The Parent App

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Understanding Families in the Digital Age

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PREFACE | *The Parent App and the Parent Trap*

I t's 2:45 p.m. and I'm late—again. My husband, Jon, already texted me to tell me that he was going to be at a meeting, a subtle reminder that it's my turn to pick up the kids today. I left my office on time, but I'd forgotten to allow for the construction project at the end of Evans Avenue, the main thoroughfare separating my office from the highway. So I've got my iPhone on the seat next to me, at the ready for when I hit the next red light, and I'm already scrolling through the list in my head. Should I call Delia? No, she's working on Thursdays; so is Suelita, and she always works until six. Keiko and Mike are at work, too, and Jodi's got to take her boys to baseball right after school. Laura, my friend who's a dedicated stay-at-home mom, just helped me out two days ago; I'm too embarrassed to have to ask her to bail me out again. Red light: what's the plan? I decide to call Margie, who works at the school's front desk, and ask her to catch my young family members as they exit the school and let them know I'm on my way. But I dread that, too: who knows what the school staff does with the dirt they have on chronically late parents like me? I suddenly find myself wishing, for the very first time, that my ten-year-old had a cell phone. Life would be so easy then, I muse. I could simply call Jonathan and tell him that I will be there ten minutes after school lets out, and ask him to alert his younger sister so that they can wait for me together. Such a call might have an added benefit, too: maybe I could forestall "the look" (any parent who's ever been late for pickup will know exactly which guilt-inducing look I'm talking about).

I quickly dismiss the idea of getting him a cell phone. I couldn't do that, because then eight-year-old Allison would be more convinced than ever

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that Jonathan was the favorite—unless I bought one for her, too. Which she'd no doubt lose within a week, since she'd really have no use for it. And anyway, their school doesn't allow them to bring mobiles into the classroom, so even if they both had one, there'd be no guarantee either one of them would remember to pick it up from the office and turn it on to check for a message from Mom. And then I had the strangest realization of all: the real reason that I didn't want to get them cell phones was that I felt unprepared for it. I didn't know enough about what getting them mobiles would *mean*: for them, for me, for our family. What would having a cell phone lead to? Is it sort of like the adult drug abuser's slide from beer to hard liquor to heroin, so that the next thing I know they're twelve-year-olds with a CrackBerry habit?

Especially strange was the thought that occurred to me in the next moment: how could I not know what having a mobile phone would mean? I've had a cell phone for more than a decade. What's more, I've been studying family uses of mobiles, the Internet, television, and a host of other media for the better part of fifteen years. I can rattle off statistics with the best of them: 95 percent of kids have access to the Internet by age eleven; 89 percent of families have multiple mobile phones, and 75 percent of twelve- to seventeen-year-olds have their own phone; the average age at which young people get a cell phone is around nine and a half, and children in single-parent families tend to get cell phones earlier than those who have two parents living in the same household; the average number of texts sent a month by a U.S. teen is well over three thousand.[1] I also know that it's parental concerns for safety, as much as kids' desires, that are fueling the growth of Xbox, PlayStation, Wii gaming, and portable game devices, since parents want kids to be supervised and kids who have fewer resources for or access to supervised outside activities are more likely to spend time inside with mediated entertainment. I know all about the defeat of the Stop Online Piracy Act and the Verizon-AT&T showdown over the iPhone. Like most moms, I'm sometimes unsure of myself, but shouldn't I, of all people, know what to expect?

I realized then that what all parents really need, or wish we had, is some way to discern the most caring, smart, sensitive, and effective responses to the dilemmas that digital and mobile media have introduced into the lives of our families. What we need is a Parent App. Is my thirteen-year-old responsible enough to handle a Facebook page? Check the Parent App. What will happen down the road if I allow my seven-year-old to download games onto my cell phone? Consult the Parent App. The house phone is ringing and ringing, but my twelve-year-old has decided that pounding out

the Harry Potter theme on the piano is what he'd rather be doing right now. Parent App, can you help me out here? How about helping out with dinner, laundry, or after-school pickups while we're at it?

