JAQUELINE MCLEOD ROGERS AND FIONA JOY GREEN

Mommy Blogging and Deliberative Dialogical Ethics

Being in the Ethical Moment

This article argues that while some mommy bloggers follow ethical practices in protecting the privacy of those they write about, others have given little thought to such self-regulation, leaving room and need for the dialogical blog-based forum proposed by the authors. Since mommy blogging takes family as its subject (and often family members who are dependent minors), confidentiality and privacy issues are particularly sensitive. Apart from an early effort to codify guidelines published on the BlogHer *website, there has been little blog-based or scholarly discussion of ethical blogging practices. Several examples of prominent mommy bloggers who disclose sensitive information about others without apparent privacy concerns for purposes of entertaining or informing their audience are documented. To conclude, the authors propose opening their blog—*Mommy Bloglines: Ta[l]king Care—*as a forum for interactive community discussion of evolving practices, with a goal of identifying some shared values amidst diversity.*

About four years ago, in 2011, we turned to the project of mommy blogging, collaborating from our perspective as two middle-aged, white, senior scholars and administrators teaching at an inner-city University in Winnipeg, Manitoba—one of us from the field of Rhetoric and Communication (Jaqueline) and one of us from Women's and Gender Studies (Fiona). As mothers of young adult children, we were interested in finding ways to connect our work to our outside identities and to use our own creative voices. We started our first blog, *Fluid Maternities*, intending to talk about our experiences raising young adult children in order to fill a gap we had observed when trying to find blogs by moms about their experiences with older children. At this point of entry, we did not expect to be overly guarded when sharing incidents of

family life and interactions with our children.

After several posts it became clear to us that talking about parenting our children was fraught with problems. Whereas Fiona was comfortable making public presentations about elements of her openly gay son's life, with his consent, she was quickly aware of censoring herself to protect his privacy on the blog. It is one situation to present research in controlled circumstances to in-person audiences, yet another to post on the Internet, making life details a matter of public record. Jaqueline also became concerned about the uncomfortable level of exposure involved in writing about parenting her daughters through the struggles of moving into their late teens and early twenties, whether telling about their accomplishments or problems with health or friends. It became clear that contextualizing the experience of an individual family member as a family situation made the story no less revelatory. Mommy blogging seemed less about self-reporting than about telling stories about others—really telling *on* them.

Nor was it helpful to tell ourselves our aim was service-oriented—to help or prepare others parenting young adult children. Telling any stories about interacting with our children seemed to involve not only trespassing on their rights to privacy but also stealing their stories, amounting to a writer's abuse of power. What if they saw our versions of their stories, and felt misunderstood or misrepresented? Perhaps worse, what if they started accepting the blogged version in place of their own, so that we were tampering with the pattern of their memories and even revising their lives? We both concluded that mommy blogging involved intimate revelations about others that seemed to encroach on privacy rights in disrespectful and even dangerous ways.

In our early investigation of an ethics of mommy blogging, three ethical areas came to the fore as more prominent than others: 1) the potential for corporate exploitation, 2) generic expectations governing truth telling and misrepresentation, and 3) the need to protect the privacy of subjects (particularly that of our children who are dependents and/or minors). Of course it is often difficult to tease apart the ethical pitfalls that arise from sponsorship exploitation, deliberate inauthenticity and privacy violations: seeking notoriety in hopes of engaging readership and sponsorship may lead one to exaggerate or even falsify lived experience, which in turn moves one away from thinking about how to portray people with fairness and dignity. The blog becomes its own reality show! Yet for the sake of conceptualizing the three areas, it is possible to differentiate them according to considerations of victims and harms. In the first case of corporate sponsorship, bloggers themselves may be the primary victims at risk of exploitation. In the second case when bloggers deliberately misrepresent themselves in their blogs, they may be taking advantage of the trust and expectations of their followers or readers. Finally, when bloggers tell about family members and people they know, they may be taking advantage of

subjects who have not given consent—who may not be of age to give consent.

We are intrigued by this third ethical tension because it can easily arise without a blogger being aware of it. Moreover, those who stand to be hurt by sensationalized and unauthorized disclosures are likely those the blogger cares about and hopes to celebrate or help. We are also concerned that damages may go beyond harming individual subjects. When subjects are treated like commodities, often processed into blogs against their will or knowledge, the larger project of mommy blogging and the community of mom bloggers may suffer. A difficult issue for all mommy bloggers—whether sponsored or not—is determining what is off limits to blogtalk. Being cautious about representing others is perhaps especially important to mommy bloggers whose reflections on life and lived experiences often centre on revealing details about intimate others and are circulated to readers as exemplary forms of advice.

As researchers, we do not to intend to set ourselves up as ethical arbiters but to examine community practices and engage mommy bloggers in dialogues about online privacy and disclosure. To foster such dialogue by providing a welcoming platform, we transitioned from a blog site to a web site, *Mommy Blog Lines: Ta[l]king Care* . We are still in the process of developing this site, looking for strategies to attract bloggers to join a conversation about blogging practices of withholding or sharing stories and images involving their children. One of the purposes of this paper is to announce that our blog site is open to the mommy blogging community as space for interactive discussion about privacy practices. Ultimately what we are looking for is not a hard and fast manifesto but better blogging practices based on deliberative and dialogical ethics—reflexive practices that encourage self-examination and allow some space for diversity of opinion and approach. As feminist researchers, we are committed to developing a dialogical partnership with the community. Our hope is that community reflection will lead mommy bloggers and readers to become more aware of ethical considerations that affect how we treat public and private matters.

