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Chapter 13. The Unavoidable Place: How Parents Manage the Socially Mediated Visibility of their Young Children

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P. 107 The birth of a child marks the beginning of a period of “snapshot significance” (Chalfen, 1987, p. 89). Out come the cameras to capture coos, smiles, steps, and birthdays, but also some of the tantrums, tears, or even toilet activities. Parents display these photos on walls and albums and send them to loved ones—as physical objects mailed in envelopes, as files attached in emails, and, increasingly, as images posted on social media. As soon as they enter the world, children develop a presence, even a social life, online. How do parents think about this process? How do they conceptualize the mediated presence of their young children?

Parents must make profoundly complex choices about the mediated presence of their children, but my interviews with new mothers suggest a certain normalization of this complexity. For most people, posting pictures on social media is a mundane part of everyday life. They make choices without necessarily noticing their intricacy. They experience the practice as inevitable, perceiving the internet as an “unavoidable place.” Here, the internet is more than a tool for transmitting or containing information, but not quite a way of being in which self, technology, and everyday life collapse completely and seamlessly. The mothers I talked to are still aware that they’re performing an identity online. In this vignette I seek to illustrate how parents implicitly accept responsibility for managing their child’s socially mediated visibility (Pearce et al., 2018) and harness various social media features to do so in ways that align with their beliefs.

P. 108 In 2013–2014, I interviewed 22 new mothers as part of a project on parenthood and digital photo-sharing (Kumar & Schoenebeck, 2015). This piece focuses on the stories of Brianna[¶] and her then four-month-old daughter, Abigail, as well as Marina and her then 10-month-old son, Cooper. Both women lived in the U.S., worked outside the home, and used social media. For Brianna, the “inevitability” of her daughter entering Facebook caused frustration. For Marina, bringing her son into social media helped her contribute to the professional success of her best friend, a popular YouTube vlogger, as well as share his pictures with family abroad. I describe how these women managed their child’s socially mediated visibility and how they articulated their everyday choices regarding their child’s mediated presence.

Strategically limiting visibility

[¶] All names are pseudonyms.

The potential visibility of her child on Facebook weighed on Brianna during her pregnancy. “It made me uncomfortable ... people who I hadn’t spoken to in 20 years knowing her name and knowing what she looked like,” Brianna said. Yet this was not a straightforward issue of privacy or mistrust of the internet. Brianna used the internet as a tool to email pictures of her daughter to her parents. When it came to social media, and Facebook in particular, Brianna didn’t want her daughter present in a place populated by people Brianna wasn’t close to.

“My original plan had been to keep her completely off of social media,” Brianna said. But when she did, “a lot of people were complaining that I wasn’t posting photos.” She bought her parents special frames that display the digital photos she emails them. Still, “my mother is constantly hounding us to put photos up. And she wants her family to see them. All my aunts and uncles and everyone on Facebook,” Brianna said.

A few weeks after Abigail’s birth, Brianna’s sister-in-law posted a picture of the infant on Facebook without asking. “I was frustrated with it,” Brianna said. “It highlighted for me the inevitability of the fact that [Abigail] was going to be on Facebook.” Feeling like the pressure would never yield, Brianna created boundaries to limit her daughter’s visibility (Pearce et al., 2018). “There was no way I was going to completely be able to keep her off [Facebook],” she said: “so I wanted to try and limit it as much as I had control over it.” Brianna created a list of close family, best friends, and people who had met or would meet her daughter (about 15% of her Facebook friends) and changed the settings so only this group would be able to see the baby-related content.

P. 109 When Abigail was two months old, Brianna posted an album of 10 pictures. Two months later, after more pressure from her friends and family, she posted a picture of Abigail’s toes in the sand. “I like the idea [that] the only the people who know what her face looks like every day are the people who actually see her face every day,” Brianna said. Yet her ambivalence persisted. “I’m still uncomfortable with her being on [Facebook] at all. Like, I don’t love the fact that I put those 10 pictures up.”

Brianna felt that she was “responsible for shaping [Abigail’s] online presence before [Abigail] had any sort of control over it.” This prompted Brianna to think about “allowing [Abigail] to create her own presence.” Brianna also challenged the notion that a baby automatically belongs on a mother’s Facebook profile. “It’s not her Facebook. It’s my Facebook,” she laughed. “Yes, she’s a big part of my life, obviously. But, I think that my Facebook should be about me and the things that I’m doing ... If we take a family photo, then maybe that can go up there because that’s me and that’s my life. But the point of my Facebook isn’t to document her life. It’s to document, to the extent I want, my life.”

Brianna’s conceptualization of Facebook as a place for self-expression, as well as her desire to grant Abigail the agency to shape her own presence online, led Brianna to see Abigail’s visibility as something that she needed to limit and protect. “For some reason, I feel more private about her than I’ve ever felt about anything else in my life,” Brianna said. “I kind of want to keep the baby stuff to ourselves ... I feel like my job is to protect her from being on the Internet as much as I can.”

