

Family photography in a networked age

Anti-sharenting as a reaction to risk assessment and behaviour adaption

Ulla Autenrieth

Abstract

Parents sharing happy family moments on their Facebook or Instagram profiles, and thus publish private scenes of their children's lives to an extended personal networked public (so called *sharenting*) have been a huge issue in recent times. The chapter presents findings of a national funded research project at the University of Basel with the title *Picturing Family in the Social Web*. Central aspects of the chapter are: What kind of risks do parents see when sharing pictures of their children in online environments? How do they deal with those risks and arousing ambivalences? In what ways are social norms affected and adapted in parental peer groups? And what kind of new photo practices do emerge as a consequence? Furthermore, a family online photo guide will be introduced, which supports families in discussing these issues.

Keywords: sharenting, family photography, social media, mediatization, media literacy

Introduction

Recent times have witnessed mounting discussion in English and German media about infant photos on social media platforms. When parents share happy family moments on their Facebook or Instagram profiles, they publish private scenes of their children's lives on an extended personal networked public. This actually private media practice faces considerable public criticism. Such criticism is reflected in the term "sharenting", which is mostly used to denote a negative perspective on parents' (semi-)public image-sharing practices (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017). This criticism notwithstanding, the sharing of family photographs remains a common and widespread activity among new parents, especially new mothers (Ammari et al., 2015).

With the term “networked family”, Rainie and Wellman (2012) describe the framework conditions of current family life. Furthermore, families themselves form networks and are nodes within wider networks of institutions such as schools, workplaces and peer groups. Online technologies are omnipresent; the domestication of digital media is almost complete. Many families live in a condition of high mobility regarding places and means of communication (especially through mobile phones). As a consequence, there is an ongoing mediatization of childhood and family life (Krotz, 2009). This growing mediatization is accompanied by an increasing visualization of social relationships, so that there is an annual rise in the numbers of photographs shared online.

In recent years the generation formerly known as the first “digital natives” have become parents themselves. When these natives were young, they entered online-spheres mostly out of their own will, sometimes even without the consent of their own parents. First on social media platforms like Myspace and Friendster (Boyd, 2006), and later Facebook, they connected with their peers and experimented with their adolescent identities (Autenrieth, 2014a). Retrospectively, they can be considered the last generation of internet users who entered the online sphere on their own terms. Nowadays it is these parents who start sharing information and often photos of their babies and little children online and so create their “online biography” (Autenrieth, 2014b).

Unlike the negative public image of sharenting implies, this chapter will show that many parents are actually acutely aware of the potential risks associated with posting images of children. Aware as they are, they are challenged by the difficult issues this raises. This chapter will address the following questions: What kind of risks do parents see? How do they deal with those risks and arising ambivalences? In which way are social norms affected and adapted in parental peer groups? And what kind of new photo practices emerge as a consequence? To conclude, a guide for sharing family-photos in networked environments is introduced.

The chapter presents findings of a study at the Seminar for Media Studies at the University of Basel titled *Picturing Family in the Social Web. A Comparative Analysis of the Growing Image-Based Presentation of Familial Occasions in Participative Online Contexts using the Example of the Parenthood of the So-Called “Digital Natives”*, funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation. Qualitative interviews and ethnographic online observations covered 52 parents of young children. Most of them post photos of their children on social media platforms. This chapter is not about social media celebrities or determined parenting bloggers (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017). The families which were interviewed and observed can be considered “average” social media users. The interviews were transcribed and subsequently coded and analysed with MAXQDA according to the principles of grounded theory. The interviews were conducted in (Swiss) German and translated into English. Furthermore, a corpus was created with (interviewed and not interviewed) project participants’ pictures. For this we established a research profile on Facebook and asked the participants to friend it. This happened before the interviews were conducted. Their pictures were categorized and the five-part typology of anti-sharenting practices introduced in section four below

was created (Kelle & Kluge, 2010). All participants consented to the anonymized use of their statements and images for research purposes. Following the investigation, the Facebook friendships were deleted.

