

Digital Media Practices in Households

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Digital Media Practices in Households

Kinship through Data

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1. Introduction

Abstract

In this introductory chapter we begin with one of our participants, Rika, as she uses her smartphone practices to help create a sense of care at a distance with her aging mother—what we call *Digital Kinship*. We then turn to contextualizing the methods deployed over the three years in three locations and how each of the three cultural contexts informs different rituals around data use. We discuss how Digital Kinship can make sense of the paradoxical role of surveillance in an age of datafication through “friendly surveillance” and “care at a distance.”

Keywords: data; dataveillance; care at a distance; intergenerational; Digital Kinship; ethnography

Data—and its locative possibilities and potentialities—can be found in almost all our quotidian moments. Waiting at the bus stop. Riding home on a bike. Searching for the nearest bookshop. Grabbing a bite to eat on the run. Moving from one work meeting to the next. A school pickup. A Sunday brunch with family. In these everyday moments, the mobile phone is on hand. Listening. Tracking. Connecting.

For many, the datafication of everyday life has both *invisible* and *visible* dimensions and implications through social mobile media. Datafication—the “conversion of qualitative aspects of life into quantified data” (Ruckenstein and Schüll 2017, 261)—unevenly occupies many of our lives in ways we are yet to fully understand. Sometimes the narratives between practice and perception converge, other times they diverge. Datafication occupies a paradoxical role in our lives—empowering and yet exploiting, visualizing while camouflaging, user-generated and yet platform (corporate) personalized.

Mobile media devices such as smartphones and Apple Watches—along with apps like Strava and Instagram—weave multiple data trails of *intentional* and *unintentional* tracking. From self to social to corporate, the data

trails and tracks are as *thick* as they are *dynamic*. Examples are endless. Sometimes we consciously check on a relative through social media, other times we unthinkingly watch ourselves and loved ones on a post. Sometimes we reflect on a deceased loved one with someone in another country via a post. Sometimes our data trails take a life of their own, in ways we are still yet to fully understand.

Much scholarship has been conducted into these two camps of belief—one, the dataveillance (Ruppert 2011; van Dijck 2014; Lupton 2016) group who see empowerment narratives underscored by obligations often not understood by users; the other group more aligned with Quantified Self (QS) ideals that see the body as the laboratory for creative reflection and self-knowledge through numbers. Indeed, much is still to be learnt from ethnographic and creative explorations into everyday datafication as a way to reimagine ourselves within social dynamics (Sharon 2017; Pink and Fors 2017; Khot et al. 2016; Fors et al. 2019). Such research into self-tracking and wearables has demonstrated how personal data can become part of people's personal and collective digital lives—whether as part of ordinary everyday life, or within the context of the QS movement (e.g. Lupton 2016). However, there is another dimension to mobile tracking that is less immediately visible, yet perhaps even more pervasive than digital self-tracking.

In the literature, the role of data to *care at a distance*—especially between the generations—has been relatively overlooked. For instance, how can we learn from quotidian intergenerational practices to reflect upon the changing role of care with datafication? What are some of the making-do practices emerging around intergenerational care at a distance?

In *Digital Media Practices in Households* focus on intergenerational mobile media practices, through an analysis of how these are lived and experienced across three different social and cultural contexts. These practices are played out in an *ambivalent* and *paradoxical* space that is at the intersection of *intimacy*, *care* and *data transition*. Attention to such practices account for, but goes beyond, the emphasis on personal data, spans different types of platform and media practices, and brings attention to the intergenerational and cross-cultural understandings that are often left out of the debate. We seek to understand datafication in terms of the often-invisible care work done in intergenerational relationships. We bring care and media practice together to think about contemporary forms of kinship that marry the digital, social and material in complex ways.

In *Digital Media Practices in Households* we trace the cross-cultural and intergenerational role of mobile media practices in three locations—Shanghai, Tokyo and Melbourne. Through the concept of Digital Kinship, we bring

together the continuities and discontinuities in and around the negotiation of mundane intimacies in the digital and non-digital worlds. In this book we seek to connect the discontinuities with the continuities through four key kinship concepts—*Digital, Playful, Visualizing, Co-futuring*—and show how these elements of kinship are played out through culturally specific modes of the intimate and mundane.

