

# Toddlers' digital media practices and everyday parental struggles

## *Interactions and meaning-making as digital media are domesticated*

Helena Sandberg,<sup>I</sup> Ulrika Sjöberg,<sup>II</sup> & Ebba Sundin<sup>III</sup>

<sup>I</sup>Department of Communication and Media, Lund University, Sweden

<sup>II</sup>School of Arts and Communication, Malmö University, Sweden

<sup>III</sup>School of Health and Welfare, Halmstad University, Sweden

### **Abstract**

In this article, the Swedish findings from a European comparative study on 0–3-year-old children and their digital lives are presented and discussed in relation to domestication theory, including the concept of moral economy. More specifically, attention is paid to toddler's appropriation of digital technology and the parents' moral struggles: the negotiations between the parents concerning the introduction of digital media practices in early childhood, the selection of content, and the monitoring of children. Parents of very young children have ambivalent feelings towards digital media technologies and struggle to make the right decision for their children. The study demonstrates that the domestication of digital technology in early childhood is far more multifaceted and troublesome for parents to handle than previous research has found.

**Keywords:** 0–3-year-old children, digital media practices, domestication theory, moral economy, “day in the life” methodology

### **Introduction**

Digital media are central to modern family life and to early childhood development (Naab, 2018; Erstad et al., 2019). Many children grow up in media-rich households (Chaudron et al., 2018), but does that mean that the very young children, infants, and toddlers have access to digital media technology? If so, how do they actually use it? What do parents think about the introduction of digital media in early childhood, and how do they handle it in the everyday routines and practices of their child?

In the digital age, parenting has become an increasingly challenging task (Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020). Parents are concerned about the potential risks and societal expectations that come with new technology. They are held responsible for the well-being and fostering of their child into a digitally literate citizen. Concurrently, the introduction of

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digital media technology opens up for family negotiations due to differences between parent and child generations, but also, and maybe more importantly, due to the rise of the “democratic family”, referring to current expectations of parents to negotiate with and respect the voice of the child (Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020). Thus, parents are under pressure from several different directions. In the intersection between the social microlevel (everyday life) and social macrolevel (societal expectations), clashes and conflicts may arise. Simultaneously, knowledge of the variations and nuances in digital media practices in early childhood is still sparse, and the research field of children and media needs more qualitative and in-depth approaches in our understanding of young children’s digital media lives (Kumpulainen & Gillen, 2019).

Our aim in this article is twofold. Our first objective is to provide insight into young children’s (0–3 years old) digital media practices and everyday life through the lens of domestication theory (Silverstone et al., 1992) by answering questions about how toddlers appropriate digital media, and in what way the digital media become part of their everyday routines. The second objective is to make parental struggles visible through the notion of the moral economy of the household (Silverstone et al., 1992), including parental strategies and ways of handling challenges concerning children and digital media technology. To achieve this, we draw from “A Day in the Digital Lives of children 0–3”, initiated within COST Action IS1410 The Digital Literacy and Multimodal Practices of Young Children DigiLitEY, 2017–2019, including 14 families in six European countries. The aim of the project was to investigate the ways in which digital technologies permeate the everyday lives of children from birth to three years of age. In this article, we focus upon the two Swedish case studies in the project. Domestication theory is a well-established framework in media and communication studies, but to our knowledge, it has not been widely applied in studies involving younger children’s media use.

### *Contradictory societal discourses on children and digital media*

Since the introduction of digital tablets to the market a decade ago, there has been a steady increase in public debate as well as media coverage on young children and digital media use. This is also the case in Sweden. In 2017, the Swedish government launched a strategy to promote digitalisation, along with a vision to make Sweden a world leader in using the opportunities that digitalisation brings to foster “digitally skilled and digitally secure” citizens (Government Offices of Sweden, 2017: 1). The same year, the government implemented a “National Digitalisation Strategy for the School System” (Regeringen, 2017), making digital technology in preschool education (0–5 years) mandatory (Skolverket, 2019). However, the new policy does not fully harmonise with earlier recommendations by American paediatricians (Council on Communications and Media, 2016) and the World Health Organization (WHO, 2019). WHO claims, for example, that children under the age of two should not use or be exposed to screens at all, and children 2–5 years old should at the most spend an hour in front of the screen (WHO, 2019). In Sweden, an animated and polarised debate was sparked concerning, among many other things, the limited evidence for positive effects of tablets and apps on learning and development in early childhood.

To illustrate the debate on children and digital media in Sweden, a search in the archive *Retriever* was performed, using the keywords “barn” [children] and “surfplatta”

[tablet computer]. The search, performed on 7 February 2020, was limited in time (1 January 2010–31 December 2019) and outlets, including national, urban, and tabloid newspapers: *Dagens Nyheter*, *Dagens Industri*, *Svenska Dagbladet*, *Göteborgs-Posten*, *Sydsvenska Dagbladet*, *Metro*, *Aftonbladet*, *Kvällsposten*, *Expressen*, and *Göteborgs-Tidningen (GT)*. A total of 470 news articles, opinion pieces, and editorials were identified. Table 1 summarises only a tiny fraction of all the contradictory article headlines, thematically organised, in order to demonstrate the dichotomised debate.