Our commitment to developing community-based ethics that are situation-sensitive resonates with recent theory that describes the mamasphere as open and flexible, more a moment where reader and writer meet than an artifact (Friedman, 74-75). In connecting mommy blogs to the changing face of motherhood, May Friedman envisions the mamasphere as a location within cyberspace that can allow for fluid identity. Her analysis builds on some of the positive elements in Donna Haraway's predictions about the liberatory power available with "a merging of body and technology" (99). For Friedman, the mamasphere offers a space for exploratory thinking and alternative identities, a forum for redefining "motherhood, the relationships between mothers, the relationships between mothers and their children, and the maternal subject

position" (153). It mediates the differences between writer and reader without attempting to "arrive at a conclusion … to find 'the answer'": "The mamasphere is, instead, about never-ending questions and an ongoing discussion" (75). Ethics can likewise be conceived as moments for reflective practice rather than as rules. The blog we propose would both respond and contribute to the fluidity of the mamasphere by opening more channels for thinking about the ecology or networked nature of talking about our lives on line, about the levels of trust we should place on our readers, as well as about the connections and disjunctions between the virtual world and the real world practices.

We begin this discussion of the ethics of mommy blogging by defining the key terms, first examining how "mommy blogging" is understood, evolving, and best applied. We then explore "ethics" in relation to communication and privacy and consider the explanatory power of several ethical approaches in relation to mommy blogging practices of personal disclosure. Finally, we look at why mommy blogging is vulnerable to ethical slips, particularly to exposé of self and family. We review the case and influence of several high profile bloggers who model a lack of concern for the privacy of others and who set a tone that tends to celebrate "say what you will" self-expression. We conclude by considering the particular exigencies motivating mommy bloggers to exercise reflection and restraint in talking about their families on line, primary of which is the need for mommy bloggers to observe and protect children's rights.

Where Mommy Blogging and Ethics Collide

The term "mommy blogging" is contested by some (Bon; Bradley; Connors, "Meter" 92; Mohanraj). A blog in 2006 critiqued the unfairness of the term being "thrown out as a comprehensive put-down" (Tracey Goughran-Perez, qtd. in Friedman and Calixte 24) to refer to any blogs that were badly written and self-indulgent, noting that using the term in this way revealed ongoing assumptions about the second rate status of women and motherhood in society (Bon; Bradley; Mohanraj). Blogger Catherine Connors identifies the element of controversy as internal to the mommy blogging community, arising because "some believe it to exclude mothers who do not identify as 'mommies'" and see it as being used as a licence to pursue personal interests (92). By 2009, May Friedman and Shana Calixte called mommy blogging "a radical act" and referred to participating in a mounting "reclamation of the term" (25). In their edited collection *Mothering and Blogging: The Radical Act of the Mommyblog*, they extol the virtues of how mothers use blogs for networks and share experiential wisdom in the abandonment of relying on traditional "experts."

In a more recent 2013 book-length publication, *Mommy Blogs and the Chang-*

ing Face of Motherhood, May Friedman revisits and extends the argument to position mommy blogging not only as a conduit for networking that interrupts unhealthy silence and isolation, but also as a space for building communities that are healthy and diverse. When mothers are able to talk about what they do and to solve problems from within their own community, they develop not only a sense of personal identity but also a sense of their own expertise and community membership. Mommy blogging serves as a force that pushes back against dominant and restrictive discourses of motherhood to move "beyond rigid constructions of motherhood towards a more complicated and manifold subjectivity" (28). There is liberatory power in mommy blogging by putting "forth a version of motherhood more honest and raw than any representation of motherhood found elsewhere" (Freidman and Calixte 22).

In Friedman's analysis, women are no longer isolated individuals defined by cultural values, but participate in narrating a collective identity, whose members participate by contributing resonant personal stories. The purpose of the writing and reading mommy blogging network is to expansively explore the act of mothering—participants move, she says, "from mother to mothering. Both project and identity are collectivist, and thus they participate in destabilizing an individualist version of maternal subjectivity that in past years and culture defined and disempowered women" (152).

Apart from extending the argument that writing mothers no longer feel alone or powerless in a predefined role, Friedman explores the argument that blogging mothers connect to others to form an inclusive and diverse collectivity. Addressing the concerns that mommy bloggers conform "to the mythical norm of middle-class, heterosexual, married, and white motherhood" (147), Friedman argues that the mamasphere is capable of overcoming the presumption that mothers are white and middle-class, "a presumption that pervades the institution of motherhood itself," a presumption that rests on "the perceived racelessness of white mothers" (148). The networks and communities she describes are a hybrid that update the platitude that it takes a village to raise a child by proposing instead "the creation of an alternate village model that does not require mothers to always agree, that resists the need for ground rules and instead embraces chaos and laughter, loud fervent conversation, and noisy battles" (153). If corporatization privileges "the mythical norm of middle-class, heterosexual, married, and white motherhood," Friedman observes that the mamasphere is more diverse although "not clearly representatively so" (147). The communities she describes, taking shape in "the cyborg margins," are thus transgressive and even transformative, bringing together "mothers of children with disabilities, trans-mothers, non-English-speaking mothers, single mothers, mothers of colour, and every other mother whose experiences is not already documented in commercials, parenting magazines, and subway

advertisements" (148). Quite unlike Connors avocation of a community turned in and against itself, the mommy blogging community Friedman envisions is expansive, diverse and bravely communicative.

