

Transcendent Parenting in Digitally Connected Families

When the Technological Meets the Social

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Abstract

In the digitally connected household lives the transcendent parent. Mobile media and cloud computing enable always-on, always-available information and communication services, shaping the communication practices and media consumption habits of parents and children. For the transcendent parent, these digital ties enable and shape how they communicate with their children, and how they guide their children's media use. In this chapter, I discuss the practice of "transcendent parenting", its manifestations at various development stages of the children, and its implications for emerging parenting obligations.

Keywords: transcendent parenting, parental mediation, mobile media, timeless time, family communication

Introduction

All the way from birth to the first day at kindergarten, the first overnight camp, and school concert, to graduation from university and the first day at work, parents are marking their children's milestones with and through media. Photographs of perfect moments, frozen in time, are widely shared with friends and family, belying much of the frenetic activity that would have surrounded many of these significant events. Behind the scenes of digitally connected families are busy lifestyles lubricated by micro-coordination, with smartphones enabling parents and children to manage packed schedules, and a slew of media devices offering content that informs and entertains. The digitally connected family inhabits an environment that is powered and enveloped by always on and always-on-hand mobile media.

Indeed, in many urban societies, information and communication services enabled by mobile media and cloud computing are increasingly pervasive. Percolating through all strata of society, these services shape the communication practices and media consumption habits of families, influencing how parents guide their children's media use, and how parents and children connect with one another. From this highly mediated climate has emerged the transcendent parent. In this chapter, I discuss how the practice of "transcendent parenting" is occurring in an environment where ubiquitous media pervades everyday life, wherein parents must transcend every media consumption environment their children enter, their children's offline and online social interaction milieu and "timeless time" as experienced in the apparent ceaselessness of parenting duties. I will first outline the media environments of young people from childhood and adolescence through to emerging adulthood, before discussing the implications of their media use at each stage of young people's development.

Growing up in a digitally connected family

The digitally connected family, virtually a mainstay in Western urban societies and strongly emerging in urban areas of the Global South with rising internet access (Global Kids Online, 2016), is deeply and richly connected by multiple media and communication platforms. It is not uncommon for such families to acquire and own the full complement of media devices, including shared items such as televisions and desktop computers, and individually used items such as video game machines, music players, tablet computers, and smartphones. In these media-rich households, media use is both the primary activity of children at various junctures throughout the day, and a secondary activity that occupies little pockets of time. Media multi-tasking is increasingly practised by young people, both within and across devices, including both traditional and digital media. They can listen to streaming music when conversing with friends via social media, while also playing a game on their laptops simultaneously. Or they could be watching a Youtube video while sending a Snapchat message to their friends via their smartphones. Indeed, a study by Singapore's Media Development Authority (2015) on the media use of Singaporean children aged 0 to 14 found that their top paired multitasking activities were watching TV and using mobile devices, using computers and using mobile devices, using mobile devices and listening to music, watching TV and using computers, using mobile devices and reading newspapers or magazines. In other surveys in Asia, 57 per cent of the respondents in China (Statista, 2016a), 52 per cent in Japan (Statista, 2016b), 66 per cent in Taiwan (Statista, 2016c) and 63 per cent in Vietnam (Statista, 2016d) reported that they went online via other devices like computers, smartphones and tablets while they watched TV. Parent-child communication in digitally connected families can also manifest such characteristics where complementing their face-to-face communication, parents can be connected to their children via multiple communication platforms, such as messaging apps, social media, email, and

voice or video calls. The range and extent of parent-child mediated communication will naturally differ by age as children become more independent and have growing access to, and competency with, personal media devices. The transcendent parent is one who must harness these multiple modes of communication to keep watch over and keep in touch with their children wherever they may be.

From kindergarten to elementary school

Even in the pre-school years, when most children are yet to carry around personal media devices, they can be digitally connected to their parents through proxies. When left in childcare or kindergarten or with appointed caregivers, these children are connected to their parents in various ways. For preschools and nannies, parents are no more than a phone call or text message away, with some parents in China, Hong Kong and Singapore even installing webcams or CCTVs in the home to keep an eye on appointed caregivers (Chan, 2015; Chen, 2017; Hussain, 2016), and preschools in countries such as Malaysia are offering parents live webcam streaming of their classroom activities too (Chung, 2016). Through these different communication channels, parents remain digitally connected to their young children even while physically apart from them.

