

# Parenting for Digital Literacy in Denmark and Germany: Between Techno-Invitationalism and Techno-Protectionism<sup>1</sup>

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On 23 May 2016, at 10.45 p.m. the German public service television channel ARD broadcasted the weekly talk show *Hart aber fair* (Tough but fair). This week's topic was entitled: *Are smartphones dumbing people down and making them ill?* (Plasberg, 2016, my translation).

On the other side of the German-Danish border, two days later: The Danish public service television DR2 broadcasts a morning show interview with clinical psychologist Bo Møhl. The related news article on DR's website opens with the following caption: *Expert: Absent parents are to blame for widespread self-harm among children and youth* (Ellesøe, 2016, my translation). The expert mentions two main reasons for self-harm among children and youth: Firstly the high amount of time children spend at educational and care institutions and thus away from home; and secondly, the absent-mindedness and lack of childcare on the part of the parents, due to the high amount of time they spend on social media and digital media devices while at home. Møhl's analysis of parental absence and absent-mindedness is backed by the chair of the Danish National Council for Children (*Børnerådet*), whose institution had just issued a survey study on self-harm among 9th grade students (Alim & Nielsen, 2016).

Both broadcasts frame the debate around digital concerns in terms of health and well-being, a discourse of avoiding harm in the use of digital consumer products. Although the German talk show did not explicitly focus on children and

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1 One of the empirical studies this chapter is based on was realised as part of the Danish Center for Research in Early Childhood Education and Care (CEDIF), which is financially supported by the Danish Union of Early Childhood and Youth Educators (BUPL).

youth, the discussions revolved almost exclusively around children and the alleged digital generation's individual use of digital devices (smartphone plus everything else). This concern with the individual youngsters' preparedness for an increasingly digitalized future may be similar in Danish public discourses, but the role of the parents in the preparation for this future is much less so. In Danish public discourses, parents tend to be articulated as active co-producers of the child's already present future, for better and worse. In German public discourses, parents tend to be articulated as protectionist gatekeepers who need to be convinced that the digitalized future is unavoidable. At least, this is what national digital literacy initiatives directed at pedagogical-educational practice seem to be ontologically supporting and reproducing.

This chapter opens with an empirical grounding of these debates' relevance in the everyday concerns of parents towards their young children's digital practice. It is argued that these concerns exhibit similar contradictions in daily life, but nevertheless consistently draw on differing parental ontologies, as evidenced in empirical interview material collected in a German and two Danish nursery institutions. The parents' everyday concerns are thereafter contrasted with the European Council's digital concerns, the latter largely ignoring even the existence of the former. After a brief introduction of the chapter's case study methodology, digital literacy initiatives from Germany and Denmark are contrasted. It is argued that such initiatives substantially co-constitute the discursive and thus the imaginative frame for parents' possibilities to articulate their digital parental concerns, particularly in moments of heightened uncertainty. Finally, it is concluded that digital parenting concerns cannot be purposefully debated without a more general debate as to what a parent ought to be.

## **DIGITAL PARENTAL CONCERNS SHAKING UP STABILIZED ONTOLOGIES**

The initially presented ontological discourses of what a parent should be in times of children's increasingly digitalized everyday life, showcase mere – nationalized – snapshots of the variety of understandings that parents articulate when asked about this issue. Interviews conducted with parents and nursery professionals in the context of two long-term participatory studies at a German nursery and two Danish nurseries underline the fact that extreme cases of techno-euphoric and techno-dystopic discourses can be identified across national borders, frequently even within the very same interview with the very same interviewee:

A father in Germany does not want one of his son's kindergarten friends to come over, as the friend is a purported digital addict and the father fears the friend might harm his son's social behaviour – while at the same time the father himself is an eager computer game player and also praises his son as a digital native. A mother in Denmark tells me that she is fascinated by how her son clicks through YouTube and learns foreign language words via the cartoons he chooses to watch – while strictly opposing the idea that a nursery should include digital literacy in its pedagogical curriculum. A couple from the same institution agree that the nursery should be devoid of digital devices for children – yet they still want their daughter to develop digital skills for her future life, while the only ritualized digital engagement they allow for is television watching before dinner time. At another Danish nursery, a parental couple is happy about the application *Famly*, which nursery staff use to inform parents about what projects their children engage in throughout the day, and to remind them of upcoming events – with the mother asking for more *Famly* messages, while the father feels overwhelmed by the quantity of *Famly* messages received.

All parents I have interviewed explicitly agree that they are deeply concerned about current digital developments and how best to prepare their children for them: In a nutshell, they are uncertain as to whether to prioritize their child's current well-being or projected future well-becoming. This results in insecurity with regard to how to discuss and meaningfully engage with their children's increasingly digitalized everyday life, regardless of whether their respective nursery's pedagogical approach actively promotes digital literacy or not. A certain degree of parental uncertainty in this matter is surely unavoidable – as Lynn Schofield Clark (2012) also illustrates in her book *The parent app*, one of the few academic publications on this topic also addressing parents (arguably, in particular the blog *Parenting for a Digital Future*<sup>2</sup>, but also the related Media Policy Brief, could be considered relevant academic publications directed at parents; cf. Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2016). Everyday family life is already too varied and unpredictable for there to be a list of straightforward and standardized guidelines on how to handle parents' digital concerns. Meanwhile, it is broadly acknowledged that parents should become actively interested and engaged in their children's digital practice. *How* this combines with other parenting activities, whether supporting and/or contradicting them, however, has until now hardly been investigated.