This debate energizes the term "mommy blogging" and suggests that there are important stakes involved. At its most basic, mommy blogging denotes a communication situation that involves a mother writing about some aspect of her relationship with her children. The website *Mashable* uses a similar pragmatic approach to define a "mom blog" as generated by "women who have at least one child in their household and have read or contributed to a blog in the last 30 days" (Laird). This basic definition is helpful to a discussion of ethics because it establishes that the writer takes as her subject not only herself, but also (at least by implication) her children. With this resonance factor, when ethical violations occur, there are seldom single victims but entire families are put at risk. Yet, if we accept Friedman's claims that mommy bloggers form a collectivity engaged in the shared project of redefining mothering, then it is also true that ethical mistakes have the potential to harm not only the individuals involved but also the broader mommy blogging community. An ethical gaffe is not an isolated personal self-promotional misstep in the way that Connors was trying to convey, but damaging to the development and ethos of the collective. If mommy blogging has the vibrant and revisionary potential that Friedman envisions, then an ethical review of community practices is timely. Asking members of the mommy blogging community to reflect on their practices ensures the participatory element of this review.

The Development of Privacy Ethics in Mommy Blogging

We understand our project of examining ethics in relation to "mommy blogging"—blogging about children and family—as an ongoing process aimed at identifying areas of ethical tension, especially those identified by community members who are prepared to enter into an online dialogue about ethical practices. In this section we will review some recent ways women have taken the lead in attempting to regulate the climate of debate and dialogue—whether through lists or essentialist theorizing about moral character—and we will also introduce vocabulary to guide ethical considerations beyond these approaches.

Although bloggers have generated a variety of lists to guide internet civility, implying that ethical practice is a straightforward matter of following a short set of rules, many philosophers of ethics and communications scholars have observed that ethics governing internet communications remain unresolved and emergent, for we are still in a "learn-as-you-go" stage (Christians, Jonas, and Madau). It is more literally descriptive than metaphorical to refer to the virtual spaces of the blogosphere and social media as "the wild west,"

evoking an untamed frontier where everyone must look out for themselves. For example, "The Wild West of Journalistic (and Blogistic) Ethics"—a blog from thetrialwarrior.com about law and justice—examines how laws have not kept up with online practices surrounding issues of "publishing defamatory statements online, or … hyperlinking to a story or comment that is otherwise defamatory."

The mommy blogging community was one of the first to make a strong gesture in the direction of invoking ethical communication standards. In 2006, in association with BlogHer, the community published a set of standards to promote online civility, and defines "unacceptable content as anything included or linked that is:

> •Being used to abuse, harass, stalk or threaten a person or persons;
> •Libelous, defamatory, knowingly false or misrepresents another person; Infringes upon any copyright, trademark, trade secret or patent of any third party. (If you quote or excerpt someone's content, it is your responsibility to provide proper attribution to the original author. For a clear definition of proper attribution and fair use, please see The Electronic Frontier Foundation's Legal Guide for Bloggers at http://www.eff.org/bloggers/lg;
> •Violates any obligation of confidentiality;
> •Violates the privacy, publicity, moral or any other right of any third party;
> •Contains editorial content that has been commissioned and paid for by a third party, (either cash or goods in barter), and/or contains paid advertising links and/or SPAM or "Stupid Pointless Annoying Messages." For BlogHer's purposes, we define SPAM as anything that qualifies as nonsense unrelated to the discussion, either in comments on a blog or in our forums. This nonsense may take classic forms (e.g., simple links to unrelated content that are often advertising or e-commerce), or more insidious forms.

In taking aim at "unacceptable" content, BlogHer authors acknowledged the permeability of this category and made provision for assessing complaints on a case-by-case basis. BlogHer co-founder Lisa Stone defends the efficacy of the standards for governing site-specific and community communication practices when she stated that by 2006 BlogHer "became the schoolmarms of the Internet." Yet she denies that these standards where ever intended for broad use, and says that BlogHer had "no desire to impose its guidelines on the entire Internet … nor a universal standard" (qtd. in Lasica, np.).

Sanctioned or not, these BlogHer guidelines were used by social media guru

Tim O'Reilly in 2007 to create his notorious code of conduct, which when applied, he suggested would ensure a code of civility. This codified approach may encourage more respectful interaction, yet is limited because it rigidifies and universalizes a process that needs to be fluid, responsive and particular. It also models a top down process rather than one of community engagement by giving out pre-formed rules to regulate participants. As J. D. Lasica, social media expert, observes, the development of standards is subject to resistance and the imposition of standards requires that they be applied to a well-defined and limited audience and that they be subject to ongoing review and revision.

Another strand of thinking about ethics advocates for an overall way of being or a particular orientation to problem solving, rather than imparting a list of standards. The ethics of care developed by Nel Noddings and Carole Gilligan in the late 1980s imagined women to be concerned with fostering relationships and maintaining the welfare of others above satisfying their own needs. More recently, the essentialist problems with this approach have been critiqued—for example Daryl Koehn devotes a chapter to critiquing the ethical primacy of caring for others although she maintains an appreciation for their dialogical approach (20-52). In a similar vein, Elisabeth Porter argues for the need to integrate interest in justice with care to make women active moral agents and overcome dualism (21).

