From Media Trusteeship to Parental Mediation
The Parental Development of Parental Mediation

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Abstract

Active mediation, restrictive mediation, and media co-use are widely discussed strategies of parental mediation. This chapter reviews their theoretical framework in the context of social media activities. It suggests media trusteeship as a complementary approach to parental mediation that parents especially apply until their new-borns, infants, and toddlers have developed abilities to use digital media autonomously. The transitional process from trusteeship to parental mediation is further investigated empirically based on 29 in-depth interviews. The results indicate that although parents believe digital media will be a vital part of their children's lives, most parents are unaware of their trusteeship and its fluidity. Parents possess only limited concepts of how they could support their children's digital media development. Instead, they seem to be driven by the transformations of social media and apply ad-hoc tactics to cope with changes of their children's media autonomy.

Keywords: parents' media trusteeship, parental mediation, social media, media generations, digital identity

Introduction

Digital media are a vital part of young families' everyday life. Family members of all age share their opinions, experiences, and knowledge with a network of family, friends, and public (Taddicken, 2014). Furthermore, they implement digital media in their daily activities resulting in a mediatisation of almost all areas of their social life (Hepp, 2016). Within this context, parents moderate their children's media use to protect them from negative media impacts and to foster positive developments (e.g., Clark, 2011; Shin,

Huh & Faber, 2012). While research on parental mediation indicates that parents apply different strategies of media use regulation (Shin & Li, 2017), their common basis is a coordination process between parent and child: Parents discuss, restrict or supervise media use with their children. This process seems different considering new-borns', infants', and toddlers' limited abilities to reflect and to communicate about their media use. Therefore, this chapter proposes the concept of media trusteeship as a complementary approach to parental mediation. While especially young children are unable to manage their media use autonomously, parents hold trust and are responsible for their children's benefit with regard to property and authority.

However, media trusteeship is only a transitory strategy of parental mediation. As soon as children learn to reflect and negotiate their media-related demands and strive for greater autonomy in media use, parents need to develop different and more collaborative forms of parental mediation. The idea of this transitory process is at the heart of this chapter which aims to reconstruct the parental development of parental mediation. Specifically, it asks what concepts parents develop to cope with the transition of responsibility for digital media use. The paper discusses how different forms of media trusteeship connect with the specific strategies of parental mediation that are currently considered by communication scholars. Therefore, the review of existing research on parental mediation as well as literature on children's and parents' media use focusses on evaluating concepts used to describe and explain parents' media-related parenting behaviour.

These theoretical considerations are augmented with the results of 29 in-depth interviews as the concept of media trusteeship proves to be suitable to explain parental mediation with regard to new-borns, infants, and toddlers. However, the empirical perspective also reveals that parents are only marginally aware of the transitory nature of media trusteeship and have developed only limited ideas about how to pass on their trusteeship responsibilities to their descendants. In conclusion, this chapter argues for a stronger analysis of the parental development of parental mediation.

Parental mediation

Being "the most influential people in the development and socialization of children" (Sonck et al., 2013: 96), parents are primarily responsible for their children's media-related development and well-being (Shin & Huh, 2011; Shin & Li, 2017). Communication scholars discuss mainly three different strategies that parents apply to protect their offspring from media threats and to cultivate positive developmental outcomes: active mediation, restrictive mediation, and co-use (Nathanson, 1999; Shin & Huh, 2011; Valkenburg, Krcmar, Peeters & Marseille, 1999).

Parents participate in active mediation when they explain and discuss media with their children. This strategy focuses on the parent-child negotiation of positive, negative, or neutral arguments about media use (Martins et al., 2015). Active mediation

increases children's understanding of media content (Lemish & Rice, 1986), supports the development of media critical thinking (Fujioka & Austin, 2002; Youn, 2008) and hinders media induced aggressive behaviour (Nathanson, 1999).

Restrictive mediation describes a strategy that regulates children's media use through implicit and explicit rules. These rules are usually linked to the amount of time children are allowed to use media, to whether the content is desirable to use, or both. Although restrictive mediation leads to a decreased exposure to media risks (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008), less media use (Vittrup, 2009), and less aggressive children (Nathanson, 1999), Nathanson (2002) argues that media restrictions can cause a forbidden fruit effect that counteracts parents' mediation goals. Considering the appearance of a negative age effect regarding restrictive mediation effects (Martins et al., 2015), it seems arguable that the effects of this regulation strategy may reflect mainly the degree of parents' importance as authority figures for their children.