A recent exception is a chapter written by media researcher Maja Sonne Damkjær, who investigated Danish couples' use of digital media at the transition to becoming parents, ergo during pregnancy and up until four months after giving

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2 <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/parenting4digitalfuture/>

birth – thus at a time when uncertainties regarding good parenting are arguably most prominent in a couple’s everyday life. She found that digital media content actively co-produces new parents’ understandings of parenthood, that there is societal pressure on parents to (digitally) communicate, reflect on and aestheticize parenthood, and finally that the communicative framings around parenthood are destabilized, which can lead to both gain and loss of autonomy and in extreme cases disturb parenthood’s central task: to care together for the child (Damkjær, 2016, pp. 126-127).

New (as well as, in my own empirical material, experienced) parents’ digital uncertainties, then, regard not only children’s acceptable digital practice, but clearly also the parents’ own digital practice (see also clinical psychologist Møhl’s claims above). Moments of heightened parental doubt, given the destabilized communicative framings surrounding parenthood, may make parents more prone to turn to currently popular public discourses – at least as a referential framework or *backdrop for articulating their concerns*. Although there are many similarities in the everyday parental ambivalences, contradictions and insecurities with regard to discussing and acting on their young children’s digital practices, these were differently articulated according to whether the interviews were conducted in Germany or in Denmark. For instance, the above mentioned father, the one who fears his son’s friend’s negative influence, emphasizes that it is a parent’s central task to protect the child from social and thus also digital harm – while the Danish parents I talked to are utterly aware that they ought to be welcoming digital education into the nursery, and thus feel like harming their child’s future becoming when acting too protectively. This nation-specific appraisal would also be broadly in line with the country clusters synthesizing opportunities, risks and harm experienced by the children who participated in the EU Kids Online project (cf. Helsper, Kalmus, Hasebrink, Sagvari & De Haan, 2013).

The working hypothesis for this chapter, then, is that there exist fundamentally differing parent ontologies in German and Danish popular discourses around digital literacy: one that values parental protection from digital harm, and one that values parental openness to digital gain. It is one of the aims of this chapter to identify and inquire into the presumable discursive backdrop, where it consolidates certain ontologies while at the same time creating new contradictions, leaving the parents feeling alone with their digital concerns as they juggle their daily family life.

## AN INQUIRY INTO DIGITAL LITERACY CONCERNS AND INITIATIVES AFFECTING NURSERY ARRANGEMENTS

In 2015, the Council of the European Union (EC) in its conclusions on the role of early childhood education and primary education in fostering creativity, innovation and digital competence<sup>3</sup> acknowledged that we live in “a world where many children tend to be quite comfortable with digital media” (p. 19), a view that despite meaningful critiques (e.g. Helsper & Eynon, 2009; Selwyn, 2012) echoes Prensky’s (2001) widely popularized idea that the current generation of children and youth can be purposefully described by the term *digital natives*. Nevertheless, recent EC-funded research emphasizes not only the many opportunities involved for children in using digital media and particularly in surfing the World Wide Web, but also its multiple risks, many of which were articulated as problematic by the young users themselves (cf. EU Kids Online, 2014), as well as by their parents in the context of parental mediation efforts (cf. Livingstone, Mascheroni, Dreier, Chaudron & Lagae, 2015). Hence, the question of how digitally literate or competent children actually are when it comes to decoding, critically questioning and reflexively acting on digitally transmitted media content, including computer game content, remains academically and politically unsettled. Accordingly, related concerns vary strongly in EU public discourses across member states. This is the case despite EU-wide digital literacy initiatives such as the Better Internet for Kids strategy<sup>4</sup> and its national Safer Internet Centres – arguably on a continuum with neighbours Germany and Denmark marking the two extremes. This variety is mirrored in a nation’s rating systems and institutions for computer games, television series and films, meant to legally protect the child from harmful media content (cf. Dreyer, 2018, this volume; Schank, 2018, this volume; Hjorth, 2018, this volume), as well as official political initiatives to promote digital literacy, including research funding and media reports covering these initiatives and their outcomes (but also actual possibilities for children to participate in computer game and other digital design processes [cf. Berriman, 2018, this volume]).

More important for the argument here, however, is that these institutional concerns, socially and materially stabilized in popular media and political discourses and initiatives around children’s Internet usage and more generally usage of digital devices in everyday life, not only feed on distinct ontological understandings of what children are and what they can do at certain ages. They also feed on distinct ontological understandings of what parents (and other adults) are and what they

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3 I wish to thank Jaakko Hilppö for pointing me to the publication of this document.

4 [www.betterinternetforkids.eu](http://www.betterinternetforkids.eu)

can do in the light of new technological challenges in everyday life. This, in turn, has consequences for the self-understanding that the respective nation state and its institutions (government, ministries, agencies, municipalities, as well as media institutions) produce and reproduce when launching and funding initiatives that support the development of digital literacy.

