Family Interview Results: Technologies Impact on Family Communication

Kimberly A. Groya

Kent State University
Family Interview Results: Technologies Impact on Family Communication

With the increase in usage of technology in America it is easy to see diverse ways how technology impacts family communication practices. The impact of technology on families can be both positive and negative and conducting interviews with three generations of a family provides a way to explore how technology influences family interactions for better and for worse. The main goal of these interviews was to examine how technology impacts the family and their communication with each other. The interviews were also conducted to explore generational differences in the way technology influences family communication practices. Attached to the end of this analysis is an appendix with the interview questions that were asked to the three generations of the family.

The interviewed family was of Italian heritage. The family member of the oldest generation is named Tamera. Tamera is 80 years old and came over to America from Italy when she was 18 years old. Tamera had three children, two live in America and one lives in Italy, and one of them is named Gina. Gina is 51 years old and married with two children. Gina’s youngest child is Tina who is 22 years old and a recent graduate of Miami University. These three generations vary greatly in age so technology has impacted them all and the ways they communicate within the family in many different ways which made them a great family to interview.

After conducting the interviews with these three family members many themes appeared among their answers. The first theme is that as the generations got younger technology had a bigger impact on how they communicated with their family. Tina believes that technology has had a huge impact on how she communicates with her family. She spends much of her time on the internet, watching television, or talking on the phone with her friends but Tamera rarely
watches television and only uses the internet to talk to her daughter in Italy. When Tamera wants to talk to a family member she either calls them or talks to them in person whereas Tina would rather just send over a quick text to her Mother, Gina, to say that everything is going well at school. Gina notes that advancement of technology has definitely impacted how she talks to her children and in mostly negative ways but it has not greatly impacted her communication with her Mother.

These findings are not surprising. Tamera grew up without technology and it was only introduced in the later years of her life. She has not let technology take over her life like most children have and only uses it as a bonus in her life like talking to her daughter in Italy. Tina grew up having technology at her fingertips so it is not surprising that she would rather be on Facebook or watching television than communicating with her family. Although Gina has had the television for her whole life, and has had the internet for a good portion, she still believes that family should come before these things. Many older generations may believe that technology can exert a negative influence on family interaction expressing a privilege for face-to-face rather than mediated communication within the family. The younger generation seemed to be more attached to technology and preferred mediated interactions. Although Tina noted that technology sometimes was able to take over her life and provided less time for dedicated face-to-face family communication without technological interruptions.

The second theme found from the interviews is that all generations can agree that the most positive impact that technology has had on their family communication is that they can now easily talk with their family in Italy. Tamera, Gina, and Tina all made mention of the fact that it is now a lot easier to talk to their family overseas and they enjoy being able to talk on a regular basis since they only see each other once or twice a year. Tamera rarely uses the internet and she
says that the only reason she has it is to talk to her daughter in Italy. Without the internet she would have to rely on phone calls which are very expensive or written letters which take a long time to get overseas. All three members now depend on the internet to talk to their family overseas and it has had a huge positive impact on their communication and ability to stay connected as a family across the miles.

Most families can agree that the internet has helped them to stay in touch with relatives that do not live close but families with relatives overseas really feel the positive impact of the advancement of technology on their communication. The internet was first helpful for the family because they could use email instead of pricey phone calls. In recent years the invention of Skype has helped them out even more. They can now talk face to face for free and are able to communicate on a regular basis.

Participants discussed positive and negative ways that television-viewing impacted family communication. For examples, sometimes the television resulted in more passive family interactions yet at other time there were instances when watching televised families decide how to deal with difficult topics, such as discussing sex or alcohol and drug use, provided a catalyst for more family conversations about these difficult topics. Thus, television can help facilitate difficult dialogue discussion in the family. Tamera did not get to experience this because Gina did not watch much television growing up but she remembered Gina talking about how hard it would be to have those conversations but television shows made a good introduction to the topic. Tina recalled that the television show Dawson’s Creek was what started all the conversations because in the show the characters discuss sex and alcohol in almost every episode. The negative impacts of television that the family mentioned were that it cut into valuable time for the family to talk and it also led to some tension when arguments would come up about what to watch.
Although these negative impacts are pretty large the benefits of television are also large because those conversations are always hard for a parent and child so having a television show to initiate the conversation tends to make it less awkward.

Discussing sex can be difficult and complex for both parents and children but such dialogues are important. Children hear about these topics at a young age in school and on the television so it is essential for parents to discuss these topics so that children are not misinformed. Instead of bringing up such difficult conversations out of nowhere, parents are able to start the conversation based on the television show’s treatment of the topic, potentially resulting in less awkwardness in family conversations about difficult topics. Several programs on TV discuss sex, alcohol, and drugs in a more sensitive way for younger audiences and more parents can use television as a way to bring up these conversations.

Media and technology provide both benefits to family communication and well as potential for conflict or superficial family interactions to occur. Thus, technology in and of itself is not good or bad but provides more diversity for the ways that families can interact and relate to one another. Technology can take away from family discussions but also allows family members to stay easily connected and have conversations even when not in the same house. While there are plenty of negative impacts technology may have on family communication the benefits of media and technology are also prevalent. These interviews themes show that media and technology impact family communication in diverse ways. Even though the younger generations have grown up with advanced technology and it has had a bigger impact on their life the older generations also experience these impacts on how they communicate with their family. As the years go on and technology becomes more advanced, families will continue to struggle with how to create the desired culture for technological influence on family interaction patterns.
Appendix

1. In what ways has the internet led you to have better communications with your family in Italy?

2. What are the positive and negative impacts the television has had on your family and how they communicate?

3. Are there any specific examples of a television show or movie helping to initiate a conversation about a typically awkward subject like sex, drug use, or teen drinking?

4. What would you consider the internet’s impact, if any, to be on your immediate family’s day to day communication?

5. In what ways do you feel the media in general has positively and negatively impacted families and how they communicate?