

MEDIA USE IN LIFE TRANSITIONS

ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses how media use changes when everyday life undergoes change, focusing on major life transitions. I briefly introduce different perspectives on evolving media repertoires across the life course, and argue for the relevance of studying periods of destabilization and reorientation, when elements of media repertoires and modes of public connection are temporarily or more permanently transformed. I argue that easily adaptable media technologies such as smartphones tend to become more important in unsettled circumstances, as easy-to-reach for tools for new forms of self-expression, information-seeking or social contact, in accordance with shifting social roles and everyday circumstances. The primary empirical material analyzed in the chapter is a small qualitative interview study with mothers, about their media use the first year with a new-born.

When something important changes in your life, what happens to the ways you use media? This chapter analyses how transformations in everyday media use relate to other changes in life, focusing on significant transitions between life phases. Whereas the former chapter discussed media use an ordinary day, what we perceive as ‘ordinary’ is not constant all the way through our lives. Instead, our perceptions of the ordinary day are likely to be closely intertwined with the most important circumstances of our life at present, connected to the past and to the future through our biographical narratives. This means that processes of change in everyday life are of particular significance to understand everyday media use.

Examples of life transitions can include starting or leaving school, changing or losing jobs, entering or dissolving intimate relationships, living and relocating different places, experiencing illness or loss, or having children be born and grow up to leave home. Some life transitions represent unwelcome hardships and struggles, others are fulfilments of desired long-term goals or happy turns of events. Likewise, different expressions and trajectories of life transitions can more or less conform to or differentiate from societal norms and expectations, in various cultural contexts.

This book emphasizes an understanding of media use as central to our routinized navigation across social domains in everyday life. Life transitions can imply that all these elements – our routines, our modes of navigation, our social domains – change partially or all at once. This can be overwhelming and challenging, exiting or promising, difficult or draining, but often highly emotional and meaningful in some capacity. As such, life transitions highlight the existential dimensions of everyday life, and represent moments of crisis or reflection in biographical continuity, in Anthony Giddens (1991) terms. A key interest for Giddens is how we form narratives of the self, also as we are tasked with the work of integrating occurring events and contradictory experiences into a coherent story of who we are. In a more digital society, social and digital media represent potential tools for expression and negotiation of changing identities (Ytre-Arne, 2016) but also more practical means of assistance as we manage daily communication in unsettled circumstances.

This chapter investigates the role of digital media as part of life transitions, particularly focusing on smartphones, but also discussing social media, news, books and podcasts, and generally taking a cross-media perspective. I draw on a qualitative interview study, conducted in Norway in 2020, with new mothers talking about changing media use the first year with a new-born, meaning that this particular life transition is at the centre of analysis. This case study cannot be taken as universal to any kind of life transition, nor as representative of parental media use in other contexts – it is a small study, and connected to the cultural circumstances of having children in a Northern European welfare state with extensive family leave policies. However, the analysis provides insight into how some mothers adapt their uses of digital media in conjunction a life transition many undergo, one that is characterized by extensive societal norms as well as considerable variation in circumstances and experiences.

In the chapter, I first introduce some perspectives on how media use changes in conjunction with life transitions, and situate the particular significance of digital media use to changing everyday circumstances. I develop an analytical perspective on *disruption, destabilization and reorientation*, before analyzing

changing media repertoires amongst new mothers. This analysis particularly highlights the relevance of understanding communicative dilemmas and normative negotiations of digital media use in specific everyday settings, drawing on the research literature on digital disconnection and ambivalence.

LIFE PHASES, MEDIA GENERATIONS AND EVOLVING REPERTOIRES

How does media use change from childhood to old age? The intersection of age and media use have inspired significant bodies of research, particularly with very extensive scholarship on children, adolescents and young people, and also a growing interest in elderly users and generational differences (see for instance Ahn & Jung, 2016; Lüders & Gjevjon, 2017; Sarwatay & Raman, 2021). In-between the young and the old, we might find studies aiming for a range in representation of age groups, or zooming in on particular media practices or demographical criteria that combine age with for instance gender, occupation, ethnicity or geographical location. An interest in age and media use does not necessarily entail an explicit interest in everyday life in different life phases, but such ideas often form part of the background or analysis nevertheless. One of the things that belonging to an age group might indicate, however crudely, is a basic idea of what we presume everyday life might look like, for a child or a young adult or a senior, and this might have a series of repercussions on their media use when it comes to preferences, capabilities and opportunities.