It will be argued that a selective current snapshot of national, institutionally supported digital literacy initiatives and related media coverage, with EU-wide initiatives acting as backdrop, reveals similar material-discursive tendencies in both Germany and Denmark and simultaneously one crucial difference. In both cases, children appear to be primarily understood as agentic and skilful digital users in need of guidance; however, within Germany's rather techno-protectionist ontological framework, children are understood as less digitally literate than parents, as being more at risk of harm and in need of strong parental protection (despite positive regulation measures [cf. Raczkowski, 2018, this volume; also Dreyer, 2018, this volume; Martin & Aßmann, 2018, this volume]). Accordingly, digital literacy initiatives primarily focus on slowly developing the child's individual literacy via pedagogical-educational institutions such as nurseries, while broadly ignoring the parents' development. Within Denmark's rather techno-invitationalist ontological framework, children are understood as digitally quite literate but not yet enough for anticipated, future (economic) challenges. They not only need parental guidance, but parental co-development of digital literacy. Initiatives thus focus on developing children's digital literacy in interplay with the digital literacy of the intergenerational communities they are part of, with special emphasis on the nuclear family's digital literacy (although in Germany, assistance in becoming responsible members of the community is also centrally mentioned in the German Constitution, [cf. Dreyer, 2018, this volume]; hence, this task is also reiterated in German pedagogical programmes, such as the Berlin Educational Programme [*Berliner Bildungsprogramm*] [cf. Chimirri, 2014]). Issues related to computer games and other digital concerns could thus be understood as pointing to transgenerational problems with digital literacy within Danish discourses, rather than reproducing them as an individual child's or a specific generation's problem. At the same time, these discourses suggest that Danish pedagogical-educational professionals and parents should not only rearrange everyday life practice so as to better prepare children for future technological and labour market challenges, but should also welcome technological change into the intergenerational everyday life practice and enthusiastically appropriate it together with the children.

## A HEURISTIC CASE STUDY APPROACH TO CONTRASTING DIGITAL LITERACY CONCERNS AND INITIATIVES

The argumentation presented here is based on empirical material generated during fieldwork at a nursery institution in Berlin, Germany, as well as initial empirical insights into two nursery institutions in Denmark, including analyses of which pedagogical discourses the institutions explicitly and implicitly build their digital literacy practice upon. The German study was part of my PhD research project (Chimirri, 2014), and following a one-week pilot, conducted in the spring/summer of 2011, I visited the institution 55 times over a course of four months, keeping a research diary with a primary focus on children's individual and collaborative activities and their possibilities for drawing on popular media content and narratives. Diary notes were complemented with 20 hours of video observations, 15 hours of recorded conversations with children, staff and parents, problem-centred interviews with 13 staff members including the leadership, and nine problem-centred interviews with parents. The study in Denmark is still ongoing, and was started in September 2016 at two nurseries that are located in proximity to my university, but belong to two different municipalities, and vary considerably in size, in their material and pedagogical arrangements, and not least in their uptake of digital devices in institutional everyday life. In this project, the analytical focus is on what the politically strongly promoted digitalization of early childhood education and care in Denmark may imply for children's possibilities for engaging with the material and social arrangement of the institution and for fostering their well-being. Again, a research diary is being kept of the – by now – around 20 visits per institution, and complemented with video observations, audio recordings of spontaneous conversations with children, staff and parents and of staff interviews and parent interviews.

In this chapter, this empirical material generated together with parents during participatory fieldwork serves as a motivation for looking into the two nationalized cases of digital literacy initiatives and their articulations of parent ontologies. As stated in the beginning, parental concerns and uncertainties about securing their children's future well-being by fostering digital literacy emerged in relation to contradictory expectations articulated, among others, by lawmakers, the mass media and other public discourses enacted in such initiatives (on the contradictory nature of the legal framework for parenting in Germany [cf. especially Dreyer,

2018, this volume])<sup>5</sup>. In the process of trying to trace and inquire into these actualized public discourses, I let myself be guided by all the adult research participants with whom I came in contact, in particular the parents I conversed with and interviewed, but also pedagogical staff, colleagues at relevant research gatherings, and experts such as the Head of the Danish Media Council for Children and Young People, Anne Mette Thorhauge, whom I interviewed in the context of another research project (cf. Das & Ytre-Arne, 2017). These contacts pointed me to those digital literacy initiatives as well as to underlying legal sources that they considered most relevant in order to make sense of parental articulations of what to do about their children's use of (digital) media, and I followed up with cross-reference research on the European Commission's and the respective initiatives' websites, as well as with related, current media coverage searches via Google and DuckDuckGo search engines in order to further diversify perspectives on this matter of concern.

The methodology enacted in selecting and analysing the thus gathered sources is inspired by psychology from the standpoint of the subject (e.g. Schraube & Osterkamp, 2013; Motzkau & Schraube, 2015; Busch-Jensen, 2015), qualitative heuristics (e.g. Kleining & Witt, 2001) as well as the phonetic approach to working with case studies (e.g. Flyvbjerg, 2001). Although grounded in different philosophical paradigms, all three approaches highlight the need to let methodical decisions follow the subject matter under scrutiny, and hold that iterative adjustments throughout the research process are not only acceptable, but unavoidable, given that insight into the subject matter develops and along with it the researcher's analytical tools. As a result, such processual methodologies cannot generate any *final* results, but rather historically-societally situated, intermediary insights which potentially lead to the posing of a different set of collectively relevant questions to the subject matter under scrutiny (cf. Chimirri, Andersen, Jensen, Søndergaard & Wulff Kristiansen, 2018, this volume; also: Amin & Thrift, 2005). With another methodological approach and analytical focus, I would have ended

