active, thus fostering agency, and allowing some individuals and groups to feel empowered. Hence, ICTs and Web 2.0 may be understood as manifestations of post-modernity or even exaggerate it.

Nevertheless, inequalities regarding Internet access and computer literacy still jeopardize digital citizenship and democratization. These inequalities are also gendered in how they affect, for example, work-family balance. The pandemic has revealed that women were significantly more affected than men by telework and the blurring of the boundaries between professional and family spheres (Adisa et al. 2021; Lambert et al. 2020). ICTs also constitute powerful tools in the normalization of hegemonic ideologies – intensive parenting being one example – sometimes further entrenching gendered, class-based, racial, national, and sexual inequalities, among others.

To conclude, in this special issue, we have decided to focus on sets of practices where the family and ICTs meet. Considering the Internet as an institution that is entangled with family matters and family relations, as suggested by Gina Longo in her article, points to the potential of ICTs for personal and collective well-being; particularly if we consider that the main purpose of

families is “the commitment of its members to provide active care in intimate settings over the long term” (Widemann Kane, 2019, p. 81). We thus suggest that in order to avoid pitfalls, families, and other institutions, should adopt an ethic of care that encompasses the digital. In other words, we argue for the integration of a digital ethics and politics of care within the institution of the family.

### *Implications for practices and policies*

In the wake of increased digitization of public policies and the multiplication of online experts and counselling services, governmental institutions have the responsibility to better structure interventions to support families and family policies by using up-to-date ICT systems, creating mentorship programs, and digital mediations. In shaping social measures addressed to families, institutions must consider the rights of vulnerable actors such as stay-behind children, children in separated families or in the care of social services, elderly people living alone, parents dealing with addictions or mental health issues, etc., while considering family members’ emotions and experience. An investment in a comprehensive digital citizenship education program seems necessary and should involve family members, family practitioners, and other intermediaries who intervene with families, parents, couples, and children. Sensitization programs should address alternative forms of expertise found online and should develop tools to better sort through (mis)information. Specialized and continuous training for social workers, health professionals, and other family experts is also needed to better integrate ICTs in their plans of action.

Moreover, family professionals need to develop an ethic of digital citizenship that enhances their consciousness regarding their role as intermediaries between populations and the state, and according to the configuration of the families they deal with (i.e., separated, migrant, transnational, extended). As front-line workers, family professionals and other experts are well positioned to bridge the digital divide that prevents certain families and individuals from accessing information circulating online, or from carrying out procedures that are only accessible online (see also Walker 2022).

Finally, more scientific research is needed to assess the impact of the ICTs on the Digital Generation (COFACE, 2020; Lorenz & Kapella, 2020); and more efforts have to be put in place to bridge the divides between academia, civil society, and governments in this domain (see UNDESA, EU Digital Assembly 2022). The manifold consequences of the ICT-family nexus have acquired new relevance after the pandemic (Walker 2021) a crisis that has jeopardized the well-being of children, adolescents, parents, elderly people, and other marginalized or vulnerable populations, while reinforcing a reliance on the Internet as a moral authority in doing family.

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