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Infancy Online: An Introduction

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Abstract

This article introduces a Special Issue on the topic of infancy online, addressing a range of issues, including representation, privacy, datafication, and children's rights. The 7 articles included map important arenas of emerging research which highlight a range of increasingly urgent questions around the way infants are situated online, the longer term ramifications of infant online presences, and the ways in which infants and young children participate as users of online media.

Keywords

children, infants, surveillance, pregnancy, parenting

In February 2017, US singer and superstar Beyoncé posted a highly stylized and carefully crafted image to her Instagram feed, announcing her pregnancy with twins. This image was notable for all sorts of reasons, but one of the most widely reported is that within days, Beyoncé's pregnancy announcement photograph became the most popular image of all time on the Instagram platform, with over 10.5 million likes. While Beyoncé's fame drove an exceptionally intense interest around her pregnancy announcement, the act of using Instagram, or other social media platforms to announce a pregnancy, is far from exceptional. Recent research by Katrin Tiidenberg and Nancy Baym (2017), for example, has shown that pregnant women are often socially compelled to share images of their pregnant bodies and "perform" pregnancy on social media in relatively constrained ways. Similarly, prenatal ultrasound images are also routinely shared online, visualizing and establishing a social media footprint for infants before they are actually born (Leaver, 2015; Leaver & Highfield, 2016).

Following birth, social practices of sharing images and videos of infants are becoming increasingly normalized, *and* researched, with preliminary studies showing varying intensities of sharing across different social media platforms based on their affordances and publics (Morris, 2014). While identity and privacy concerns are evident in studies of infant visual content shared on popular social media sites—dominated by the desire to share quotidian, cute, and milestone images (Kumar & Schoenebeck, 2015)—alternative research highlights instances of crafting and curating infant profiles in order to gather views or build a brand (Abidin, 2015; Nansen & Jayemanne, 2016). In the case of Beyoncé, her fame suggests that from the announcement image onward, her children will have a significant and inescapable online presence which will shape how their identities are viewed, experienced, and performed online. More importantly, the emerging field of research into infancy online highlights that so will millions of other young people as vernacular sharing practices mean that digital traces of infancy swell within a cultural database that is persistent, replicable, scalable, and searchable (boyd, 2010).

Beyond online spaces and content shared *about* young children, increasingly Internet researchers are investigating the situated and digital practices *of* young children, including infants. Largely driven by the proliferation of mobile devices and touchscreen interfaces, which has lowered thresholds of usability, along with an ever-expanding range of entertainment and educational content made for young audiences, are shifting forms of digital participation by young children. This field builds on studies that quantify children's media devices and activities (e.g., Marsh et al., 2015; Rideout, 2014), by for example, drawing on ethnographic techniques to explore the household media ecologies and negotiated relations shaping young children's digital practices and play (e.g., Giddings, 2014; Nansen, 2015), or alternatively by critically analyzing advertising, branding, and marketing in economies of children's digital games and apps (e.g., Grimes, 2015; Shuler, 2009).

While mainstream discussions of children and the Internet have often been driven by moral panics, this Special Issue

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follows Sonia Livingstone (2009) in recognizing that new technologies, affordances, and shifting social practices relating to children online come with both new risks *and* new opportunities. Broadly focusing on infancy, then, is not intended to reify a media effects approach which situates infants, or young children, as largely passive, and thus as the product of outside forces. Rather, aligning with a rights approach, in curating this Special Issue we hope that in focusing on infancy questions are raised about the immediate and longer term impacts of emerging online and digital practices in relation to children's rights, including safety, privacy, and meaningful online participation (Livingstone, 2016). A number of the articles in this Special Issue, for example, examine digital surveillance practices, yet the point here is not to criticize specific parents, but rather to make visible some of the potentially life-long impacts of this "dataveillance" (Lupton & Williamson, 2017). The social, health and well-being value of sharing specific information about infants, from biomedical data to photos on Facebook, will have to be balanced with the impact of these traces having a lasting existence, potentially outside the control of parents or, as they grow, the children whose lives generated them. As the "right to be forgotten," is debated and, in some cases, enshrined in national legal systems, balancing, controlling, and in some cases erasing digital traces will undoubtedly prove complex and contradictory terrain (Jones, 2016).

