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Towards a natural history of internet use? Working to overcome the implications for research of the child-adult divide

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Abstract

Using a metaphor borrowed from the biological sciences, this paper discusses a 'natural history' of Internet use. As 'digital natives' many of today's teenagers and young people have grown up and matured interacting with the Internet from an early age. Research about young people's Internet use tends, however, to focus on the protection of minors. Young people, 16 years or older, are often excluded from non-commercial research about how young people grow into more mature patterns of Internet use.

This paper highlights how parents with teenagers are building dynamic models of their children's engagement with the Internet as they mature. Parents reported changes in the level of their children's Internet use as they age and they envisage further changes as their children mature. We also identify the variety of ways in which parents support their children's developing Internet skills that anticipate and respond to Internet risks and excessive Internet use.

Keywords: Parents, peers, internet use, family life, research divide, adulthood

Introduction

What researchers know about children's and young adults' Internet use suffers from a major distortion. Research focuses upon the Internet activities of children (vulnerable, at risk, in need of protection) and, apart from market researchers and consumer behaviourists, ignores the activities of the adults that the children become. The field lacks a 'natural history' of Internet use which would offer some reassurance to parents and policy makers that the 16 year-old excessive Internet user (Green et al., 2012) is likely to become an everyday, socially balanced young adult. This would happen once the other age-related milestones of car licence competency, drinking age, romantic attachments, paid employment, holidays and periods of time away from family have been successfully negotiated. At that point, online activity is likely to be just one of many enjoyable and/or productive ways to spend their time.

This paper draws upon eight interviews with parents conducted as part of an Australian Research Council (ARC) Discovery-funded project investigating the different influences and impacts that parents and peers have on high school students' Internet activities. The project perpetuates the age divide identified above, but recognises that parents respond in nuanced ways to their children's changing patterns of activity, and risk behaviour, as they mature. The in-depth interview-based, qualitative research is connected to a multi-national quantitative investigation into the online risks and opportunities encountered by children and teenagers (9-16). Such funding streams emphasise younger children and are entirely absent for research into the Internet use of 18 year-olds and over.

This study argues that parents construct patterns for what they know of the Internet use of their children, and their children's friends. In a sense they imagine the natural history of Internet use, which is yet to be written. As their child's age-group cohort moves through childhood to adolescence to young adulthood and into their mid-20s, they develop a dynamic model of their children's progressive engagement with online technology, attempting to place current behaviour within an emerging context. There is a sense in which they intuit the likely impact of the wider range of social and activity options available to their children as they mature.

Background

This paper critiques current constructions of childhood which fail to acknowledge the trajectory that sees children eventually re-categorised as adults. Borrowing a metaphor from the biological sciences, since it is based upon notions of growing up and reaching maturity, we ask what it means to our understanding of young people's online engagement in that there is no 'natural history' of their Internet use. Such a history would investigate how, why and in what circumstances children first learn about the Internet and would develop a sense of the chronology which takes the child from its first digital steps through to its final status as a mature adult, a conscious consumer and a potential member of multiple target markets.

The value of such a natural history is that it would allow researchers, parents and other interested parties to view an individual child's online behaviour in the broader context of a biological and social maturation cycle. Such a cycle would construct a typical trajectory from infancy through to independent operation in the world, living

away from the parental home and being in charge of their own finances and time management. A first step towards such a history has been offered in terms of younger (video) gamers (Green and Guinery, 2006), but much of the focus of funded research to date is targeted at understanding the risks that children run online and their exposure to danger and potential harm, rather than identifying the broader sweep of online engagement over, say, the first quarter-century of a person's life.

This distortion has a double impact. First, it looks for, and finds, risks, difficulties, challenges and, in some cases, harm faced by children online. This perspective rarely investigates the many benefits of digital engagement. Secondly, it concentrates on the age groups that are constructed as requiring protection, thus ignoring those in early adulthood. Even within the under-18 age group, the fact that it is minors who may be exposed to risk both complicates and distorts research and public policy development, preventing the development of a natural history of the under-18s.

