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Sharenting: parent blogging and the boundaries of the digital self

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“Sharenting,” parent blogging and the boundaries of the digital self

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Abstract

This article asks whether “sharenting” (sharing representations of one’s parenting or children online) is a form of digital self-representation. Drawing on interviews with 17 parent bloggers, we explore how parents define the borders of their digital selves and justify what is their “story to tell.” We find that bloggers grapple with profound ethical dilemmas, as representing their identities as parents inevitably makes public aspects of their children’s lives, introducing risks that they are, paradoxically, responsible for safeguarding against. Parents thus evaluate what to share by juggling multiple obligations – to themselves, their children in the present and imagined into the future, and to their physical and virtual communities. The digital practices of representing the relational self are impeded more than eased by the individualistic notion of identity instantiated by digital platforms, thereby intensifying the ambivalence of both parents and the wider society in judging emerging genres of blogging the self.

Keywords: Parenting, identity, privacy, blogging, children, digital representation, self-representation

Representing the relational self in the digital age

Understanding the significance of “sharenting,” a shorthand term denoting when parents share information about themselves and their children online, concerns both parents and the wider public. Despite the widespread popularity of posting images of and stories about children online, urgent questions have been raised as to whether parents are infringing their children’s “right to privacy” (Wayne, 2016). A new French law allows adult children to sue their parents for such infringements (Chazan, 2016). “Sharenting” is decried in the mass media as exploitative, narcissistic or plain naïve (A. Webb, 2013). Some warn that posting images and video online may expose children to paedophiles or online grooming (Tait, 2016), and new fears of data mining, marketing and facial recognition are growing. Yet the popularity of parent bloggers and vloggers (video bloggers) continues to rise, as sharing and blogging about one’s children proves a widely enjoyed form of user-generated content creation and consumption. As has been claimed of other genres of popular communication, when parents share their stories online it can be argued that they are committing “subversive,” even “radical” acts (Lopez, 2009, Pearl, 2016) that serve to diversify representations of parenting, especially mothering, to validate the experience of parenting within the public domain and to enable parents to access and contribute to authentic communities of support and advice (Pederson and Lupton, in press).

But “sharenting” in general and parent blogging in particular are contested genres, with many parents (and others in a child’s social circle) treading uncharted territory as they navigate the ethics and practicalities of sharing. As the first cohort of babies of social media users comes of age, we explore how parents define the boundaries of their digital personhood, weigh the conflicting interests at stake, and justify what is their “story to tell.”

In the digital realm, where images are potentially vastly more visible, sharable, and persistent to known and unknown audiences (boyd, 2006; Thumim, 2012), the question of who is being represented takes on a new urgency. Where does the parental self end and the child’s self begin online? For instance, when parents are invited to imagine a future in which their child calls them to account regarding their sharing practices, the implication is that they have shared information belonging to *someone else*. Yet, from the first ultrasound scan onwards, parents are encouraged to share images and stories of their *own* experiences *as parents*. Related tensions arise regarding privacy in the digital age: is sharing a child’s image publicly a violation of that child’s privacy? What if the parent’s purpose is to reveal and reflect on their own parenting? Who should decide when to share a family photo? Can and should a child even assert their privacy or independence from

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their parent, and at what stage might a parent consider this transfer of control (e.g. Bartholet, 2011)?

Notwithstanding the intuitive appeal of public anxieties about “sharenting”, few social scientific theories of identity would assert a one-to-one mapping of identity onto individuals, having left behind an essentialist account of identity. Instead, identity is theorised as mutually constructed through our lived relations (Mitchell, 2014) and “communicative interdependence” (Clark, 2013) with others, as “constructed within, not outside, discourse” (Hall, 1996, p. 4). This is to critique the popular conception of the self as the autonomous individual of liberal pluralism, characterised by “the discourse of the individual interior” (Gergen, 1996, p. 127) or the “self-sustaining subject” (Hall, 1996, p. 15). Identity is narrated over time in terms of biographical self, rendering us at once “unique”, for no-one else has lived through our own precise set of circumstances, and yet social, since these circumstances emerge from intersecting histories of social interactions and community engagements (Burkitt, 2008).