Veronica Barassi's "Babyveillance? Expecting parents, online surveillance and the culture specificity of pregnancy apps" begins the Special Issue by revisiting the existing literature on pregnancy apps and arguing for a more complex and nuanced understanding of how these apps are experienced and operate in different contexts. First, Barassi argues that while pregnancy apps have generally been analyzed as part of the realm of quantified self and self-tracking discourses, a richer understanding emerges when these apps are situated as more complex socio-technical assemblages and that their meaning is continually being negotiated by individuals in different social and cultural contexts. Second, she argues, that across these differences there are also commonalities which can be mapped, including the fact that, while received in different ways, the purposeful framing through promotional material and terms of use "coerce" and normalize specific ways of using and experiencing pregnancy apps. These terms of use also make claim not only to biometric data of pregnant users of these apps, but also explicitly claim rights to harvest separable data about the unborn. Finally, Barassi undertakes a detailed analysis of the user reviews of these apps to explore cultural specificities which frame how these apps are used and understood, revealing a number of differences including variable levels of comfort with the advertising and promotional material embedded in these apps, differing responses to the heteronormativity and presumed whiteness of the apps' users, and very different experiences for women who experience miscarriages but cannot easily prevent further milestone updates from certain apps.

In "Intimate Surveillance: Normalizing parental monitoring and mediation of infants online," Tama Leaver explores similar terrain but with a more direct focus on infant wearables, sometimes likened to Fitbits for Babies, which are monitoring devices worn by infants which record, encode, and transmit specific biological and physical activity. Most importantly, infant wearables also produce data which are shared via the cloud and aggregated by the companies which sell the devices, transforming infant activity into a form of big data which is itself then treated as a valuable and exploitable resource. Leaver argues that there is fundamental disconnection between the promotional and marketing material generated by infant wearables and the actual capability of the devices; despite alluding to being medical devices, infant wearables are not medically certified devices and are rather strategically marketed as providing "peace of mind" for weary parents. Leaver argues further that paid parental influencers not only write sponsored posts about infant wearables, but also tend to reproduce the same discourse highlighting "peace of mind" and thus normalizing infant wearables to their readers and viewers. Ultimately, Leaver argues that intimate surveillance occurs when parents, guardians, and loved ones use apps and devices to monitor and survey infants. He notes that this surveillance is almost always undertaken with the very best of intentions. However, use of infant wearables can both provide false reassurance as well as potentially beginning a very long association tying digital surveillance with seemingly responsible parenting practices. The inverse, Leaver argues, is also true: the normalization of infant monitoring and intimate surveillance increasingly situates parents who do not monitor as aberrant or irresponsible.

Elisabetta Locatelli's "Images of breastfeeding on Instagram: self-presentation, publicness and privacy management" examines the way breastfeeding images are purposefully shared on visual social media platforms. Breastfeeding images initially proved problematic for Instagram, as they were often removed due to Terms of Use which forbade nudity. However, after very visible protests, Instagram altered their Terms to explicitly allow breastfeeding images. Locatelli catalogues a range of image types, including breastfeeding selfies, or "brelfies" and examines the ways in which these are used as advocacy for breastfeeding and for broader forms of self-expression. Far from being uniform, the range of images highlight the spectrum of highs and lows associated with vernacular lived experiences of breastfeeding. While the public visibility of breastfeeding images on Instagram is usually purposeful and political, Locatelli raises the important point that these images usually contain a baby who is also then publicly visible. In negotiating shifting boundaries of publicness and privacy, breastfeeding mothers also demonstrate a range of methods for either deliberately occluding, or deliberately sharing, the names and faces of their children. Locatelli argues that sharing breastfeeding images can be empowering both in general terms, and in navigating the joys and challenges of the lived

experience of breastfeeding. Moreover, each time a breastfeeding image is shared, the complexities of making decisions about presence, privacy, and publicness are doubly present in that these choices are being made for both the person breastfeeding and the baby being fed.

In "Mothering on Facebook: exploring the privacy/openness paradox," Charlotte Chalklen analyses how Facebook's affordances allowing mothers to easily share information about their children are tempered by concerns about the potential risks to their privacy. This paradox in digital parenting is explored through a mixed-methods study of Australian mothers' strategies for negotiating the disclosure of information and posting of images of their young children. The study found that overall mothers are becoming increasingly adept at negotiating ways to protect their privacy while enjoying the benefits of openness, yet such capacities are not evenly distributed. Strategies of negotiation varied across a user spectrum, with more active users sharing more, but also being more vigilant curating friends and content, while more privacy-conscious users tended to refrain from posting but still participated in viewing other's posts or reading information about parenting. Ultimately, the research highlighted that becoming a parent made mothers more reflexive about their position and responsibility in platform participation, with the privacy-openness paradox navigated by selectively engaging with Facebook features, and making distinctions between the benefits of accessing, sharing, and discussing parenting information, while more carefully considering or refraining from the potential negative consequences of posting photos of their children.