**Table 1** *Thematic categorisation of headlines in Swedish newspapers, 2010–2019 (sample)*

Positive and encouraging	Negative and alarmist
“The children love their tablets” Aftonbladet (Davidsson, 28 November 2012)	Money back for Smurf games Göteborgs-Posten (TT, 15 April 2011)
Web user before he can walk Göteborgs-Posten (Karlsson, 17 October 2012)	Tablets put children's health at risk Aftonbladet (Ladberg & Hedendahl, 1 April 2012)
The tablet makes learning a children's game Metro (Andersson, 26 September 2012)	Computers steal playtime Svenska Dagbladet (Stienstedt, 19 October 2012)
Technology turns music into pure play Aftonbladet (Persson, 31 January 2014)	“Children are part of an experiment” Aftonbladet (Lidbo, 8 November 2016)
Children make film – already in preschool Göteborgs-Posten (Henricson, 14 November 2014)	Warning: Electronic gadgets in the home can give your children cancer Kvällsposten (Bäsén, 19 March 2016)
Child health advice: For sure, your baby can use apps Sydsvenskan (Philipson, 5 April 2016)	“Screen children” develop empathy disturbance Kvällsposten (Birgersson, 7 August 2017)
Here are the best apps for kids: 10 tips on apps for your child Aftonbladet (Sjöblom, 20 July 2019)	Study: Screen time makes you more stupid Kvällsposten (Thomasson, 13 December 2018)

*Comments:* The examples in the table illustrate the polarised debate on children's usage of digital media. On the one hand, Swedish newspapers write about the issue in a positive and encouraging way; on the other hand, many articles are critical to the extensive use of digital media. Titles have been translated from Swedish.

Swedish parents are in a crossfire of contradictory messages about children and digital media use. Encouraging headlines go hand in hand with discouraging ones, warning the parents about the early introduction of technology and the potential harmful effects on the emotional and cognitive development of the child. Also, parents get their share of “shaming” in the media, being accused of lacking control, using technology as a babysitter, and allowing their child to participate in this social experiment (see Table 1).

In the Swedish news coverage, digital media are, in effect, *simultaneously* “good” and “bad”, “right” and “wrong”. The discourse oscillates between the young child as a great and creative consumer of media technology, and the capacity of the technologies to “consume” the child. This puts the parents of young children in a difficult position.

They must constantly negotiate their standpoints and handle contradictory information, as we demonstrate in the analysis.

## **Key issues in previous research**

The study of children and media is a rich and rapidly expanding field of research, yet very young children, aged 0–3, still constitute a group of users who are less visible and receive less attention in research. Young children’s usage of digital media is presumed to accelerate as new products, such as apps, Internet-connected toys, and new-release technologies become more toddler-friendly (Holloway et al., 2013; Holloway & Green, 2016; Mascheroni & Holloway, 2017). Furthermore, due to the rapid rise in use of digital media among children, scholars are increasingly interested in what parenting and parenthood mean in a digital media world (Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020; Mascheroni et al., 2018; Sparrman et al., 2016).

In Sweden, almost half of all preschool children (aged 0–5) use the Internet on a daily basis (48%), according to the latest annual survey by the Swedish Internet Foundation (2019). Mobile devices are becoming the preferred media choice for many young children, due to their grip-friendly screen size, mobility, interactivity, capacity to stream content, and shrinking cost (Kabali et al., 2015). Preschool children in Sweden use tablets to a slightly higher degree than smartphones. In the survey, parents report that their children use digital media mainly for entertainment, such as watching videos, and to some extent for creative purposes, such as drawing, painting, and creating music. Few differences between girls and boys are reported in the survey (Swedish Internet Foundation, 2019). International studies focusing on younger children (ages 0–8) are consistent with the results from Sweden, pointing towards entertainment as the main reason for engaging with screens in early years (Cristia & Siedl, 2015; Kabali et al., 2015; Rideout, 2017).

Besides studies on how much time children spend on digital media and what kind of content they use, previous research has approached young children’s use of digital media from different perspectives in the field, for example, access to devices, the role of parents’ socioeconomic status, online media in relation to offline activities, and learning from family members.

A study exploring families in seven European countries found that even though young children are surrounded by a great deal of digital technology, they do not necessarily have access to the devices (Chaudron, 2015). This finding mirrors research in the US (Lauricella et al., 2015). Livingstone and colleagues (2015) claim that higher income or higher educated parents are particularly likely to promote offline activities for children while limiting time spent with digital devices.

Research on the theme of “online and offline activities” demonstrates that screens do not replace offline play; children do not stop playing outdoors once the tablet is introduced (see Kucirkova et al., 2018; Rideout, 2017). Children’s cultural practices, such as play, are often embedded in global mediascapes. They engage with videos and online websites and create their own artefacts and invent new practices related to their media interests, resulting in “transmedia intertextuality” and “media assemblage” dominated by “new” digital media content, and practices (Marsh, 2014: 268). Studies show that digital activities interact and support children’s offline interests, as children

use digital media as an enlargement of their activities (Burke & Marsh, 2013; Kumpulainen & Gillen, 2017).