Within the home, parents play a critical role in curating the domestic media environment. With the growing proliferation of household media technology, parents must manage more devices and consequently, more content as well (Jennings, 2017). Indeed, there is much that parents must do to ensure that their children's media consumption is optimised to reap the greatest benefits and minimise risks. With family context being the child's first and primary environment for consuming media (Harrison, 2015), parents must make considered decisions on purchasing media products, devices and services, helping their children to explore media environments safely, and supervising their media consumption in light of typical household routines.

For pre-schoolers, watching television and playing video games at home is typical, and watching videos or playing games on mobile devices while outdoors is increasingly common as well. Their parents must thus ensure that they cultivate a healthy media environment for their children and purchase age-appropriate devices, download suitable apps, games and videos, and perhaps install parental control filters to regulate harmful or unsavoury content. The mind-boggling plethora of media content targeted at children today necessitates that parents undertake investigative parenting (Jiow et al., 2017) that involves researching into the different types and forms of media content that they deem ideal for their children's developmental stage to identify positive and potential adverse effects. Investigative parenting would include consulting teachers, paediatricians and other parents, reading parenting blogs and media content reviews, perusing public education materials from relevant organisations, assessing product information claims and so on. The parent thus has much to do if desiring to consciously create a healthy media diet for their pre-school aged child. They may also engage in active co-viewing

or co-use where they guide their children on their media consumption, in the hopes that they will learn to make wise choices.

As children enter elementary school, they become more independent. Increasingly, elementary school aged children carry their own mobile phones, often purchased by parents for the purposes of micro-coordination and safety concerns. Equipped with their own devices, these children may use their mobile phones to engage in shared media use with their peers such as watching a video on a phone or playing tablet games together. Even though such shared media use is likely to be innocuous, exposure to age-inappropriate content may occur. Parents thus have to be proactive and inculcate in their children skills of discernment and establish a relationship of trust so that their children will turn to them if they encounter media content that is disturbing or confusing.

Apart from having to keep a watchful eye over their children's media consumption, mobile media has also heralded new parenting obligations in the child's younger years. Schools may be directly connected to parents via apps that enable parents to monitor their children's academic progress, in-class performance, homework, personal development milestones, and even the foods they purchase in the cafeteria. Social media platforms such as Whatsapp and Facebook present yet another parenting obligation in the form of parent chat groups for their children's classes to discuss school-related matters (Philomin, 2015). These can range from daily minutiae such as the forms children must submit and the sharing of homework tips, to weightier issues such as discussing the quality of teachers and the school's academic programs. While these digital connections may seem at first brush helpful for parents to be more involved in their children's school lives, it begs the question of whether parents can become *too* involved. Such trends have also raised questions of whether children may become more dependent on their parents for tasks which they should perform on their own.

The tween years

As children enter their tween years, around the ages of 8 to 12, they attain greater autonomy and their media use patterns become more complex because a growing proportion of them will be given their own devices to manage. They will also be avid social media users, directly connected to their peers over multiple platforms, but also to their family. Face-to-face socialising with peers will take place alongside mediated interactions via platforms such as Whatsapp, Instagram and Snapchat.

With greater independence to explore the online world on their own, parents will likely take a backseat and offer advice or support at critical junctures, but cease engaging in close supervision of their children's media use. Parents will typically introduce guidelines and rules for their children to abide by, including possibly creating contracts on their device use with terms that they want their children to honour (Hoffman, 2012).

Parents need to therefore see their role as supporting their children as they navigate their mediated and mediatised environment, as social actors, media consumers, and

content creators. Parents who wish to mediate their children's online social experiences have to consider the different online spaces their children could potentially explore and the varied opportunities for sociality that such spaces enable or facilitate. Such mediated interactions with peers can be enjoyable but do require emotional maturity on the part of the child to cope with any awkward or difficult communication situations that may occur. For instance, an argument that escalates within a group chat may fracture friendships and create unwelcome tensions, possibly precipitating into online indiscretions and cyberbullying, with potential ramifications for offline, face-to-face interactions as well. Interactions with unknown online acquaintances are dicier too, as some can be with people of a sharply distinct sociocultural makeup, with behaviour, values, and worldviews that may not be consonant with their own.