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5 Parental concerns and uncertainties also emerged as more ambivalent and contradictory in the German context I explored than what Martin & Abmann's (2018, this volume) findings suggest. I speculate this may be due to my research focusing not solely on computer games, but on the wider media landscape; the fact that I only talked to parents with children in nursery, where for instance violent computer games are less of an explicit issue; and the fact that my analytical interest was not primarily focused on the parents' concerns during the interviews, but on what they considered their children to be doing with (digital) media and why they found these to be (un)important for their institutional everyday life.

up with a different selection of relevant sources and thus different findings. But rather than viewing alternative samples and findings, such as those of the European Audiovisual Observatory's (2016) *Mapping of media literacy practices and actions in EU-28*, as standing in opposition to the selection made here, I understand them as an analytical complement that would need to be taken into consideration when attempting to critically reflect on and generalize across the analytical foci and questions addressed in this chapter and in the mapping report.

In the two nationalized case analyses of this chapter (Danish and German digital literacy initiatives and related media coverage), the subject matter consists of similarities in understanding publicly formulated and iteratively reproduced concerns around young children's digital literacy, including how it should be promoted and what role parents should assume in this promotion. The above described approach follows the heuristic methodological principle of "aiming at *exploration and discoveries*" (Kleining & Witt, 2001, para. 11, emphasis in original; cf. Chimirri, 2014, pp. 56-58), while seeking to maximally diversify the perspectives on the subject matter. In my interpretation of qualitative heuristics, the search for similarity goes hand in hand with the diversification of perspectives<sup>6</sup> (or sources and genres) over the course of an inquiry process, in that the discovery of a similarity across diversified perspectives calls for a critical examination of this very same similarity by further diversifying perspectives. It thus represents an ongoing, inherently explorative and democratic approach to prototyping discoveries, suggesting always preliminary conclusions that enable and call for further theoretical development through dialogue and ensuing new questions to the perspectives analysed, pointing to alternative, not-yet-considered perspectives and foci of analysis. Accordingly, although this chapter started out with an interest in mapping the child ontologies present in current German and Danish discourses on digital literacy, the research process and its analytical interest in pinpointing how digital concerns are socially and materially stabilized in different ways in the nursery institutions I visited, as well as in relevant documents, ultimately afforded me to redirect the focus towards the child-adult relationship and more specifically towards differing ontologies of parenthood.

Flyvbjerg's (2001) phronetic approach to working with case studies is further valuable in that it emphasizes contextual values and situational ethics, thereby rejecting the question of whether one nation's institutionalized digital literacy practice is universally better than the other. Instead, working phronetically with cases

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6 Perspectives not understood in an essentialist, ocularcentric manner, ergo as viewpoints belonging to one particular individual, but as the enactment of a relatively stabilized, material-discursive arrangement or configuration.

may allow the emergence of alternative interpretations of what is at stake in the respective digital literacy practice, allowing for critical inquiry into nationalized presumptions of what aims digital literacy initiatives are to strive for (such as, e.g., job market readiness). Moreover, phronetic social research places power at the core of the analysis, or more specifically: the governmental rationalities that “are at work when those who govern govern” (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 131). These rationalities are not per se problematic, and neither is power. But power may be exercised in problematic ways (cf. also Busch-Jensen, 2015). For instance, to borrow from the insights of Karen Barad, the problematic exercising of power may be in play once “material-discursive apparatuses of bodily production” (2003, p. 827) become configured as apparently immovable and unquestionable. Once power relations are rendered non-renegotiable, they merely reproduce the dominant-hegemonic meaning structures in the sense of Hall (1980), which, in a diffractive reading through psychology from the standpoint of the subject, constitute the currently most self-suggestive *imaginable possibilities for acting and collaborating* (cf. Chimirri, 2012; 2014) on digital literacy across variations of perspective. Thus, who we (via the governmental rationalities we are acting through) understand to be the primary addressees of institutionally supported digital literacy initiatives, given certain, apparently obvious ontological configurations of these addressees, powerfully frames and temporarily stabilizes our possibilities for how to meaningfully relate to and renegotiate digital practice in children’s and adults’ everyday life. This is illustrated in depth by means of contrasting two arguably extreme cases within the EU with regard to regulating children’s digital engagements and to framing digital literacy initiatives: the case of German initiatives and the case of Danish initiatives.

## **THE CASE OF GERMAN DIGITAL LITERACY INITIATIVES: ADDRESSING PARENTS AND EDUCATORS AS A KEY TO REACHING CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS**

The formulation “addressing parents and educators as a key to reaching children and adolescents” is borrowed from the German web presence *klicksafe* (What does *klicksafe* do?, n.d.). It describes how *klicksafe*, the German awareness centre of the EU-wide Better Internet for Kids strategy<sup>7</sup>, intends to achieve its goals: In addition to providing children and youth directly with information and activities that

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7 The German Safer Internet Centre not only encompasses *klicksafe* as awareness centre, but also two national alert platforms for reporting illegal content on the Internet:

aim at promoting their media literacy, for instance through small film clips, the initiative seeks to address parents and pedagogical-educational professionals as responsible gatekeepers and protectors of children's inviolacy. Educators are primarily to ensure that children will be protected from Internet risks and harms.