At a conceptual level, two central answers to the question of how age connects to media use are found in the idea of life courses versus media generations. Theories of life courses emphasize the sequential development of phases of life, such as adolescent versus middle aged, whereas the idea of media generations emphasizes biographical cohorts coming of age in different sociocultural circumstances, such as millennials versus boomers. Both perspectives are, however, interested in connections between individual life trajectories and societal conditions: A life course perspective underlines how ‘aging is a sequence of life phases and transitions that is constructed in a reciprocal process of political, social and economic conditions’ (Heinz et al., 2019) while the idea of media generations underline how habits and interests are developed in particularly formative years of shared historical circumstances, inspiring feelings of belonging or identity (Bolin, 2016; Gherseti & Westlund, 2018, Vittadini, 2014).

There are also strands of research looking into life transitions – shifts between life phases – or focusing specifically on the question of what change

in media use means. Particularly relevant to this chapter, a body of work in sociology and communication studies focuses on parents and parenthood, analyzing the role of media technologies as part of what it means to have and raise children in digital society (Clark, 2011; Das, 2019; Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020). Moreover, research on media repertoires has underlined the need to understand why and how repertoires emerge, transform and disappear, thereby bringing the question of change to the forefront (Peters & Schröder, 2018; Vandenplas et al., 2021; Vulpius et al., 2022). These studies highlight interconnections between different factors that drive change in media repertoires, including social, technological and spatiotemporal dimensions, all of which correspond well with an interest in everyday life as the context for media use. We might ask, however, when something extraordinary happens to us, if that is part of *everyday* life? And, consequently, if media use in life transitions is fundamentally different from everyday media use?

DESTABILIZATION, REORIENTATION AND DIGITAL MEDIA EXPANSION

In the introduction to this book, I referenced the theories of Alfred Schutz about the lifeworld (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973) as a sphere in which we live our lives and experience the world around us, encompassing both ordinary and extraordinary circumstances. In Chapter 2, I discussed everyday media use as potentially mundane, routinized, and integrated in what we experience as an *ordinary* day. Major life events are almost by definition *not* the same as ordinary days, but some transitions go on for quite some time, while other aspects of our lives – and the everyday lives of people around us – go on as normal. Furthermore, many life transitions are a type of project that entail restructuring of our daily activities, including establishing new routines, and engaging with social domains differently. Think of examples such as retiring from work or moving to a new place – essential aspects of everyday life alter radically, but everyday life does not cease to exist or matter. I therefore suggest to consider life transitions as periods representing partial or dramatic changes to what we perceive as ordinary in our lives. This means that it is not productive to consider life transitions as separated from everyday life, but instead as particularly significant moments of reconfiguration and awareness of everyday experiences. Here, the ideas of *destabilization* and *reorientation* are useful.

In a former article, I developed the notion of destabilization of media repertoires in conjunction with life events (Ytre-Arne, 2019), and hinted at

the particularly central position of digital media such as the smartphone for reorientation. The article concluded:

More than other forms of media use, the smartphone appears intimately connected with the physical, cognitive and emotional processes of dealing with biographical disruption in the context of everyday life. This suggests that factors such as well-being, and physical and psychological dimensions of using media technologies, should be studied along with the spatiotemporal, material and socio-political factors of change in media repertoires. It also speaks of the adaptability of smartphone use to subtly but persistently fill time-gaps and become part of different everyday situations, meriting further empirical and theoretical analysis. Not only does the combination of smartphones and babies seem to have a nearly explosive force in uprooting established media repertoires and modes of public connection. Smartphone use is also key to the reorientation that follows, and to new routines that are gradually established as the life course progresses. (Ytre-Arne, 2019)