For parents there is nothing new in the tension between the individual self, commonly described as the “real” (often the pre-parenting) self, and “the relational self,” (Gergen, 1996) and the self-as-parent enacted with and for their children, family and community. But in pre-digital times, this tension was not so visible nor, thereby, so judged (Brighenti, 2007), and nor did representations of the relational self potentially so sharply impinge on the rights of others. Digital platforms and networks, in effect, encode particular “theories” of self (Cohen, 2012, p. 10). Shaped by the Western liberal pluralist legal system with its particular norms of responsibility, autonomy, control, choice and privacy, the regulatory frameworks that govern the internet instantiate the autonomy and rights of the individual self. Relatedly, albeit driven by the logic of the market, social media sites often require that each user registers with one and only one name, codifying a direct correspondence between legal identity and online identity, purportedly to guarantee “integrity” but, as van Dijck (2013) argues, also to streamline the tracking of consumers for commercial purposes. For example, on Facebook a parent is free to post images of their child, notwithstanding popular anxieties, and Facebook treats those images as owned by the parent alone; it does not permit a profile to be co-owned or to represent a family grouping, while its “group” feature cannot be joined by children under 13 years old.

But at the same time, it is the relational (or “networked”) self that has gained a new significance now that, “during the space of a decade, the network has become the dominant cultural logic” (Varnelis, 2008, p. 145), “affecting the ways in which we understand our own capabilities, our relative boundedness, and the properties of the surrounding world” (Cohen, 2012, p. 33). The affordances of the digital environment can

be helpful or problematic to the task and the pleasures of representing oneself (boyd, 2006; D. Miller, 2011). What could once be bracketed as the mundane practice of *self-presentation* – how one’s identity is communicated and performed in myriad implicit and explicit gestures, clothing and behaviours, in face-to-face interactions (Goffman, 1959) – is now a reflexive practice of *self-representation*, with every decision visible and open to scrutiny (Bauman and Lyon, 2013). For parents, these “digital” dilemmas are intensified by the twin truths that to represent one’s own identity *as a parent* means making public aspects of a (potentially vulnerable) child’s life and yet *because they are the parent*, they are precisely the person primarily responsible for protecting that child’s privacy. This poses more than just practical dilemmas about social media use, for it forces a comparison – for researchers, but also for society - of relational versus individualistic conceptions of identity, ethics, privacy and responsibility.

The controversial rise of parent blogging

We have chosen to focus on parent bloggers because they illustrate the dilemmas faced by many parents as social media users and because their experiences are intensified by their investment both in being a parent and a blogger. Being a blogger imposes further demands – to represent oneself authentically, to meet the professional standards of the blogging community, to develop a commercial strategy of maximising audiences and revenues from one’s blog. Thus bloggers in effect test evolving social norms, experiment with possibilities and reflect on the consequences in ways that speak to parental practices more generally. Currently there is a wide spectrum of blogging practices regarding children’s privacy, with some parent bloggers openly disclosing their own and their children’s full names, images and locations, while others use pseudonyms or avoid images of faces. Even so, their practices challenge the kind of boundary policing required by individualistic conceptions of the self for, inevitably, the “selves” being represented by parents implicate others – their children, friends, partner or other family members, along with the known and virtual readers of the blog itself.

Parents are enthusiastic adopters of social media, including blogging (Duggan, Lenhart, Lampe, & Ellison, 2015). Yet it is difficult to assess the extent of parent blogging since blogs frequently appear and disappear. Commercial measures indicate some 4.2 million parents in the US who read or write blogs (eMarketer, 2013). BritMums, an organization for parent bloggers in the UK, maintains a network of 15,000+ blogs, and runs an annual conference attended by thousands which attracts significant corporate sponsorship (BritMums, 2016). Mumsnet, a highly active online community for parents with several thousand blogs and four million website visits per month (Mumsnet, 2016), maintains a sprawling network where parent bloggers can register to promote their posts and also find opportunities to “work with brands”. Although we write here of fathers as well as

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mothers, the British parent blogging community owes much to the so-called “mommy blogs” in the United States (Pearl, 2016), some of which have millions of readers each month.

Blogging constitutes a form of “popular” communication not only because of the sheer numbers of participants but also because, in cultural terms it is “made by the people for themselves” (Williams, 1983, p. 237). As with other cultural objects, blogs invite the integrated analysis of authors, texts, audiences (with audiences and authors often the same people, as in other forms of user-generated content), and the wider political economy of platforms, networks and corporate interests (Fiske, 2010). Blogs enable multimedia and multi-vocal storytelling processes in which bloggers “authoris[e] notions, both individual and collective, of who [they] are” (Jackson, 2002, p.16). The representational affordances of blogs allow parents to play with what Lopez (2009) describes as “fragmented” parental identities. Their episodic nature means that posts can be read in isolation, moving freely from a glossy shot of a new sofa to a hard-hitting post about post-natal depression. Introspection about parenting strife and instructions for toddler-friendly outings may sit side by side, differentiated by a blogs episodic entry structure and its architecture of “tags” or “tabs.” Yet despite or perhaps because of such features, parent blogs have emerged as an increasingly influential public sphere. Bloggers’ complaints regarding state failures have held politicians to account (Henderson, 2011) and there are innumerable accounts of bloggers influencing commerce or others’ parenting decisions (Lee & Curcic, 2010).