Instead of advocating for lists or for putting others ahead of ourselves in principle, we are interested in framing the question as one of power and rights. Mothers as writers have a right to express themselves and give voice to lived experiences; at the same time, they need to think of the confidentiality rights of others who are part of their narratives. This is not an entirely new question, but one that has weighed on fiction writers who stray too close to fact, or perhaps even more to memoirists who tell about others in telling about themselves. As Maxine Hong Kingston says in a short story that records how she imagines her aunt's suicide in "China Women," when we tell about others we may do so as a gesture of respect, yet there are nonetheless elements of exploitation and exposure, so that she admits with some guilt that she is "telling on her" (15).

There is no set of guidelines to govern what can be said of others, so it is important that the writer acknowledges that the person wielding the pen assumes a powerful role. Writer and teacher Bronwyn T. Williams points out that there is no single solution or transposable matrix to guide writers in determining the balance to strike between real life and plot details in the creation of fictional and non-fictional narratives. Whether writing a blog, or another narrative form, writers might temper their decisions about inclusion and exposure by reflecting on Williams' concerns about the power of the writer and the relative powerlessness of those she or he animates in text:

family stories belong to all members of a family. It is only the writer, however, who gets to define those stories—even the stories that are true—in print for an audience of strangers to see. It is only the writer who decides which stories that larger audience "deserves" to hear. And, if those who don't do the writing are more afraid of the "truth" that appears in print it is, perhaps, a well-founded fear. They know that they will not have the power or opportunity to respond, to present their stories. (299)

To support the serious and lonely work of reflective practice, we are proposing a dialogic approach that puts mommy bloggers in contact with each other, discussing choices and boundaries. We want to think through the responsibilities particular to mommy bloggers that are attached to writing about loved ones, many of whom are dependents and/or minors. Because mommy bloggers choose to investigate and memorialize intimate interpersonal relations, they have moved by choice into territory fraught with ethical questions about the rights and feelings of self and others.

There is limited published scholarship specifically linking mommy blogging and ethics. Emily January Petersen in a recent publication expressing the belief that blogging is a positive way to professionalize motherhood, touches on ethics as one of four components. Drawn from Brenton Faber's theory of professionalism that "distinguishes between professional and occupational writing" (4): these four elements include: relationship with audience, social responsibility, ethical awareness, and redefining the workplace (Petersen, 7). In her commitment to making the argument that blogging is a positive development that professionalizes motherhood, Petersen elides the question of whether sharing with others in an attempted act of social responsibility may unintentionally devolve into an ethical lapse. By Faber's definition, ethical awareness requires "professionals exhibit a critical awareness of their own activities" (314). Yet, Petersen limits this awareness to matters of avoiding deceit and controversy—presumably unethical for stirring up unnecessary dissent.

Another essay published by Melissa Camara Wilkins promises to address "the question of content" (152). Wilkins claims to have moved away from the antics of her children to look instead at her own role as mother and issues of mothering. To say that mommy blogs are about the writer herself and motherhood issues is to solve the ethical dilemma that comes of writing about others. Yet, making this claim is not entirely convincing; it is like saying one will talk about good teaching without ever mentioning students. By the end of her essay, Wilkins concedes that it will be impossible to abandon writing about her children, conceding that "occasional posts devoted to the children's silliness and sweetness will still appear" (156). Rather than saying that she

cannot tell their stories anymore because they are not her own, her approach instead is to say that she's interested in her own story first, that her children will have to cultivate a similar writing interest if they wish to star in a blog and that they will only enter her blog if there's room. As she claims, "it is my blog, after all" (156).

There is a wide body of literature about communications and ethics. As Ronald Arnett, Janie Harden Fritz, and Leeanne Bell point out in presenting current thinking about ethics in communications, we live in an age of diversity when it is unlikely for opinions about what is right and good to coalesce. Yet to be ethical in our minimalist era necessitates assuming responsibility for learning about and listening to others: "Acknowledging that our learning requires a dialogic openness to listening to another's point of view opens a space for finding common ground" (17). They cite the case Sessela Bok makes for taking a pragmatic view of communication ethics, which holds that "a given community [should] locate minimal virtues that permit life together to continue, despite disagreement" (18). In Bok's view, these minimal virtues become common sense for the local community, without reaching for any level of universality. Relating this pragmatic approach to our enterprise reminds us that such minimal standards of good practices that may emerge for the mommy blogging community cannot be expected to last or to fit other groups, certainly not without effort or thoughtful adjustments. Whatever standards may emerge as shared are thus contextual and provisional.

Apart from appealing to mommy bloggers to join a discussion about ethical practices as a way to constitute community identity, we believe that they will be drawn to participate as a way to cultivate their own ethos and identity. If we offer a definition of mommy blogging as a communicative act, then it de-emphasizes its being understood solely as a form of self-expression. Arnett, Fritz and Bell make the point that the opposite of communication that links us to others is narcissistic self-expression that keeps us turned in on self: "Humans need to interact with others to learn from them. We do not give ourselves identity; we inherit our identities from others"(17). Most of the mommy bloggers we have spoken with so far express the hope of writing for others and are, in turn, interested in reading others' lives. We believe they would welcome membership in an interactive conversation about ethics as a way of feeling further connected to a community of writers.