Changes in modes of photographic production and distribution

In recent years, through the rise of networked media, there have been dramatic changes in the usage of what can be considered private (family) photographs. Rose (2010: 16) describes family “photographs as objects embedded in practices”. While they are still objects heavily tied to social interactions, current practices differ from those of pre-digital times. In the analogue age, production costs and effort limited the number of pictures. In comparison, the quantity of photos taken and distributed today has risen dramatically. On online platforms like Flickr, Facebook and Instagram, hundreds of millions of photos are posted every day. With high-quality cameras in most mobile phones, the tool to take pictures is always within reach. As a consequence, new parents in particular tend to visually document the lives of their new-born babies and share those pictures via various social networks. This raises mounting challenges for the storage of pictures. Various devices – for example mobile phones, digital photo cameras and tablets – of different family members need to be coordinated. Furthermore, archiving strategies need to be established. As our research shows, many families struggle with these photo-managing activities and postpone them to an unknown future.

When I put all the pictures together, I don't know how many thousands there are. I'd like to sort them [...] and then just split them up – every kid, that everyone has a folder, and that later they have better access to the pictures. (Lia, age 33)

Often, over the years thousands of photos are produced and collected in different places, most of them unsorted and unsystematized. Here a change in the communicative significance of photos can be observed. Many of them are produced (and edited) for an instant of connection and communication in a specific context, rather than to be archived and passed down over generations. This ephemeral use contrasts with the potential eternity they might have in networked spheres.

Widespread fears of posting pictures online and how parents cope with them

What users of personal sharing platforms see in their profiles and what other users see about them is often driven by algorithms that are hard to grasp. On Facebook, for example, the personal network of contacts needs to be understood as a “potential audience”. Members do not know who is watching unless there is some reaction, for example in the form of likes and comments. For many users this uncertainty creates a feeling of

lack of control. We sought to answer the questions: What are parents' central fears about publishing content of their children – especially photos – in online environments? And how do they deal with those risks?

Parents' main fears

Three fears emerged from the interviews. The most frequently mentioned risk was “stranger danger”. Many parents feared that strangers, mostly described as male, could access the pictures and misuse them.

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Well, I mean, there are enough paedophiles and other sick people where you have to seriously think about [...]. It's so ambivalent, right? Especially with the children, I pay great attention to what photos I post online. [...] Because just someone has to press the “like button” and then the photo does its rounds. (Stefanie, age 30)

Another often mentioned fear was the potential commercial misuse of one's photos. Parents imagined how the platforms, especially Facebook, could use their images for advertisements. Analogously the concern was regularly mentioned that companies could use pictures to sell their products.

I really see the problem with Facebook, now that they're on the stock market, where you somehow think, Are you going to take my photo now, even though you're not allowed?, or something like that, which makes me skeptical. (Katrin, age 22)

A third major concern was the biographical footprint parents construct of their children. Parents have started to realize the importance of not creating any digital burden by posting embarrassing content about their children, such as that found under pseudo-ironic Instagram hashtags like #assholeparents. These sites show children in distressing situations with purportedly funny captions. Parents showed some awareness that they need to consider the reactions of their children, once they are old enough to know about the photos their parents shared of them.

Also, I read that I should always have the kids' permission and that there's a risk that they'll be laughed at for the photos at some point. So I'm trying to not upload any stupid videos or the like, which could be embarrassing for the children at some point. But as parents, that's hard to gauge. As parents, you will not find things embarrassing, which the children or others may find embarrassing later, in a few years. (Miriam, age 29)

As previous research has shown, teenagers and even younger children are increasingly critical of their parents' sharing behaviour (Autenrieth, Bizzarri & Lützel, 2017; Moser, Chen & Schoenebeck, 2017).

Contrary to the widespread negative media coverage about sharenting, these worries showed that most of the parents interviewed did not post pictures of their children light-heartedly. This raises the question: What kind of action do parents take to deal with their ambivalent feelings?