Research shows that parent bloggers have diverse motivations - establishing an outlet for creativity and “voice” (Lenhart & Fox, 2006), chronicling their lives for their children and extended community (Stefanone & Jang, 2007), advocating particular political, religious or cultural parenting practices and philosophies (Matchar, 2011; Whitehead, 2015), establishing supportive practical and emotional communities (L. M. Webb & Lee, 2011), and/or gaining financial resources either directly through blogging or by promoting the blogger’s linked business, artwork or related writing projects (Doucet & Mauthner, 2013). In this article, we inquire into how parent bloggers represent themselves as parents, and the implications for those drawn into these representations, most obviously but not only their children, as bloggers display their ties to others, construct their “networked self” (Papacharissi, 2011) through blogrolls, “linkies” and comment feeds, and potentially contribute to a “networked public” (boyd & Marwick, 2011) within and beyond their blog.

Researching parent bloggers

This article draws on a subset of the 66 in-depth family interviews conducted for *Parenting for a Digital Future*, part of the Connected Learning Research Network funded by the MacArthur Foundation. To explore how parents imagine and prepare for their children’s futures in a digital age, our sampling strategy combined an effort to include a diversity of parenting experiences in terms of children’s age, family composition, ethnicity and socio-economic status with purposive sampling (Palys, 2008) of families who, for one reason or another, have decided to privilege the potential of digital media within their children’s present and anticipated future. We grouped the families into overlapping case studies, each comprising ten to twenty families, including parent bloggers (the focus of this article), parents of children with special educational needs and disabilities, and parents of children who engage in coding or other digital media and learning activities. Our methods combined parent and child interviews with observations, fieldwork visits to digital media sites, schools and related locations, and analysis of digital media texts produced by parents or children.

Parent bloggers were recruited initially through the Mumsnet Blogging Network. We asked the coordinator to suggest demographically diverse bloggers in the London area who frequently blog about the experience of parenting. Of the contacts we were given, about 60% responded to our email. To supplement the sample, we combined snowball sampling, Googling “London mum/dad blog”, and interviewing “dad bloggers” attending a national blogging conference. We refer here to parent bloggers, although we acknowledge that use of the term “parenting” may erase the gendered power differentials often embedded in parenting practice (Thomson, 2011). Of the seventeen parent bloggers recruited, thirteen identified as White and the remaining four as Asian, British Asian or Mixed Race. Most had young children from toddlers through primary school age, and four had children with special educational needs and disabilities. Five of the 17 bloggers were fathers. Income levels ranged from over £100,000 per year to below £15,000, though most were fairly well-off with an average household income of £62,000 per year. What they called their “day job” included media-related positions (such as social media managers or digital copywriters) to small businesses, teaching or the civil service, and their work often had implications for their approach to blogging. Four identified their occupation as “blogger” on our demographic questionnaire, although others were also beginning to earn a notable income from their blogs. Their blogs varied in popularity from under 5,000 to over 100,000 page views per month. Although not representative of the diversity of families as a whole, the sample fits with anecdotal reports of the demographics of parent bloggers as being relatively privileged (Lenhart & Fox, 2006).

The semi-structured interviews lasted between 30 minutes (for those interviewed at the conference) and 2.5 hours for some of those interviewed at home. We asked parents how they approach their future-oriented task of socializing their children, and what supports or hinders them in their parenting. Additionally, we asked the parent bloggers how and why they blog, who reads their blog and what purpose(s) they felt it served, and how they saw it developing in the future. Perhaps as a result of being questioned but also as part of their evolving identity as bloggers, interviewees were reflexively engaged with the ethical, practical and social implications of their "sharenting." Rapport was enabled by our own status as mothers: some interviewees questioned us about our families, some asked us for feedback on their dilemmas, all of this contributing to the emotional labour of interviews (Duncombe & Jessop, 2012) in which we sought to create ethically symmetrical relationships with those we interviewed (Christensen & Prout, 2002). In the interviews, field notes and subsequent analysis we prioritised a narrative approach in which we understand meaning production to occur partly through the telling of one's experience (Jackson, 2002, p. 18). Parents responded in terms of "strategically constructed and voiced narratives," for example describing themselves as "good" or "lazy" or even "crap" parents, all framed by wider cultural imaginaries (T. Miller, 2005, p. 8).