Another perspective in previous research is studies focusing on how young children learn from parents and siblings in the household. They observe and learn from other household members using digital services, apps, and video calls, for example, Skype or FaceTime (Kelly, 2013; Nevski & Siibak, 2016). The parents' screen media use is associated with children's screen media use for all types of devices, but apart from parents' own media use, their attitudes towards media technology may influence the family life and the media experiences of the toddler (Lauricella et al., 2015; Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020).

We support the argument for more qualitative and in-depth approaches to the study of young children and digital media (Gillen et al., 2019; Holloway et al., 2013; Kumpulainen & Gillen, 2017). With our study, we want to contribute to an additional perspective in the current research field by bringing in approaches from domestication theory, in the natural setting of the household, including the interaction between family members.

## Domestication theory

Domestication theory (Silverstone et al., 1992) has been widely used since the 1980s in media and cultural research (Haddon, 2006, 2007, 2018; Hartmann, 2013; de Reuver et al., 2016; Slettemeås, 2014) to investigate the introduction and uses of media technology and consumer goods in modern family life. In media and communication studies, the role of television in households has gained much attention, but domestication theory has also been applicable for the understanding of digital technology in households (Haddon, 2018). The theory offers a conceptual framework that allows us to analyse individuals' media practices, and the everyday dynamics of families, including the moral economy of the household. At its core, there is a concern with the nature of consumption, the appropriation of information and communication technologies, and their mediated meanings in the complex nexus of the relations of the home – the domestic sphere (Silverstone et al., 1992). The home has a privileged position within the theory, since this is the dominant place where everyday life takes place, where activities are initiated and practices consolidated into rituals. Young children are first introduced to digital technology in the home, by their parents. Thus, this theory provides a good starting point in understanding young children's early digital media appropriation and practices.

According to domestication theory, digital devices and technology have an impact on family members' routines and behaviours, but technology is also shaped by family interactions and meaning-making. In the domestication theory tradition, there is an interest in agency as well as adoption, the material implications (consumable goods) as well as the symbolic content and inscriptions of meaning in the technology, often referred to as technology's double articulation (Hartmann, 2013; Silverstone et al., 1992).

Domestication theory includes the four processes of appropriation, objectification, incorporation, and conversion (Haddon, 2006, 2007, 2018; Silverstone, 1994; Silverstone et al., 1992). The process of appropriation starts when a media product is purchased and enters the domestic sphere. Appropriation involves the adoption and use, but also the negotiations of meaning around a product. Objectification examines the spatial location of products: where are media placed and why? In addition, the process of objectification

is also seen in the physical representations of media content in the household, for example, posters of media celebrities. Compared with objectification, with its spatial focus, incorporation involves temporal aspects of everyday life, expressed in terms of daily routines and time schedules. Media are seen as being formed by the temporal structure of the home but also challenging and revising them. Finally, the process of conversion connects the household to outside surroundings, including how we talk to others about media. Conversion is about positioning oneself in relation to peers, the neighbourhood, and also to societal discourses.

### *The moral economy of the household*

A core concept within domestication theory is the notion of the “household as a moral economy” (Silverstone et al., 1992). From a historical point of view, households have been part of economic and social transactional systems connecting the informal private micro social sphere with the formal public macro social sphere. This means that the household is constantly engaged with the cultural artefacts and the dominant public discourses. It also implies that the appropriation and incorporation of artefacts (e.g., digital technology) entails a transformation and reinterpretation of the goods according to the values and interests of the household (Silverstone et al., 1992). Moral economy refers to parental norms, values, and ideas, for example, how they regard different technologies, but also their aspirations for the children. These moral struggles might result in various tensions and contradictions of the media practices, content selections, and parental monitoring of the young media users, as has also been suggested by Kervin and colleagues (2018). In their study of Australian families’ perspectives on the role of digital technologies in the activities of children, they found three potential areas for conflict: practice, selection, and monitoring children’s activities of digital play.

### **Research design: A day in the life**

The present study is part of a European collaboration in the EU-funded network Digi-LitEY. In six countries, 0–3-year-olds and their everyday digital media practices were studied. The methodology applied in the project, “A day in the life” (Gillen et al., 2007), has an ethnographic approach for generating rich data with multiple perspectives on young children’s everyday digital lives in their homes (for a full report on the project, see Gillen et al., 2019). In comparison to doing ethnography, which often involves an open-ended approach and the researcher participating for a long period of time in people’s lives, paying attention to emerging patterns (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019), we apply a time-condensed method with an ethnographic perspective to investigate young children’s practices in their natural setting.

The research design consists of three visits to the home of each child. We use various methods for data collection: interviews with parents, observations of children during a day, including video recordings for at least six hours, surveys mapping the media ecology, skills and access, drawings of the domestic space, and a follow-up interview based on co-viewing a video compilation (Gillen et al., 2007). In this article, we build our analysis on the video-recorded observations, and the interview data with parents during our three visits to each family.