How do parents deal with the perceived risks? (individual responses)

Facebook, Instagram, and other social network providers continuously emphasize how much they care about the security options they offer and the personal control that members exercise over their own data. However, hardly any of our interviewees trusted these options.

I have adjusted the basic settings a bit. But I do not think it makes a difference. If you want the pictures, you can get the pictures, no matter how I set it. Facebook has all the pictures, can do with the pictures what they want. So we have no control over Facebook, we're only deluding ourselves with the security options we seem to have. (Robert, age 26)

Many of the parents presented an almost fatalistic perspective on the possibilities that providers offer to secure their profiles. As a consequence, they do not actually rely on the offered privacy settings. Instead, they adapt to potential risks in alternative ways: Individually by reducing content and audiences, and collectively through adapting norms and practices.

Reduction of content

The first, and maybe most obvious response, is to reduce the number of new postings. This is especially motivated by the fact that many users mistrust providers' delete options and seem to be quite aware of the potential consequences of sharing a picture even once.

It's just so that you cannot delete it properly. So I think you have to be aware in advance. So either you put it online in the knowledge that it stays there somehow, even if you press delete. Either you do it then or not. That's why I make sure that there really are only a few photos. (Julia, age 28)

In reaction to their concerns, many parents limit their photo sharing habits to the most important occasions, like birth announcements and significant milestones in the lives of their children.

Yes, when the dwarf was born, we had such a small photo shoot [...]. Otherwise, I have no pictures of the dwarf or myself on Facebook. Except for two, yes only two pictures. One reason is that I think my daughter is still so small and so young that she does not have to be on Facebook or does not have to have so many pictures on Facebook. And those are just the two, the one just after birth. Just to inform

every one of my colleagues. And the other, the photo shoot, to show, ok, she is already so and so far developed. (Andreas, age 30)

Since some parents were contemplating reducing their posting habits, they started using alternative ways of sharing private photos.

So I thought I would like to reduce a bit on Facebook because that's just too big a community [...] For example, this picture of us which I think is very cute. Actually, that's not for everyone, it's actually a very private picture of us, all together in bed. And then I thought I just always feel a bit uncomfortable when I put it online. Then I think about who can see it and also because you can copy and pass things on. That's why I think about just sending more to people's OneDrive albums [...] (Miriam, age 29)

Reducing postings is not limited to quantitative considerations. Sometimes it is not so much the number of photos shared, but the topics and poses that disconcert parents. Accordingly, they may limit the displayed photographs both in number and content.

I think there'd be such embarrassing things for my children [...] which I don't post online. There'd be quite funny photos, but I don't want them to be confronted with them some time again, in a situation that I can't control then. (Sonja, age 29)

As the quote demonstrates, it is not that all parents pursue likes, no matter the consequences for their children. Most parents feel quite sensitive about not sharing potentially disrespectful and harmful content about their children. Nevertheless, differences remain regarding what is considered questionable content.

Reduction of audience

Another frequently mentioned adaption is the adjustment of one's own profile contacts. This goes beyond the kind of obvious 'don't accept friend requests from people you don't know'. Many parents reported a change in their mind-set. While they previously used to accept nearly every friend request from acquaintances, they now try to reduce the potential audience through deleting friends and rejecting friend requests.

It's important to just make it clear to everyone, hey people, it's really dangerous, don't accept a friend request from anyone you don't really know! And maybe that's why I reduced my contacts [...] So now, for about one year, I stopped adding everyone to my Facebook. Even many people I went to school with like 20 years ago, I then reject. I used to accept their contact requests but then kicked them out again later. (Katrin, age 22)

Interestingly, the reduction of contacts is often considered easier than establishing specific rights of access, such as audience groups on Facebook.

No, I tried it [introducing group access rights], I can't do it. I don't know how to do it, but I saw that you can do it. I think it'd be good. It'd also be good, because then maybe the risk is smaller. (Diana, age 29)

Evidently, parents did not only lack trust in social network sites' security and privacy settings; they also lacked technological skills that might assuage their fears.