Finally, parents engaging in media co-use supervise (Nikken & Jansz, 2014) and monitor (Livingstone, 2008) their children's media activities to take countermeasures if necessary. This parenting strategy is associated with a mostly non-verbal parent-child negotiation. Therefore, children use media content with higher parental desirability (Lee & Chae, 2007) as well as parents' co-use can signal parental approval of media content and media practice (Nathanson, 2001).

Media trusteeship in the context of parental mediation

All of the mentioned parenting styles can be understood as a coordination process between parent and child. While active mediation supposes that children communicate with their parents, restrictive mediation requires children to understand parents' rules of media use and render them into their media behaviour. Media co-use demands children to coordinate their media use non-verbally with their parents, who also assume that children can reflect and actively choose their media behaviour. Arguably, newborns and infants may not meet the communicative requirements of the mentioned strategies of parental mediation. Even toddlers might possess only limited abilities to reflect and communicate about their media use. For this reason, research concerned with parental mediation focuses its attention on older children (e.g., Livingstone, 2008 about children aged 12 to 18) or solely on parents (e.g., Martins et al., 2015; Nikken & Jansz, 2014).

However, a growing body of research indicates the importance of media within the lives of young children (Nansen & Jayemanne, 2016). Therefore, this chapter proposes parents' media trusteeship as a complementary strategy of parental mediation. The trusteeship concept describes the idea that a person holds trust and is responsible for the benefit of another with regard to property and authority. Specifically, "the duty of the trustee is to preserve and enhance the value of the assets under his control, and to balance fairly the various claims to the returns which these assets generate" (Kay & Silberston, 1995: 92). Within the context of parental mediation, parental media

trusteeship understands parents as trustees of their children's media-related, properties and all media activities that parents make on behalf of their children. The idea of media trusteeship is not dissimilar to the concept of privacy stewardship introduced by Kumar & Schoenebeck (2015), but more comprehensive as it includes additional media-related properties children might hold such as image rights.

Parental media trusteeship appears to be firmly entangled with parents' personal media use as well as with parents' perception of their children being part of their personality rather than individual entities. The reason is that a substantial part of parents' daily routines revolves around the challenges concerned with their parenthood (Bartholomew et al., 2012). Therefore, parents' digital media activities likely include content about their children or are related to the challenges of parenthood (e.g., Bartholomew et al., 2012). Furthermore, parents disclose child-related information to enact good parenthood (Kumar & Schoenebeck, 2015). Analogous to other styles of parental mediation, it is assumable that parents substantiate their trusteeship role in different ways depending on their children's age (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008; Shin & Huh, 2011; Valkenburg et al., 1999), media perception (Valkenburg et al., 1999), media knowledge (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008; Sonck et al., 2013), parents' general parenting style (Eastin et al., 2006) and previous experiences regarding negative and positive media effects.

From media trusteeship to parental mediation

Besides being a complementary strategy of parental mediation, media trusteeship is likely to be an antecedent of active mediation, restrictive mediation, and media co-use as well. While children's abilities of autonomous media use will undoubtfully grow during childhood, parents are required to monitor children's demands to follow their media-related development. Therefore, media trusteeship appears to be a transitory strategy that fades out of relevance for parents the better children reflect and communicate their media-related actions. However, the mechanism that drives the change from media trusteeship to other styles of parental mediation appears unclear and needs further clarification.

Two perspectives appear to be worthwhile to look at: research on factors that influence parental mediation styles and research on parents' role development. Regarding the first, it is safe to assume that children's age should be an important determinant of the transition process because children's abilities to reflect and communicate about their media use increase with their age. Furthermore, the transition process might be connected with parents' general parenting style. Assumedly, parents that tend to a stricter behavioural control of their children might hold longer to parental mediation through media trusteeship. This practice goes probably hand in hand with parents' perceptions of media hostility. The more parents perceive media as a hostile environment, the longer they might cling to taking media use decisions on behalf of their children.

Considering parent's role development, research considering this phenomenon indicates that parents' role perceptions undergo a substantial change until their children enter elementary school (Mowder et al., 1995). It seems highly reasonable that children's admission to the system of formal education marks a turning point in parental mediation at which parents need to adjust to the appearance of other socialization agents in their children's lives. Admittedly, with regard to parents' transition from media trusteeship to other styles of parental mediation, this point in time should be only regarded as a possible proxy than a real turning point.