The interviews were transcribed, anonymised and entered into NVIVO to be hand-coded by the research team. The codebook was collectively produced by comparing multiple coding of the same transcript (Campbell, Quincy, Osserman, & Pedersen, 2013), and discussing inductive themes repeatedly observed in relation to those in the research literature. Our interpretative process continuously demanded a return to close readings of the original transcripts, in an "intense conversation" between researcher and data (Ely, 1991, p. 87). We organise the findings in terms of what we might call the bloggers' imagined "spheres of obligation" (Davis, 2012), namely the individuals and communities to whom the bloggers experienced a duty, beginning with themselves.

Blogging for oneself, blogging for others

Most of the bloggers identified blogging as something they "do for themselves," a new iteration of previous creative or professional interests which had to be re-configured given the time pressures especially of early parenting. Nicole, whose blog was the most widely read (over 100,000 pageviews per month), said "I've always really liked writing, and I like the kind of idea of being... able to tell your own story." Minna, the author of a less popular blog but one to which she dedicated considerable time, also described her blog as an outlet for long-held interests and hobbies, saying "I really enjoy writing. I really enjoy photography. I want a place for my creativity. Yes, I'm not an amazing writer, but I have learned a lot." Some write as a version of "self-therapy," as Cameron put it, saying he didn't care if "anybody would read it... I blog for myself. It's great that

people do read it, and good things come of it, but if they didn’t, then I wouldn’t blog any differently.” Here blogging seems to meet a need occasioned precisely by becoming a parent, namely to do something for oneself, to sustain a sense of self from before becoming a parent. Blogging also addresses the conditions of parenting itself. Thus Supna, who decided not to return to work after her second maternity leave, ignited an interest in blogging to combat her growing feeling of isolation:

While it was lovely taking care of the kids, my mind was starting to go... when you’re at home, especially when my son was little, I would talk to him... [but] it was very one sided... It was just nice writing everything out and being like, how do I feel about this?... it was really good for me... I wasn’t depressed but I wasn’t happy. It gave me something a bit extra, something that was for me and not just as a mum.

Relatedly, Nina, the mother of seven-year-old Iris who was on the autism spectrum, vividly described how her world, which had formerly been filled with professional commitments, had become much smaller since leaving work to care for Iris. While rejecting any pity for her caretaking responsibilities, she values her blog as “one of the bits of me that’s *me*, the one that sits in a bar with a glass, no, a bucket of wine – and a packet of fags... [who] doesn’t exist in someone else’s world.”

Not only, then, is the need to blog in part a result of parenting, but it often also concerns the experience of parenting even when seeming to write about oneself. Beth viewed her blogging as personally “cathartic,” a way of writing through problems and, unexpectedly, found a way to communicate with her partner: having written about the routine of the “weekend row”, her husband read her post and subsequently they “didn’t then have a row for weeks, because I guess I really processed my thoughts.” While partners are sometimes implicated in a blog, children are omnipresent. This is a paradox built into the architecture of parent blogging, for in writing as a parent one inevitably writes about one’s children. Some try to distinguish writing about their emotional life as a parent from writing about their children directly, but such boundaries are to maintain. Beth had written a post about an excruciating moment in which her toddlers had a simultaneous meltdown on a bus, and how comforting it had been when an older woman had reached out to her. While the post concerned Beth’s feelings about herself as a mother and sense of “sisterhood” with other mothers, her children were central players in the scene.

Viewed in terms of Goffman’s notion of the “biographical self”, it seems that these parent bloggers want to explore how “the apparently haphazard contacts of everyday life may still constitute some kind of structure holding the individual to one biography, and this in spite of the multiplicity of selves that role and audience segregation allow” (1963, p. 92; see also Burkitt, 2008). In other words, through the effort to represent the “unique”

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biographical self, parent blogging not only represents familial others but also contributes to the wider culture of parenting.

Blogging the present, blogging for the future

Goffman (1972) also describes the individual’s “information preserve” as the “biographical facts about the individual over the divulgence of which he expects to maintain control” (p. 63), which are managed territorially (systems of reference and so forth) albeit subject to varieties of intrusion or transgression. So, rather than asserting that parent and child each owns their own data in a mutually exclusive manner, it is perhaps more meaningful to inquire into the evolving norms of shared representation for relational selves (for example regarding the right to post a family photo), given social and digital connections among people and through time. Most obviously, for many bloggers the purpose was the curation of memories, a modern photo-album built to share snapshots and stories of the child(ren) not only for far-flung family and friends in the present, but also for the child(ren) as imagined into the future. Described as something the parent does *for* their children, blogging is seen as an extension of the care-work of parenting. Yet being public blogs, the potential audience is much wider than that of the yellowing hard-copy photo albums of the bloggers’ own childhoods, raising new questions not only about their children’s safety, but also about ownership of the family narrative – even, on occasion, creating competition for the child’s future memories.