A final reason in support of mommy bloggers taking part in a discussion of ethics is more theoretical than persuasive, having to do with a philosophical implication of post-modern life. For many of us, values do not arise from a faith-based framework outside human experience but emerge from within ourselves, from within the individual. This reliance on human and personal experience to determine belief and guide action further strengthens the call to

listen to how others account for experience, so that there is a form of public interaction and negotiation to cultivate shared ground.

The sort of ethics we are interested in, then, cannot be set down as a set of universal rules, but will arise from communication within the community, as we find common ground in the expression of individual ideas and practices. Many mommy bloggers claim to turn to blogging to escape isolation and to find a virtual community. We believe that the prospect of joining a virtual community and abandoning a position of maverick narcissism will have wide appeal. Moreover, the mommy blogging community is distinctive in being devoted to talking about vulnerable intimacies; yet it is not to avoid harming themselves or others that they should take up questions of good practice, not a reactionary move to dodge harm or blame. Mommy bloggers are likely to be drawn into conversation about blogging on the basis of promoting a united and flexible understanding about common sense and respect in community.

Where Ethics and Mommy Blogging Collide: Blogging Problems and Media Flare-ups

Some bloggers are mindful of the power of their words. They implement strategies to guide their behaviour and provide a non-didactic model to encourage readers and other bloggers to cultivate non-narcissistic communicative tactics such as restraint, creativity, irony, and reflective intellect. Conversely, others are saying what they like under the guise of innocence and good-humoured fun. A problem arises, however, if they are disclosing information about themselves and those close to them without reflecting on the potential harms or risks of such disclosure.

Related to this is that such extroverted bloggers may exert influence on the tone of the mamasphere and encourage reckless disclosure in the name of humour and healing. We have attended two blogging conferences where well-known mommy bloggers cultivate self-dramatizing personas and regale the audience with personal stories about awkward situations that feature a cast of family members, whose extreme and odd behaviour is recounted for the sake of humor. Well known mommy blogger, journalist and 2012 Goodreads Choice Awards Best Humor winner for *Let's Pretend This Never Happened: A Mostly True Memoir,* Jenny Lawson, for instance, attempts to present herself in stand-up comedian fashion and reveals so much about her persona that there seems to be no areas untouched. At one presentation when asked directly about her style online and at conferences, she noted that she is playing a role and that this persona is only part of her full identity (Lawson, "In conversation"). Yet, mommy blogging readers and audience members who are not privy to the discrimination she makes about identity

performance are likely to see her as a role model and deduce that it is safe to behave in a similar fashion.

Another successful blogger, Tanis Miller (whose self-describes her blog as "a humorous and insightful look at the joys of parenting, the delights of marriage and the heartbreak of losing a child") adopted a similar stance and tell-all persona—judging by her blog content and by her performance on a panel at BlogHer 2012. For example, at the conference she gleefully told an audience of about 75 bloggers about the consequences of writing about a pinworm outbreak in her home affecting her children; her blog story lead to one of her children being confronted by classmates at recess time mockingly dragging their bums around the school grounds. At the panel presentation she took credit for learning there are implications to what she says online, yet maintained that her children should nevertheless have an inherent trust that what she writes won't harm them. While she believes she has learned by experience about ethical behaviour and consequences, she does not recognize the irony of coming to safe practices through bad ones. Judging from audience members who were amused by or supportive of her position, we speculate that other bloggers learn what they will or will not blog about through situations that have arisen through their blogging mistakes ("Mom, stop blogging about me").

Apart from following the lead of popular bloggers, there are other conditions that encourage writers to follow a path of sensationalizing the lives they tell. In general, the search for popularity, traffic and even notoriety might be an incentive to embellish personal stories and reveal secrets about the lives of family members, even though these details become embedded in the internet archives. There may be something of a slippery slope effect to adopting a tell-all stance. Bloggers may move from self-reflection to self-dramatization to create fictionalized worlds. It was fiction rather than reality that Judith Stadtman Tucker—a writer and activist offering online resources on motherhood as a social issue—claims to encounter as a reader of mommy blogs. She was surprised to discover that she felt like she was "lurking," visiting fictional worlds in which she felt more like an "interloper" than a reader and called for mommy blogs to become more authentic: "I want to see the lives of other mothers as real and full of meaning" (15).

There is loss of authenticity when blogs resemble fiction more than diary or memoir. A reader like Tucker feels the inauthenticity and disconnection. At risk for writers is that they are no longer using the blog to explore motherhood and reach out to the mothering community, but are drawn into an escalating fictional self-expression. At stake is the genre of mommy blogging itself. As we learned from the publishing ordeal of James Frey, there is nothing wrong with telling a fictional story if we are honest about the type of story being told, yet readers feel cheated if a fiction is called reality. In terms of ethics, if

one is telling a fictional story there is no particular onus to protect anyone. On the other hand, if one is writing about actual experiences of mothering and family members, there is a need for ethical awareness and honouring the privacy of others.

