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Learning as it goes down the line: siblings and family networked in the acquisition of online skills

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Abstract

The Parents and Peers project set out to investigate key influences of peers and parents on the online experiences of young people aged 13-17. Specifically, the project sought to explore the family constructions of learning, support and management systems that operate in the informal context of the domestic space of the family home (Silverstone & Haddon 1996). It became apparent through interviewing several sets of older siblings that there was benefit in interviewing a wider age range of siblings who were engaged in online activity within individual families. Therefore, the interview participants' age range was extended to age 9-17. This paper utilises sets of interviews from three families in which 3 or 4 siblings agreed to participate in the research. What became clear from these multiple interviews in each of the three families was that any consideration of influence upon these young people's online activities needed to expand from parents and peers to include the influence of siblings and cousins. This paper examines the various influences operating within larger families, particularly on the youngest members of these families, aged 9-10, whom we have called 'young gamers'. It also considers how influence might be exchanged within the sibling/cousin network operating in these families.

Introduction

Livingstone calls for widening the lens of research about young people's internet activities when she states: "I have argued that research does not, and should not, focus solely on the activities of children and young people, for instead a dual analysis is required that encompasses the social and the technological, at the level of both individual and institutional practice" (2011, p. 367). It is not clear whether she is including the family and peers in this 'widening of the lens', but it is in keeping with the spirit of her argument that it is important to appreciate the context in which young people learn about the internet, and this includes learning from other family members. Indeed, in the EU Kids Online project that she led, the survey part of that work included questions on the different roles of parents and peers (and teachers) (Livingstone et al 2010) and this was also investigated in the qualitative work within that project (Šmahel & Wright 2013). This paper explores that wider context a stage further by examining the influence of siblings.

The paper draws on 13 interviews conducted as part of the Parents and Peers project, an Australian Research Council Discovery-funded project investigating how parents and peers influence teenagers'

online activity. An opportunity arose within the project to interview multiple members of three large individual families. It was anticipated that there would also be a specific benefit in interviewing younger members of these families, aged 9-10, who are called 'young gamers' for the purposes of this paper. The ECU Human Research Ethics Officer was approached, and permission granted to extend the interviewee age range from 11-17 to 9-17, allowing an additional focus on 9-10 year olds. While the original aim of the project was to compare and contrast the influence of a teen's friends and peers with that of his/her parents, what became clear during the interviews was that siblings, and other close family members such as cousins, also have a significant influence on young people's online activity. Hence their role is explored in more depth here.

Parents or Peers methodology

The overall methodological approach is social constructionist (Berger & Luckman 1966). Within this, the project uses qualitative research methods – in-depth semi-structured individual (Seidman 2006) and focus group (Krueger & Casey 2009) interviews. This paper relied upon interviews, and all interviews were conducted within the families' homes, which was where the internet activity took place. Whilst the project initially encountered some participant recruitment problems, a change of recruitment from using school-based networks to using personal and informal networks, finally resulted in a total of 57 interviews. The majority of these were drawn from within a Perth and regional Western Australian context, while ten were located within a UK context.

Interviewees

This paper uses interviews with three families of between four and five siblings each, the youngest of whom were not interviewed since they were under the age of the study. Of these three families, two sets of siblings were related as first cousins. The participants' names and some aspects of their identity have been changed to protect their privacy.

Whilst this study focuses on only three families, the in-depth interviews with multiple members of these families produced rich data about influences on online behaviour and, particularly, about differences between siblings and between families. Together, the three families constitute a valuable source of insight into influence as it operates within family networks. These three families were:

The Donald family – this is a family of two parents and four children. Interviewees in this family consisted of the mother, Sue, and three of the four siblings: Chrissie age 16, Matthew age 15 and Jordan age 9. The youngest child, age 7, was not interviewed. The family live in an outer suburb of Perth and the father was away working on a regional building site at the time of the interviews. This mother is the sister of the father in the Russell family.

The Russell family – this is a family of two parents and five children. Interviewees in this family consisted of the mother Jo, and four of the five siblings: Louise age 16, Kath age 15, Lucy age 12 and Dominic age 9. The youngest child, age 4, was not interviewed. The family live in an inner city suburb of Perth and the

father was away working on a gas platform in the state's north at the time of the interviews. The father is the brother of Sue Donald.

The Vladich family – this is a family of two parents and four children. Interviewees in the family consisted of the mother Maria, and three of the four siblings: Leah age 16, Anna age 13 and Morris age 9. The youngest child, age 6, was not interviewed. The family live in a southern beachside suburb of Perth. The father works long hours at the city's port facility and was not home at the time of the interviews.