From social media like LINE, WhatsApp and WeChat and self-tracking health apps on smartphones to wearables like Apple watches, this book explores the multiple ways in which intergenerational practices play out around mobile media for care at a distance. This can involve locative and non-locative possibilities. We recognize that quotidian forms of locative media are often embedded in social and mobile media practices. As Rowan Wilken notes in *The Cultural Economies of Locative Media* (2019), within the all-pervasiveness of everyday mobile media, we can find multiple and contesting forms, textures, and gradations of location that inform our contemporary ways of being in place (2019, 5). Thus, understanding locative media needs to be done in the context of the embedded mobile media practices.

Entwined within our exploration of mobile media in households and familial contexts is the integral role of care within contemporary media practices. Care, as we argue, isn't just a practice for feminist or social services but rather crucial to an ethics of media practice (Mol 2009; Bellacasa 2018). As the fallout from the Cambridge Analytica debacle still resonates around notions of trust, bringing care (ethically, theoretically, conceptually and methodologically) to media practices is key (Gold and Klein 2019). We redeploy Jeanette Pols' notion of care at a distance (2012)—originally used in telecare settings to explore the role of technology to enhance relationships when used in unison, not replacing, people—to consider the *tacit, informal and mundane* ways in which mobile media does often invisible care work in everyday intimate relations.

Given the above ambitions, *Digital Media Practices in Households* is not a conventional academic book. In it we seek to bring readers into the mobile and digital family lives and everyday worlds of participants, across three different cultural and national contexts. This means leading our discussion by example, rather than by theory. *In particular, through the practices of our participants we reflect on the quotidian and often-invisible forms of care at a distance constitute contemporary Digital Kinship.*

Through cross-cultural examples, we seek to explore the ways in which place and context inform particular rituals of belonging. We believe this helps to bring to the fore the socially active micro-moments that matter to our participants, and our analysis. In doing so, we invite readers into

an interpretive process that is based on ethnographic encounters with participants in the places where mobile media practices are meaningful to them. Through this process, we seek to explore the everyday intimate and mundane meanings of caring and relationality that, in turn, has methodological consequences and makes a substantive contribution to the study of intergenerational mobile media practices across cultures.

In this introductory chapter we begin with one of our participants, Rika. We visit her experiences in negotiating her aging mother's independence and how her smartphone practices help to create a sense of care at a distance—what we call *Digital Kinship*. We then turn to contextualizing the methods deployed over the three years in three locations. Then we discuss understanding Digital Kinship as a form of intimate mundane co-presence. This is followed by a reflection upon the ways in which we seek to understand the paradoxical role of surveillance in an age of datafication, through “friendly surveillance” and “care at a distance.” Having outlined key concepts, we then contextualize our three contrasting sites that can provide insight into some of the salient and culturally specific notions. We reflect upon how understanding data and care through an intergenerational lens can provide nuanced insight. We then discuss the book structure. Now let us turn to Rika.

Meet Rika

In 2014 we met 32-year-old female flight attendant Rika who lived in a bedsit about an hour by train from Tokyo. Just a stone's throw away from her apartment, Rika's only family member—her 72-year-old mother—lived alone. Rika would often leave home for work early in the morning and return home late. Rika and her mother respected each other's daily rhythms by living separately. While traditionally families in Japan would live together in bygone times, now it is common for them to live apart. However, Rika's smartphone (*sumaho*) provided a care at a distance whereby Rika was able to monitor her elderly mother through the constant co-presence of social mobile media.

Like many Japanese of her generation, Rika grew up with the mobile (*keitai*) and viewed her phone as an integral part of her everyday life. Rika's first *keitai* was the one that her mother bought her when she was in junior high school, with the intention of using the phone as a form of personal security—or what Misa Matsuda (2009) calls “mom in the pocket”—to accompany her constantly when travelling from after-school cram (or “*juku*”)

school. Since her first *keitai*, Rika and her mother had a long history communicating phatic, logistic, and emotional messages through and by the mobile phone. As the mobile phone had grown and transformed into the *sumaho*, so too had Rika and her mother's relationship evolved through its constant co-presence, so much so that the mobile played an integral role in maintaining their broader kinship network.