The presumably best-known digital literacy campaign in Germany is called *Schau hin! Was Dein Kind mit Medien macht* (Look! What your child does with media; the exclamation's imperative meaning can best be approximated in English by doubly negating it: Don't look away!). It intends to be an online parent guidebook on media usage, which supports educators in strengthening their children in handling media (SCHAU HIN! hilft Eltern, n.d.), and is a collaboration between the Federal Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, German public television (ARD and ZDF) and the television magazine *TV Spielfilm*. In existence since 2003, the umbrella campaign supports around 60 national initiatives on media and digital literacy, features German TV ambassadors and is promoted on public television also around prime time. Its statement of purpose notes that it aims at promoting *Medienkompetenz* (media literacy) (SCHAU HIN! hilft Eltern, n.d.). The website explicitly addresses parents, both via its title and its web presence (look at what YOUR child does with media).

Other politically supported initiatives that primarily or secondarily address parents include *klick-tips* (Willkommen auf der Erwachsenenseite, n.d.), which is a collaboration between the competence centre for the protection of minors on the Internet, *jugendschutz.net* (financed by the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, the regional youth protection and youth media protection agencies, and also part of the EU's Better Internet for Kids strategy) and the *Stiftung MedienKompetenz Forum Südwest*, a foundation financed by two southern regional media agencies as well as one public television & radio station.

These online initiatives address parents rather than pedagogical-educational staff. The latter's function in promoting digital literacy is foremost emphasized elsewhere, for instance in the Education and Science Workers' Union's research publications (e.g. GEW [2016] on new media at school), as well as via the relevant national legal framework (SGBVIII) and in particular the regional pedagogical programmes. Education is *Ländersache* in Germany: The main legislative and administrative responsibility lies with Germany's 16 federal states, its parliaments and relevant agencies. For nursery professionals, the federal parliaments issue

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1. jugendschutz.net, 2. the complaint office IBSDE, driven by the Voluntary Self-Monitoring of Multimedia Service Providers (FSM e. V.) in cooperation with the internet industry association, eco.

guidelines that specify the national legal framework, and which are in turn reinterpreted by the various institutions according to their own pedagogical aims (for more detailed analyses of this interplay, see Chimirri, 2014, pp. 61-104). Berlin's pedagogical programme, for instance, specifies how professional staff should assist children in discovering digital opportunities and make it part of pedagogical projects, calling for professionals to develop their digital literacy as well. A more systematic approach is offered by the federal state of North Rhine-Westphalia: It launched a programme (*Medienkompetenz-Kitas NRW*<sup>8</sup>) that on the one hand offers professional media literacy training for nursery staff and on the other hand makes suggestions as to how parents can use digital devices at home together with their children in educationally purposeful ways. Approaches to how media and digital literacy should be addressed and/or implemented thus vary widely across federal states, including the extent to which pedagogical-educational staff should become involved.

Media coverage of digital literacy issues repeatedly reproduces polarized viewpoints on digital technology's ubiquity and its consequences for the individual child. In the initially mentioned talk show *Hart aber fair*, cognitive neuroscientist and psychiatrist Manfred Spitzer most clearly represented the techno-dystopic and protectionist pole. Entrepreneur Frank Thelen represented the techno-invitational pole, which is worried about the nation's future economic development and fears that German children will end up as 'digital illiterates'. The techno-enthusiasts focus more on the future employability of the individual child rather than on any possible uncontrollable effects on well-being or health as a result of excessive or inappropriate digital exposure. Interventions by the press include helping the individual child to identify Internet risks (such as in *Dein SPIEGEL* 3/2012, the monthly child-directed version of Germany's most renowned weekly news magazine *DER SPIEGEL*, in which the issue was entitled *Ich und das Internet: Surfen, Lernen, Gefahr erkennen* [I and the Internet: Surfing, learning, recognizing danger] [Mascolo, 2012]) as well as calls for professional nursery and other educational staff to make use of digital learning games and further train digital literacy, as has been happening in Germany in recent years (cf. Lorenzen's [2013, 20 February] article in *Wirtschaftswoche* entitled *Digital education: Why the tablet should be introduced to the kindergarten*).

Many more nuanced (often but not exclusively academic) voices also partake in these debates, including within the above-mentioned talk show and press articles. Nevertheless, while children and professional nursery staff are to be trained in digital literacy, the analysis' main discovery is that it is the parents who are

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8 [www.meko-kitas-nrw.de](http://www.meko-kitas-nrw.de)

expected foremost to monitor and regulate quantitative and qualitative access to digital content. Parents are thus addressed as persons relevant to the child's everyday life only to the extent that they hold a 'monopoly position' in the access to and thereby promotion of their children's digital literacy, as also expressed in a study issued by the corporately funded *Deutsches Institut für Vertrauen und Sicherheit im Internet* (DIVSI) (German Institute for Trust and Security on the Internet) (DIVSI, 2015, p. 76). Parents primarily act as the children's gatekeepers, both in relation to how children are to be exposed to media as well as to digital literacy initiatives.