A number of companies have rushed in to address our felt need for apps that will help with parenting. Parents can diagnose children's aches and pains with the Portable Pediatrician mobile app, look to the Dinner Spinner for suppertime plans, or figure out what their teens are saying by checking the Teen Chat Decoder. There's even a app you can use if you put your child in time-out: it will remind you to take her out of it when her time is up. Additionally, parents can consult a number of social network sites for advice on parenting. Almost all of the most frequently trafficked have the word "mom" in the title. With sites such as CafeMom, Mamapedia, and MomsLikeMe, help is only a click away.[2] These apps hold the promise of making life more manageable and productive, especially for women who are expected to balance the demands of work and family and to move seamlessly between them. But does technology really make life easier for us? Is that how technology is changing family life today? Most parents instead are reporting that technology is making life with their children more challenging, not less.[3]

Parents have always had to face challenges. Yet digital and mobile media have put a fine point on the experience of living with preteen and teenage young people who believe they know better than their parents about how best to manage such things. I decided to name this book *The Parent App* when I said the title out loud and realized how much the voices of the young people in this book remind me of the perennially popular film with a similar name: *The Parent Trap*. Hayley Mills and, later, Lindsay Lohan brought to life a humorous fantasy with enduring appeal among generations of elementary, tween, and teenage young people, including me and later my own children. In those films, twins who were separated at birth discover a deep secret about their parents' past that is obvious to everyone who meets them. Then they connive to help their parents recognize and correct the mistake the adults made so long ago. Once the parents have realized that the kids were right, they all live happily ever after. The pink landline phones featured on the cover of the 1961 video version are replaced with mobiles in the 1998 version, but the theme is the same: young people are able to work around and ultimately correct their parents' wrongs because they are smart, they can pull together resources (including those of technology), and, of course, they knew all along what was best for everyone.

Young people thinking they know what's best for everyone: that may sound familiar to parents and to those of us who remember what it was like

to feel that way. In the interviews with mothers and fathers that form the core of this book, this is the way that many parents of teens and preteens characterize the interactions they have with their children about mobile phones, social media sites, gaming platforms, and the Internet. Parents recognize that young people are growing up in a world saturated by digital and mobile media, and we often feel trapped because the context seems so different when compared with our own growing-up experiences. Yet, like the similarities between the 1961 and 1998 films, we also know that some aspects of the growing-up years remain the same. We just need help navigating the new situations.

But this book is not strictly an advice manual for parents. For one thing, digital and mobile media are changing so rapidly that any book could be outdated before it reached publication. Numerous websites and blogs exist that provide excellent advice on how parents can address particular situations they confront, and thus it's possible to find suggestions tailored to the unique challenges of individual families. Some of these resources are highlighted in Appendix B, and specific suggestions for parents are offered in the concluding chapter of this book. But in order to set those suggestions in context, this book explores the meaning behind the changes that we are all experiencing. It asks how families are experiencing and responding to the challenges, both new and old, of parenting young people through the late elementary, preteen, and teen years. Why are parent responding in the ways that they are? And perhaps most important, what will these responses mean for us as family members and as members of society?

In order to investigate these questions, in this book I bring together two different bodies of research. First, as a sociologist who studies media, I consider various theories that are helping to explain both the characteristics of today's new media and the ways in which these characteristics may be changing our individual and social experiences. Second, as a communication scholar interested in families, I look at how families have adopted various strategies for communication between family members, and how these strategies shape the ways in which digital and mobile media technologies fit into our lives as individuals and as families. I also bring to this book my perspective as a married working mother of a teen and preteen, with our family living in a middle-class neighborhood.

When I first realized my own hesitation about getting my son a mobile phone, I wondered where the nervousness was coming from. I wasn't overly worried about the risks that receive the most media attention: sexting, possible exposure to undesirable content, or contact with sexual predators. I just wanted to know whether a mobile would help me in my

quest to be a good parent. Would getting him a phone help me achieve my goal of having positive connections with my son, or would it undermine that goal? I realized then that I didn't want to write this book solely about the risks of new media. I wanted to write about how digital and mobile media fit into this felt wish to be a "good-enough" parent.[4] Of course, my own context and family background shape what it means to me to be a "good-enough" parent. I *might* use a Parent App to help me locate a family-friendly restaurant, but what I could *really* use is a Parent App that would help me recognize risk as I define it, so that I can be the best parent possible in my own context, in relation to my own children, and in what often feel like unfamiliar situations.

In this book, I want to add to the numerous important studies exploring how parenting is changing in the United States, particularly with the rise of overparenting and the "helicopter parent," trends that are much in evidence in my own cultural milieu.[5] Some books, such as Margaret Nelson's *Parenting Out of Control* and Barbara Hofer and Abigail Sullivan Moore's *The iConnected Parent*, have argued that today's technologies make it altogether too easy for "helicopter parents" to spy on their children or remain too connected to let go as the children get older.[6] The temptation to be this kind of parent is surely there, but it's one that many parents in my study actively tried to resist.