Siblings

Given the extent of the literature about young people and the internet, there is little discussion of the influence of siblings upon one another's choices in internet activity. Frequently there is a focus on parental factors, or the influence of schools on digital literacy, but not on the sibling relationships as a context for influence. Howe and Recchia (2014) state that siblings "are important socialization agents for one another" (p.155). They refer to older children within families as providing younger siblings with a training ground within which to "learn about their social and cognitive worlds", and influence one another's behaviours (p.155). Dunn (1983) also advocates for the study of sibling relationships as a key context for children's learning. Furthermore, Cotte and Wood (2004) draw on extensive surveys and triadic analysis of family influence between parent and two siblings to argue that in families "innovative behaviour is influenced both intergenerationally and intragenerationally" (p. 84) further supporting the need to examine the role that siblings play in influencing young people's internet activity choices.

Family

The Parents and Peers project was designed to explore how adolescents negotiate the influences of their peers and their parents upon their online engagement and understanding of the digital world. It became apparent as the research progressed that rather than there being an either/or influence, that is either parents or peers, there are in fact complex sets of negotiations with which young people engage in relation to their developing internet activity. These negotiations take place at school, within friendship networks on and offline, and within the family, between not only parents and children but between siblings. It is with this latter context of negotiation, the family, that this paper is most concerned. In this way, the study adds to previous work on the internet and family (Green, Holloway & Quin, 2004).

It should also be noted that, even though the three families in this paper reflect a relatively traditional model of the family, 'family' in this study does not refer to a tightly bordered single unit, separated from outside influences. In fact, the influence of cousins that came to light in these interviews suggest we need to consider influences upon young people's internet behaviours not just within the immediate family but also within the extended family network. Cited in Livingstone (2009, p. 7), Hill and Tisdall (1997, p. 66) describe the notion of family as "to some degree a fluid one, with a mix of concepts at its core – direct biological relatedness, parental caring role, long-term cohabitation, permanent belonging".

The Donald family

Mother Sue introduces one of the key themes across the families that her children learn about the internet from different sources, and that the age of the children is important in this respect: "I would put it down to a generational thing that, okay I have taught them a little bit, but then they've picked up a bit from school, and they've picked up a bit from friends as well". Sue goes on to explain what she means by "generational" more fully in terms of who influences whom in their internet behaviour: "With Jordan [9] it would be his family [siblings], like Matthew and Chrissie and what they do…if they've found a good app, he'll want to do that app or that game...with Matthew [15], I'd say more friends and family". In relation to who influences her daughter, Sue states "Chrissie's [17] a bit out there herself, so I would say it's hard with Chrissie". Chrissie herself is a little clearer on this matter and had no hesitation in clearly listing who played the greater role from most to least: "Me. So if I had to do a table it would go me, my friends, my siblings and my parents".

Despite stressing her autonomy Chrissie highlighted the influence of her sibling Matthew along with her peers on her choice to join an online social network: "Facebook ….it was through friends and Matthew because Matthew was on it before I was on it". Matthew himself was an extremely reticent interviewee, often answering questions in only two or three words, and never physically relaxed in the interview to the point where his toes were curled throughout the entire process. Yet he clearly identified who had the most bearing upon his online choices, stating that his friends played a part in his choices about what apps, social networking and games he acquired, noting specifically the role of fashion, and symbolically participating in the world of peers by doing the same things: "Because you don't want to be left behind and you do stuff like they're doing, and stuff". Matthew made no mention of his family's role.

His young gamer brother Jordan [9], however, was very clear that it was his sibling Matthew who influenced him the most. When asked if his cousins, big sister or friends at school played some role in his choices, Jordan answered "no" every time. Whereas Mathew had talked about 'influence' in relation to copying peers, Jordan also understood that word in terms of supporting his online activities: "Mum doesn't really help me and dad doesn't". Instead, for Jordan, his brother Matthew is the first and, in his mind, only influence on his gaming and internet activity. He stated that it was Matthew who taught him to use Xbox and how to use the internet. Moreover, 'influence' not only involved showing him how to do something but also advising about being careful when online. Matthew also taught Jordan how to be safe when gaming online: "My brother always says ask for their name first otherwise they could be a hacker. So I always ask for the name before I send a [re]quest". So in this instance the role played by siblings is multifaceted.