One example is with regards to sexting, an everyday teen activity (Albury and Crawford, 2012) apparently used – since it is hard to ascertain this via research – as part of a pattern of trust-development in relationships between peers and/or in a romantic or sexual partnership. Despite the importance of robust research in this area, especially given that "sexts are classified as child pornography when the images are of people under 18, even if the person pictured took the photographs themselves and willingly sent them to others" (Brady, 2011), it is impossible to gain ethics approval to interview under-16s about the practice for fear of inviting their self-incrimination, given that the creation of child pornography is a mandatorily reportable offence and under-16s are below the age of sexual consent.

An important project in this area led by Albury et al. (2013), as part of the Australian Research Council's Centre of Excellence for Creative Industries and Innovation's research into Risk and Representation, is consequently limited to work with 16 and 17 year olds, and concerns their knowledge of other (unspecified) people's sexting practices. A more nuanced way of approaching the rights, responsibilities and competencies within the adulthood spectrum has the potential to open up "unspeakable" (Mitchelson, 1993) areas of everyday life to research, and thus to evidence-based policy development. These issues around ethics which prevent a full understanding of 'sexting', an everyday occurrence in the lives of many under 16 year olds, means that there is only a partial 'natural history' of the age group which is the focus of significant research effort.

Less serious distortions affect recent investigations into online risks and opportunities encountered by Australian children and teenagers aged 9-16 (Green et al., 2011). The European Union funding, which underwrites the primary research project to which the Australian research is linked, draws upon European Commission (EC) Safer Internet plus Programme funding, and responds to an imperative to protect children from harm (Livingstone et al., 2011). Such funding streams again emphasise younger children and are entirely absent for research into the internet use of 18 year olds and over. The funding body construction of under-18s as being at risk online, and of over 18s as constituting market segments that represent mature taste/use cultures, prevents nuanced and non-commercial research into the ways in which young people grow into mature patterns of Internet use. Even though it is possible for many older parents to perceive patterns in the Internet use of their children and their children's friends, as

their child's age-group cohort moves through childhood to adolescence to young adulthood and into their mid-20s, studies which could create a context for different stages of the journey are lacking. The child/adult divide distorts available research and information and this in turn impoverishes our understandings of the under-18 experience as part of a dynamic whole.

Given the growing evidence that brains continue to mature into a person's mid-20s (Jetha & Segalowitz, 2012), and noting that "the temporal cortex continues to mature after other association areas, the functions of which it integrates, are relatively developed" (Gogtay et al,. 2004: 8177), many young adults might be constructed as still emerging into full maturity. In the absence of the kind of research which is outlined here as desirable, there are indications from research that parents and young people use the information from their everyday lives to construct an imagined community (Anderson, 1991 [1983]) of online users as a context within which their own behaviour can be placed.

Conceptual framework and methodology

The conceptual framework used in this project is social constructionism: the social construction of meaning. This approach asserts that what people do and say constitute the conceptual tools which construct their actions and utterances as meaningful within the wider society (Burr, 2003). A number of methodological approaches work within social constructionism to unpack these sometimes implicit meanings, helping to make them explicit, and allowing them to be subject to investigation and analysis. This project is built upon qualitative research which predominantly uses in depth, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews (Seidman, 2006).

Parents and children were recruited in both metropolitan and regional areas using school communication channels and invited to participate in the research. Where both parent and child agreed, a research interview was set up to talk to the parent and child separately. Sometimes, there was more than one parent willing to participate, and more than one high school-aged child in the family also willing to be interviewed. On those occasions, all people willing to take part were interviewed, separately where possible. The verbatim data used in this paper is drawn from the first eight in-depth semi-structured interviews with parents.