After graduating from university, the mobile phone became even more important in maintaining Rika's relationship with her mother, as Rika started to fly around the world as a flight attendant. Overseas flights occasionally caused unexpected delays. As Rika described, "I couldn't come back to Japan when there was a flood in Thailand and a volcanic explosion in Iceland. In these situations, if it wasn't for mobile phones, my mother would not have been able to find out if I was OK." Her airline policy stated that family members of employees were not allowed to make calls directly to the airline if a hijacking occurred. This made the mobile phone indispensable in allowing Rika to communicate with her mother especially when she was abroad.

Rika often did a "check-in" on Facebook when she went abroad on business. One reason was to let her mother know where she was. Her mother did not have her own Facebook account. So, Rika kept hers logged-on via the tablet PC and gave it to her mother, who could then check Rika's timeline without it being bothersome. Previously, she used to give a paper-based hotel list to her mother, but with Facebook "check-in" functions this was no longer needed. Social media platform LINE also played a key role in connecting the pair when they were away from each other. They could talk or chat for free by using LINE—the most used social media app in Japan—when they have WiFi connection, regardless of their location.

In this opening vignette we see Rika utilizing mobile media to share both co-presence and co-location with her mother as a type of care at a distance. Over the three years of the fieldwork, Rika went from using locative media as a tool for care at a distance with her mum to becoming a mum herself. Through these transitions, Rika adapted media practices in accordance with the rhythm of her everyday life. We understand how Japanese social media platforms LINE and Facebook were used for digital and visual reflection *of*—and *for*—kinship. These digital kinship practices played a key role in the maintenance of social rituals and gift giving economies as well as affording new ways to express mundane intimacies in playful and visual modes. Through the study of Rika's media practices over three years, we recognized that the relationship between mother and daughter was gradually changing as they began to adopt new mobile media technologies.



Figure 1.1: Rika's LINE picture to her mum

In Rika's exchange with her mother we can understand the power of digital media to create different forms of care at a distance. For many feminist scholars, care cultures are an important site for affective, emotional and unpaid labor (Mol 2009). Fields such as nursing and teaching are often underpaid despite the pivotal role played in maintaining many societies. The role of care as a feminized form of labor often plays out in many work and social contexts with particular "feeling rules" (Hochschild 1979) being expected. The maintenance of particular feeling rules often involves a type of informal surveillance.

Care has always had a complex relationship to surveillance (Bellacasa 2017), but digital media obscures this imbrication further. Mobile technologies have been deployed as ambient forms of surveillance between family members as evidenced through the substantial research of Misa Matsuda (2009) in Japan. More recently, work has begun to emerge around

mundane, emergent practices that maintain intimacy in families (Clark 2012; Sengupta 2012; Leaver 2017; Burrows 2017), school surveillance (Shade and Singh 2016) and intergenerational “friendly surveillance” (Hjorth et al. 2017). We know very little about the ways mobile media practices relating to care and intimacy—what Tama Leaver calls “intimate surveillance” (2017)—are being played out in everyday familial contexts. And how, in turn, these mobile intimacy practices are recalibrating how surveillance is being conceptualized.

In Rika’s mundane and intimate exchanges with her mother through social mobile media we see the persistence of previous media rituals—most notably the *keitai*. We begin to comprehend how the *keitai* cultures have become part of the fabric of ritualization that represents an extension of existing types of care and gift giving practices as well as new ways to be co-present—a mode of electronic proximity that expands upon temporal, spatial and geographic distances. These modes of co-presence afford ways in which the mobile phone can operate materially and symbolically, expanding upon existing care cultures through the ambience of co-presence. A message or “stamps” (stickers) on LINE can send feelings of care and responsibility—reminding us of the ongoing role of the mobile phone in gift giving practices (Taylor and Harper 2002). As we will see in Chapter 2, the uptake of different platforms in the specific contexts highlight that cultures enhance particular modes of “platformativity” (Lamarre 2017) as much as platforms frame our ways of seeing. In Japan, LINE dominates, while in China WeChat is all-pervasive. In Australia there is a mixture of Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp.