The Russell family

Though electing to be the parent interviewed for this research, Jo, as a busy mother of five, identified herself as the family member who was least engaged with internet technology: "They've kept up with technology, as soon as something has come out we've jumped on the bandwagon within a few months

of it coming out. So, yeah, five iPads in the house and [dad] Clive wants his own as well. I don't touch them. I have nothing to do with them at all". Despite her perceived lack of engagement with the technology itself, Jo did aspire to guide her children's internet activity as to appropriate behaviour online: "I hope I've influenced them enough to know what they should and shouldn't put on there." Jo also clarified how she tried to intervene to make sure that older siblings set a good role model for younger ones: "I've tried to explain to Louise [16] that everything she does reflects on the younger kids so if the siblings see her doing it, that they're going to think that it's okay for them to do it". When considering who influences her three oldest children the most, Jo agreed with Sue from the Donald family that the age of the child makes a difference: "For Louise, I'd say me and her friends that influence her the most, then as it goes down the line it would be their siblings and me and their friends. All three of them". As regards her second oldest daughter Kath [15], Jo thought that her friends were the most influential. For the next daughter Lucy [12], according to Jo it was siblings and friends. And for the 9 year old young gamer Dominic [9] and the youngest child Nikita [4] it was siblings alone.

The siblings had differing views on who had the most influence on them, suggesting that 'influence' is a vague term for the children and evokes different understandings. Oldest sister Louise reflected on reactions to a seminar her school had run in which an internet safety expert was able to assume a fake identity, befriending the majority of her year level on Facebook. Here she again thought about 'influence' in relation to internet safety: "I think it's mostly school and my parents. They're the ones that really said 'oh', because my friends don't really think twice about, like, we don't talk about stuff of that sort". In other words, while peers may set fashions, as Mathew from the Donald family had suggested, they do not necessarily act to shape young people internet behaviour in all respects. Meanwhile Kath, the second oldest sister, thought about 'influence' as not only her sister setting a precedent but in terms of getting parental permission. When setting up her Facebook account: "Mum and Louise [helped] because Louise had it and then I'd said to Mum. 'Well, since Louise got it at this age, can I get it?' And so Mum was, 'Fine, you can get it'. Because I was kind of arguing with her. So yeah."

The third sister, Lucy [12], did not identify her siblings as having any bearing on her decisions. Instead she was very clear that it was her friends who had the greatest influence as to encouraging her to explore the internet: "I would say it was my friends. Because they tell me to search things up and they're, 'Okay, let's talk to each other tonight on Snapchat or Instagram' or anything like that. So basically my friends are influencing me in going online and talking to them". Yet for safety, Lucy turns instead to her parents, again illustrating how this is not a key role that she expects peers to play: "Mum and Dad. Because they are always telling me what to do and what not to do on there and I'm listening to them and so if they say 'Don't follow people that you won't follow', I would listen to them. I won't follow people that I don't know".

Dominic [9], the young gamer in the family, identified all three sisters as influences on his social networking, in connection with setting an example and teaching him how to do things, specifically in obtaining an Instagram account for his iPad: "Well, my sisters, Louise, Kath and Lucy, well, they all had it and then they got me an account". He was able to clearly articulate how they helped: "they told me how to take photos. Told me how to delete photos and sometimes I found out new stuff. Well, [Lucy] she kind

of helped. I asked her how to delete them and she taught me how to do that." When asked about how his parents influenced him, Dominic said "Not that much but sometimes they talk about stuff on the Internet" – implying his parents provided, if not specifically safety advice, encouragement of some wider reflections on the online world, rather than practical support.

In relation to gaming, Dominic only once discussed the part played by of his friends "They talk about games" – again supporting the 'in fashion' dimension. But it was his Donald family cousin Jordan who influenced his gaming the most: "I went to my cousin's once and he had Assassin's Creed and we played that and I didn't really like that game". The Donald family's young gamer son Jordan taught Dominic the most about gaming: "Well, Jordan teaches me how to play the games that he's got like Skyrim or Disney Infinity, that's how I know how to play them because he teaches me". Whilst identifying Jordan as teaching him the most specifically about console gaming, Dominic apportioned influence on particular internet skills to particular family members:

> What do your mum and dad say to you about being safe, safe against hackers and things like that? Do they ever talk to you about that?
>
> Well, Dad says once you've finished, just say you're on Instagram, when you've finished doing all your stuff, just log out and that. So you log out so nobody can go in then and then hack into it.
>
> Right. And what about school? Do they ever talk to you about being safe?
>
> No.
>
> And what about your sisters? Do they ever tell you how to be safe online?
>
> Yeah. Like what Dad says, to log out and that.
>
> So the key question that we're asking in this is who do you think helps you the most with using the Internet? Your mum and dad? Your friends? Or your sisters?
>
> Well, maybe, Louise. She helps me a lot.
>
> In terms of getting app games, who encourages you or influences you the most in choosing which games you're going to get?
>
> Lucy.
>
> And lastly, who influences you to be safe the most?
>
> Kath.
>
> Kath? So she helps you know how to be safe?
>
> Well, pretty much all of them on that one.

