Compilation of the interview results

The Project "Digital Relationships"

The increasingly digitalized world in which we live and in which our children move as "digital natives" presents parents, but also society as a whole, with ever new challenges. In recent years there has been rapid technological development, which has led to a large part of the social life of many young people, and increasingly also of children, taking place online. Grandparents skype with their grandchildren, family and class chats as well as friends in social networks make it possible to stay in constant contact, etc.

In this project, a consortium of organizations from Germany, Bulgaria, Belgium, Poland and Spain are aiming to find out how much and in what form digital relationships are lived in European families and how this affects them. A further question will be whether parents in different European countries are able to cope with this challenge and what solutions they have found.

To this end, each partner in his or her country conducted and evaluated partially standardized conversations with at least 5 families (traditional, rainbow families or single parents). In social science research, this type of survey is used to investigate facts that are represented in subjective experience and to conduct basic research. Both conditions apply here, as digital relations are a relatively new phenomenon and inductive conclusions can give a first impression of the situation. The questions for the interviews were worked out by the project partners. They provide a framework for data collection and analysis, but it was also possible to include new questions and topics from the interview situation. The interviews took about 30 to 60 Minutes The results of the survey were evaluated using the category system method, whereby the categories were drawn from the first interviews. This was followed by a comparison of the categories of all partners and further evaluation. The survey period ran from October 2018 to October 2019.

Statistical Information on the Interviewees

The interviews by "Systeme in Bewegung e.V." (DE) were done with five female and four male participants, in the age between 15 and 57 years. Their occupations are student, business data processing specialists, office administrator, social security clerk, care professional and controller.

For the "Stiftung Medien- und Onlinesucht" (DE), a total of four mothers aged between 36 and 54 and a 52-year-old father took part in the survey. The mothers work as office clerks and nurses, one is early retired, the father is a retail salesman.

The "Uchebna Rabotilnitsa Evropa Sdruzhenie" (Lewke) (BG) conducted interviews with three women and two men, who are working as freelance translator and journalist; economist, logistics specialist, municipal administration officer and psychologist and are parents of altogether twelve children in the age of 8 to 25 years.

For the "Sambucusforum" (BE), five women were interviewed, in the age between 22 and 64 years, and four men, aged between 37 and 66. They are working as cashier, salesmen, freelancers, teacher, media specialist, speachtherapist and care teacher and employee in a marketing company. They are parents of seven children between 2 and 18 years of age.

In Poland, the "Autokreacja Foundation" conducted interviews with two men, aged 23 and 30, and three women between 32 und 42 years of age.

The Spanish organization "Asociación de Innovación, Formación y Empleo para el Desarrollo sostenible" (AIFED) interviewed three women, between 27 and 54 years old, and two men, at the age of 42 and 55 years. Their occupations include a widow, a secretary, a student at a university, a public worker, a secretary in a big company and someone working in the commercial division of a sales chain.

Results:

A life without social media - possible or not?

In Germany, thirteen out of fourteen respondents stated that they could imagine a life without social media. One interviewee said that she found it desirable, but could no longer imagine it, since "we have arranged ourselves in this way in this existing system". Other respondents said that they no longer wanted to do without social media, as it "facilitates communication in many areas, or makes life easier or more beautiful", or linked the answer to the restriction that "then the mobile phone may not lie there. When I see it, I also want to see if someone has written me a message". A Belgium interviewee, aged over 60 years, had the same opinion: "I can imagine a life without social media, but I would be unhappy if the current possibilities were to disappear.". One German father associated the statement with a criticism of today's youth: "Yes, because I have already experienced it (life without a mobile phone), and it wasn't so bad at all. I think it was more relaxed and exciting. We just met and built things or something, nowadays young people only look at their mobile phones when they're sitting together:". This is a concern that is shared in Belgium: here, a single mother worries that "real board games [might] disappear" and there might be "no more talking or playing at school.". In Bulgaria, the opinions of the interview partners are divided: two said, they could imagine life without social media, three neglected this. But all of them agreed that in today's world, it is impossible to live without them. One mother talked about herself living without social media on purpose in summer, "because I was really fed up with all the meaningless stuff on Facebook (I use only this social medium) and I realized how much precious time I was losing when searching for something interesting or useful on it.". The impression in Spain was that even those people most critical of digital media could not live without them. The interviewed women and men stated that they have already created habits in social networks that are very important to them, transforming the way they communicate with family, friends and work. The importance of a fluid and constant relationship with family members or old friends is a value that reinforces the use of digital media.

This response was repeated by all Spanish respondents. In other answers, the Spanish partners found living facilities for the interviewees that are already part of their life organization routine and that today they consider indispensable in their lives: "Google maps is fantastic to travel. I cannot imagine how we travelled some years ago". "I shop in the online supermarket, some things even from China, and all my flight and train connections are booked over the internet ".