The fieldwork started in autumn 2017 and ended in spring 2018. The family visits were distributed in time with approximately three months between the first and the third visit. The researchers worked in pairs during the fieldwork. There was no remuneration to the families, except a copy of the video compilation of the child's day, saved on a USB stick. The project was approved by the Regional Ethical Review Board.

Various recruitment strategies were used across the countries in the project "A day in the life". Recruitment turned out to be difficult. In Sweden, we contacted several families before getting acceptance. The families were recruited from our extended networks, through snowball sampling. Our overall ambition was to include families with a child in the proper age group (0–3) with different backgrounds and different family compositions. The Swedish families turned out to be rather alike, both having a middle-class background, although they differed in family composition. We are aware of the impossibility of achieving representativeness and generalisability with two cases; however, our aim is to show the complexity of young children's digital media practices and parental struggles in everyday life.

The two Swedish children in the study are Anna and Oscar (pseudonyms). Anna is 30 months old and Oscar is 28 months old, and both children live with their parents (in their thirties) and siblings. Anna has a baby brother (4 months old) and Oscar has two older brothers (aged 7 and 9). Anna and Oscar attend preschool most days of the working week. Anna's family lives in a newly built detached house in a suburban area, while Oscar's family lives in a townhouse within walking distance of the centre of a mid-sized town.

## Analysis

In an attempt to gain insight into young children's (0–3 years) digital media practices in the home, the analysis presented here is conducted through the lens of domestication theory and, more specifically, the processes of appropriation, objectification, incorporation, and conversion. The processes are in turn interwoven with the moral economy of the household (Silverstone et al., 1992), its values and ideas about, for example, what constitutes good parenting and media use. We began the analysis process by going through the video-recorded observations and interview data. Domestication theory helped us organise the rich amount of data, highlighting certain events, attitudes, routines, and practices. The data were systematically organised according to appropriation, objectification, incorporation, and conversion in relation to the moral economy of the household. In the second stage of the analysis, three narrative themes emerged, indicating both similarities and differences between the two families. The identified themes show the complexity of daily life, and the above-mentioned processes are not the same in the households. They also demonstrate the ongoing discursive struggle about the understanding and sense-making of media technologies and the values and norms surrounding them. These processes are always in flux, and they can only be understood as contingent and contextual.

The findings are presented according to the main identified themes. The first theme presents findings on the practices around the digital TV screen in a more general context of domestic routines and moral economy of the household. Then we look more specifically at the convergence between digital media "online" and traditional play "offline".



The third and final theme deals with the selection of digital media with a special focus on media content.

### *The practices around the digital TV screen*

For both Anna and Oscar, the living room is the main space for spending time during the day. It is a common space, where the parents can keep an eye on their children. It is also where the digital TV screen is placed in the centre. In both families, the digital TV screen is connected to cable as well as Internet services. The physical arrangement of the television becomes a main element in the construction of the home environment, exemplifying the domestication process of objectification. The meanings attached to the digital TV screen are quite different within the two families, being an outcome of the moral economy of the households.

**Figure 1** *Watching children's programmes on the digital TV screen with family members*



*Comments:* The left image shows Anna and her parents together on the couch facing the television. The right image shows Oscar with his siblings on the couch watching television and eating. Images are published with the informed consent of the parents.

In Anna's family, media are only to be used with a specific purpose in mind, and digital media are not visible to Anna except on the digital TV screen. The parents have critical views on media usage without a purpose. This reflects how the usage is incorporated into the daily life of the family's moral economy, in terms of situation and time. As for the digital TV screen, the family only turns it on during the day if someone is sick or for special sports events. The remote control lies next to the screen, but Anna pays no attention to it and never asks to watch TV. The regulation of when and how to use the TV is clear to Anna, exemplifying how the appropriation of a medium is mediated by the parents. All media use in the family has a functional approach, including the iPad, as a means to keep Anna busy in the morning while her father is working and her mother is still sleeping, or in the car to avoid Anna falling asleep.

In the evening, the family gathers in front of the television to watch the daily children's programme *Bolibompa*, broadcast on one of the Swedish Public Service channels and hosted by a fictive green teddy-bear-like dragon named the Dragon. With digital TV, they can watch the programme whenever they want. Before watching, Anna goes upstairs to put her pyjamas on, and, most importantly, her silver-sparkling skirt that she always wears for the dragon dance at the end of the programme, where the Dragon also wears a skirt. Anna dances along in front of the screen, illustrating how media content is materialised, appropriated, and incorporated in the daily routines of the family – a



moment to be together but also preparing Anna for bedtime. The family's use of the digital TV screen resembles what Gauntlett and Hill (1999: 38) labelled as television being "a primary determining factor in how households organise their internal geography and everyday timetables". The same television patterns are still valid in Anna's family; when it comes to both the physical aspects and the social interactions. Sitting together in front of the digital TV screen is an important social event for Anna and her family, but it is more individual viewing than co-viewing; for example, the father sometimes looks at his smartphone (see the left image in Figure 1). In Anna's family, where media use is restricted and functional – for example, the mother mentioned that they never use any media during meals – the father's smartphone use is contested. It is not so much the content per se, but his use of it in front of the children, and the mother finds it rather frustrating when he becomes distracted. The father stated how he sometimes feels ashamed when Anna asks for his attention while he is busy with the smartphone. The use of the smartphone does not go hand in hand with the moral economy of the household and challenges the values of family life and parenting. Anna herself has no interest in using the smartphone, but sees it as something competing for her father's attention:

Mother: It could be like "daddy, daddy, daddy". Twenty times. You don't always need to react but sometimes it could be that you are focused on something. [...]

Father: Yes, absolutely. Yes, I might take a call, look at something in the smartphone for a while and then we play again, but I still have it nearby.

Interviewer: Has Anna reacted or said "stop daddy, look at me"?

Father: Yes. It is not that she wants it herself but she wants the attention. She has said so a couple of times. Then I feel embarrassed and stop using it.

The excerpt above also highlights the idea of conversion. How media are talked about, the mother's complaints, and the father's feeling of guilt can be understood as an adaptation to or internalisation of the dominating media discourses on the negative effects of digital media.

In Oscar's home, the central placement of the digital TV screen in the living room serves as a base for him during the day. The open space between the living room and the kitchen makes it possible for Oscar's mother to monitor him from a short distance while doing things on her own, such as reading a newspaper or checking her smartphone. The position of the digital TV screen follows the idea of how technology is objectified in the household and incorporated in everyday routines. After Oscar's brothers have left for school, he wants to watch *Pippi* (the Swedish television series with Pippi Longstocking). Oscar is in front of the TV screen the whole morning watching the same episode repeatedly, laughing aloud and making comments to his mother. From her distance, she checks her smartphone at the same time as she replies to his comments. Oscar shows little interest in her smartphone, and he likes to spend time in the living room watching television, even if he gets restless after a while. His mother confirms his delight in having the television on, even if he is not watching:

Mother: [...] he often walks around and does different things, but he wants to have it on [the TV] in the background all the time.

Interviewer: What do you think about this?

Mother: Really, I can't think of anything worse, but then you have enough of conflicts so sometimes I just let the TV be on...

It is obvious that Oscar's mother has a different view than Oscar about the use of the digital TV screen. This struggle is not derived from the idea of monitoring Oscar's screen time, but the idea of what functions the digital TV screen serve in the household.

Oscar has no access to the remote control, but he is well aware of where to reach it from a chair. The remote control is blocked from his vision, but he has memorised its visibility. The remote control is incorporated in the household's routines and is a contemporary example of what Morley (1986) described as remote switch battles. When all the family members are gathered at home, the television becomes the central focal point. One of the family rituals is to gather in the sofa on Saturdays to watch a movie, usually a Harry Potter movie, chosen by Oscar's older brothers:

Interviewer: Do you have any tradition, ritual, or routine in the family to watch a programme or movie?

Brother: Harry Potter.

Interviewer: And the whole family sits together?

Brother: Even Oscar. But maybe not the whole movie...

Interviewer: And mum and dad too?

Mother: Yes.

Interviewer: Is it Friday then?

Brother: Saturday.

Interviewer: So, TV is a bit of a gathering point?

Mother: Yes, it really is.

Both the description of Oscar's everyday routines and the statement from the interview about the Saturday movie rituals are examples of how digital media practice is incorporated in the moral economy of the household in Oscar's family.

The use of the digital TV screen is part of both Oscar's and Anna's daily routines, but its usage is different. Nevertheless, the usage is incorporated in the temporal orientation of the two families. Anna's access to the TV screen is restricted. In her case, there is the once-a-day routine of television after dinner as part of the daily time schedule and the repeated family interaction pattern. In Oscar's case, we see a more fluid and integrated way of watching television programmes.

### *Digital media "online" and traditional play "offline"*

The living room not only serves as the centre for watching digital TV, but also for traditional activities such as reading books and playing with toys. In the homes of Anna and Oscar, the living room has its share of children's toys, games, and books (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2** Traditional patterns of play offline as part of everyday routines



*Comments:* In the left image, Anna plays with a wooden train set among other toys. In the right image, Oscar chooses among toys on a shelf. Images are published with the informed consent of the parents.

Anna's mother talks about how traditional play encourages her child's fantasy:

I think it is like this, traditional play, because you notice, when we are playing actively with her or if she is sitting and looking, then she has a lot of fantasy, talking to herself and is active with her dolls, which are all around. We think it is important.

During an appointment at the Children's Health Clinic for the eight-month check-up of Anna's younger brother, the parents received a leaflet about screen time. It recommended that children should not spend too much time in front of various screens and encouraged parents to sit and watch the screen together with their children. These recommendations are in alignment with the parents' view about not using media all the time, and during the interview, the parents stressed the importance of encouraging traditional play and physical activities.