The theory, then, is as follows: Disruption entails destabilization. This does imply that every element of media repertoires change all at once, but the elements and their relations are unsettled from the fixed routines of everyday life, when temporal, spatial, social and existential dimensions of the lifeworld are perceived to be in a partial state of flux. Processes of destabilization entail moments of heightened awareness and reflection, nudging people to more actively reconsider the media they use and the meanings they provide, for instance pursuing or abandoning interests, or connecting to new social domains. The particular role of digital media in this context can be conveyed through the notion of *expansion*, emblemized by the capacities of the smartphone as adaptable, aggregating and always near. The smartphone is easy to turn to in shifting circumstances, finding and filling small moments of free time between obligations and external demands, and serves as a go-to tool not just for mundane coordination but also for more existential re-orientation. Digital media might be used differently in life transitions, but are likely to remain and grow in importance through processes of destabilization and reorientation.

WELCOMING NEW LIFE IN DIGITAL SOCIETIES

To analyze changing media use in conjunction with life transitions, and particularly explore the role of digital media technologies, I draw on a small

qualitative interview study conducted in Norway in 2020. This was one of several case studies in a research project exploring dilemmas regarding ubiquitous connectivity (Karlsen & Ytre-Arne, 2021; Syvertsen, 2022). To understand how such dilemmas play out in specific contexts, we were interested in what we called ‘precarious situations’, here understood not in terms of an economic precariat but as particular circumstances in which something important was at stake, representing values or pursuits that digital media could be perceived to infringe upon. As such a case, new parents in the postnatal period are in the middle of emotionally intense and life-altering circumstances, orienting themselves to new roles and responsibilities, looking towards the future of their newborn children, and facing societal norms pertaining to multiple aspects of life, including uses of digital media.

The special character of the early newborn period is emphasized in cultural discourse and by health professionals alike, connected to ideas of giving vulnerable children the best possible start in life. There is considerable interest in the role of digital technologies in childhood and parenting (Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020). Health authorities and organizations providing advice to new parents utilize the internet and social media for reaching out – sometimes while also advocating for the benefits of disconnection. Digital media are part of new self-expressions, needs for information-seeking, and modes of social contact upon entering parenthood. New parents might choose or be forced to rely on digital media for support and connection, underlining intersectional power relations and ambivalent experiences, and the embeddedness of digital platforms in social life (Das, 2019; Hodkinson & Das, 2021). While public discourse on parents’ use of smartphones or social media might convey simple ideas of right and wrong, the experiences of new parents are likely to be more complex.

My interview study focused on mothers who had given birth in the past year and a half, and explored their recollections of experiences with everyday media use before and after having a child, with a particular interest in the early new-born period. The informants were eight Norwegian women from early 20s to late 30s, most around 30 years of age, which is also the average age for first-time mothers in Norway. They had different education levels from high school to university degrees, and different family circumstances: Some were first-time mothers, some also had older children, not everyone was living with a partner. They all worked or studied as their main occupation, and were or had recently been on paid leave, although for different periods of time, shared in different ways with partners. Interviews were conducted in the summer and fall of 2020, digitally due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which also constituted a backdrop for the women’s experiences. Some had giving birth under heavy

pandemic restrictions in hospitals, had older siblings sent home from locked down schools and kindergartens, or found work-from-home regimens to blur boundaries between family leave and work.

At the start of the interviews, we talked of what life was like at the time, with an explorative approach to everyday media use similar to the day-in-the-life-techniques discussed in the former chapter. Follow-up questions explored how everyday routines and media use had changed since having the baby, and in some cases also before and after pandemic lockdown. The interviews further included retrospective questions on experiences and digital media use in the maternity ward immediately after birth, when returning home with the new-born, and through family leave. Towards the end of the interviews we went deeper into normative negotiations of digital media use in family settings, also looking to the future and discussing topics such as parental mediation (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2018; Clark, 2011) or ‘sharenting’ (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017; Damkjær, 2018).

In the following analysis, I will draw on these interviews to substantiate the idea of destabilization as essential to understand changing media repertoires in conjunction with life transitions. I focus on the notion of digital media expansion by examining the role of smartphones and other digital media technologies in reorientation to changing circumstances, and examine the disconnection dilemmas the mothers faced in the immediate postnatal period.