You mean all of your sisters, or mum and dad and your sisters?

My sisters and maybe Mum and Dad.

The Vladich family

Like the Donald family, the Vladich family consists of two parents and four siblings, the youngest of whom was not interviewed. Whereas the Donald and Russell families are related, the Vladich family has no connection with any other family in this study. However, the role played by cousins in the Vladich family did arise in the interviews.

Maria, the Vladich family mother, shaped her children's options as regards to controlling the children's social media access relatively strictly. Only the oldest child Leah [16] had been allowed to have Facebook on her 16th birthday. The two oldest girls were, however, allowed to have Snapchat. But Maria felt that her stringent control was slipping. When asked if she'd had a strong influence she replied: "Yes. But as they're getting older that's sort of leaving the parent. What we would like them to do doesn't necessarily—I'm sure they could go on things that I would prefer they're not looking at". Leah [16], the oldest sister, concurred with her mother when asked about who influenced her internet use, referring to family rules, in this case constraints: "There might be a mix of Mum and Dad on what we have always been allowed to [do], only use the Internet for this much time, and what we've been allowed to connect through, because I definitely wasn't allowed to have any kind of social media until I was [15], I don't know, like last year maybe". But Leah identified how that is changing:

I think definitely as you get older it's more your friends because everyone's constantly being 'Oh, have you seen this?', 'Look, I'll show you this', and I think that your friends definitely influence what you do on the Internet and, as you're given more freedom with your Internet usage, your friends tell you stuff, and then with that freedom you kind of make your own [choices]. Yeah, I think your friends definitely influence Internet use as you make your own choices about what you use the Internet for.

Second oldest Vladich child, Anna [13], also discussed her parents and friends as influences in this sense, but differentiated between who provided advice about behaviour online and who introduced her to different parts of the internet: "My family's taught me things that are okay to post and things that aren't okay to post, but my friends are probably the people that sort of got me onto social media. So they're probably the ones that have most influenced me on what I do on the internet."

Though both girls mentioned being connected to cousins via social media, neither saw these cousins as an influence on their internet activity. However the young gamer in the family, Morris age 9, illustrated clearly his interactions with cousins: "Sometimes I play [FIFA 14] with my elder cousins online, just me and them". When asked about the ages of his cousins, Morris said: "I've got one the same age as me [9] that plays sometimes with me […] and I have an older one that's 12, and then there's one that's 15 and one that's like 18 or 19 […] And I've got another one that's 13, I think."

All of the cousins that Morris engages in gaming with are boys, and all of Morris's siblings are girls. He does however recognise that he has also learnt about these games from his sisters. When asked who taught him the most about gaming: "Probably my two oldest cousins and sometimes Leah and Anna for online gaming".

Responding to a question concerning what his parents have helped with or taught him about the internet, Morris once again stressed the part they played in terms of internet safety: "Oh, not that much. It's that they've only taught me not to go on bad stuff so I don't go on all that stuff that I'm allowed to see; just say there was an app that Leah or Anna might download, I just look at the cover of it and if I know it's a bad game and I know it's a game I can't play then I'll delete it off my iPod." When asked directly about who influences him, Morris referred to both support and guidance on appropriate behaviour: "Teaching me about online and how it works probably my friends and cousins have teached me more about how to work online and what not to do and what to do when you play and what's the basics of getting online and setting everything up for you to play and teaching you to play right". However, he did return to what his parents have taught him regarding internet safety by saying: "Just not do stuff that you know that's not right. So anything that's bad, just like bullying and stuff like that, I know that's not alright and the stuff Mum and Dad teach me, they're the ones that say, 'You can't do this and you can't do that', and for me it's 'I agree on that', because the stuff they say I just would never do."

Discussion

Larger families are comparatively unusual in contemporary demographics, with only 5% of Australian families in the 2011 Census (Australian Government 2013) having four or more children. These intensely interconnected social units, however, give some pointers as to the different dynamics in operation. First there is the effect of age. Younger children are more willing to note the influence of others upon their internet use. This may partly reflect the recent nature of that influence, which makes it more memorable, and the relatively less autonomous positioning of younger children, which makes it easier for them to admit that other people have an influence. Notable also in this context is the gender dimension of the influence of Matthew Donald (15) on younger brother Jordan (9) and on Jordan's and Matthew's young cousin Dominic Russell (9). Morris Vladich, also 9 but in an unrelated family, also credits his same-gender cousins and friends as being the people whom he is most likely to play games with online, although he is most likely to say that he's 'learned about' things from his "two oldest cousins" and "sometimes" his older siblings. This implies a nexus of learning from older family members and playing with a network of similar-aged, same-gender gamers.