Research questions and research strategy

The previous sections outlined that parents are responsible for their children's media-related development. Previous research literature has identified three main strategies parents apply to guide their children's media-related development: active mediation, restrictive mediation, and media co-use. It was suggested that the current theoretical work on parental mediation should be complemented with the media trusteeship concept. Although this approach helps to understand how parents regulate young children's media behaviour in a mediatized world, it was argued that media trusteeship is only a transitory strategy of parental mediation. The empirical perspective takes up on this idea and aims to describe how parents develop their media trusteeship into other forms of parental mediation. The following guiding research questions were addressed:

RQ1: How do parents develop their trusteeship role?

RQ2: What concepts do parents develop to cope with the transition of responsibility for their children's media use?

RQ3: How is media trusteeship connected to other parental mediation styles?

The conducted study concentrates on the microscopic level of individual media practices. It aims to reconstruct parents' considerations about parental media regulation. The study attempts to assess parents' awareness of their role as trustees and how they substantiate their trusteeship (RQ1). Furthermore, it scrutinizes parents' trusteeship sustainability as well as their tactics and strategies to cope with their children's media-related development (RQ2). Finally, this work evaluates the significance of media trusteeship in relation to other practices of parental mediation (RQ3).

Method

This study relies on two series of face-to-face in-depth interviews: The first series of 21 interviews was conducted from December 2016 to August 2017 with parents with at least one child aged between zero and six years. Another series of eight interviews was

carried out in August and September 2017 with parents with at least one child aged between six and ten years. All participants were permanent residents of Germany. Parents' social media postings about children, their personal experience, and their behaviour concerning these topics were chosen as entry points for both interview sets. During conversations, the interviewers broadened the topic towards parents' general media-related strategies of parenting as well as their development of media regulation practices. The first series of interviews lasted between 22 and 58 minutes, those of the second series of interviews lasted between 20 and 36 minutes.

Results

The interviews provided comprehensive insights into parents' ideas about parental media regulation and their according practices of parental mediation. However, this richness can only be cursory reflected as a selection of particular findings which summarizes the individual perspectives of the interviewees to three main arguments: parent's styles of media trusteeship (RQ1), how they develop their trusteeship over time (RQ2), and how their trusteeship style might link to their style of parental mediation (RQ3).

Styles of parental media trusteeship

Although each dialogue partner substantiates their media trusteeship differently, the individual lines of argument reflect nuances of three main types of trusteeship roles which parents tend to take: cyber-wall hermits, re-activists, and naive optimists.

Cyber-wall hermits. Parents who understand their media trusteeship as cyber-wall hermitage try to establish absolute control over their digital communication to shield themselves and their family from any media threats. Therefore, these parents have developed a somewhat restrictive approach to media activities with regard to their children. They base their regulations on a comprehensive understanding of the social and technical aspects of digital media. Furthermore, cyber-wall hermits utilize their technical knowledge and invest considerable time and effort to realize technical countermeasures to media threats. Finally, a significant inequity between their media consumption and their trusteeship practice can be found. While cyber-wall hermits indicate to be familiar with a broad range of digital media services, they try to withdraw their children almost entirely from digital media. Instead, they explicitly encourage their children's use of books and audio plays.

Re-activists. A basic open-mindedness characterises the re-activist style of media trusteeship towards children's digital media use. They believe that digital media can contribute positively to the daily lives of their children. Despite their general laissez-faire with their children's media use, re-activist parents have developed some regulations during their trusteeship. However, in contrast to cyber-wall hermits, re-activists started to reflect upon possible media threats only after critical incidents happened.

This re-active perspective on their children's media trust appears to be the dominant regulation mechanism of this rather common media trusteeship style as well as its main problem: Parents understand their trustee role as a maintaining task until their children can make autonomous media decisions. Instead of actively improving their children's media literacy, parents deploy countermeasures to repair or conceal the damage of possible media threats.

Naive optimists. Similar but different to re-activist parents is the case of how parents substantiate a naive optimist-style of media trusteeship. Both media trusteeship styles share the belief that positive media effects largely outweigh the occurrence of media threats. However, parents who follow a naive optimist style of media trusteeship apparently blind out their perception of media threats. This behaviour seems to reason either in parents' belief that the occurrence of harmful media events is improbable or their belief that future benefits outweigh current threats.