ADAPTING MEDIA REPERTOIRES TO A NEW PHASE OF LIFE

Let us start with a story of a day in the life with media, from Torunn, a first-time mother in her late 20s, on leave from a public sector job and living with her partner in a Norwegian city:

I start my day by changing diapers, then making breakfast. I listen to the radio to catch the news. I'm no good with online news, I prefer to listen. Depending on the baby, we might stay home until 11-ish, and then she sleeps, and we go out. I take long walks, but also do things like daytime cinema... it varies from day to day. Then we go home and start dinner. My partner returns, taking over the active role with the baby, while I get time for myself... I can shower or read or something. I read a lot the first weeks, because I got a Kindle right after she was born, in the most hectic period, so I could read with just one hand. Recently, we have tried to put her to bed at night and have some time alone, watching TV or looking at something

on the computer. You cannot do that when she is awake, she needs attention. I find my routines are changing, because when she was younger, she slept so much and did not seek contact like she does now. I used the phone more then, now I would feel bad [...] If she is awake and active, seeking my eye... one would not want to be on Facebook.

This quote encompasses several experiences that appeared resonant in the informant group: Structuring the day around a gradually more set schedule for the baby, getting out of the house, sharing care with partners. Her mentions of different practices of media use also appeared typical: finding ways to check the news, finding ways to read or watch TV, considering the distractions of smartphones and social media, and, importantly, adapting technological affordances to bodily obligations of care. The latter was a distinct topic in the interviews, and presumably particularly relevant to the experience of new motherhood and the near-constant presence of a baby to care for.

Otherwise, the quote shares several similarities with the stories of everyday media use I analyzed in the former chapter: intermittent checking in small breaks, using sound media for companionship, managing digital platforms and negotiating one's attention – but for Torunn, the new situation of taking care of a baby was a guiding framework around these practices. This also meant that she and the other mothers were more vocal about explaining considerations in making time and finding ways for media use. These themes speak to how media use is situated in the temporal, spatial, social and existential dimensions of everyday life, also in times of transition inspiring heightened awareness of how these dimensions matter.

A particularly interesting topic that comes across in the quote, and in the interviews more broadly, concerns physical negotiations of media technologies into space and time. In the account of Torunn's day this is expressed in the form of a lightweight tablet allowing for reading with just one hand, while feeding or holding the baby. Others mentioned examples such as switching away from former rituals of print newspaper reading, to podcast listening while walking with a stroller and trying to get the baby to sleep. Different strategies for reading on a screen with a low light, while nursing at night, were also a recurring example. The demands of the caring situation pushed towards mobile media and adjustable affordances as more important than before.

With the smartphone established as the go-to platform for quick communication, information-seeking and practical assistance to users in many different contexts, its significance as a ready resource to new parents can hardly be exaggerated. Googling on the phone for baby-related advice and

information was a commonly described practice, one that also afforded possibilities for finding support and validation. Torunn said:

I used the phone a lot the first weeks. I had so many questions. Help with breastfeeding, you can find that on Facebook... There is lots of information, also from solid sources. I even followed some of those groups for people having children around the same time, because sometimes you just want to know if others are experiencing the same things, to read about people in the same situation.

These new ways of using the phone supplemented other modes of phone use from life pre-baby. Many said they had significantly less or close to no work communication while on leave, meaning that some uses of the phone were temporarily replaced. Most social and practical dimensions of phone use remained with them, however, and the practical benefits of doing things on the phone became even more central.

Beyond the smartphone, informants mentioned various examples of how their media use had changed since having children, sometimes taking up new habits or discarding old ones, but mainly by adapting persistent or emerging interests to shifting circumstances. Some had watched more television and followed more online news while on leave, and some mentioned changing entertainment preferences, including laughing about a growing interest in Supernanny shows or surfing the sales websites for second-hand children's items. Kindergarten teacher Sara talked about which groups she engaged with on social media, gradually moving away from her former student communities towards parent groups, while trying to avoid sending 'too much baby spam' in the direction of her childless friends. Generally, the mothers claimed that their priorities when it came to media had perhaps changed a little, not a lot, but that their days were very different when on leave from work and adjusting to new family situations. Interests in news, reading books, or following social media were therefore adapted rather than discarded.