Hence, parents have their work cut out for them when it comes to preparing their children for different online opportunities and their attendant gains and risks. Parents must actively instil values in their children and inculcate skills of discernment. Yet providing such guidance will not come easily or naturally to parents, many of whom will have to invest time and effort to familiarize themselves with the complex media environment, and the ever-growing plethora of communication platforms each with their own affordances and challenges. Parents will have to engage in discursive mediation (Jiow et al., 2017) to explain and discuss with their children the benefits and risks of different kinds of media content and forms of mediated interaction, while also rationalizing for them the rules and regulations they may impose on their media use.

Teenhood to delayed launching

As children enter their teen years, they will likely seek and be granted greater independence and autonomy from their parents. Parents are likely to continue instilling values in their children and reinforcing those already inculcated in their earlier years. The parent-child relationship will also evolve from a superior-subordinate nature towards more of a buddy or peer dynamic. However, parents will still have to continue to offer guidance and support for the child's mobile media use, possibly with issues of managing excessive use and moderating the child's attachment to mobile media devices so that their overall well-being and relationships with significant others are not compromised (Kwon et al., 2013).

With entry into emerging adulthood, young people will enjoy an unprecedented degree of personal independence. Those who are bound for university education will live on their own for the first time and be responsible for their duties, needs, and daily routines. And yet, even as they are living away from home, young people are avidly keeping in contact with their parents via daily exchanges of text messages, voice and video calls, and social media connections (see for example Gentzler et al., 2011). Indeed, there is growing evidence for the phenomenon of delayed launching where young people increasingly delay the responsibilities of adulthood and remain "under the care"

of their parents (Kins & Beyers, 2010). My recent research on Vietnamese university students in Singapore shows that even when the students hail from semi-rural areas where household internet connectivity is not a given, they set up internet-enabled mobile phone subscriptions for their parents back home so as to ensure a constant line of contact with their parents (Pham & Lim, 2015). Members of these transnational families then communicate frequently using affordable and visually rich messaging platforms such as Skype or LINE that facilitate voice and text communication. Despite being separated by a great distance, the parents continue to check on the safety and whereabouts of their children, either by contacting them directly, or by viewing their social media updates, and in some instances, even contacting their children's friends.

Parenting in a digitally connected family

In the digitally connected family therefore, mobile media and cloud computing have broadened both the scale and scope of parenting obligations, heralding the practice of transcendent parenting. In the mobile-infused climate that characterises many urban societies today, parents and children are connected in multiple ways, thus introducing new parenting obligations. To fulfil these obligations, parents must increasingly engage in transcendent parenting which is manifested in three key ways.

Enveloped by media

As digitally connected families are practically enveloped by media, parents must make efforts to create a home environment in which their children can safely and productively consume media. However, with the advent of mobile media that streams online content directly into children's personal devices, parents will find the ability to manage or supervise their children's media use more challenging given the diversity of content and intensity of use (Jiow & Lim, 2012). Beyond the home too, the parent has diminishing control because the child can engage in independent media use or shared media experiences with friends. How do parents then ensure that they are the omni-present voices of authority to guide their children towards all that is edifying and beneficial in media, and to steer them away from that which is risky and harmful? Parents may employ technological mechanisms such as installing filters and monitoring software that tracks their children's online history. However, such measures do not accord privacy to the child and can erode trust between parents and children. Ultimately, besides using such blunt regulatory tools, parents have to inculcate in their children enduring values and powers of discernment that can buttress children when they encounter media experiences that leave them troubled or confused. Transcending the complex and diverse multi-media environments that children can transit through is thus a constant challenge that the transcendent parent must negotiate.