During the second visit to Anna's family, the same playground was visited twice during the day, either on foot or by bicycle. Concerning the messages in the leaflet, Anna's mother exemplifies how the moral economy of the family is anchored in societal discourses about what constitutes a good childhood and how children should play (see James et al., 2007):

It [the leaflet] said that there was not so much research, that you couldn't know for sure. We thought, not a big issue there... some common sense, we thought nothing that collided with what we had thought about earlier [...] it was probably more if you were playing a lot of games, that it shouldn't take time from other activities, like playing. That they should move their bodies, more from that point of view. I remember that, I just went through it quickly.

The talk exemplifies the domestication process of conversion of how digital media and its symbolic meanings are challenged by creating tensions in relation to what should be considered the basics for children's play. The negative effects of media are mentioned as a potential threat to traditional play and physical activity, and even a threat to a good childhood (see Postman, 1983). Hence, digital activities in this case are not seen as supporting children's offline activities.

Traditional activities are also part of Oscar's everyday life at home. From Oscar's perspective, he is happy to alternate or combine playtime with watching programmes on the digital TV screen. His mother states that Oscar is a child with little interest in playing with traditional toys:

Mother: This child does not play with toys... he reads books, watches TV, he can be outdoors playing and walking around, he likes to be around to set the table and do the cooking...

Interviewer: But the Pippi doll is upstairs in his bedroom?

Mother: Well, they are there [laughter], he might play for a little while...

The Pippi dolls in his bedroom illustrate how Oscar relates to the media content in his extended forms of offline play. Also, from the TV versions of Laban, the Little Spook (also translated into English as *The Little Ghost Godfrey*), Oscar has developed his fantasy friend to bring with him during outdoor activities. Laban is with him all the time while outside in the nearby woods, and he "helps" Oscar build a hut with sticks. Laban has clearly been adopted by Oscar in terms of the process of appropriation when a media product enters the domestic sphere, because Oscar used to watch Laban on the TV screen, provided by one of the streaming services not subscribed to anymore. Although he misses his programmes, he has negotiated the meaning of Laban and turned him into a fantasy friend. Furthermore, Laban is still there for him in several books which his parents read to him; and he sometimes even "reads" the books himself. Laban is Oscar's companion while playing on his own, or with his mother nearby. Oscar's relation to the digital media content as well as the physical artefacts of dolls and books shows how the content is objectified from the online to the offline space in Oscar's home. This could also be interpreted as a form of transmedia intertextuality: a blend of media engagement and play online and offline (Marsh, 2014).

As a mother of three children, Oscar's mother feels that she has become laxer in terms of restrictions, not only towards the youngest one, but also in general:

We can always think that we have certain rules about this but it is very hard to keep them, especially when the children are off school, for example in the Christmas holidays or the like. Of course, they are involved [in digital media], and I sometimes think that they do it so much that it leads to conflicts. Really, they go... I don't know why, but this is the way it is, [...] lots of conflicts. And then you just have to stop it. They can't spend the whole day, but periods of time. We think they are too involved with their smartphones and iPads, as soon as they get home from school, and they can do it for a little while, but then you have to nag the whole time for them to turn it off, they wouldn't do it on their own accord.

In the quotation above, Oscar's mother clearly expresses her concern about the extensive use of digital media and the difficulty of balancing between children's independent interactions and parents' questions of screen time. The media have been incorporated into the everyday life of the household, but the family members have different views on routines and temporal conditions for using digital media.

It is obvious that both Anna's and Oscar's parents share the concern about the extensive usage of digital media, and both sets of parents encourage the choice of offline

activities. We can note a difference between the two children, with Anna switching back and forth between online and offline activities to a greater extent than Oscar, who integrates his online content, like his imaginary friends, to his offline play outdoors. Conflicts between children and parents arise when parents want the children to be offline from the media practice, and in both cases, parents try to negotiate and offer other options for activities. Another way of avoiding conflicts is to make digital media invisible, as part of the incorporation of the moral economy of the household.

### *Selection of digital media and its content*

Anna and Oscar are both familiar with the television content provided by the Swedish Public Service (SVT). In Anna's family, it is the evening routine to watch one of the daily children's programmes together; it is incorporated in the time structure and daily family life. Oscar, on the other hand, chooses programmes from the SVT children's channel during the day. This way, Oscar has appropriated the content as a flow during the day, even if his mother changes the conditions during the day.

Anna's parents stated clearly that they prefer public service because it contains no commercials and, in their view, provides good-quality content. Suitable media content, according to them, is primarily pedagogical and does not reproduce gender stereotypes. The parents' media talk, and also their choice of content, exemplify the objectification of values in the household. Below, Anna's parents compare public service with clips on YouTube:

Father: So, there were these things on YouTube that didn't, lots of girls running around with make-up, and boys running around...

Mother: Yeah, and they (the boys) were like punching each other.

**Figure 3** *Interacting with digital technology*



*Comments:* On the left, Anna uses an app on a tablet. On the right, Oscar points to a programme he would like to watch on digital TV. Images are published with the informed consent of the parents.

