



The following article was first published in *Media Development* 1/2014.

## **Technology rights of the world's families**

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*The family remains the basic societal unit of reproduction, consumption, asset-building and – in many parts of the world – production. Families bear the primary responsibility for the development, education and socialization of children. They provide material and non-material care and support to their members and are the backbone of intergenerational solidarity and social cohesion. The achievement of development goals depends, to a significant extent, on how families are empowered to fulfill their numerous functions.<sup>1</sup>*

As we prepare to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the United Nations International Year of the Family, it is important to recognize how changing family dynamics and changing global conditions have made it as important as ever to prioritize the rights of the world's families. Digital and mobile technologies penetrate into new areas – geographically and socially – and we must consider the influence of this spread on the well-being of families. In order to support families, it is imperative to assess how changes in technology empower or marginalize them, and support globally the creation of sound policies, affordable technologies, and appropriate and enriching content.

To consider the role of technology in family empowerment, I will organize this essay according to the three themes identified by the U.N. General Assembly Economic and Social Council (A/68/61-E/2013/3) to guide the preparations for the 20th anniversary of the International Year of the Family: a) confronting family poverty and social exclusion; b) supporting families in achieving work-family balance; and c) advancing social integration and intergenerational solidarity.

*Family poverty is the inability to cover adequately the family's basic cost of living – the cost of housing, clothing, education, health care, utilities and transport – as a result of insufficient income and/or access to basic social services. Chronic poverty within families is especially troubling as it is generally, bound to continue into the next generation.*

Over the past 20 years, digital literacy has become one of the most important requirements for successful participation in the global workforce. I would argue that access to digital technology, Internet connectivity, and appropriate content is as necessary to the well-being of families to be considered a “basic social service”. Policies

and programs that enable families to access devices, training, and content can support adults and children in their quest for education, employment and adequate income, and perhaps, stop the cycle of chronic poverty.

Around the globe, we have seen a dramatic increase in household access to digital technology and Internet connectivity. Globally, ownership of Internet-enabled computers has doubled since 2005. Currently, 40% of the world's households have Internet-enabled computers and 35% of the world's population uses the Internet. Family households in nearly every country are more likely than non-family households to have online access.

But access is not equal across and within countries. Less than half of the households in the Middle East and Africa, Asia, and Latin America have Internet-enabled computers; between 66 and 85% of households in Europe, North America, the U.K., and Australia are so enabled (Euromonitor International, 2013).

One of the discouraging realities in the U.S. is the existence of a "time wasting gap" (Rideout, Foehr & Roberts, 2010). As access to devices has spread, lower-income and ethnic minority children spend considerably more time than higher-income and Caucasian children using their technology to watch shows and videos, play games, and connect on social networking sites. And the higher rate of cell phone Internet access among disadvantaged groups makes it more difficult to use the Internet for homework, job searching, or accessing important civic information.

If we want to truly empower families and provide opportunities to escape chronic poverty, parents and children must be provided access to the appropriate technology and taught how to use it for education, enrichment, and employment opportunities.

*Given that gainful employment is considered the single most important factor in combating poverty, policies aiming at facilitating work-family balance have a key role in development. Moreover, since poverty rates are lower in dual-earner households, policies responding to the realities of dual-earner families are needed to reduce poverty and make it easier for both parents to combine their work and family responsibilities.*

A majority of U.S. parents with dependent children are part of the paid workforce (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013). How they balance their work and family responsibilities varies and many working parents find themselves juggling employment and parental responsibilities simultaneously. In 2011, more than one in five working mothers of preschoolers cared for their children *while they worked*. The rest rely on family members (27%), center-based day care (25%) or home-based day care (13%) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012).

*Where* children spend their time influences *how* they spend their time. Christakis et al. (2009) discovered that children in home-based day care spent nearly two hours more per day watching TV than children in center-based care. While information about daily activities of children at home with working parents is hard to find, it is likely that technology is used to buy parents some uninterrupted work time.

If findings from a recent survey by the Northwestern University Center on Media and Human Development (2013) are any indication, we can assume that U.S. children are very likely to spend time with technology while their parents work at home. The parents

surveyed reported that they are *somewhat* or *very likely* to use electronic technology to keep their children busy at home when the parent has to get things done around the house (77% use TV; 47% use handheld video game player; 37% use mobile device; 35% use computer).