## THE CASE OF DANISH DIGITAL LITERACY INITIATIVES: INTERGENERATIONAL COMMUNITIES AS IDEAL ADDRESSEES

In Denmark, the awareness centre of the EU's Better Internet for Kids strategy is hosted by the Media Council for Children and Young People (whose Director, as mentioned, also contributed a chapter to the current anthology [cf. Thorhauge, 2018, this volume]). The Media Council is part of the Danish Film Institute and was established in 1997, with the primary task of classifying films and DVDs for children under the age of fifteen. It thus started out with an explicitly protectionist agenda. In 2004, it began hosting the awareness centre<sup>9</sup> with a mandate "to create awareness and inform about children's use of the Internet and new digital technologies as well as provide parents and educators with knowledge and tools for guiding children in the network society" (Awareness Centre Denmark, n.d., para. 2). It now collaborates with the Danish Centre for Digital Youth Care (*Center for Digital Pædagogik*) and its *cyberhus*<sup>10</sup> helpline as well as the hotline of the NGO Save the Children (*Red Barnet*) in order to implement the national Safer Internet Centre.

The provision of knowledge and tools to parents and pedagogical-educational staff and thus the promotion not only of children's, but also parents' and professional's digital literacy, rests primarily with the Media Council. It publishes news and reports, initiates research projects, seeks dialogue with the industry as well as academia and regularly contributes to public debates through established chan-

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9 First under the umbrella of the EU's Safer Internet Initiative, now under Better Internet for Kids.

10 [www.cyberhus.dk](http://www.cyberhus.dk)

nels. It also uses its own website to reach out to children, parents and professionals. Its interventions are less of a prescriptive kind than many of those offered in Germany, for instance in terms of children's quantitative media exposure. Sporadically, this lack of prescriptive guidelines – which could arguably assist Danish parents and professionals to take responsible decisions in relation to media exposure – is criticized, recently for example by Save the Children (cf. Ritzau, 2015). Possibly as response to such (partly internal) criticisms, while underlining the aim of promoting the digital literacy not only of children and professionals, but also of parents, the Media Council issued a guidebook for parents of children aged seven to twelve, together with the Danish Centre for Digital Youth Care and Save the Children (Medierådet, 2015; co-financed by several corporate partners such as Lego and Microsoft; cf. also the section on Denmark in the European Audiovisual Observatory's 2016 report). Among other things, parents are also asked to reflect on their own digital practice, and take it as point of departure for a fellow inter-generational exploration of digital concerns and challenges.

A similarly self-reflexive chord is struck by the former Director of The National Council for Children (*Børnerådet*), Per Schultz Jørgensen, in an article on setting parental rules for children's digital practice published in the free consumer newspaper *Søndagsavisen*. One of the suggestions for setting rules is: Create a family narrative in which your community ought not to be replaced by tablets and phones, but in which you instead all engage in something together. Be ready to offer your children alternative content and ways of being together when they are not allowed to use screens (Kjeldsen, 2015, para. 9).

Since Egedal municipality kicked off the presumably first iPad acquisition programme for nursery children of all ages (cf. Gräs, 2011), professional nursery staff have increasingly tended to be articulated as willing to engage in explorations of digital literacy together with children: For instance, they are meant to become “digital forerunners” (Mehlsen, 2014, p. 6, my translation), as described in an interview with media and communication researcher Stine Liv Johansen<sup>11</sup> from Aarhus University published in a special issue of *Børn & Unge Forskning*, the research magazine of the Danish Union of Early Childhood and Youth Educators (BUPL). A number of other researchers emphasize a similar understanding of the same issue, and the assessment is also iterated on channels oriented at pedagogical-educational staff (cf. Schousboe, 2014) as well as national media outlets such as DR<sup>12</sup> (cf. Rosenberg & Øtting, 2014), which reported on Johansen's studies in

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11 Johansen later became a member of the Media Council for Children and Youth, in the spring of 2016.

12 [www.dr.dk](http://www.dr.dk)

an after-school care club in Odder municipality that started a pilot project in 2013/2014 on implementing iPads so as to ease the transition between nursery and school. The pilot was positively evaluated by the municipality, which decided to implement it in all its nursery centres in combination with comprehensive wireless LAN access.

Through meta-reports such as the one recently issued by the Implement Consulting Group in cooperation with *Socialt Udviklingscenter* (2015) on behalf of the Danish Ministry for Children, Education and Gender Equality (UVM) and the Danish Agency for Digitisation (*Digitaliseringsstyrelsen*), such municipal initiatives tend to be displayed as best practice examples of how it may make sense to promote the pedagogical use of digital devices in nursery everyday life. Such material-discursive arrangements have already had an impact, for instance in current suggestions on how to create *Fremtidens Dagtilbud* (Nursery of the Future)<sup>13</sup>, in which it is stressed that older nursery children should learn to use iPads so as to be better prepared for working digitally in school (cf. Blicher, 2016). Or, as it is put in the new 2016-2020 digitalization strategy issued by government, municipalities and regions: In a digital world, IT and digital tools and learning devices should be a natural part of pedagogical practice, of the teaching and education of children and youth. New digital tools and learning devices are meant to challenge the digital generation in nursery centres, schools and other educational institutions, and to enable good pedagogical practice and high-quality teaching (Digitaliseringsstyrelsen, 2016, p. 29). Notably, promotion of parents' digital literacy is neither explicitly addressed in the Implement/SUS (2015) report, nor in the *Digitalization strategy 2016-2020*. Here, parents are chiefly mentioned when it comes to expanding and easing digital communication between pedagogical-educational institutions, state agencies and parents – thereby implicitly reproducing their gatekeeper function.