Most blogs included at a minimum a chronicle of a child, generally with images (most showing faces, some intentionally obscuring, only one not including images at all), most with recollections of outings or funny quotes. Some included full names; others called children by silly nicknames or initials. Describing her blog as a bulwark against the possibility of forgetting, mum-of-three Andrea described it as akin to a “baby book.” She said “there’s some bits in there that I share, kind of, just like cute things that I want to remember, but I think actually, if I don’t record this somewhere it’s going to get lost.” Some bloggers used memes and prompts routinized in the blogging community as a stimulus. Many wrote letters to their children on their birthdays, others participated in linkies that prompted, in Supna’s case, taking “parent-child selfies” once a month – something she was pleased to be reminded to do, worrying that she would inadvertently erase her own image from the blog, and therefore from her own and her children’s memories.

The hope that her then two-year old daughter, Eja, might look back on the blog as a way of learning more about herself as a small child was one of Minna’s main motivations. She explained, “[I don’t] have that much knowledge of what I was like as a child and, you know, when you do find those little pictures or like those little notes it’s really nice

looking back.” Rather than scavenging for insights in family scrapbooks, Minna was preparing an illustrated album of observations for Eja as an adult. A blog could also communicate to the blogger’s children about the parent’s own life. Peter described his blog as a “legacy blog” for his two teenage daughters, being frustrated that when his own father had died he realised his father remained a mystery to him. Peter wanted his daughters to “know everything that I can possibly share with them, realistically, about me and my work... the last thing I wanted was them to be in a position that I found myself in, not knowing.”

Some bloggers drew boundaries around the content and images they felt it was appropriate to share, often prompted to reflect on this boundary marking through disapproval of judgement calls made by others. For example, Andrea commented:

Is there a line that I don’t cross? Well, I don’t... some people, kind of, share pictures on social media and their blogs, and what not, of, like, their kids having tantrums, and things like that. I don’t particularly think that’s appropriate. Because I think, at some point, they’re not going to be kids anymore, and they might be quite embarrassed by that.

Thus a balance must be struck between the blogger’s present needs and their child’s imagined future needs. Although she described herself as trying to write “really openly and honestly about things,” Nicole struggled with how much to write about challenging moments with her three-year-old daughter. She had written a post about how frustrating baking was with her daughter before deciding to keep it as a draft. She explained, “I’m just always really conscious that she will grow up and read it,” perhaps feeling betrayed and even disappointedly concluding, “I used to love baking with my mum but she didn’t like it.” By contrast, Supna hoped that she was “raising [her] kids with enough of a sense of humour and self-awareness not be like ‘mummy, why [were] you acting like that and making people think we were so bad?’”

For those with babies and toddlers, the parents’ rights to share felt relatively uncontested, but as the children grew, this shifted. Nicole mused that her daughters might “fade out [from the blog] as they get older.” As a mother of a teenage daughter, Jane described that “the trajectory seems to be that until your child can read... you have a kind of... content ownership of your kid or something... [then] one day [my daughter] said to me are you going to post about this on the internet? I was, like, holy fucking crap.” Harvey confronted this issue when his six-year-old son Archie began to express discomfort at appearing on the blog. Harvey described how Archie had begun to ask what the photos Harvey took were for, questioning “is this a photo for you, Daddy, or is it a photo for the blog?” Increasingly Archie would refuse to be in pictures, eventually extracting revenge by covertly using Harvey’s phone post an unflattering picture of Harvey eating a

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sandwich on his dad’s Instagram feed. Harvey was working with Archie to help Archie decide what “he wants me to write” so he could be more in control. Yet, finding himself cajoling his son Harvey described a struggle between respecting his son’s boundaries and keeping his commitment to the blog, and his readership among the wider blogging community.

Possibilities and problems of community

A blogger’s audience is both imagined and yet made manifest through comments and interactions on and analytics and page-views provided by the blogging platforms (Brake, 2012). Knowing that others read the blog was a source of motivation but also of stress as bloggers struggled to produce content, find time to read and comment on others’ blogs, or deal with controversies. Participating in the “community of other parent bloggers,” as Minna described it, was a particular pleasure. Supna described her blog, and by extension those who read and comment on it, as being “like my friend that I’ve never met.” Anisha, a single mother at odds with the parenting practices of her South Asian cousins, used her blog to gain reassurance from a like-minded community:

Sometimes when your child does things you, kind of, as a parent, doubt yourself. You’re like... is it something I’m doing?... With blogging and technology generally now you don’t feel that because you can always go online and people are sharing their experiences. And you, kind of feel like, okay, it’s not just my child.