Brianna's sentiments might seem fairly straightforward, but they surface overlapping tensions and contradictions that speak to the complexity of one's choices about mediated presence. Brianna discusses her own private feelings about Abigail as well as protecting Abigail's privacy. She then makes a claim about the nature of the Internet as a place one needs to be protected from. She also makes a point to distinguish her own self-expression from the presentation of her daughter, which makes a claim about the function of a Facebook profile.

Embracing a managed visibility

The day after Marina gave birth to her son Cooper, she texted her best friend, whom Marina described as a "YouTube star." The best friend "got really excited, called me crying, and she said, let me know when I can make this public," to her hundreds of thousands of YouTube subscribers and Instagram followers. Marina, who frequently appeared in her friend's videos and photos, had created Instagram and Twitter accounts to support her friend's career. "My followers ... they're all her fans," Marina said. "And I post cute pictures of the baby because they love the baby. And I'm OK with that If it gets her more likes by these kids, then I'm going to do it. Because it's her career. And you know, she's my best friend, so obviously I'm going to help her in any way I can."

P. 110 When Cooper was seven months old, he and Marina joined the best friend on a trip abroad. "And she had been vlogging and of course we were in all of her vlogs, because it was her daily life," Marina said. "You know, cutting us out would have been more difficult than just having us there." Marina's best friend made a living by performing her life online, and Marina accepted that this friendship involved her and her son's participation in the friend's online presence. Marina's comfort also stemmed from her feeling that her friend had "a very family-friendly YouTube channel," making it an appropriate place for her son to appear.

Cooper's presence on Instagram and YouTube benefitted Marina's best friend. Marina also posted pictures of Cooper on Facebook, and his presence there benefitted her family. "I'm doing it for my cousins who I don't see every day. I'm doing it for my aunts and uncles in Australia who might not ever meet him," she said.

Compared to YouTube, which Marina perceived almost as her friend's workplace, Facebook was more a way for family members to "see each other's children grow up." Yet Marina openly acknowledged that she carefully managed how she presented Cooper on Facebook: "I want [friends and family who see Cooper on Facebook] to know him as the baby that I portray through phone calls," Marina said. "And when I talk about him, he's, like, he's the happiest, most smiley kid I've ever met When they hear stories about him, they want pictures that coincide with those stories. So I would never put up a picture of him crying, because I wouldn't call 'em and be like, oh my god, he just threw a tantrum ... I want him to be seen as a happy-go-lucky kid."

Marina described her son as "the most important thing in my life." For her, this translated into him belonging on her Facebook profile. "I'm that mom that if my profile picture isn't of my baby, I have to have him up, him up somewhere. Or else I feel like a failure," she said. While this might be read primarily as a claim that Facebook is the place to present Marina the Mother,

Marina herself interprets Facebook as being the place to document her child's life. "I don't have a baby book for my child. You can call me the worst mom of the year. ... [But] I have a modern day baby book. I can go back to my Facebook profile and tell you the exact day that Cooper took his first step. I could go back and tell you the exact day he crawled. And ... Cooper can look back and look at his life. You know, that's something that I never had for my childhood," Marina said.

In Marina's sentiments, like in Brianna's earlier, we see contradictory claims about the internet, particular platforms, and their functionality for children's mediated presence.

Navigating the "unavoidable place"

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When Marina and Brianna were children, family pictures sat in an album, on a mantle, in a wallet, or on an office desk. In the early days of email, photos went from one computer to another. Now, they often go from a smartphone to a social network site, making children present and visible on social media. The images do not independently fly from phone to Facebook, instead needing a human actor to choose to upload them. Nevertheless, the mothers I studied see social media sites as "unavoidable places" for their young children.

Instead of deeply questioning this inevitability, parents take on a responsibility to manage their children's socially mediated visibility (Kumar & Schoenebeck, 2015). How they do so differs based on their perceptions and interpretations of the technologies as well as of their role as parents. For Marina, Facebook, YouTube, and other social media functioned as tools for self-presentation as well as ways of being a best friend and mother. She embraced bringing her son Cooper into this unavoidable place while remaining attuned to her impression management goals. Brianna also saw Facebook as a tool for self-presentation, but found it at odds with her desire to maintain privacy and to give her daughter Abigail the agency to control her own digital presence. She begrudgingly brought Abigail into this unavoidable place in response to peer pressure, but only after creating boundaries to limit Abigail's visibility.

Cooper and Abigail are part of the first generation to grow up with a digital presence from birth. Soon, they will begin charting their own path through socially mediated visibility, offering a promising line for us to think about the internet as a *tool*, a *place*, a *way of being* or something entirely different.

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