At the other end of the age group, the eldest children are most likely to construct their internet activities as semi-autonomous. Chrissie Donald (17) was very happy to name herself as the greatest influence on her internet use, followed by her friends. Louise Russell at 16, and slightly younger than cousin Chrissie, was willing to attribute some influence to the school, sharing a vignette about online security within a social network when a stranger infiltrated a range of online friendship circles. Younger sister Kath (15), was able to give examples of Louise's help, but essentially validated her mother's view that friends were her most important influence. This had also been 15-year old Matthew Donald's perception. The eldest

Vladich child, Leah, also identified her friends as being of growing importance as she got older indicating, as Matthew had done, that "you don't want to be left behind and you do stuff like they're doing, and stuff" (Matthew). The implication here, although not explicitly stated, is in line with the perception of Maria Vladich, mother to Leah, who said: "as they're getting older that's sort of leaving the parent. What we would like them to do doesn't necessarily—I'm sure they could go on things that I would prefer they're not looking at". Internet use is constructed by teens as another way in which to 'leave the nest' and form social relationships apart from the family.

The two 'tween' children in age, Lucy Russell (12) and Anna Vladich (13) both talked about the separate influences of parents and friends, rather than siblings. Although, when prompted, all children would generally talk about their parents in terms of their cautionary and moderating influence, this age group was more explicit about differentiating between their parents' role in promoting safety and their friends' role in introducing them to new things, and engaging them online. Neither child talked about the role of siblings. This might be the transitional age group, where siblings' influence online becomes secondary to that of friends.

This last point also underlines the point made in the EU Kids Online research that peers, parents and now also siblings influence children's use in many different ways: from following the fashion or encouragement of peers or the precedent set by a sibling, through being taught how to do things online to guidance and guidelines about how to behave online and what to avoid.

Conclusion

Although it is particularly unwise to generalise findings from larger families, given their comparative rareness in contemporary Australia, it may be that they can provide pointers to further research. Indeed, the EU Kids Online project contributes to the discussion of siblings and mediation of internet activity whilst reporting that, other than this contribution, "there is no literature on the mediating role of other family members, children's siblings and other relatives" (Farrugia & Haddon 2014, p.137). In their study of family influence on consumer choices, Cotte and Wood (2004) have also suggested "consumer socialization research would benefit from further study of factors that moderate sibling influence" (p.84). This highlights the potential of further research in this area.

A possible hypothesis emerging from the case study reported here is that younger children with older siblings attribute their internet skills to lessons learned from their brothers and sisters, with parents' contribution being mainly around strategies to be safe online. As they get older, approaching early teen years, so the focus moves outside the family to the friendship circle, while the role of teaching safety is more shared by parents and school. In the mid-teens, the friendship circle strengthens further, and parents become generally sanguine about the fact that their older children are acting semi-autonomously and may be accessing material of which they know the parents disapprove. By the time they are nearing adulthood, young people may become increasingly unwilling to see their internet activity choices as representing anything other than their own interests and preferences. At the same

time these older children are in a position to, and are sometimes expected to, guide the internet activities of younger siblings and extended family members in their circle.

In terms of the 'parents and peers' dynamic, the parents' role is one of cautioning, while the peers' role is one of inclusion, building a social connection away from the family of origin. Sibling influence has been shown in this research to function in diverse ways, sometimes being more like the influence of friends, sometimes, as in safety advice, more like the influence of parents. This latter aspect may partly reflect a dynamic in families whereby parents expect older children to act as surrogate parents, or the older children adopt this role themselves. The siblings' role therefore might be construed as intimate peers and instructors, helping to form tastes and passing on skills and competencies. Setting a precedent within the family is the aspect of influence unique to older siblings, and different from the other roles of parents or peers. To put this in context, the diversity of sibling influences may reflect the more general ways in which siblings play a role beyond the internet. Nevertheless, this research underlines how siblings should not be neglected in the repertoire of social actors to whom children turn to in their acquisition of internet skills. What is clear is that children seek out and use a repertoire of social actors to play a changing series of roles as they move from neophyte internet users through to autonomous agents.

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