Kate Orton-Johnson's "Mommy blogs and representations of motherhood: 'Bad mommies' and their readers," continues analyzing mothers' roles and responsibilities in mediating their young children's online presence by focusing on "Mommy blogs" as spaces in which experiences of mothering are represented, negotiated, and resisted. In particular, Orton-Johnson explores the digital terrain of mommy blogs that fail to live up to expected norms and instead deliberately subvert the genre through a confessional mode of performing "bad" motherhood by sharing personal stories of maternal deficiency, boredom, and frustration. The article turns to reader understandings of these online representations of motherhood by interviewing mothers who regularly read mommy blogs in order to contextualize their own experiences and identities. Identifying reciprocal relationships of social surveillance, in which mommy blogs monitor each other and readers monitor mommy blogs, the analysis highlights how the making visible of messy realities of mothering challenge mainstream narratives of self-sacrifice, while also representing a space of ethical uncertainty and risk in publicizing frustration or failure within the collapsed contexts of networked publics.

Benjamin Burroughs' paper, "YouTube Kids: The App Economy and Parenting," shifts focus from issues of motherhood and infants' online identity to investigate how media industries are increasingly entangled within the everyday viewing patterns and digital lives of young children. The research builds on industry studies of the app economy to focus on the development of the YouTube Kids app, which seeks to take advantage of the ubiquity of mobile devices and touchscreen interfaces in infant media consumption practices in order to capture and monetize their attention. Noting how the YouTube Kids app was launched in response to parental concerns about children's potential exposure to adult or inappropriate content on the platform, Burroughs proceeds to closely analyze two spectacularly successful YouTube channels, FunToyzCollector and EvanTubeHD, to highlight how such reassurances are contradicted by the advertising and marketing strategies on these channels. The textual analysis reveals the ways children are being shaped as a new consumer demographic though direct advertising, branded content, child brand influencers, and the algorithmic organization of infant media consumption.

In our final article, "#familygoals: Family influencers, calibrated amateurism, and justifying young digital labour," Crystal Abidin continues examining the political economy of infancy online, turning to an analysis of families who create online content featuring the entire family, including young children, as part of building their online brand and presence in the attention economy of influence. However, having children featured in the digital content created by influencer families raises important questions about visibility and the labor of children. Abidin argues that these families avoid controversies around child labor by using strategies of "calibrated amateurism" which are deployed in four ways: first, parents emphasize the fact that their children are having fun and playing in the content created; second, as a range of content is created, children are often given seeming control over one platform or channel, demonstrating their agency in being part of the material created; third, parents emphasize their children's desire to participate by including non-participation as a form of disciplining; and finally, parents make their children's banal everyday routines very visible, demonstrating the that are just "normal" kids. Ultimately, Abidin argues, these strategies are effective, and the communities of viewers that engage with family influencers usually celebrate and seek to emulate influencer children rather than raising questions about choice or payment for children involved in this form of digital labour.

As infants grow into older children and become more able to articulate their own opinions and preferences, they will likely join their peers in negotiating their own presence online and privacy in complex and nuanced ways, across multiple contexts (Clark, 2013; Livingstone & Sefton-Green, 2016). The decisions that parents, guardians and loved ones make today in terms of sharing data, information, photos, videos, and other media about babies and infants will likely have lasting implications. This Special Issue has, we hope, offered a number of important questions and lines of enquiry to consider in relation to infancy online both in broad

cultural terms and in very specific terms. Much more work is needed, however, and we hope that the articles in this Special Issue will contribute to fostering further work in the area.

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Tama Leaver is an associate professor in the Department of Internet Studies at Curtin University in Perth, Western Australia. His research currently focuses on the 'ends of identity' online, spanning ultrasound sharing, and infancy online at one end, through to digital death at the other. He is the author of *Artificial Culture: Identity, Technology and Bodies* (Routledge, 2012); co-editor of *An Education in Facebook? Higher Education and the World's Largest Social Network* (Routledge, 2014) with Mike Kent; and *Social, Casual and Mobile Games: The Changing Gaming Landscape* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2016) with Michele Willson. He is @tamaleaver on Twitter, and his web presence is www.tamaleaver.net.

Bjorn Nansen is a lecturer in Media and Communications at The University of Melbourne, Australia. He is a Digital Media Fellow in the Melbourne Networked Society Institute, and a member of the Microsoft Social NUI Research Centre and Research Unit in Public Cultures. His research interests include home media infrastructures and environments, media use in family life, young children's digital play, and the digitization of death. He is a co-author of *Death and Digital Media* (Routledge, forthcoming), and currently holds an Australian Research Council funded Discovery Early Career Researcher Award studying young children's use of mobile and interactive media.