Adaption of norms and practices (collective responses)

The usage of photographs in online-environments becomes increasingly complicated when more than one family is involved. Since children and parents frequently encounter other families in comparatively private (e.g., birthday parties and playdates) or comparatively private (e.g., playgroups and school events) events, they have to deal with each other's photo-sharing preferences. While parents may love to visually document their family life, taking photos of solely one's own child is neither always possible nor desired. Thus, there is a deep need to discuss photo-sharing practices and negotiate new norms amongst parental peer groups.

This has also happened before, that a mother has said that you cannot show the friend of the child on photos. I don't take pictures of other kids. Never, as long as I don't know if I'm allowed to. I'll not do that. Because I don't want that myself, that someone just takes pictures of my children. I also have a friend who posted a photo of them [the children] online. So I said that I don't really want that right now. Because I want to know who I'm giving permission to for the photos and I don't know his friends. (Doris, age 34)

In order to respect other families' privacy rights and to avoid inter-familial conflicts, parents reported on the need to establish new norms and practices of photo-sharing. The strategies of adapting to the new challenges of networked environments varied among parental peer groups. The obviously most categorical and consistent option was to not allow any online photo sharing at all.

I told everyone I don't want the pictures I send you to end up on Facebook, Instagram, Whatsapp, etc. I want you to keep them safe, and I really don't want to see these pictures anywhere on a social network. That should be really private. (Anja, age 45)

Other parents took a less categorical stance: While they rejected the distribution of photos on social network sites, they accepted private or group messaging-apps.

Family photos, this is private and that should also be private, there must not someone, I was at some point friends with, but have not had any close contact for years, see things like that. There then is Whatsapp to forward. (Andreas, age 30)

Another frequently discussed option is the consensual online sharing of photos. These parents were not categorically against posting pictures of their children online but

expected their peers to request permission to do so. Often this practice was related to a specific aesthetic of the picture. For example, some parents were comfortable with sharing photos of their children online, as long as they did not depict a critical situation (birthday parties were reported to be acceptable), and the faces of their children were not fully visible (as in picture 1).

Picture 1. Photo-sharing practices in parental peer groups



The hub giving instructions for the next treasure hunt

Emerging photo practices: How do parents show their children in online environments against the backdrop of their concerns?

In the history of photography, a main aim seemed to be to attain visual presence and to show one's face. Especially where pictures served as documentary artifacts of family history for future generations, it seemed essential that the face of the person(s) in focus could be clearly seen. The shift to networked photography has, however, introduced a change in this photographic practice. Dealing with the tension between their wish to post photos of their children online while creating as few visual traces as possible, parents have been developing new photo practices that allow them to show their children while maintaining some anonymity. In the tradition of the "anti-selfie" (Tifentale & Manovich, 2018), this can be described as anti-sharenting pictures. This practice reduces the focus on the child and emphasizes the photographic and spatial contexts of the images. We identified five types of pictures with specific practices of (un-)showing.

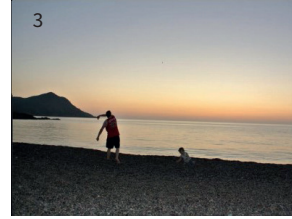
1. *The disguised child (picture 2)*

The disguised children (see picture 2) already wear some kind of mask while they are being photographed. This includes sunglasses, caps and costumes which already cover their faces, especially their eyes, without any further photo-processing.



2. *The faraway child (picture 3)*

In this type of photo, the children are photographed from a distance that makes their facial expressions unrecognizable (see picture 3). With this photographic practice in particular, the emphasis of the pictorial expression lays on the context rather than the child.