Paralinguistics—like *emojis*, stamps and stickers—provide emotional and facial clues for mediated environments. Each platform has its own customized form of *emojis*, further enhancing particular cultural nuances and norms. They also expand upon discourses around mobile parenting research by affording unilateral social or friendly surveillance between children, their parents and grandparents. During the age of the *keitai*, children were the ones monitored by their parents. Now, however, in the age of the *sumaho*, it is the grown children who are monitoring their elderly parents in what can be understood as a “social” (Marwick 2012), friendly or careful surveillance (Hjorth, Richardson and Balmford 2016).

Underlining the tension between enduring and changing rituals of kinship, Rika’s story and use of digital forms of co-presence also demonstrate how new forms of kinship are being interwoven within the everyday. *Understanding Digital Kinship is central to this book.* Through the role of locative media use and non-use, we explore how cultural and generational



Figure 1.2: Sending messages, stamps and videos to family members on LINE

differences are informing practices of care at a distance, social surveillance and maintaining intimacy. The significance of “non-use” is now a significant part of the repertoire of everyday media practices (Baumer, Ames, Burrell, Brubaker and Dourish 2015; Baumer, Adams and Khovanskaya 2013; Satchell and Dourish 2009) and researchers are starting to realize the importance of understanding media practices as part of a continuum that involves use and non-use in relation to the rhythms and activities of everyday life.

In the remainder of this introductory chapter we outline some of the key concepts and methods included in this book. First, we begin with a brief methods section. We then discuss the role of *Digital Kinship* as *intimate mundane co-presence*. This is followed by a review into some of the ways in which surveillance has been theorized and consider how it is being recalibrated through familial locative media use. Then we examine our fieldsite locations, ethnographic methods, and how ethnography can provide valuable insight into understanding locative media in practice. We conclude with a discussion of the book's structure and chapter outlines.

Methods

Mobile and haptic media play an increasingly central role in intergenerational and transnational relationships and intimacies. To understand how locative, social and mobile media fits into the rhythms of everyday life—with its mundane routines and intimacies—requires us to go beyond standard interviewing methods. Instead we developed ethnographic techniques that

enable the researcher to engage empathetically with people's intimate experiences in mundane life (Pink, Ardèvol and Lanzeni 2016). Often mundane experience of digital technologies is difficult to access or to observe as a researcher, precisely because it happens at moments when people are alone and in situations where they are unlikely to usually share with others, let alone with researchers.

We employed mobile media as a tool for the researchers and participants, and also positioned mobile devices and software as tools in themselves. This approach was predicated on the idea that mobile media such as smartphones and apps work as a very intimate and mundane objects, allowing for ethnographic research to be undertaken without participants feeling the need to be 'on display' or perform activities that were not part of their usual lifeworlds.

Given that locative media is often used on the move, this makes it even harder to trace. Earlier in the research we had considered using Go-Pro video cameras and giving them to participants, however we felt such a technology would be too foreign and thus destabilize everyday familiar practices. Much of locative media that is activated intentionally, occurs while moving and waiting to move—at a bus stop, planning a driving trip, on public transport, just before getting up in the morning or just about to go to sleep at night, tagging locations while on holiday, or while taking a moment out of a social situation. That is, *transitional moments*.

To conduct an ethnography of Digital Kinship through locative media means developing techniques to understand these practices as situated within the familial rhythms of everyday life. This means understanding it as part of social mobile media practices more generally. In particular, our study followed 12 households over three years (2014–2017) within the three very different locations we strategically selected (Melbourne, Tokyo and Shanghai) to gain a sense of cultural differences and similarities with respect to intergenerational use. In each cultural context, one local informant was the key researcher to ensure for nuanced understandings of the linguistic, social and cultural practices. In each location we had one Chief Investigator (CI) who worked with a research assistant to recruit a diverse cohort of families in different parts of the three cities. Given the attrition rate over three years, we began with 36 households and ended with 30 households.

In Tokyo and Shanghai, interviews were held in Japanese and Chinese, then transcribed into English. Interviews were predominantly held in the home except when participants, for convenience, requested alternative sites. In this three-year study we were keen to put locative media into context—culturally, socially, linguistically and technologically. This required