As an extension of her blog, Anisha had created a Facebook group to discuss non-“cry-it-out” sleep training methods, which had attracted nearly a thousand participants. Other bloggers had translated “online friendships” into face-to-face friendships. In such ways bloggers sought not only to meet their own needs but thereby to provide resources for others. When Dennis’s wife had a traumatic miscarriage, he found little online that helped, so he started blogging in order that his experience could be “found and used and utilised” by other men who might also be struggling. The bloggers whose children had special educational needs and disabilities often found themselves unable to participate in mainstream rituals of parenting, and saw blogging as way of supporting and being supported by others. Jane had started blogging before her now-teenage daughter’s autism diagnosis, but explained how:

As an autism parent your social life implodes... All the people who were in your mummy and me group, gone, not because they leave but because your kids go on these different trajectories and there’s nothing ... that glues you together.

Blogging helped Jane connect with others in similar circumstances, and the resulting “cadre... that protected me emotionally and protected my kid because I got good advice

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from them, and expanded our possibilities,” helped her negotiate the complexities of social services, health care and schools. She also turned to blogs written by adults with autism, asking them for advice about how to help her daughter and understand what her daughter might want in terms of social intervention. With her daughter now in her late teens and hopefully heading to university, and following some uncomfortable conversations with her daughter about the blog in which she had questioned what Jane wrote about her, Jane had become much more careful with what she wrote. But she nonetheless carried on occasionally blogging as she had become an “advice person” for those with younger children and wanted to repay the help she had received by being “generous” to others.

Parents of children with autism face particular dilemmas and some find a digital space able to offer unique and deeply welcomed sources of support. But as Jane found, sharing their own problems could raise concerns about speaking on behalf of their children (some of whom have difficulty communicating) or on behalf of the wider autism community. Nina found this balance difficult to manage when a post she wrote about raising her daughter Iris had “gone viral,” resulting in over a million pageviews at the time of interview. Although that level of traffic was something others may have dreamed of, and had raised a considerable sum for autism awareness, Nina felt uncomfortable about the post’s success, for in speaking for herself she had also spoken for Iris. Although she had written the post honestly, Nina feared she came across as yet “another autism mum” whose “blogging persona... doesn’t help the autism cause because I think I would be better facilitating her to speak for herself than speaking or her.” In order to follow through on this aim Nina experimented with helping Iris set up her own short-lived blog and eventually assisted Iris with writing an article about her experiences in a widely-read newspaper. Nina was fervent in her hope that Iris would find outlets to represent herself as a complex person who was more than her diagnosis.

Communities, however, are not always supportive. Nina had received both positive and negative comments, ranging from fawning praise for her parenting to suggestions from “trolls” that Iris needed an exorcism, both of which made her uncomfortable. More common, according to Melissa, was the quotidian “bitching” and competitiveness among bloggers, especially amongst those who saw blogging as a type of “workplace” where other bloggers might be “fighting for the same work.” Equally, Melissa noted that opprobrium could be levied against other bloggers, as bloggers implicitly compete in how to best display themselves as “good” mothers, whatever that may mean in their various communities (Pederson & Lupton, in press).

The business of blogging

If speaking for yourself inevitably also means speaking for others, the ethical difficulties this poses are hugely amplified when the process of self-representation is commodified by the business of blogging. Bloggers derive income in several ways: through “sponsored posts” where the blogger is sent an item to review asked to post on a theme related to a product. Payment may either be monetary or in-kind (which can be equivalent to a considerable sum in the case of a luxury vacuum cleaner or family holiday). Bloggers also receive in-kind goods to “host giveaways” or receive direct payment for a banner or sidebar advertisements, or through “affiliate links,” where the blogger receives a small percentage of the cost each time if a reader clicks a link and then buys an item.

These various tactics are called “monetising” a blog, something that two thirds of the bloggers we interviewed were attempting to pursue in some way. The greater the blog readership, the more money a blogger can make, but if a blog *too* full of sponsored posts then readers may stop engaging, so bloggers must avoid the appearance of “selling out.” For professional bloggers like Melissa and Nicole, the income derived was equivalent to the part-time income from their former corporate roles. Blogs could also serve as a line on a curriculum vitae: for Florence, who returned to work when her children were in school, her blog functioned as evidence that her digital skills were current. Others used the blog as a means of promoting a linked business, like Beth who started a business sending bespoke gifts to new mothers, or Andrea who was promoting her self-help memoir.