Designed to explore how adolescents negotiate the influence of their family, and of their peers, upon their Internet engagement and upon the development of online skills and competencies, the project also addresses parental constructions of their children's Internet activities. Interviews were fully transcribed to form a full-text dataset and contributions are analysed according to themes arising which have relevance for the research topic. In this case, a number of contributions indicate that parents actively piece together a sense of a chronology of Internet use and anticipate both positives and negatives ahead. This is a result of the ways in which they and other parents whom they know respond to their children's online behaviour. This outcome might not seem surprising, but it is particularly important evidence of an 'imagined natural history' of Internet use, given that there is little evidence of academically rigorous research with young people across the first decades of their Internet engagement. Initially, this gap in research is for those children beyond the age of 16 in terms of exposure to risk and experience of harm but also below the age of 16 when it comes to

participatory activities in behaviours which might be legally constructed as sexual but which are an everyday occurrence in terms of romantic teenage relationships.

Parents' perspectives

Parents' comments clearly demonstrate an awareness that what constitutes safe Internet use and appropriate caution changes over time, as do the strategies for monitoring their child's behaviour: "when they were first on the Internet, when they wanted to go onto a site they would check with me, but [my 16 year old] is obviously way past that now, but [younger, year 8 child], maybe retrospectively, asks me about things like going on YouTube" (PARENT 1). At the same time, some parents are aware that what was a rule is no longer as important to them as the child gets older and is seen to make responsible decisions. "We always said that when they got Facebook they had to have a limit of friends but slowly that has been blown out of the water a bit […] She is quite responsible with that so I don't really worry too much" (PARENT 2).

This perspective aligns with Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) commissioned research into *Media and Communications in Australian families* (ACMA, 2007). This study of 751 households involved telephone interviews with parents and 1003 children of the households aged between 8-17 completing diaries. The ACMA research demonstrates that parents and children negotiate parameters around rules, and trust, and these considerations change over time as children get older. "Most parents trust their child's judgement about the Internet and, at least some of the time, leave it up to him/her to choose what is done on the Internet (83%). This includes two-thirds who trust their child's judgement all/most of the time (66%)." (ACMA, 2007: 21). Parents already work on intuition and networked exchanges with other parents to develop their own operational model of a natural history of Internet use.

Parents interviewed for this project indicate their construction of Internet use as one activity among a range of different options. Consequently, online activity is something that children will spend more time doing, or less time, depending upon their maturity and other priorities in their lives. Complaining about past lack of help around the home, and noting that this had recently improved, one mother commented "I feel like I'm ignored sometimes, but I think that is just because they are teenagers […] At one stage I just felt like I was a slave to them – they would just rush off to the computer and everything gets left" (PARENT 1). She went on to predict that "I think the Internet use might go down a bit, or be used for different things when [16 year old] goes to uni". PARENT 3 felt that the family's strategy around video gaming had paid dividends:

> I have heard of kids getting up in the middle of the night and turn their Play Station on but our two wouldn't be allowed and we would hear them through the walls. The only thing would have been too much obsession with games when they were younger, not wanting to come down for meals but not so much now. They've grown out of that stage now. (PARENT 3)

To some extent this parent's viewpoint indicates that not all caregivers see it as inevitable that children spend more time on the Internet as they get older. This is the

dynamic that is indicated, however, when the age range investigated is 9-16, prior to the increased freedom often won by 17 and 18 year olds as they move towards increased self-scheduling and greater autonomy. Livingstone et al. (2011: 26), arguing on the basis of a 25,142-child European-based sample, states that that the "largest difference in time spent online is by age. The 15-16 year olds spend almost two hours per day, on average (118 minutes), twice that of the youngest group (9-10 year olds average 58 minutes per day)." Such a trajectory might indicate [falsely we would argue] that Internet use would intensify as children move into adulthood. Parents also take into account their personal experiences of Internet use, however, and in that way Internet activity changes in line with their circumstances. As PARENT 5 notes: "When we first got the Internet we didn't have kids [...] It was a big thing to start with, but then it wore off and the computer could sit there for days without us going on. Now it is on all the time because we run a business and it has to be on all the time".