Keeping watch online and offline

As children's interactions with their peer's flit seamlessly between offline spaces and online environments, the transcendent parent must also do likewise. Parents must seek to understand the climate of sociality their children inhabit, as well as to grasp the roles that media devices and content play in their peer interactions. Social interaction in online channels have their own language, logics, rhythms, and norms that children may adopt and practice, but without a full appreciation of their implications and consequences. As well, complications arising from online disinhibition such as identity multiplicity and experimentation, deceit and abuse may present themselves (Suler, 2004), even as virtual interactions can be rewarding and enlightening. These wider possibilities thus raise issues that necessitate parental guidance and support. The transcendent parent has to thus build an open, trusting relationship with their children and exert a firm yet benevolent presence so that their children know that they can approach them when they face unexpected media encounters that upset or confuse. To perform this task effectively, parents must first develop an awareness of the communication affordances of mobile media and understand their children's level of emotional maturity to cope in the face of difficulty.

Always-on parenting

In the digitally-connected household, the pace of life seems to approximate the situation of "timeless time" (Castells, 1996), or when phenomena lose their chronological rhythm and are instead arranged in new time sequences based on the social context and purposes due to technological advancements within the networked society. The time for communication becomes "timeless" as it can now be compressed through split-second and expedient technologically mediated connectivity, while individuals' states of staying connected and being disconnected become increasingly blurred. The transcendent parent seems to be particularly vulnerable to "timeless time" in the face of relentless digital connectivity enabled by mobile devices. Parenting duties now no longer just exist when the parent and the child are together. It continues to persist regardless of schedules and spaces and disrupt the parent's other commitments in daily life. For instance, even when children are under the charge of appointed caregivers, the mobile-connected parent seems to be on permanent standby for emergency calls or routine communication from their children, and their caregivers. The parent of today is likely to receive distress text messages or voice calls from the school about the child's behaviour, or even email reminders about various school requests when he or she is at work. And after the children have been put to bed every evening, parents go online to deal with their own correspondence, but invariably also to manage matters relating to their children such as coordinating an after-school playdate or childcare arrangements. Parenting is now "timeless" and relentless. Indeed, even when the children leave for college, the transcendent parent can continue to play an active role in their children's

lives, enabled and encouraged by efficient and seamless mobile media connections. Transcendent parenting is therefore a state where parenting duties seem perpetual, with little chance for a respite.

Conclusion

In the digitally-connected family, young people are constantly under the oversight of the transcendent parent. Yet the full implications of this trend for children's development is yet to be closely examined. Similarly, the amount of "emotion work" (Hochschild, 1979) – or the act of trying to manage the degree or quality of emotional exchange in accordance with socially shared rules – the transcendent parent must engage in is growing and needs to be closely monitored. Specifically, future research can delve into the following issues: how do parents of different socio-economic profiles cope with the demands of transcendent parenting? Do higher socio-economic status (SES) parents have more intellectual and financial wherewithal to adopt tools and strategies that can help ease the transcendent parenting burden? Or are they conversely more pressured by the overwhelming amount of knowledge about the normative standards they must strive to meet as "responsible" parents? How do lower SES parents guide their children's mobile media use given their time and resource constraints? Which aspects of their children's mobile-facilitated, peer-to-peer interaction do parents find hardest to manage? Which genres of media content do parents find difficult to explain to their children? What literacies must parents possess to understand the implications of cloud computing, so as to effectively mediate their children's mobile media use?

These questions need to be tackled through a combination of methodological adaptation and theoretical innovation. We need to develop research protocols that can accommodate the mobile multi-screen, multi-app, multi-media, and multi-modal environment that envelopes families today. Crucially, we should also refine current parental mediation frameworks that originated in a much less complex era, when active, restrictive, and co-viewing/co-playing strategies sufficed. Current research on media use in the domestic realm tends to be somewhat dichotomous, concentrating either on the media content consumed, or on the media consumption context separately, without necessarily linking the two despite the importance of doing so (Lim, 2015). Now that families are virtually enveloped by media, it is critical that research accurately charts how content and contexts interact, delving into the typical settings in which children consume different kinds of media content, on which devices and in whose presence they do so, and the online and offline interactions surrounding such media use. Importantly, these research findings should be shared in a timely and effective manner so that policymakers, educators, and media producers can work in tandem to forge a media environment that enhances the well-being of digitally-connected families.

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