Apart from affecting the reading and writing lives of individual bloggers, issues of oversharing the details of a child's private life in mommy blogs or other forms of social media flare up from time to time in the media, particularly in reaction to blogs in which moms deal with children's health problems. Moms who take on the role of documenting their child's struggle with disease or illness usually go beyond defending their right to write and refer instead to fulfilling a sense of public mission. They refer to the needs of a readership of other parents going through similar challenges with sick children and offer their experience and insight as a helpful resource and moral support. To use Catherine Connors' colourful phrase, they are "giving good blog" if they are writing for the public good, "to tell stories that support or promote causes that are important to me—to continue to speak narrative truth to power" ("Give good blog").

Yet as the following two examples indicate, there is an odd self-serving tone to posts dedicated to this activist commitment of "telling truth to power." Certainly members of the mommy blogging community are on record for criticizing socially-minded blogs that have a disingenuous character. If there is enough online furor, traditional media often publish and exaggerate these controversies, fanning antagonisms and finding fodder for continuing mommy wars.

Beginning around January 2013, for example, wide public controversy began building around our first example of a blogger who used her child as the subject. Liza Long wrote a blog, "I am Adam Lanza's Mother," that went viral and put her on record for making a comparison between her 13-year old son and the 20-year old Adam Lanza, who killed 26 people in Newton, Connecticut. She painted the graphic details of her son's outbursts: "I live with a son who is mentally ill. I love my son. But he terrifies me. A few weeks ago, Michael pulled a knife and threatened to kill me and then himself after I asked him to return his overdue library books. His seven- and nine-year-old siblings knew the safety plan—they ran to the car and locked the doors before I even asked them to" (Long, "I am Adam Lanza's Mother").

Although Long's claim that she and her children have suffered and have something to share may be true, at the same time from her son's perspective, such a portrait written by his mother is likely difficult to accept—even potentially damaging. Yet equally troublesome is that once such information is entrenched on the internet, it becomes a matter of permanent public record, likely to have a negative impact not only on his current personal and social life, but also on his adult life. Rather than protecting her child from Internet

exposure as parents are encouraged to do by media experts, Long has chosen in her post to expose his darkest side and moments to the world. While she did not use her son's name in a gesture toward anonymity, her post included his photo and was written in her own name, so his identity is clear to those who do some investigating.

After her post went viral, it provoked media attention and controversy. In a blog critiquing Long's right to expose her child's behavior and illness to internet scrutiny, blogger Sarah Kendzior, who refers to herself as a children's rights advocate and scholar, says: "To reveal the personal struggles of a mentally ill minor online—in particular—to paint him as unstable and violent—is a form of child abuse" ("A child's right to privacy on line"). She points out that the privacy problem in mommy blogging is urgent from a rights' perspective, particularly because it arises in relation to bloggers revealing details about the lives of dependent minors. Long and Kendzior ultimately made public peace, going on record together to oppose what they recognized as the media manipulation that had fanned a mommy war between them (Kendzior, "A joint statement"). Yet, neither the controversy nor the peace pact deterred Long from continuing to tell her son's story. She became a media celebrity advocating for more support for parents with children who have mental illness. Giving a TED talk, and making appearances on shows such as "Dr. Oz," she went into the details of her son's problems, doing so, she says, to alert audiences about warning signs of mental illness and problem behavior.

Apart from becoming a well-paid public speaker, she published a book about her son in fall 2014, *The Price of Silence*. Reviewing the publication, *People Magazine* interviewed her son, asking for his opinion about his mother's public presentation in print of his struggles. He responded by affirming he was glad she might help others but in answer to whether he was glad that she told his story, he deferred. Here is the rather heartbreaking interview passage in full:

Michael has mixed feelings about his mom's outspokenness. "I really wish my mom hadn't come forward," he admits. "I also really wish others would because it sure has caused a lot of pain and suffering for our family, but I'm pretty sure it has helped a lot of others." Asked what he'd like people to know, he says, "I'm not a bad kid. With treatment, I am not that different from anyone else except for the fact I've grown up without friends." And that's his hope now that he's started high school. "I'd like to make two or three new friends," he says (McNeil).

His response captures the dilemma we want mommy bloggers to attend to: Long's actions may have a positive social outcome—may draw individuals into a helping and educative community—yet this good is achieved at the expense of her son's desire for and right to privacy. From what he says, it has also cost him the support of his siblings and ability to make and keep friends.

In essence, his community dwindles as he becomes the key figure his mother uses to educate her growing audience.

In another example, also in the name of doing social good, well-known blogger Catherine Connors (of the blog *Her Bad Mother*) made raising money for a sick child one of the main features of her blog. There is a link on her blog called "Tanner" that provides a photo and description of her nephew (Tanner), whom she identifies as a victim of Muscular Dystrophy. Beyond helping others to cope with the difficulties of suffering from similar illness, she has taken a more aggressively proactive stance of raising money for the boy and his family, by mounting a fundraising campaign she called "Tutus for Tanner." While there is no question that the blog accomplished practical good, we question whether Connors went too far in providing details about the challenges of Tanner's situation. In a passage close to his photo, for example, her opening statement is "This is Tanner … He's dying." She also states that it is important to raise money to help him maintain a comfortable way of life, noting that at this point he remains oblivious to how his life will be materially distressed by the disease. If he were to discover her blog, his comfort would be shattered because she spells out that he is facing not only death, but also physical and mental decline and anguish.