Keeping in contact through digital communication

All interview partners reported that they use digital communication to stay in touch with their family during the day. German families e.g. stated that "We write to each other how we are, what we do, what the day is like..." and "We send each other pictures and news during the day...". A father in Spain feels the advantages of digital communication when having to leave the family for work for several days: "Social networks, like WhatsApp, give me facilities to be able to have contact with my children without leaving work." The answer of a Spanish mother, saying that "I cannot phone during my work time, but I can send a WhatsApp if I need some thing from my husband or my mother." was given by a German father in exactly the same words.

Social media are also used to keep in touch with family and friends who live further away or for whom you wouldn't have enough time: "And via social media I keep in touch with friends if close contact is too time-consuming for me." (Germany), "With the family who lives further away, we communicate things we want to discuss digitally." (Germany). One mother in Germany, whose parents live in China, told us: "For me it is a relief to be able to stay in contact with my parents so easily. I used to have to buy special phone cards. Without digital communication it would not be imaginable for me to live so far away." Her parents took part in her son's second birthday party via face time, the tablet standing on the table. Two other special stories we were told were of a son who is going to leave the family to study abroad soon: "I'm soon going to South America, so digital communication will be essential for me to stay in touch with the family.", and from the mother of a six-year-old girl suffering from diabetes: "I would like to let her go home alone from school soon, she is supposed to become independent. We'll use the surveillance mode on her I-phone to see if she needs more (on her way home) time for some reason.".

Writing text messages can also be a relief when it comes to staying in touch with friends, a German mother explained: "I don't like talking on the phone. It is a relief to me, especially when I'm out and about with the kids, it is easier to write a message than call somebody."

Daily organization of family life

In most conversations, digital communication was mentioned as a tool for the daily organization of family life. In every country, at least one family mentioned that a shared cloud-calendar is used for the family: "We use the family calendar and messengers to

organize our family life." (Germany), "We share one family google calendar in order to know the plans of each other. And not to forget about the kids." (Poland). The Spanish organization involved found that there were differences between the interviewees regarding this topic, according to whether or not they are in charge of their families. The interviewed fathers or mothers who are taking care of their children and have the responsibility to educate them, give this aspect a higher value than the two interviewees who at this time are not raising children. As a Bulgarian mother said: ". As a Bulgarian mother said: "digital communication is better …because it gives enough time and comfort to think out what's needed."

Interestingly, just a young man from Germany (18 years old) stated: "I sometimes try to make mobile phone free days, but for school I have to regularly connect to the Internet.". So, the current school system prevents him from digital detox.

Real communication is preferable

In general, all interviewees agreed that real communication is preferable to digital communication: "Human contact is more pleasant and straight forwarded." (Belgium), "We have meals together and then talk a lot. Nobody has their mobile phone with them during these conversations." (Germany), "We need to keep ourselves as sensory type of beings." (Bulgaria), "It's almost always preferable, but especially when for some reasons we get emotional." (Poland), "The problem with digital communication is the loss of direct contact […]. It is a more distant communication that does not lead to opening other topics of dialogue." (Spain), "Real life doesn't happen digitally" (Germany) and "I find digital Christmas or birthday greetings terrible." (Germany). However, one German father points out one limitation: "When communicating with people who are important to me, I actually prefer real communication. But in reality I often send a message quickly via messenger instead of visiting or calling someone. It's easier and more convenient" and another one states "There's actually nothing I wouldn't communicate via Messenger.".

Emotional "filter" for conflicts – and romantic issues

Most interestingly, some interviewees in several countries told us about new ways of communicating in conflict situations. In Germany, it started with a mother referring to conflicts with her daughter: "I have found that conflicts with my daughter are better resolved through WhatsApp than through real communication. I would never do that with anyone else, but sometimes we can't exchange a sentence without her blocking it, then I "get her" via text messages. I can start with that, she'd rather read it than listen to me. And then we can talk about it." A similar answer was given by a father in Belgium, and a father from Spain stated that "I am more relaxed speaking about problems via WhatsApp.", and a polish mother explained that "We barely have conflicts since we (she and her mother) are apart and communicate mainly through social media.". This fact seems to be helpful in a professional context as well: "In professional life, it's also easier

to deliver bad news, for example, if you first write an e-mail and everyone involved knows the facts before you go into personal conversation." (Germany).

On the other hand, regarding this topic, we find again the preference for "real life" communication: "In a dispute it is important to see, hear and feel each other. In conflicts, I always seek direct contact with people. And something written is too one-dimensional for me." (Germany), "Everything that has to do with values, moral concepts, psychology and education, that's what I'm talking about in real terms, not via text messages." (Germany), "If I want to talk to someone or clarify things, I can see whether he is honest with me. In digital communication, when I can't see my counterpart, I can't judge him as well." (Germany), "Sweet messages, pictures, okay, but feelings, thoughts, fears and hopes I don't send out online." (Belgium). In the last quote we find the subject of "sweet messages", which is even heightened to romantic content by a German mother: "I write more romantic things to my husband than I would say in real life.".