Given the previously stated need for digital literacy, the changing media landscape of family households, and the financial challenges of affording out-of-home daycare, it is important to examine the *content* available to children and families. Parents have the right to provide technology experiences for their children that support their family's values and goals, provide enriching experiences, and keep their children safe.

Programs exist to allow parents to remotely monitor their children's online activities, and to block access to inappropriate content online and on TV. Some of these programs are free – indeed, in the U.S. all television sets (13" or larger) manufactured since 2000 include a device that can be programmed to work with the TV rating system to block selected content. Internet browsers can be set to "safe" modes, reducing the likelihood of children stumbling on inappropriate content. Parents need to be informed about these devices and programs, and allowed to customize the software to suit the needs of their particular family (what is "inappropriate" for one family is not for another).

To facilitate digital literacy skills, families need to feel comfortable and welcome online. They need safe online spaces for children to explore, and content that families can enjoy together. In the U.S., the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) was designed to provide some assurance to parents that websites targeting children under age 12 would protect the personally identifiable information that they collect during registration or game activities, and to empower parents to exert control over the use of their children's information. But parents don't stop protecting their children when they become teens, and indeed, teens share a lot of information online.

Policies for the collection and use of information provided by teens online should also be provided by websites in easily accessible, plain language. The most popular online social networking site, Facebook, recently announced changes to its privacy policy, allowing users who are registered as teens to post status updates publicly, and to create a "following" (a group of non-friends who have access to public posts). While the company insists it will maintain strict confidentiality over its teen users' birthday, school, and contact information, this change has angered many privacy advocates.

High quality, enriching content is plentiful on U.S. television and online. In the U.S., the "E/I" label identifies television programming with an "Educational/Informational" focus. This label appears in print and online TV Guides and is shown onscreen during the first few minutes of designated programs. The Federal Communications Commission's website allows parents to search for E/I programs in their local area. Each of the major commercial cable children's channels offers blocks of enriching programming designed for preschoolers (often free of commercials), and the Public Broadcasting Service continues to supply a steady stream of excellent programs for a variety of age groups.

Finding high quality, enriching content online requires parents to teach their children to navigate away from highly commercialized sites (that are likely to top the list of web searches) and towards trusted sites with age-appropriate, well-designed content. There

are many guides available online to help parents locate great content which they can then bookmark for their children.

*The scope of family policies has been gradually expanding, from focusing mainly on families with young children to the inclusion of all generations. Such expansion is further warranted by rapidly ageing societies where family-oriented policies need to take into account the changing roles and demands of all generations.*

Lengthening life spans and worsening economic realities have resulted in changing family demographics. On the one hand, nearly one in five U.S. adults over 65 years old maintains full or part-time employment, and 85% live independently (U.S. Health and Human Services Administration on Aging, 2012). On the other hand, the number of multigenerational households – now estimated to make up approximately 6% of U.S. households – grew faster between 2008 and 2010 than at any other time in the 21st century (AARP Public Policy Institute, 2011).

Technology can be used to promote intergenerational solidarity for non-multigenerational households through the use of communication applications like email, social networking, and Voice-over Internet Protocol (VoIP) services (e.g. Skype). These programs allow grandparents, parents, and grandchildren to connect and maintain relationships. While seniors make up the smallest age group online (53%), more than eight in 10 of those who do go online use email regularly (Zickuhr & Madden, 2012).

And mass media content can support the multigenerational family by providing examples of diverse family forms. In the U.S., network television programs have increasingly featured multi-generational families. For example, *The Simpsons* (Fox), *Modern Family* (ABC), *Parenthood* (NBC), and *The Good Wife* (CBS) feature three generations living in the same city; on *Raising Hope* (Fox), *Mom* (CBS) and *Back in the Game* (ABC), three generations live in the same household. As television remains the most used medium in the U.S., these shows can normalize and dignify this emerging family form.

Celebrating the important roles of families globally is certainly a worthy endeavor. Taking this opportunity to highlight their changing demographics and needs, and assessing how technology can serve them, should be an important consideration.

#### **Note**

1. United Nations General Assembly Economic and Social Council (2012). *Preparations for and observance of the twentieth anniversary of the International Year of the Family in 2014*. Report of the Secretary-General, p. 2.

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