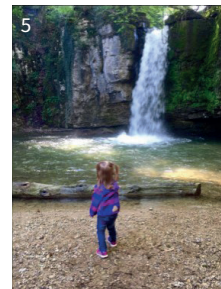
3. *The parted child (picture 4)*

Many parents tend to show pictures of their children which depict only fractions of their bodies and faces. The focus here is reduced to those parts of the body considered necessary for telling a specific story, like the hands holding the grasshopper in picture 4. While maintaining the anonymity of the child, elementary aspects required to report a situation or a specific story can nevertheless be shown.



4. *The child from behind (picture 5)*

Photographing children from behind is a common anti-sharenting strategy to ensure they remain unrecognizable for unfamiliar viewers. This way of photographing often, for example, shows the child in a wider spatial context that gives some insights into family activities (see picture 5).



5. *The digitally processed child (picture 6)*

In contrast to type 1), in these pictures children's faces are covered post-production. Sometimes visible faces are just blotted out (as in picture 1), sometimes digital stickers or emoji are used to "replace" facial expressions (see picture 6). Social networks like Facebook offer convenient in-app opportunities for users to do so.



The need for a photo-sharing guide for families

While communicating in networked environments has become a common routine for most parents, the sharing of photos remains difficult and contested terrain. On the one hand, parents' wish to share moments of this part of their lives seems comprehensible; on the other hand, children's privacy rights also need to be respected. Even if they are sensitised to the topic, many parents felt insecure and sometimes regretted their earlier sharing practices.

Yes, I'm afraid that the pictures appear where I don't want to see them. That they are somehow used for advertising, or I don't know what. And then I'm standing there and have no right to complain [...]. But these are things that only became clear to me afterwards. So you should first inform yourself about the risks, and worry. And I thought about it all in hindsight, but now I've already posted the pictures. And even if I delete them now, they're still stored. (Magdalena, age 25)

Within parental peer groups, the rules are often very implicit and context bound. This leads to further potential conflicts. Another problem is intra-familial differences: For example, when parents and grandparents have divergent opinions on posting pictures online; or when separated parents have difficulty communicating about their expectations.

It's a contentious issue for me and my daughter's father. He also takes pictures of her and sometimes careless, at least careless in my eyes, so that it comes to arguments between us. The question is always: What kind of photos are ok to put on your profile. For example, I don't want him to share a picture of her sitting in the bathtub. (Tina, age 32)

We identified the need to create some guidelines for families to deal with these insecurities and to explicate some of the implicit norms. We developed two instruments to support parents and families to make conscious decisions about their sharing practices. The first is a family photo guide with some general information on the topic (see picture 7).

The second is a decision-aid flyer based on ten basic questions (see picture 8). Photos should only be considered for sharing if each question can be answered positively. All materials can be downloaded free at www.netzbilder.net/infomaterial.

Conclusion

As the enormous numbers of shared pictures demonstrate, visualization is a growing phenomenon in communication. In addition to the specific characteristics of pictures, mostly photos, the resulting digital visual communication has consequences for intra- and extra-familial relations. Within intra- and inter-family networks, new norms and rules of sharing need to be discussed: Decisions need to be made about what is appropriate to whom, and about who has the right to decide what to share. Through the sharing of family photographs with a wide extra-familial audience, the private has

Picture 7. Family photo-sharing guide for networked environments²



Picture 8. Decision-aid – sharing or not?³



become public like never before. Major points here are: respecting children's privacy rights, but also teaching parents about responsible media usage.

Notwithstanding extreme and therefore notorious social media phenomena (such as #assholeparents), we found that most parents tend to relatively moderate sharing practices and are quite reflective about what to share and what not. At the same time, many of these parents feel insecure. They are torn between their wish to communicate and share family photos with their friends and the need to protect their children's privacy rights. Consequently, we need a more diversified discourse that goes beyond the blanket demonization of sharenting and that can deal with the growing aesthetic differentiations and practices related to posting pictures of children online.

Notes

1. For a critical discussion of the term "digital native" see Hargittai (2010).
2. The text on the cover reads "Too naked for the internet? – Tips for families on dealing with photos of children in social online networks"
3. The decision wheel lists ten key questions that parents should ask themselves before sharing photos of their children online.

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