Not all parents feel confident about their capacity to handle the challenges posed by the Internet. In that case the response is often to adopt a conservative position. This was the case with FAMILY 4's approach to Facebook. At the same time, the parent in charge is conducting an informal comparative evaluation of alternative ways of dealing with the situation, and taking decisions which include consideration of a complex range of factors while acknowledging that, as the children concerned become older, a parent's power to forbid certain behaviour becomes untenable:

> I don't think [Facebook] is very safe but I don't really know enough about it. I just believe that it is unsafe. You hear all these things. People can get into your private things and I don't want them [the children] chatting to people if I don't know who they are […] I have a niece who sits up all night and she will be on Facebook at 3am when her mum is in bed, and I just think it is bad because you don't know what is going on […]The other side of the family [the children's parents are divorced] want them on Facebook so we're in a debate about that because at the moment I am refusing, but I know there will come a time when it happens. (PARENT 4)

Another parent had agreed to allow the use of a Facebook account but had made it conditional upon full adult access: "They are not allowed to have [Facebook] until they are 12, which was half way through Year 7. They are friends with me on Facebook and we have a rule that whatever they have, I know their password at all times and I check it every night to see what is going on. They are ok with that" (PARENT 7). PARENT 6 had adopted a free Internet monitoring tool she had seen promoted on television. "We are linked to them [online] so we can see what they are doing. On the computer we have the security thing that tells us every week what they are accessing. Just on the main computer – it tells us what their favourites are and it gives a bar of which one has used the most." Constant monitoring means that parents can develop confidence over time that their child acts responsibly, and safely, in the online environment.

Parents with more than one child take into account their experience with the older sibling when deciding how to respond to perceived Internet safety issues affecting the younger child. This process of extrapolating from older children to younger ones, and factoring in peer-group behaviour, indicates that parents develop a model of children's behaviour when handling confronting Internet experiences. This model then guides the parents' expectations around how best to handle the challenges their

child faces. PARENT 2 responded to a question about being confident that their children would know if something was risky:

> I think my oldest girl, yes – but I'm not sure if [younger child] has worked that out just yet. I think she could still be conned a bit. It depends if she showed it to her friends and if they all together realised. I'm not sure if they are mature enough to realise if they were being conned or led astray. It is probably something that I still have to keep an eye on. (PARENT 2)

On the other hand, parents also acknowledge the importance of different children's personalities, with PARENT 1 commenting that "[my younger child] is not as cautious [online] but that reflects their personalities. [16 year old] is very cautious at school about who she makes friends with, she is very reserved and susses people out and makes judgements about whether she wants to be friends with them and makes choices about it. She approaches the Internet the same way".

A number of families have rules, which are more or less negotiable dependent on the circumstances in question. According to PARENT 4, "no one is allowed to use the computer after a certain time of day". There is a rider to the general ban, however, "The only time I'll allow them to be on it is if they have homework which is due the following day which they are having trouble getting to". PARENT 3 related a story about how her son "got an iPod for his birthday 2 or 3 years ago […] He did go onto inappropriate sites and got the iPod taken off him so he knows what he should and shouldn't be doing […] You can sort of police it but not come down with an iron bar". Sometimes parents discover that what they believe to be the circumstances of their child's Internet use is in fact only part of the story. Unfortunately, just such a discrepancy came to light as a result of the interview process itself. PARENT 1: "I knew she had one blog, but from what I overheard it sounds like she has more than one. She has obviously set all that up without my permission or without discussing it with me".

One strategy for communicating risks is to repeat the caution in a range of different ways and ensure that the significant adults in a child's life are giving a consistent message: "I've told them what can happen [in terms of risks], and that this is why you don't do certain things. I haven't really had the talk about 'never do this or that' but I have said, 'if you do this, this is what could happen'. All of us [have] really. Their dad does, and their step-dad does and their grandparents do" (PARENT 4). Once a child has developed a notion of the possible consequences of certain online activities, parents are likely to feel reassured. This is the case with PARENT 1:

> I think [16 year old] is just pretty savvy about how once you write something it is there forever on the Internet and she is thinking about her future reputation. I think they did have a few experiences at school – it wasn't really bullying but kids with pornography with the phones and sexting and they did have a bit of a talk about it at school.