After the campaign, Connors goes close to silent on the boy's life and medical condition. She claims that the story is too heartbreaking for her to continue reporting. Perhaps more interesting is that she eventually acknowledges in writing about Tanner that she needs to leave him alone with his story—she says that he has hit an age where he wants to be in control of his own narrative. This is her phrasing: "Tanner is becoming more and more the owner of his own story, and more and more concerned to keep it his own, for as long as he has it. Even as his body fails, his mind and spirit move forward—now, into adolescence, with all of its exquisite sensitivities and anxieties—and you know how you didn't want anyone to even look at you when you were twelve?" ("The Heart is the Strongest Muscle, Mostly"). Her phrasing capturing his precarious hold on life seems insensitive, at best. She never reflects on whether he has seen or might see her references to the gravity of his condition. She never takes up as an issue for discussion at what age a child deserves to have privacy or perhaps more important how age in any way factors into the question of child privacy. Her portrait of this young boy's struggle may have been well intended and may have raised money to support him, yet in putting his grim prognosis in writing she violates any attempts other adults may have made to shelter him.

Despite blog posts that combine indiscretion and entitlement, Catherine Connors achieved popular blogger status in Canada, although her popularity was eventually contested by a group of dissenters spoke out on GOMI (Get Off My Internets). They criticized her flawed integrity, which they say she

demonstrated by abandoning her mommy blog to take a lucrative position promoting Disney products. It is sadly ironic that a blogger who entered the mommy blogging world claiming to be concerned about social justice and education eventually left it to a chorus of detractors who consider her more of an opportunist than activist. When it was recently announced that she was removed, or resigned from her position at Disney, the internet again lit up with criticism about her.

We learn from these examples that mommy blogging is not always productive of drawing mothers together in a way that builds and educates community. Both bloggers Long and Connors make intimate revelations about minors under the auspices of being socially minded, yet in both cases there is evidence of mixed motives. Each blogger has showcased the dire predicament of a child on blogs that have been their springboard to celebrity, career advancement, and financial gains.

Moving Toward Best Blogging Practices

Family and children are the natural subject of mommy blogs, and for this reason mommy bloggers—always poised to tell about others, often dependent minors—have deep investment in taking up the question of what constitutes safe sharing in online writing. Some bloggers from inside the community have put forward what amounts to a "Just say no" position about matters of disclosure. For example, Sharon Greenthal—a former stay-at-home mom and blogger at *Empty House, Full Mind*—wrote "A Letter To Mommy Bloggers From A Blogger With Grown Kids" to discourage mommy bloggers from posting photos and writing about their children's "ugly moments." She warns that young children, whose little lives are used to create content for blogs, "are going to grow up and develop identities separate from" their mothers. While her counsel may be wise and learned through experience and reflection now that hers is an "empty house," it is unlikely that dictating self-censorship as a policy for handling personal privacy decisions will be influential and effective amongst mommy bloggers who are enjoying the benefits of a network of sharing.

On the other hand, an interactive forum could offer a place for engagement, productive discussion about ethics, and lead toward more reflective blogging practices. Clearly, online privacy practices are currently multiple and contested. Our understanding of what is public is undergoing a sea change, as our collective culture moves into online sharing. As social media scholar Dana Boyd observes, privacy is "a practice and a process, an idealized state of being, to be actively negotiated in an effort to have agency" (np). In opening our blog to be a forum for such deliberative negotiation, we are not asking members of the mommy blogging community to follow any given regime or to give

up self-expressive and community building practices, but instead to engage in an interactive and ongoing community conversation about online privacy to promote more reflective practice and safer sharing online. In introducing *Mothering and Blogging*, Friedman and Calixte point out that for blogging to be a "radical act"—a way to redefine gender and mothering in unmarked virtual space—it's time to "move beyond blogging as an individualistic pursuit" (31). Our project advocates for an interactive and collective "mamasphere" in place bloggers working alone, in isolation and removed from community.

Works Cited

Arnett, Ronald. C., Janie Harden Fritz, and Leeanne M. Bell. *Communication Ethics Literacy: Dialogue and Difference.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. 2009. Print.

BlogHer. What are your community guidelines? 29 Jan. 2006. Web. 25 Jul. 2013.

Bon. "meta-mommy, part deux." *Crib Chronicles.* 13 Mar. 2007. Web. 3 Apr. 2015.

Boyd, Danah. "What is Privacy: It's Also Not so Simple" Apophenia: Making Connections Where None Previously Existed. 1 Sept. 2014. Web. Date Accessed: 27 Apr. 2015.

Bradley, A. "BlogHer, BlogMe." 5 Aug. 2005. Web. 3 Apr. 2015.

Christians, C. "Communication Ethics and Peace." *Media Development* 54.3 (2007): 40-44. Print

Conners, Catherine. "Give good blog." Her Bad Mother. 9 Apr. 2015. Web. Date Accessed: 27 Apr. 2015.

Connors, Catherine. "Meter Politikon: On the 'Politics' of Mommyblogging." *Mothering and Blogging: The Radical Act of the MommyBlog*. Eds. May Friedman and Shana. L. Calixte. Toronto: Demeter Press. 2009. 91-111. Print.

Connors, Catherine. "The heart is the strongest muscle, mostly." 12 June 2012. Web. Date Accessed: 9 Apr. 2015.

