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YOUNG CHILDREN'S TOUCHSCREEN MEDIA HABITUS

Bjorn Nansen
The University of Melbourne

Darshana Jayemanne
Abertay University

Introduction

The increasing prevalence of touchscreen and mobile devices in homes has brought computing and the internet into the lives of toddlers and babies. Not only are such devices mobile and liable to enter toddlers' reach, but their natural user interfaces provide avenues for gestural manipulation and navigation. Drawing from ongoing qualitative research with families and children aged from 0 to 5 in their domestic media settings in Melbourne, Australia, this paper reports on young children's embodiment and enculturation of dispositions towards touchscreen media by developing the concept of a touchscreen or haptic media 'habitus'.

Background and Method

There is a growing body of research attempting to quantify young children's interactions with mobile and touchscreen devices (e.g. Rideout et al., 2013), reviewing the design and marketing of children's mobile application software products (Chiong and Shuler, 2010), analysing digital content shared about babies on social media platforms (Kumar and Schoenebeck, 2015), and exploring the spaces and technologies shaping young children's 'postdigital' play with connected toys (Jayemanne, Nansen and Apperley, 2015).

Yet, there remains a lack of research – particularly qualitative research – that specifically explores children's touchscreen conduct. How do young children come to be disposed towards touchscreen media and what are the specific relations of encounter, enculturation and embodiment that frame this disposition? This paper draws on ongoing qualitative research with families and children aged from 0 to 5 (n=40+) in their

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domestic media settings in Melbourne, Australia. The research builds on established ethnographic approaches to domestic technology consumption and use (Mackay and Ivey, 2004; Silverstone and Hirsch, 1992), utilising methods such as household technology tours, interviews, participant observation, and demonstrations of children's media use. The participating families comprise a sample of relatively early adopters that reveal emerging qualities about young children's changing media environments, embodiment, and enculturation.

Whilst medical and educational discourses are typically operative in ideas about young children, parenting and technology, media studies approaches are needed to understand everyday media use in the contemporary lives of young children. Babies and toddlers are not typically conceived as computer 'users'. However, the mobility and gesturality of touchscreen devices are bringing very young children, parents and devices together in new and unpredictable ways. We propose the concept of the 'haptic habitus' to outline this emerging set of internet rules.

Habituation

The research indicates that young children become habituated to regularly seeing mobile devices at home and in other public places. Young children often observed their parents' embodied, distracted or intimate relations with their phones and tablets:

I, I suppose indirectly he's fascinated ... He notices when our attention is drawn by it.

Parents also identified more deliberate practices of providing children with mobile devices – so-called 'passing-back' (Chiong and Shuler, 2010) – in order to 'pacify' them in situations where they were otherwise occupied. The device is thus deployed as a tool of distraction or management within the routines and rhythms of family life.

Mobile Connections and Digital Content

Habituation was often linked to touchscreen devices' connectivity (typically with wifi already set up in the domestic space). Devices were frequently valued because of digital content and communication. Family photographs and communications with relatives were particularly important:

In terms of Facetime it has already happened a little, we chatted with our parents. They'll be viewing him, I don't think he's viewing them yet, but probably will soon be.

Parental mediation facilitated children's initial encounters with mobile and touchscreen media. Combined with device mobility, appealing digital content and touchscreen interfaces, these practices helped to assemble children's habituation.

Embodiment – the Swipe as 'Touchscreen Habitus'

The assembly of elements in children's experience of connected touchscreen devices can be understood through the concept of haptic habitus. Habitus refers to the acquisition and embodiment of culturally shared dispositions or forms of conduct. Mauss, for example, argued habits such as walking, swimming, and sitting, are entrained in culturally specific – and thus collectively structured – processes of extension and internalisation. As Merleau-Ponty explains in reference to the shaping of a keyboard habitus, 'the subject who learns to type incorporates the key-board space into his bodily space' (1962, p. 145).

Touchscreen habitus considers how embodied practices, norms and imperatives are produced through situated media relations: children are no longer necessarily 'sat' in front of media. Instead, media are mobile and circulate around them. These media encounters are entangled with and animated by touchscreen interfaces, underscoring the nomenclature of 'natural user interfaces' within the product design and manufacturer communities (e.g. Norman 2010):

He has been using an iPad before he was 1. He could unlock it. He could open things with it. Play games. Choose apps. Before he could talk or walk. It's such an intuitive interface.

The feedback of the screen touch prompts further interest, interaction, and habituation through gestural interaction, especially swiping. Like Merleau-Ponty's keyboard habitus, the swipe is expressive of the ways young children have learnt the mode of interfacing and internalised this gesture into their corporeal conduct for touchscreen interaction. The *swipe* then is the key gesture of an embodied touchscreen media habitus:

They can grab it and start playing with it. It just shows that it's so much part of their world...to swipe something.

Yet, the interface as Cramer and Fuller (2008) argue, is not only a site of exchange between humans and machines at the user interface level, but also between hardware, software, code, and protocol within computer systems, and between humans in and through digital culture. So, in addition to the common observation that touchscreen interfaces lower thresholds of usability to ever-younger populations of users (Buckleitner, 2011), these encounters reveal the ways software protocols and algorithms are increasingly embedded in and help to configure everyday life (e.g. Chun, 2011), including young children's media lives (Ito, 2009). Here, software automates

process of sorting and shaping the delivery of content and information, and in doing so both empowers and governs forms of infant media conduct.

This conduct is in turn shaped by wider media and cultural contexts, including a range of digital content producers and intermediaries, such as app developers, review sites, YouTube channels, and mummy-tech blogs, which are then filtered through social networks and the spaces and routines of domestic life as part of an enculturation of children's haptic habitus.

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