The rewards were more than financial. While initially Florence had seen the blog as a way to “express myself, the frustrations” but that it had evolved into “an opportunity for me to develop my career in a different direction to the one that... I’d been shoehorned into simply because of economics and kids.” Although she didn’t (yet) derive much income from her blog, Minna felt “the easiest way to justify the amount of time spent [on her blog was] to talk about the commercial opportunities because there’s quite a lot.” Thus while she spent much of the interview discussing how her blog was a creative outlet and a record of her family life, to others she emphasized the business opportunity. But this could carry its own burden, as when Nicole said she blogs “because I love it, but then... you know [it is] part of my making money, so I need to carry on doing it.”

As already noted, the blogging community could be a place of support or of competition. A monthly list of UK parent blogs was read with excitement and trepidation as blogs moved up and down in the rankings. Melissa described how, for some, “if their ranking goes down, like on a month, even if they felt they’ve done loads, they’re almost suicidal.” Although the bloggers who derived income from their blogs did so as a kind of part-time

job, this did not fit seamlessly with the requirements of their children. To grow in popularity bloggers must maintain parallel social media accounts and read and comment on each other’s blogs – there is the possibility of near-constant participation. A few tried to talk themselves out of this “always on” mentality. Maya, mother of four-year-old Nikhil had to remind herself, “if I don’t post a blog every two days it’s fine, it’s not the end of the world.” She wanted to grow her blog but she also desperately wanted to “be present” for Nikhil. When asked how much time she spent on her blog and social media per week she said, ruefully, “probably more than I should... [Nikhil] often says mummy, look at this, or mummy, look at me, or mummy, look *long*, meaning pay attention to this, don’t look away” as she poignantly mimed looking down at her phone. Andrea was scathing in her critique of those she deemed to be putting blogging first, for example by letting their children’s food grow cold when photographing it, asserting “first and foremost, you’re a mum.” Dennis described finding this “contradiction quite difficult, when people blog about being parents but then they don’t parent because they’re blogging.”

Most bloggers we interviewed described the business side of their blogs in terms might be considered “third-wave” feminist in their emphases on choice, economic empowerment and flexibility (Snyder-Hall, 2010). For example most spoke of their blogs as enabling them to re-enter or stay in the workforce while allowing them more time with their children, notwithstanding that there are sometimes conflicts between the two. However, it is also plausible to read these blogs as part of the construction of “neoliberal selves” (McGuigan, 2014). In addition to deriving economic benefit from, at core, the commodification of their “voices” (Couldry, 2010), the bloggers were also selling products for businesses (through links, giveaways and sponsored posts) in addition to themselves being “monetized” through their participation in platforms that amalgamate the “big data” generated by participants (Mosco, 2014). And yet paradoxically, such a critical reading risks marginalising the very voices and narratives that it accuses the neoliberal project of erasing, highlighting an ambivalence of which our bloggers were acutely aware.

Conclusions: intensive parenting in the digital age

“There’s a lot more scrutiny on parenting. I don’t remember my parents ever worrying about what anyone else thought of their parenting skills [yet because] blogging exists, you’ve got people talking about and sharing their experiences of parenting. People are much more honest now. You don’t get this rose-tinted view of parenting, People are saying “do you know what, this is really hard, and sometimes I hate it”, and that was never allowed.” (Maya)

Blogs offer new spaces for writing self and community into being (boyd, 2006), constructing the “story of the self” (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000, p. 3) in ways that may overcome historical silences: where previous critiques worried that “mothers don’t write, they are written” (Suleiman in Sheehy, 2014, p. 4), both mothers and fathers can now assert their subjectivity in response to critical erasures (Juhasz, 2003). But the conditions of selfhood are themselves changing. Late modernity, Bauman (2002) argues, is transforming “‘identity’ from a ‘given’ into a ‘task’ – and charging the actors with the responsibility for performing that task and for the consequences (also the side-effects) of their performance” (p. xv). It is also transforming the conditions for such performances – ever more digital, visible, and scrutinised.

Parenting in late modernity has been described as being “intensified” and “anxious,” especially for middle class mothers (Hays, 1998) such as many of our bloggers, resulting in what Douglas and Michaels (2004, p. 4) dub the “new momism,” a “highly romanticized and yet demanding view of motherhood in which the standards for success are impossible to meet.” Parent blogging, then, is both a means through which the logic of intensive parenting is perpetuated, but paradoxically also a means of coping with it, a paradigmatic case of Giddens’ reflexive “project of the self” (1991) or Clark’s (2013) “reflexive parenting.” This article has shown that parent bloggers feel this sense of responsibility – an obligation to themselves and to those to whom they are related, for the relational self brings its own ethical burden. As articulated in Reece’s (2013) critique of “positive parenting,” such self-surveillance can be punitive, demanding continual self-improvement (Hartas et al., 2014). Moreover, the representation of the parent is not confined to the parent, for the “voice” of the parent also speaks inter-subjectively for the child (Jenkins, 2014).