In Figure 3, we can see Anna using the tablet in the image to the left while sitting on the sofa in the living room. Not shown in the figure is her father next to her, monitor-

ing Anna's use. Anna sometimes needs her father's help to use the tablet and the apps. Most of the time, Anna uses the tablet in the morning while her father is busy, then she has more freedom to choose content, even commercial clips on YouTube. When Anna is allowed to use the tablet in the evening, she can only select a few already installed pedagogical apps such as maths and puzzles. The temporal aspect affects the choice of media content, but that media use also has to fulfil a specific function, for example, strengthening Anna's cognitive development.

The tablet is the only medium that creates tensions and negotiations between the parents and Anna. During the second visit, when Anna was asked to switch off the iPad, she refused and told her father that she wanted to pause it while eating. In the end, she gave up and her father took the tablet. The father talks about how they have developed coping strategies to decrease conflicts, such as saying "this is the last one", but it does not always work. These strategies can be seen as a means to uphold the moral economy of the household, here in terms of parents' functional view of media use only being used for a specific purpose and not on a *laissez-faire* basis, according to the father:

Yes. Some mornings when she has been using the iPad, then often, I think, she gets really mad when you take it away from her. Very often you can do like "this is the last" but if she has been using it for a long time she can't do it. Then we are heading for a big quarrel.

The tablet, which is mainly used by Anna, is kept out of sight, ensuring that she is not tempted to take it and use it any time she feels like it. Here, the domestication process of objectification, where a medium is placed, becomes an important means of controlling access but also preventing unhindered use of the tablet. The media practice is highly regulated, making the tablet simply inaccessible to Anna most of the day, also becoming a strategy for the parents to avoid bad mood and conflicts.

The smartphone is another digital medium that Anna encounters in her daily life. As with the tablet, her access is limited, in terms of both content and use. Anna pays little attention to smartphones while the parents are using them. As the grandparents live in other cities, Anna talks with them occasionally on FaceTime, and while talking, the mother holds the smartphone in order to monitor and ensure that the phone is not dropped on the floor. During the second visit, Anna's grandmother called and Anna said "hi" but she was more interested in playing with the wooden train in the living room. The only time Anna actually uses the smartphone is when she sits together with her mother on the sofa – a safe place where Anna can hold the phone by herself – and looks at photos or explores the camera functions for scanning. Anna has learned how to use QR codes from preschool, where they scan them on the wall to get access to images and songs. This shows how Anna's appropriation of a medium is influenced by contexts outside the household.

There is an agreement among the parents to postpone Anna's use and adoption of the smartphone, as they are afraid that she will use it all the time and in an uncontrolled manner. Anna's parents realise that as she becomes older, with peer pressure, it will be difficult not to allow her a smartphone of her own. The internal structure and values of the household, partly based on parents' own media experiences while growing up, is slowly being revised and challenged due to external factors, exemplifying the process of conversion. Furthermore, the smartphone will become a tool for the parents to know she is safe at home:



Father: But little, I think we will be influenced by her friends. You might be able to push it in some direction, but she will have one.

Mother: It doesn't feel like we will, it feels more like she will ask about one before we...

Father: Yes, and from my point of view, she can very well wait until she is a teenager before she has a smartphone.

Mother: Or if you want to reach her, we don't really know...

Father: Yes, if all the others have one, then.

Mother: It's a bit different from when you were young yourself, if you went home by yourself from school, we had a landline telephone at home.

Oscar's appropriation of digital technologies on an everyday basis is fairly limited. So far, his main interest is watching children's programmes on the digital TV screen, although between the second and third visit with his family, he expanded his interest to also include smartphones. The use of smartphones as well as the viewing on the digital TV screen have been incorporated in Oscar's time structures. There are still limits to Oscar's appropriation of technologies, for example, he must ask his mother to turn his favourite programmes on. He has not figured out how to use the remote control, but at the same time, he is aware of it and compensates for this by giving orders and instructions to his mother. She does not feel the need to put restrictions on his viewing, since he does not focus on the TV screen for very long and the content is provided from safe sources like SVT's children's channel. Nevertheless, his mother is nearby to keep an eye on him:

Mother: I am not always sitting next to him and watching, but I am always here.

Interviewer: But is there something you think is okay for the big boys to watch but not Oscar, some restrictions, something that could be a little too much?

Mother: No, but they don't watch really scary things either, Harry Potter, there may be some scary things there, but often he is not focused, he jumps around on the table, finds a book, no, it's not...

During the third visit with Oscar and his family, he started to pay more attention to his mother's smartphone. His mother has provided him with some apps in the smartphone for him to use; however, Oscar had already developed a taste for watching clips on YouTube. The change of interest can be explained by an event occurring between our visits, with certain wishes for gifts: Christmas. Oscar became more aware of these items from listening to his two brothers' wishes. Additionally, one of the brothers had a specific wish for a gift on his upcoming birthday:

Mother: Since our oldest son will soon turn ten, he will get a smartphone and we have talked about this for a long time. He is really into technology, so he just wants an iPhone X. They just cost 10,000 [laughter] right, of course you're going to get one of those... it was not legitimate of course, but we thought he should have an iPhone because we have them and are acquainted with them, but whether it will be a 6 or 7, or a 5, that depended on what could be offered.