Parental development of media trusteeship

Considering characteristics of the identified media trusteeship styles, it is no surprise that the majority of our dialogue partners with new-borns, infants, and toddlers has only limited ideas about how to develop their trusteeship over time and how to pass on their responsibilities to their children. Notably, parents who practice the naive optimist or the re-activist style of media trusteeship appear to lack the awareness of the educational potential of their trustee role. For this reason, it is not surprising that the development of their trusteeship style seems to be controlled mainly by the development of children and external circumstances. In contrast, cyber-wall hermits see a link between their trusteeship and their children's media literacy. Moreover, they are aware of the time limitation of their responsibility. However, although this group is concerned about the development of their trusteeship style, the depth of their reflections remains at the level of popular opinions and beliefs. It seems that cyber-wall hermits' child-protection focused perspective on digital media seems to at least hinder an educational utilisation of their social and technical media knowledge in a more productive way. Therefore, analogous to parents who practice a re-activist or naive optimist style of trusteeship, the development of children is the driving force, while parents' activities are reactive in nature. Finally, it should be emphasized that the stability of the three identified forms of media trusteeship over time is only superficial. Almost all parents report a growing discrepancy between their perceived parenting role and the perceived influence on children's media activity during the course of parents' media trusteeship which increases their willingness to adapt their trusteeship style. In particular, parents with a cyber-wall hermit style of media trustees report that they perceive situations as tense where these differences become obvious. In contrast, parents who follow the trusteeship style of re-activists and naive optimist appear to be immunized against this phenomenon.

Considering the link between media trusteeship and parental mediation, the interviews suggest that parents seem to develop ad-hoc tactics to cope with changes regard-

ing their children's increasing media autonomy rather than developing a prospective strategy of parental mediation or media literacy education. Although parents of older children can precisely recapitulate their media regulations when their children were infants, differences in the style of media trusteeship seem not related to later differences in parental mediation. Instead, it appears that parents' specific style of parental mediation develops as a product of their children strive for media use autonomy as well as the emergence of new media technology and its appropriation within the familiar environment. This process becomes particularly evident in families with siblings who have a considerable age difference. While a specific pattern of media use and its regulation might be significant for the firstborn, the second child often has a disparate media use pattern. Although the parents strive for a largely consistent, cross sibling media regulation, the interviewees leave no doubt that the transition from media trusteeship to parental mediation is essentially determined by the personality of the child and his or her expectations about media use. Ultimately, the interviews also show that over time, parents themselves become more confident in using the media techniques that their children integrate as a matter of course in their everyday life. For example, some parents of older children report that they had initially drawn up very restrictive rules and relaxed them over time after gaining a better insight into how the new media worked.

Discussion and conclusion

The primary aim of this chapter was to reconsider parental mediation in the context of new-borns, infants, and toddlers. The literature review carved out that active mediation, restrictive mediation, and media co-use build upon a coordination process between parents and children about the conditions of media use. Considering young children's limited communication abilities, this chapter suggested the concept of media trusteeship to describe parental mediation of new-borns, infants, and toddlers. The empirical research which is presented in this chapter illuminates this general thought and evaluates the link between media trusteeship and parental mediation: The conducted study identifies cyber-wall hermits, re-activists, and naive optimists as different styles of media trusteeship. Although they show a different understanding of their trustee roles, all three styles of trusteeship can be seen as defensive behaviour schemes which are driven by concerns about media threats. Moreover, the identified trusteeship styles lack a prospective approach to the same extent as parents are coping with changes in their children's media autonomy. Considering the interview material of both interview sets, parental development of parental mediation appears to be a juxtaposition of ad-hoc tactics rather than a consistent strategy. Therefore, it is no surprise that a clear connection between media trusteeship and parental mediation cannot be found. Instead, the development of parents' specific style of parental mediation appears to be significantly driven by the objects of parental mediation: the emergence of new media in the lives of children as well as children's striving for media autonomy. Meanwhile, parents play

only the supporting role. However, parents' media skills in dealing with (digital) media develop during the course of their media trusteeship as well which may lead to the use of other media trusteeship strategies for siblings. Consequently, communication scholars should address the transitory stage of media trusteeship to help parents to develop their children's media literacy actively.

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