Blogs about parenting are thus not “pure creations of autonomous individuals” (Jackson, 2002, p. 22) but rather display a “porous” identity in which boundaries between parent and child are difficult, if not impossible, to maintain (Baraitser, 2006). While psychoanalytic theory has long examined how the child gradually learns to separate “the not-me from the me” (Winnicott, 2000, p. 144), less attention is paid to whether and how the reverse process is experienced by parents. Somewhere between the now-commonplace sharing of ultrasound and new-born photographs (J. S. Taylor, 2008) and parental worries about the “digital footprint” they are creating for their child (Ammari, Kumar, Lampe, & Schoenebeck, 2015) lies the moment when children become due a degree of digital separation, with parents anticipating some transfer of agency (C. Taylor, 1985), as we saw with Nicole, or with children demanding it, as we saw with Jane and Harvey. This transfer of “digital self-determination” was especially keenly felt as a moral responsibility by bloggers such as Nina, whose children have distinctive challenges of communication.

Through such instances, this article has addressed wider issues of self-representation also, by asking who is the “self” (or selves) being represented? Too often, the “user” of “user-generated content” or the “self” of “self-representation” is taken to refer to a singular individual. But when we represent ourselves through our relationships, this is not straightforward, as eloquently illustrated by the anxieties surrounding “sharenting”. As popular genres based on sharing and blogging become widespread, we have examined the tensions that arise when parent bloggers try to reconcile their child’s right to privacy with the desire to represent their identity in relational terms – as a parent, in solidarity with other parents. Parent bloggers share more, and share more frequently than other parents, but their struggles illuminate the spectrum of practices being developed by “ordinary” parents who use social media. From commiserating about potty training to proudly sharing teenagers’ exam results, parents’ social media engagement builds advice and support networks, as well as “performing the self” (Goffman, 1959). As Goffman acknowledged, performances have audiences and, generally, other players – whether physically present or implied in their absence (i.e. imagined or “virtually” present). In digital environments, the once-localised practices of self-*presentation* have become more difficult to manage, but they enable newly networked cultures of self-*representation* that bring opportunities too.

We have argued that the practical, ethical and discursive anxieties faced by parent bloggers in sharing their and their children’s families’ experiences arise from a crucial tension that affects many other social media users too. On the one hand, digital media sites operate with an essentialist conception of distinct and bounded identities, but on the other they enable connections and sharing with an unprecedented ease and scale. This tension is difficult to manage because it is obscured by the popular conception of the autonomous or essential self that, in turn, flies in the face of social theories of the self as relational, constructed through social interactions over the life course. It might be said, then, that the difficulties faced by parent sharers and bloggers in digital environments bring into sharp focus the incompatibility between identity as instantiated through social media profiles or blogs and identity as lived. Digital networks, *par excellence*, facilitate interconnectedness but their regulation presumes an autonomous “user.” The fact that children are, themselves, contested subjects of social media – often under the age of consent for companies’ terms and conditions, potentially vulnerable through their immaturity or special needs – exacerbates the difficulty of representing the relational self for parent bloggers and can even encourage “parent bashing,” although all those who “sharent” experience some of these difficulties. As a result, it is sometimes difficult for them to participate in supportive (or commercial or activist) parenting communities online, even though this is precisely the opportunity afforded by the network society.

In this article, we have shown that emergent cultures of parent blogging are governed by overlapping “spheres of obligation” that shape everyday decisions about what, where and how much to share (Davis, 2012), including the parent’s responsibility to her- or himself, to her or his child(ren) in the present and the imagined future, to others in the child’s social circle, and to the parenting communities that the blogger helps bring into being. Some bloggers also experience a sense of economic obligation as workers, either as (semi-) professional bloggers or in their “day jobs” which may or may not feature on the blog. As we have shown, the obligations due to these different constituencies often come into conflict, although parents are proving creative and reflexive in their efforts to adjust. Nonetheless, while an individualistic notion of digital identity may fit better with the dominant logics of regulation and commerce, it is out of step with the long-established relational practices of parenting, now playing out in newly fraught ways in digital environments. Indeed, insofar as relationships are at least partially constituted through visible representations (D. Miller, 2011), not being able to represent the relational self within digital cultures may carry real costs. No wonder that parents are ambivalent as they reflect on and worry about the dilemmas of self-representation they encounter in the shifting sands of today’s digital genres of popular culture. We – and they – are yet to find an approach to representing relational identities in ways that deal fairly with both parents and their children, not only in academic terms but also in the public sphere.

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