In practice, Danish nurseries relate to the integration of digital devices and the promotion of digital literacy very differently – depending, among other factors, on the municipality to which they belong. One of the nurseries I collaborate with was initially provided with three iPads, and some staff briefly experimented with its pedagogical possibilities. However, underdeveloped technical infrastructure and a prioritization of care-related projects halted most digital activities that directly involved tablet-child interaction. The other nursery, located nearby but belonging

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13 A comprehensive development programme initiated by the last government and implemented by a consortium consisting of higher education institutions, evaluation agencies and a consulting firm and being tested in 14 municipalities; cf. *Fremtidens Dagtilbud* (n.d.).

to another municipality, acquired tablet computers and in particular an application called *Famly*. On the one hand, this app enables parents to digitally check-in and check-out their children at the nursery entrance, giving the nursery leader the possibility to monitor attendance at any time. On the other hand, it provides tools to show the parents what has been happening throughout their child's nursery day, via photos, text, etc. There are other digital applications providing very similar services, such as *KBHforældre* (for all nursery parents in Copenhagen municipality), *Børn & Unge Intra* in the *Fremtidens Dagtilbud* framework and *Forældreintra* (an intranet platform for all Danish school parents) that place at least an implicit demand on the parents to expand their digital literacy – whether they want to or not (cf. Akselvoll, 2016).

In conclusion, then, it is generally not the individual child that is seen to be at risk from digital harm, as in Germany, but rather the nuclear family and the communities in Denmark that appear to be at risk from falling behind in their technological innovation potential. Therefore, digital literacy initiatives, addressing parents primarily through the equipping of the children's educational institutions with digital devices and pedagogies, are implemented in much more concerted ways than would be possible in federally organized and traditionally techno-sceptic Germany. Furthermore, these initiatives are deeply interconnected with broader societal digitalization tendencies in Danish everyday life and citizenship, as will be shown in the following section.

## **A PRELIMINARY CONTEXTUALIZING SYNTHESIS: PARENTING BETWEEN TECHNO-PROTECTIONISM AND TECHNO-INVITATIONALISM**

Despite relatively consistent articulations of the role of parents and parenting in digital literacy initiatives and related public discourses within the two national contexts, it is important to remember that parents (and to some extent also professional nursery staff) struggle with finding meaningful ways of translating these articulations into their everyday life with children. These articulations do not fit the complexity of everyday parenting questions and challenges, or actually: They *cannot* fit the complexity of everyday parenting, as practice always transgresses the verbalizable, synthesized and collectively negotiated understandings of it. As argued above, however, they do act as a backdrop for making sense of one's parental practice in digitalized times, and they appear meaningful also because they are embedded in broader, historically relatively stabilized and nationalized discourses.

sive frameworks regarding care, education, technology and citizenship. The following paragraphs are intended to exemplify these discursive intertwinements, which are never void of ambivalences and contradictions, but carry intertextual validity and authority and thereby provide the certainty that is sought after in times of heightened doubt. Once we turn to some of the European Council's transnational documents regarding digital literacy and also parenting, however, ambivalences and contradictions re-emerge more clearly.

In Denmark, the focus of the societal function of nursery institutions has been slowly shifting from primarily serving the well-being of young children towards serving the well-being of the young children's families, and thereby more specifically the parents. According to Sine Pentthin Grumløse (2014), who engaged in a Foucault-inspired diachronic and synchronic reading of political debates on Danish nursery legislation in the period 1960-2010, this development ended in implementing a neoliberal management rationale that emphasizes the promotion of flexibility for the parents of young children.

Although parents' current and children's future employability play an important role in understanding the political nudge towards the digitalization of nurseries across the EU, German initiatives seem to weigh parents' *current* employability higher: The nursery is first and foremost an institution that disburdens the working parents of the task of raising a self-responsible and community-able citizen, while strongly valuing their legally granted *natural right to educate the child* (cf. Chimirri, 2014, pp. 64-69).

Danish institutional initiatives more explicitly intervene into parents' rearing and educational practices. This implies that parents are to become more digitally literate alongside their children, and that nursery institutions cannot merely promote the digital literacy of young children, but also need to have a focus on promoting the digital literacy of parents alongside the digital literacy of the education professionals. This would also be in line with the EU-wide Better Internet for Kids strategy, whose national Safer Internet Centres are to "empower children, young people, parents, carers and teachers with the skills, knowledge and strategies to stay safe online and take advantage of the opportunities that internet and mobile technology provides" (Insafe and Inhope, n.d.).

In Denmark, the proliferation of digital tools for conducting everyday life as both a citizen and a consumer has been promoted much more strongly than in Germany: In 2014, 72 per cent of the Danish population accessed the Internet via their mobile phones or smartphones, in comparison to 56 per cent in Germany and an average of 57 per cent in the EU (Danmarks Statistik, 2015). Also thanks to unequivocally attributable, personalized social security ID numbers, which only

have a much more restricted equivalent in the German tax ID number, communication with the municipality, with the doctor, the child's school and with companies in Denmark is largely digitalized. Everyday conversations about and experiences with digital sociomaterial arrangements are thus more broadly normalized for most Danish parents of young children, including the necessity to actively relate to and draw on discourses regarding parenting in digitalized times.

