SMART SPEAKERS AND DATA RELATIONS IN FAMILIES WITH YOUNG CHILDREN

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Introduction

Smart speakers are now a popular component of the digital media ensembles of (country anonymised) families. As other "artificial companions" (Hepp, 2019), smart speakers are internet-connected objects that collect, monitor and distribute information about their users and the surrounding environment (Bunz & Meikle, 2018), thus gaining at least partially autonomous agency. In so doing, smart speakers extend the datafication of the domestic environment, while contributing to the normalisation of data relations (Couldry & Mejias, 2019)—interactions facilitated and shaped by technologies of data extraction—as an integral part of family everyday life. Smart speakers have been analysed focusing mainly on privacy issues (Büchi et al., 2020, 2022; Pridmore et al., 2019), usage patterns (Beneteau et al., 2020; Lopatovska et al., 2019), and children's interaction with social robotic agents from a developmental perspective (Lovato & Piper, 2019; De Jong et al., 2021). Research so far on the domestication of smart speakers into the domestic context, family relations, practices and imaginaries has been sparse.

Theoretical framework

We argue for a move away from a media-centric approach, towards an analysis of the emergent and situated relationships (through and with smart speakers), agencies and

power structures mobilised in the domestication of smart speakers. For these reasons, we make the argument that we can gain a deeper understanding of the role of smart speakers in family life, and, overall, of the datafication of childhood (Barassi, 2020; Mascheroni & Siibak, 2021), if we understand families as communicative figurations (Couldry & Hepp, 2017; Hepp, Breiter & Hasebrink, 2018) composed of a constellation of actors (family members), culture (including technological and surveillance imaginaries (Lyon, 2018), communication practices, and a specific digital media ensemble.

Methods

Focusing on smart speakers, this presentation reports on the first wave of a longitudinal mixed-method research project involving 20 families with children aged 0 to 8 in (country anonymised). Theoretical sampling was adopted to reach families with different socio-economic backgrounds and different media habits. Interviews with parents and children were conducted separately (when possible), after a joint ice-breaking activity. Anonymised transcriptions were analysed following a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014) via the MaxQDA software.

Findings

Findings confirm that smart speakers are appropriated, negotiated and resisted based on the specific communicative figuration enacted by each family. In particular, we advance that communicative figurations involve –and therefore demand analytical attention to– a reconfiguration of power and agency relating both to traditional axes (status, class, gender and age) and new forms of power enabled by the progressive colonisation of the domestic environment by data (Couldry & Mejias, 2019). The interplay between these (traditional and data-driven) reconfigurations is also part of our analysis.

Based on our analysis of the emergent, situated and everyday power dynamics in data practices and imaginaries, we propose a typification of households along a continuum of positions in family relationships with data between two opposite poles: *data-resistants* and *data-normalisers.*

For example, when smart speakers were framed as tools for children's empowerment (i.e. enabling children's autonomous access to digital media), they were resisted by parents who believed they threatened their ability to control and mediate children's media practices. In this case, the domestication of smart speakers involves a reconfiguration of the power dynamics inherent in parental rules. In particular, we find that children derive agency by borrowing from smart speaker's communicative agency – comprising communicative functions ("Alexa, what's the weather like?") and remote control affordances, which enable children to control other connected devices ("Alexa, play some music from my Spotify playlist").

Other families enthusiastically accepted smart speakers as the latest technological gadget, conceiving of privacy risks as an inevitable yet trivial consequence. Families can adopt communicative strategies –such as portraying a "reconciled" image of the family (Goulden, 2019)– as means to minimise the exposure of one's "colonised self" in the eyes of others. Similarly, families downplay algorithmic tracking, and thus normalise it, by referring to their moral righteousness (e.g. "having nothing to hide").

In other instances, the resistance to smart speakers is embedded both in discourses and practices which reject surveillance imaginaries (Lyon, 2018). Some families, indeed, de-domesticated smart speakers due to the chilling effect of algorithmic predictions.

Conclusions

Our presentation provides theoretical and empirical insights into the study of datafication as a diverse, situated and embodied experience. Households can negotiate, resist and oppose datafication practices and imaginaries by mobilising various strategies, discourses, meanings and practices. In this respect, our theoretical approach and typification ultimately allow studying how data practices materialise – and are (partially) accepted, negotiated or rejected – as a specific communicative figuration in each family.

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