Connors, Catherine. "This is Tanner." Her Bad Mother. 7 June 2012. Web. Date Accessed: 28 Apr. 2015.

Connors, Catherine. "What is UP with all the Tutus?" Her Bad Mother. 4 August 2010. Web. Date Accessed: 28 Apr. 2015.

Faber, Brenton. "Professional Identities: What Is Professional about Professional Communication?" *Journal of Business and Technical Communication* 16.3 (2002): 306-337. Print.

Friedman, May. *Mommyblogs and the Changing Face of Motherhood*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. 2013. Print.

Friedman, May and Shana L. Calixte. "Introduction." *Mothering and Blogging: The Radical Act of the MommyBlog*. Eds. May Friedman and Shana L. Calixte. Toronto: Demeter Press, 2009. 21-36. Print.

"Fluid Maternities." fluidmaternities.wordpress.com.

Gilligan, Carol. *Making Connections: The Relational Worlds of Adolescent Girls at Emma Willard School.* Harvard University Press, 1990. Print.

Greenthall, Sharon. "A Letter To Mommy Bloggers From A Blogger With Grown Kids." *Empty House, Full Mind.* Feb. 3, 2014. Web. Date Accessed: 28 Apr. 2015.

Haraway, Donna. *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature.* New York: Routledge. 1985. Print.

Hatfield, Jennna. "Mommy Blogging Remains a Radical Act." 24 June 2014. Web. Date Accessed: 28 Apr. 2015.

Jonas, H. *The Imperative Responsibility: In Search of Ethics in a Technological Age.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1984. Print.

Kendzior, Sarah. "A joint statement from Sarah and Liza." 17 Dec. 2012. Web. Date Accessed: 28 Apr. 2015.

Kendzior, Sarah. "Mommy bloggers: A child's right to online privacy." 1 Jan. 2013. Web. Date Accessed: 28 Apr. 2015.

Kendzior, Sarah. "Want the Truth Behind 'I Am Adam Lanza's Mother'?" Read her blog. 16 Dec. 2012. Web. Date Accessed: 28 Apr. 2015.

Kingston, Maxine Hong. *The Woman Warrior.* London: Vintage. 1989. Print

Koehn, Daryl. *Rethinking Feminist Ethics: Care, Trust and Empathy.* London: Routledge 1998. Print.

Laird, Sam. "The Rise of the Mommy Blogger." 8 May 2012. Web. 24 Nov. 2014.

Lasica, J. D. "How BlogHer Deals with Reviews and Conflicts of Interest." 9 Oct. 2009. Web. 9 Apr. 2015.

Lawson, Jenny. *Let's Pretend This Never Happened: A Mostly True Memoir.* Berkeley: Reprint edition, Penguin Group, 2013. Print.

Lawson, Jenny. In Conversation with Jenny Lawson. MBlog conference. Universitiy of Winnipeg. February 1, 2014.

Long, Lisa. *The Price of Silence: A Mom's Perspective on Mental Illness.* New York: Hudson Street Press 2014. Print.

Long, Lisa. "I am Adam Lanza's Mother." *The Blue Review.* 15 Dec. 2012. Web. 7 Apr. 2015.

McNeil, Liz. "Blogger Who Wrote 'I Am Adam Lanza's Mother' Opens Up About Life with Violent Son." August 12, 2014. Web. Date Accessed: 28 Apr. 2015.

Miller, Tanis. "About Tanis Miller." 9 Apr. 2015. Web. Date Accessed: 28 Apr. 2015.

"Mom, Stop Blogging about Me." BlogHer2012. Panel presentation with Tanis Miller, Mary Mac, and Stephanie Mullen. 9 Apr. 2015. Web. Date Accessed: 28 Apr. 2015.

Mohanraj, M. A. "Why Mommy-Blog?" SV Mom Blog. 25 Sept. 2007. Web.

27 Jun. 2008.

Mommy Blog Lines: Ta[1]king Care. mommybloglines.wordpress.com.

Mommy Blog Lines: Ta[1]king Care. Mommybloglines.com.

Noddings, Nel. *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984. Print.

O'Reilly, Tim. "Call for a Blogger's Code of Conduct." 31 March 2007. Web. 27 April 2015.

Petersen, Emily January. "Redefining the Workplace: The Professionalization of Motherhood Through Blogging." *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication* 44.3 (2014): 277-296. Print.

Porter, Elisabeth. *Feminist Perspectives on Ethics*. London: Longman. 1999. Print.

The Trial Warrior. "The Wild West of Journalistic and Blogistic Ethics." 18 May 2010. Web. 30 Jul. 2013.

Tucker, Judith Stadtman. "Small World: Maternal Blogging, Virtual Friendship, and the Computer-Mediated Self." *Mothering and Blogging: The Radical Act of the MommyBlog*. Eds. May Friedman and Shana L. Calixte. Toronto: Demeter Press, 2009. 1-20. Print.

Wilkins, Melissa Camara. "Beyond Cute: A Mom, a Blog, and a Question of Content." *Mothering and Blogging: The Radical Act of the MommyBlog*. Eds. May Friedman and Shana L. Calixte. Toronto: Demeter Press, 2009. 151-157. Print.

Williams, Bronwyn T. "Never Let the Truth Stand in the Way of a Good Story: a Work for Three Voices." *College English*. 65.3 (2003): 290-304. Print.