The German sources investigated in this chapter, in turn, resonate surprisingly well with the most recent European Council's (Council of the European Union, 2015) conclusions, which formally recognize "the important role of parents and families" in facilitating "access to and the promotion of ICT and the development of digital competence through age-appropriate exposure to, and the integration of, digital tools throughout early childhood education and primary education" (p. 19). Meanwhile, and unlike in its 2012 conclusions on the *European strategy for a better Internet for children*, the European Council does not explicitly reiterate the claim that "parents themselves need support and training not only to keep up with the fast and unpredictable changes in children's virtual lives, but also the constantly evolving new technologies" (Council of the European Union, 2012, p. 13). This is different for early childhood teachers/pedagogues. The latter are to "develop the capacity, methodology and skills to promote the effective and responsible use of new technologies for pedagogical purposes and to support children in developing digital competence" (Council of the European Union, 2015, p. 19).

The reasons behind this broad neglect of nursery parents' active involvement in the European Council's latest conclusions on educational policies on digital literacy cannot be sustainably speculated upon here. However, it is worth noting that, as in German digital literacy initiatives, parents are addressed rather as gatekeepers to the institutional promotion of digital literacy among young children in the European Council's document from 2015. The Danish discourses, conversely, resonate better with the European Council's conclusions of 2012, as these digital literacy initiatives much more explicitly make demands on the parents and families in the development and promotion of digital competences.

## **CONCLUSION: TOWARD AN INTERGENERATIONAL, RECIPROCALLY CRITICAL TECHNOLOGY EDUCATION**

As illustrated in the above analyses, while national public discourses on digital literacy may be relatively one-sided, parenting as part of living in digital times, meanwhile, is most certainly not. The European Council's propositions from

2012, contrasted with the propositions from 2015, show that a transnational consensus on what role ‘good’ parents are to play in the promotion of digital literacy may be hard or even impossible to attain. While the contradictoriness of the subject matter emerges when looking in greater detail at the respective public debates, it tends to get swept under the rug once national political decisions need to be taken (and that sweep may arguably be unavoidable in a representational democracy) – just as much as when supposedly important parental decisions need to be taken, ergo when so-called parental ‘principles’ are stabilized.

Perhaps principle-seeking parents think too much of what is right for their children’s development of digital literacy, instead of thinking how their own digital practice also makes sense to themselves, as well as to the family, as well as to other contexts the family is a part of (including work, hobbies, engagements with friends close-by and distant, and everyday acts of practicing citizenship). These contexts and the people involved are not separable from one another in the everyday conducts of life of the parents, and nor is their digital practice across these contexts: They are inextricably intertwined. Hyper-reflexivity of this interrelationship on behalf of the parents, conversely, can also create fictions, frictions and problems: The co-active parent ontology primarily identified in Danish discourses can make the complexity of intertwined parent responsibilities seem entirely overburdening, given that it implicitly posits other, non-parental activities considered to be important for living a good life as neglectable.

Arguably, though, such overburdening is most prone to happen if one confines one’s reflections of digital everyday living with children to the naturalized discourses within one’s own national context, and to one’s institutionalized role as a parent (i.e. the most prominent parent ontologies). A contrasting look into another national context and its most prominent discourses may be important in order to transcend the backdrop against which one as a parent reflects one’s own digital living, with one’s child as well as any other person.

When I engage in interviews with nursery parents on their children’s well-being at the nursery in digitalized times, it is methodologically speaking crucial for me to invite questions and curiosity from their side, to let the interview turn into uncertain dialogic conversation, to be able to explore one another’s experiences. Indeed, all parents I spoke to inquired into my experiences with digital (parenting) practice in other national contexts, inquired into what other parents would do, while at the same time seeking alternative, academically validated, clear-cut and rather one-sided answers as to how parenting can be done better, both in terms of the child’s current and its future well-being. Here, the challenges and uncertainties faced by parents in digitalized everyday parenting truly emerge,

and the nationalized discursive backdrop is transcended, in search of liveable alternative ontologies.

In order to let these liveable alternative ontologies emerge, it is crucial to continue a critical dialogue about them across professional perspectives, as we are doing in this anthology, but even more explicitly to continue our explorations and discussions together with those parents that we as researchers, game designers, regulators, etc. come in contact with. Let us continue inquiring into the contradictoriness and diversity of parenting and our respective digital practice across the various institutionalized positions we are embodying, across the contexts we inhabit and to which we contribute. And let us involve children more actively in these processes and debates, where well-being as a child, as a parent, as a family is placed on the collaborative agenda, just as much as well-being as a citizen of a nation, of the EU, of the world. Such a practice could be termed an intergenerational, reciprocally *critical technology education*, whose aim is “to nurture agency which not only survives and adapts to existing conditions, but seeks to influence them in providing a fairer and more equal society” (Saariketo, 2014, p. 136; with inspiration from Freire, 2000). Parental (and human) uncertainty may thereby never be fully overcome, at least never for good – the world is changing, technology is changing, the family is changing, we ourselves are changing. But by rendering more explicit how we are part of making these changes happen, by educating one another about them, by temporarily agreeing on what we can do about them, across age thresholds and institutionalized ontologies, as parents and non-parents, we can at least make certain that we are never alone with our everyday digitalized lives and concerns.

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