Problems of digital communication

Some participants explicitly mentioned the shortening of communication as one of the problems in digital exchange: "Our society suffers from contact poverty." (Belgium), "Digital communication sometimes leads to simplification and shortening of conversations." (Germany), "It is not communication with the heart." (Germany). The emotional significance of this shortage was summed up by a Spanish mother: "I have not better relations with my children, only more frequent.".

Other problematic aspects mentioned were the sense of obligation to be available at all times, up to the limit of the feeling of addiction, and at the same time the concern when one's own children cannot be reached: "That one has to be constantly reachable and wants to be reachable. But that one also always wants to reach the child in order to be reassured. Actually, it worries you more than if you knew that you just can't reach him now." (Germany), " I like to rest in the mountains, I try to limit myself, but, just as a habit, I look at my phone, even if I'm not waiting for a call." (Bulgaria).

In addition to the mobile phone as an "energy eater", one German participant also described it as a "time eater": "You spend a lot of time with it that you could actually use differently.", where a Belgium interviewee has the answer: "Plan your time on social media: discipline is required, otherwise you lose yourself in useless messages.

Don't let yourself be tempted by endless scrolling, liking and clicking."

Other concerns of the people questioned were the data security of digital communication, as well as cyberbullying and fake news. The Spanish partners considered that the problems of digital media have only been revealed by older respondents, whereas the 27-year-old interviewee did not point out anything relevant in this regard.

So they wonder if it could happen that our references to compare real-life to digital communication are increasingly scarce. Generations that have experienced exclusively face-to-face relationships and non-digital communication can point out pros and cons, but this leaves us with the question: will the young people of the future be able to point out

these differences between face-to-face and digital communication? Or will it be inconceivable for them because their daily life will be digital?

Advantages of digital communication

At the same time, the participants in the survey also saw other positive aspects of social media, in addition to the above-mentioned facilitated contact and organizational advantages. For example, it is possible to show family members one's affection during the day by sending "nice little information, memes or messages" (Germany).
In addition, the abundance of information in the social media can be helpful for knowledge transfer and opinion shaping: "In former times one had only a newspaper, now one can come completely easily to many different views and opinions to a topic. I feel better informed" (Germany), "It is fantastic to find information about all important things for me. I like History, and when I am travelling I do not need to bring a lot of books with me, only my Iphone." (Spain), "I read books, magazines and newspapers online" (Belgium).

Digital communication also facilitates cooperation across borders: "I really believe that digital communication is an enormous benefit to the world of work" (Germany), "I think social media can improve life, it gives me more security when I go abroad because I have seen the people, that I meet there, before." (student going to study abroad from Germany) and in my own house: "Sometimes my husband is too lazy to get up from the sofa, and then he sends a message to our son in his room" (Germany). The possibility of being able to reach one's children at any time was also mentioned. Just like the influence of the social media on the personality development of young people, in a positive way: "I think it was good for my daughter to be able to leave her family without having to leave home and thus find her own style" (Germany), "Sincerely for me it is fantastic to get likes on Facebook. I am really happy when I upload a photo and my friends like it "(Spain), "I never feel alone with my phone and WhatsApp" (Spain). While the advantages of social media seem to be most important to young people, the older generation seems to find their benefits also in online news and shopping: "Our preference goes more and more to online news." (Belgium), "It is useful for my mother. She is 85 years old and buys on the internet a lot of things that she needs." (Spain).
A very special advantage is mentioned by the mother of the little girl, suffering from diabetes: "She sometimes takes pictures of her food when she's with friends or at a party so I can tell her how much insulin she has to release." (Spain).

Conclusion

As assumed, families in all participating countries are using social media and messenger for their everyday life, and therefore share similar problems, fears, hopes and benefits. Especially for families who are living far apart or have special needs, digitalization can be

a blessing. Most of the people questioned appreciate and prefer real life contact. But all of them also appreciate the advantages of digital communication.

All parents struggle to find a healthy way for their children to use the new media, and most of the kids seem to be finding their way in the digital world very well. The development of communication as a result of digitalization can be clearly seen when it comes to emotional topics. It is possible that there are new ways of dealing with conflicts and also positive emotions, the further development of which will be interesting to observe. For example, it was very fascinating to find parents in different countries using text messages to get back in contact with their teenage kids.

The results suggest that, as initially assumed, parents in Europe are similar in their challenges in everyday family life. At best, this can foster a sense of community, so that European parents no longer feel so alone with their problems.