In this case, the older brother shows awareness of the impact of digital technology in terms of identity and the relationship between the moral economy of the household and the external “outside” society, referred to as the element of conversion. Oscar may still be too young to understand the impact of conversion, for example peer pressure, but according to his mother, it may just be a question of time until even the youngest ones grasp the idea of digital technology. She is well aware of the competence of the young children and that the younger generation’s use must be accepted:

Mother: Children are good at it, they pick things up quickly, and for them it is a matter of course. And this is what could be called the new society, and just to accept what they are doing and realise that you are more than one generation older than your children.

Oscar’s mother reflects on the fact that the more children you have, the laxer you get towards the use and content of digital media. But she states that they do have restrictions: they cannot download apps that are not approved by the father. Some websites are not accessible for the boys and therefore not incorporated in their usage. This is also an example of how the monitoring function is expressed in the family. When it comes to Oscar’s use of digital technology, the mother wishes for common sense:

Mother: I don’t know, it is difficult, I wish he will use it in a moderate way, with common sense as I see it [laughter]. But it is really difficult, I really don’t know, I hope he is not becoming a YouTuber. That would be horrifying [laughter].

Both Anna and Oscar demonstrate that digital media are incorporated in their everyday lives and that they have adopted preferences for the usage and their routines. To a certain extent, they are free to select content and make choices according to their preferences as long as it is within the moral economy of the household; it is clear that in both families, parents have a preference for public service content.

## Conclusions

In this article, the Swedish findings from two case studies on 0–3-year-old children and their digital lives are examined through the lens of domestication theory (Silverstone et al., 1992). We have looked specifically at the processes – appropriation, objectification, incorporation, and conversion – and how parental struggles are made visible through the notion of the moral economy of the household. Even with a small sample size, our analysis shows complexity, here in terms of the parallel and ongoing domestication processes that form different layers around the toddlers’ media practices. An insight into these processes, revealing the complexity, provides us with new and detailed knowledge for the emerging research field on toddlers and digital media. Domestication theory perceives the child as an active individual, acting in a complex web of integrated processes, including the moral economy of the household. The latter is especially seen in the parents’ negotiations, reflections, and moral struggles concerning their own media use, but also the choices and values associated with their children’s media practices.

From our two cases, we see different practices around the digital TV screen, but they are all embedded in the incorporation of everyday routines in the households. It is obvious that the domestication processes in the participating families also include the

appropriation of traditional media, such as books and mainstream television. Nowadays, mainstream media are considered to be digital but nevertheless, an interesting notion is that both the children adopted media content to use in their play offline, such as the creation of a fantasy friend or the skirt to be worn before bed to match the character in the programme. The digital everyday life of the two children in this study could be described as sparse: they do not use much digital technology on their own premises, and their selections of digital media and content are still restricted. This is part of the parental challenges on how to negotiate issues, and sometimes handle conflicts, concerning children and digital media practice. The parents have developed various coping strategies, such as postponing the introduction as long as possible. As we have shown at the beginning of this article, there are contradictory discourses and demands on the development and integration of digital media technology in society, also in the lives of very young children. From the interviews with parents, we can trace their awareness and struggles to encourage and restrict the use of digital media. These contradictory discourses are embedded in the moral economy of the households.

Livingstone and colleagues (2015) point out that parents with education are more likely to promote offline activities for children and limit the time spent with digital devices, and thus it is not surprising that our families demonstrate similar patterns. We can also see that the family composition of the household matters. Older siblings encourage and accelerate the appropriation and incorporation of digital media, and raising several children sometimes makes it difficult for parents to uphold strict rules on media use. Furthermore, homes are not isolated units, and toddlers are introduced to digital media by external actors, such as preschool teachers and the extended network of family members.

To our knowledge, this is the first publication of detailed accounts of children aged 0–3 years in Sweden, investigated in their homes from an ethnographic perspective using the “A day in the life” method. From a critical point of view, the small sample size might be questioned, as the case studies do not allow us to generalise beyond the participating toddlers and their families. However, our aim is not to generalise but to add an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon investigated through the lens of domestication theory. By offering multiple perspectives and insights into the microlevel of children's lifeworlds, we demonstrate some of the complexity and need for further investigations of young children's appropriation of media technology in their natural setting, including the moral economy of households.

Walking along with Anna and Oscar gives us a better understanding of the nuances of the domestication of digital technology in early childhood, and modern family life in Sweden. The picture is far more multifaceted and troublesome for parents to handle than previous research has found, and we encourage further studies on toddlers from an everyday perspective. Toddlers are far from a homogeneous group, and they grow up in families of diverse backgrounds and with different moral economies. This variation must be taken into account in any future attempt to grasp the broader picture of young children, their digital media practices, and parents' everyday struggles.

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