Looking towards new stages of parenting and family life, the informants considered that digital media use would continue to require management, as part of the parent role and life in the family. Sigrid, a lawyer and second-time-mother, said 'We realized we needed to establish a policy' when she talked about how to navigate children's privacy in social media, a topic several informants were concerned about. Sigrid had instructed grandparents to restrict what they posted on Facebook, and set up private groups for sharing pictures. Others took a different approach: 'We have no rules', said Vera, talking about screen use at home, but went on to explain that she found it important to be a good role model to her children by reading books and doing

activities away from screens: ‘You have to practice what you preach’. But the idea of being a role model had several nuances that were more complicated than one single norm for smartphone use. Vera also said: ‘The five-year-old knows I have a job, and sometimes things are urgent’, and underlined how this was also part of the picture of figuring out digital media use in the home. One informant who would soon return to work predicted her that her phone use would change when combining professional and parental roles:

I used to be really strict about keeping focus and not looking at the smartphone at work. Now the phone will be... not in use, necessarily, but there on my desk. I will keep a closer eye on it. Because, as I understand it, kindergartens are more in touch with parents than before, there could be messages... the worry that he could fall ill so that I need to pick him up... I think the phone will be much more of a presence. (Eva, administrator, first baby)

This quote frames the smartphone as a necessary but potentially distractive device, a connection across social domains, and a constant presence. While the smartphone on the desk at work here represents a link to the child in day-care, these roles could be reversed when parents and children were together. The same informant gave a different example of trying to put away the phone to play with her child, while friends were messaging about plans that needed quick clarification. ‘The phone is such a big part of our daily life’, she said: ‘it is extremely difficult to consider not using it’.

Conducted between three months to well over a year after the birth of the baby, most informants gave an impression of settling into new routines in everyday life, often explicitly contrasted with a more chaotic period immediately after birth. The dilemmas of digital media use in this period will be examined more closely in the next section.

EXISTENTIAL CONNECTION AND DISCONNECTION DILEMMAS

As I conducted the interviews, I found it striking that the mothers appeared to agree on the nearly taken-for-granted existence of shared cultural norms for digital media use in the postnatal period, with ‘put away the phone’ as the most essential tenet. Exploring norms and dilemmas was a central part of the plan for the interview, but specific questions on this topic was not really needed to bring it to light. Instead, the language informants used when explaining their choices and practices appeared to echo cultural discourse on the value of digital disconnection, with justifications such as privacy and presence

(Syvertsen, 2020). Whereas digital disconnection scholarship is also interested in the limitations and problematics of making users responsible (Syvertsen, 2020; Ytre-Arne et al., 2020), the mothers rarely voiced explicitly normative counter-arguments. However, they acknowledged that norms for phone use were hard to follow, and spoke about how emotional and pragmatic concerns played a role in negotiating what to do.

In planning the interviews, I had decided on several specific examples that could be useful to broach the subject of norms for digital media use in the new-born period, such as asking about announcing the arrival of the baby to friends and family, which I assumed would involve smartphones and social media. Some had pre-planned strategies for how to keep news of the birth off social media, but others described losing control of the information flow, or simply not remembering who had notified who. Anette, a health secretary and first-time mother around 30, said:

I was very preoccupied with telling my friends she had arrived, but I can't remember the specifics of it. I found it to be... it was a new and scary situation to suddenly be responsible for a child, and social media and the phone... that was kind of a safe spot. Maybe just trying to shut out some of the feelings, it was so scary I just needed to turn it off a bit. I am not sure quite how to express myself...

As this response indicates, the position of the smartphone should be understood in light of the emotional and existential intensity of new motherhood. For Anette and others with similar experiences, the phone was a connection to the known and safe and taken-for-granted. The disconnection she needed was from the overwhelming emotions and demands of the moment, not from digital media as such. Others talked about phone use in hospital as means of escaping pandemic restrictions that instituted a lonely and scary mood around the maternity ward, with the phone as the one way of remaining socially connected. Second-time-mother Yvonne gave birth in the harshest COVID-19 lockdown and had to stay in the postnatal ward for a couple of days due to a complication. She compared the experience to being alone in a cell:

It was quite isolated, actually. I was alone, one could not roam the hallways. Regulations were strict, and of course I used the phone a lot when I was there. Both for media and for calling and talking to family. (Yvonne, youth worker, second baby)

Most of the mothers had observed posters in the hospital encouraging parents to put the phone away and focus on the baby, and remembered these messages very vividly. A maternity ward in a big city where several informants

lived had a poster in most rooms with the key phrase: ‘In this room, miracles happen’ followed by recommendations to put away the phone. The informants generally expressed that these posters were a good idea, several referred to them as ‘reminders’. However, they had different experiences of how to deal with the no-phone norm in the hospital. Eva said:

It felt almost shameful, looking at the phone. I tried not to do it in front of the staff. During birth, my partner had his phone up once, responding to texts from my mother, and I told him to put it away and don't answer her. That was mainly because I thought no, no, that is not done in this place. Not because I myself found it problematic [...] I stayed for two nights, and if I heard someone in the door, it was like... hide the phone, I need to look at my child. (Eva, administrator, first baby)

Ingeborg, a student who was also a first-time mother, had a different experience. She found herself in sync with the idea that the phone should not distract from the miracle of the newborn, and was grateful for finding institutional support for her decision to shut out the rest of the world. This included extended family who were eager for more pictures and updates about the newborn. Ingeborg advocated for the value of digital disconnection as a principle also in her studies and life in general, but found it particularly essential to the emotional intensity of new motherhood:

I needed to shield myself from everything. There was a poster in the delivery room saying they recommended no phones, that it was a sacred time you would never get back, and I felt so vulnerable [...] I embraced it and needed it, so I did not use my phone at all in the hospital. [...] My partner sent a text message to family [...] There was little acceptance, they blamed us for not including them. (Ingeborg, student, first baby)

Several informants said that ‘a little phone use is fine, but it should not detract attention away from the baby’. Some operated with distinctions between different purposes of phone use, from what they perceived as frivolous (particularly mentioning social media) to necessary (one-to-one communication with family). Second-time-mother Vera said:

I agree you shouldn't go straight to Insta. But we used the phone to let family know he was born, and to take some pictures. And when you have an older child and need to organize the babysitter... and there is downtime... yeah, I used my phone. (Vera, consultant, second baby)

This admittance of using the phone in ‘downtime’ is interesting, because the term defies the purpose-driven categories she had just established: The idea of downtime is mainly contextual, possibly encompassing both mindless scrolling and necessary messages. ‘When the baby sleeps’ was another category for when phone use would be more acceptable, while ‘when the baby feeds’ was more contested.

The dual understanding smartphones as coordinating devices and sources of digital distractions would continue after leaving the hospital. The next example we discussed in the interviews was norms for smartphone use while feeding the baby. There is a strong breastfeeding ideal in Norway, supported throughout the health care system, advising on the need to direct attention towards small signs of hunger and other forms of silent communication, rather than sticking to a schedule. Similar advice about the value of eye-contact in the feeding situation applies to bottle-feeding. Eva, who talked about hiding her phone from midwives in the hospital, continued to hide her scrolling from her baby when breastfeeding. She talked about her media use with lots of reflection and self-deprecating humour, often contradicting herself and also pointing it out. Regarding feeding, she recognized the norm and the value of eye-contact, but laughingly admitted to ‘cheating’, although based on careful interpretation of cues from the baby:

The phone is there, on the table, but I try not to scroll, at least not any unnecessary media, Instagram and those things. But if he is playing, I might check the weather or send a text or check the news. Sometimes, I try to limit use. And when I am breastfeeding, and he closes his eyes, he does that a lot, I might check the phone, without him noticing. I have to admit it. (Eva, administrator, first baby)

Awareness of the issue of phone use while taking care of the baby was prevalent in the informant group, but opinions on how to handle this diverged. There were some notable – but not consistent, even in such a small sample – differences between some of the second- and first- time mothers:

When the baby is eating, the baby is concerned with eating. Particularly when they are small. I think it is fine to use the phone. He will not be harmed by me reading the online newspaper. (Sigrid, lawyer, second-time mother)

I really stuck with not letting myself be distracted from being in the moment. It was such an emotional time, so picking up the phone... I could not do it. There was always some change to notice with the baby, from day to day [...] something big happening before my very eyes. I do not think I am representative. (Ingeborg, student, first baby)