I also wanted to consider insights from my field, media studies. It does have an important lens of theory to bring to these issues of how families are experiencing digital and mobile media in their everyday lives and how children and parents struggle together over the when and why of their practices involving media.[7] The field of media studies reminds us to think about communication technologies not as things we merely use but as innovations that evolve in specific contexts in relation to perceived needs and which continue to evolve in relation both to those needs and to practices that specific technologies discourage or make possible.[8] Technologies such as mobile and online communication do not only enable our connections with others and with information. They also add a new layer of meaning to those connections, and in doing this, they change our relationships with each other. New technologies make possible certain ways of being, and how we use technologies then further shapes our options for the future.[9] I wanted to look not only at how parents and their children were using technologies but also at how those uses made sense to them in relation to the rest of their lives.

The media-saturated context of our lives is undergoing change, and this provides an excellent opportunity for us to reexamine some of the

taken-for-granted ways in which we have approached communication and communication technologies within our families. Some of our assumptions may be outdated given this new context; as this book will argue, they may even be having unintended consequences that we are not yet able to see. As Carolyn Marvin suggested in her book *When Old Technologies Were New*, "new practices do not so much flow directly from technologies that inspire them as they are improvised out of old practices that no longer work in new settings."[10] It's in the spirit of this observation that this book turns to how, exactly, families are improvising in the new settings inaugurated by digital and mobile media.

This book argues that two distinct patterns in how families communicate are shaping media use in the digital age, and each of these patterns both is rooted in particular histories and is now evolving in relation to digital and mobile media affordances. Among upper-income families, I observe an *ethic of expressive empowerment*, in which parents want to encourage their children to use these media in relation to education and self-development and to avoid use that might distract them from goals of achievement. Among lower-income families, I observe what I term an *ethic of respectful connectedness*, in which family members want to encourage the use of digital and mobile media in ways that are respectful, compliant toward parents, and family-focused. Certainly upper-income families want their children to be respectful and connected, and lower-income families want their children to grow into expressive and empowered people, and there are many instances in which family members use these media in ways that end up being disrespectful or even disempowering. I use the term "ethic" to signal that there are guiding principles that help parents and young people determine a course of action in relation to communication practices. Even if our efforts fall short, we all act out of the limits of our practical situations and in relation to what we take for granted as the right or good way to do things. But I argue that families live in a cultural milieu that tends to value one approach or the other, and we find ourselves adopting or responding to the patterns that are taken for granted in our particular context. Because there remain distinct gradations of digital inclusion, and because U.S. families experience lives that are increasingly isolated from the lives of those in different economic circumstances, the uses of these media are reinforcing rather than alleviating what is becoming a troubling economic and social gap in U.S. society.[11]

What may be surprising is this: when you consider the stories people from differing economic backgrounds tell about how they incorporate technology into their family lives, those with the greatest access to skills

and resources would find much to envy among the family communication ethics of those who have much less access to skills and resources. And yet the very embrace of a communication ethic of expressive empowerment may be undermining our ability to foster an ethic of respectful connectedness within our families and beyond them. Does this mean that middle- and upper-income families are actually losing something of value as we unconsciously embrace certain approaches to technology in our fast-paced and teleconnected lives? I believe that we are, and this is part of the larger story this book will tell about how technological advances and family communication patterns are working together to reshape the family and the communication environment in which we all live. What I will argue is that in the networked society, focusing on the empowerment of our individual children may be causing us to miss the bigger picture. We need to understand not only what's new about technology and how technology changes our children's environments but also how our traditional ways of communicating with one another in our families may be generating more work for us all, and may need to be rethought in the digital era.

Not all upper-income families engage in the same strategies for setting guidelines regarding digital and mobile media, and not all lower-income families are similar to one another, either, as this book will demonstrate. But I believe that the patterns of difference that are emerging now will continue to shape the landscape of the future. The ways in which families are now differently engaging in digital and mobile media use suggest that technology is playing a role not in leveling the playing field, as many of us had hoped it would, but rather in contributing to the income inequality that has been on the rise in most countries since the early 1980s.[12] Thus, this book will foreground three issues: (1) how new technologies are introducing new situations that parents and children confront in their daily lives, (2) how inherited patterns of communicating within families are shaping our uses of and approaches to digital and mobile media, and (3) how the ways we communicate with one another (and not only the ways we regulate or oversee the uses of technologies) may need to be reconsidered so that we can better understand and manage the changes we are currently experiencing. All three of these components are needed if we are to understand how young people and their families are experiencing the mediated environment today, what parents can and should be doing to help young people to prepare to face the challenges of the emergent digital environment, and what we might anticipate for our future together. I believe that for too long we have overlooked the connections between family, technology, and what researcher Roger Silverstone referred to as the

"moral economy of the household"—the relationships between what we do in our individual households and what happens in the world at large.[13] We owe it to ourselves to understand both how digital and mobile media are reshaping family life and how family uses of these media are, in turn, reshaping our society. Ultimately, these interrelated issues inform what parents need to do with, for, and in relation to young people in the emergent digital environment.