Hand in hand with the use of warnings comes an acknowledgement of the value of experience. Within certain parameters, parents accept that children will make poor decisions, or decisions which have sub-optimal outcomes, and construct this as a useful learning process. "You can't hide them from things like Facebook, and it makes them street wise. They have friends that are not allowed to use it, but their

mums pick them up from school and drop them off and they are not learning any life skills" (PARENT 6). As PARENT 3 commented,

> [some children] can be very naive and just don't get it. They are very vulnerable. It depends on the way they have been brought up […] my husband was a support worker so you can see the different ones, ones that have been wrapped up and haven't been allowed to do things, or haven't been pushed. They will stand back and do nothing for themselves. In a way you have to steer them.

Parents are likely to indicate that monitoring a child's online behaviour is a dynamic 'work in progress' that reflects the personality of the child and evolves in an organic way. Interviewer to PARENT 2: "**Is there anything else that you would like to comment about?**" "No, I am just learning as I go so have nothing to add." Interviewer to PARENT 8: **Is there much interaction going on between family members on Facebook?** "No. I was friends with [my university-aged son] for about 3 minutes because he left his account up, but he took me off very quickly". Even when parents make a decision, they are not always confident that it is the right one:

> She had a couple of friends [moved away…] She was mourning the fact that she wouldn't have contact with them. She had a Facebook account and was sort of using it with a few people, but I encouraged her to start using Facebook but she wouldn't put a friend request up for a while. She didn't have the confidence but we had a chat about it and after that Facebook seemed to take off. I'm not sure if it is a good or a bad thing that I encourage her. (PARENT 1)

There is a sense of reciprocity too: if parents can comment on children's activities then the reverse is also the case. PARENT 1 worries that maybe the children are on the Internet too much: "We turn it off late at the moment but I think that is going to come back to an earlier time. But we don't set a good example – I watch a lot of TV and [other parent] is on the Internet a lot. It is almost like you have to turn it off and make everybody do the same thing." PARENT 8 sets rules for the family, but also accepts them, even though she would like to do things differently if it were up to her:

> With my Facebook account, the only photos I have of a [child] is my youngest and that is because a friend posted it. I'm not allowed to post any photos of any of my boys. **Did the [children] tell you that?** No, my husband. Because of the Internet and Facebook, people were stealing identities and all that. And also because of predators. He said 'you can't have any photos on Facebook'. Even though I've now met relatives who are on my Facebook account and it would be nice to show them photos, I'm not allowed to.

Conclusion

There is currently a child/adult divide in terms of what we know about the development of mature Internet users. The majority of available research concentrates upon 16s and under, but this leaves a detailed knowledge of children's online activity at the cusp of early maturity, just before the child moves into greater autonomy with such life stage milestones as driving lessons and more intense romantic attachments. This primary focus upon children and early teens partly reflects a concern over children's exposure to risk. However, the absence of a reliable indicator of what happens in the everyday online experience of 17-25 year olds means that families

construct their own understanding of a 'natural history' of Internet use. Increasingly parents are able to draw on their own experience of life online, but teenagers' exposure and experiences in the 1990s involved a very different set of circumstances from that which exists in the 2010s.

It is unclear from these vignettes whether it would help parental decision-making to have an idea of a 'normal' trajectory of Internet use, which gives a sense of children's online activity from pre-school through to workforce participation. What is clear from the results of this research is that parents use a method of constant comparison in evaluating their children's competencies and activities against their peers, against the behaviour of other children that the parent knows or knows about, and in light of the parent's personal Internet experiences. In these ways, parents monitor their own reactions to their children's Internet use, with most parents working hard to balance trust with prudence.

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