The issue of social sanctions also came up in this context. Some informants mentioned uncomfortable experiences of being criticized for using the phone while feeding the baby, in one case in the postnatal ward, and by others as one of those things mothers-in-law would be prone to have opinions about. Many connected the specificities of the postnatal period to more longstanding concerns about childhood and parenting in a digital world. Ideals about the social development of children easily come into conflict with immersive media technologies, but also with what pragmatically works in the moment in everyday settings:

You should limit screen time, and read to the child instead, but there are so many things you should do and then in reality they do not happen. We had a period where she woke up at five, and of course we let her watch cartoons on the iPad [...] Sometimes you have to do what works. (Anette, health secretary, first baby)

It is so easy to waste time on social media. With kids, it is a difficult balance between letting them do their own thing, and being involved in play and interaction so that they develop socially. And then the guilty conscience turns up. Social media can make for poorer social development because parents are too immersed. I am probably guilty myself! (Sara, kindergarten teacher, two children)

What comes across in these dilemmas is a gap between very broad concerns about the potential harm of digital media, and the embedded and specific positions of digital communication in everyday life. When ideals of no phones are transferred from general discourse to particular situations, questions arise about how the ideals can be managed in the complex contexts of situations, leaving users to try to figure out what works. Digital media use in the newborn period is characterized by the impossibility of adhering to norms that do not fully account for the specificities of the moment, with various personal experiences, emotional reactions, and pragmatic considerations, all juggled by individuals as part of their media use. Some mothers found solutions or strategies that worked for them, others faced negative reactions or guilt, some were playful or self-deprecating, and some challenged the idea of optimizing everything. Eva summarized the dilemma in this manner, which is relevant beyond the situation of new mothers: ‘The phone is always with me, but I try to limit use’.

CONCLUSION: NAVIGATING NORMS IN SHIFTING CONTEXTS

This chapter has analyzed the essential and ambivalent position of digital media in life transitions, focusing on periods when everyday life changes.

By exploring how new mothers negotiate norms for digital media use, and adapt media repertoires to changing everyday circumstances, I have underlined the complexities of the decisions people make regarding media use in digital everyday life. People in a myriad of situations turn to digital media for information, support, communication, entertainment, coordination and orientation to communities, while navigating the demands and concerns of the moment they are in. It is therefore essential to understand how values as well as pragmatics are embedded in the situations surrounding everyday media use, making sweeping norms for right and wrong particularly difficult to adhere to.

Connecting to the former chapter, where I argued that everyday routines are most easily reflected upon when changing, this analysis also shows that processes of disruption are fruitful to study to understand everyday media use. I particularly drew on the idea of destabilization and reorientation to highlight how media repertoires are gradually and partially reconfigured in relation to life transitions. Similar arguments could be made regarding people's public connection (Ytre-Arne, 2019). For instance, the experience of parenthood represents potential new orientations to different societal issues or communities, but not necessarily an abandonment of previous interests in the public realm, even though modes of keeping informed of these might be changing.

As this analysis has focused on motherhood, it is important to underline that other life transitions could be characterized by considerations that are different, particular to other life phases or other social roles. Likewise, the socioeconomic, cultural and geographical context in which life transitions take place is likely to be very relevant. For instance, the experience of being on paid leave but planning to return to work is an important framework for the stories of the mothers in this study. This is closely connected to Norwegian family leave and kindergarten policies, while notions of both parents working outside the home are embedded with Scandinavian gender equality ideals. Even in other Northern European contexts, these structures could be very different with different implications for the role of media regarding motherhood (see for instance Orgad, 2019).

Even with the particularities of the case study analyzed here, we might wonder if the idea of digital media expansion could be prone to happen to very different people in very different life transitions. The capacities of smartphones as adaptable, aggregating and always-near speak to vast possibilities for tailoring smartphone use to different situations. It therefore seems probable that digital media – smartphones and others – could fill gaps and serve as tools for reorientation in numerous kinds of transitions and disruptions. The next chapter discusses a societal and global disruption – the COVID-19 pandemic – and how it changed everyday lives and media repertoires.