In order to write this book, I relied upon both formal and informal interviews held over more than a decade with parents, young people, relatives, educators, and researchers. I also relied upon the excellent research being produced in the areas of parenting, digital and mobile media, and gender and technology, and am especially grateful for the many journalists who have worked hard to keep parents informed about the issues confronting parents and young people today. Although my research team and I analyzed interview and survey data that filled well over a bookshelf's worth of three-ring notebooks, this book is also informed by my own experiences. As my children have grown up, the issues of this book have taken on increasing urgency in my own family's life.

In this book, I write in a way that is consistent with what some scholars have called "women's ways of knowing," in which there is no harsh separation between research and life, and where what happens in one realm inevitably informs the other.[14] Researchers are charged with telling stories that help to convey new interpretations of data and to offer new insights into shared experiences. Similarly, when parents, and in particular mothers, are faced with parenting dilemmas that relate to digital and mobile media, we also share stories. Just as researchers contribute to an ongoing conversation in which they build upon or challenge existing understandings, parents listen to what others have done and we try to learn from the successes and foibles of other parents. Sometimes the stories that parents share with one another are laugh-out-loud funny; other times they're sad and deeply troubling. Sometimes they're not even our own stories, but stories that have attained a mythic level of resonance because they speak to deep fears or anxieties about what it means to be a human being who cares about others. We are symbolic animals, and by putting our experiences in story form for others we learn what to do and what our actions mean.

My own understandings of the role of digital and mobile media within family life have been impossible to separate from my personal experiences as a parent who now lives within the milieu of expressive and empowering parenting. They are also influenced by my own experiences of having been parented in a context that was a study in contrasts. I grew up in a household

where one of my parents came from privilege and the other didn't; one liked television, the other liked reading. Members of my mother's Italian American family have lived their entire lives in an economically depressed rust belt city of the Northeast. Many members of my father's Anglo-American family moved from the New York City area to the upwardly mobile and progressive city of San Francisco. On my mother's side there are bankruptcies; on my father's, millionaires. I think my own complicated background is why the relationships between economics, technology, and family life have always fascinated me. I'm sure it's why I am uncomfortable with the term "working class" or even "lower middle class," as you will see in this book. Sociologists would refer to half of my extended family in that way, although my family would never use those terms themselves. Members of my extended family buy middle-class things; they do things middle-class people do. If things had worked out differently, they would have had middle-class incomes and security. Some of them do now; others might someday. That's the way they, and I, see it. Like most parents, and like my own relatives, I hope that my own children are able to craft a balanced life that is meaningful and not financially strapped, and I worry about today's economy and their future prospects. Today my children go to a school two blocks from a mobile home park and two blocks from mini-mansions, and I sometimes wonder if there will be anything in between when they are older. As much as anything else, my desire that there be something in between is behind this book.

Researchers often fail to acknowledge how our own stories connect with what we study and why.[15] I include these personal stories to provide a framework for evaluating what I say here. It may not make the stories in this book any more "informational" or "factual," but I hope the stories will be resonant and instructive.

I have structured this book as a series of stories because I believe that even as human beings are challenged to access, process, and manage information to a greater extent than ever before, we do not make decisions based on a formula that is rooted in algorithms. Having information is not the same as *knowing*. Knowing involves feelings and intuitions as well as logical analysis. Knowing is relational, and our past experiences shape what we think we know about our present. We do not need more information on how to parent, therefore: we need ways of knowing that can frame how we understand the changes we are experiencing, and how we might parent as a result.

This book is divided into three parts, and you are welcome to read them in the order that strikes you as most interesting or urgent.

The first section foregrounds the most well-publicized parental fears related to digital and mobile media. These chapters tell stories that highlight concerns about possible links between depression and overinvolvement in social network sites, cyberbullying and teen suicide, and gaming and dropping out of high school. They include a discussion of how young people experience some of the things parents fear most about digital and mobile media contexts: cyberbullying, sexting, and Internet predators. Most of these stories reveal that young people are capable of handling the new situations that emerge with digital and mobile media, yet they also reveal the benefits that can come from advocating for those who are most vulnerable.

In the second section, I turn to the stories of young people, particularly preteens and teens. These stories illuminate why digital and mobile media technologies have come to be so central in the lives of youth today, and what that looks like in the lives of differently situated young people. These chapters consider how these media relate to youthful needs for identity, peer relationships, privacy, and autonomy, as well as to young people's continuing needs to maintain relationships with family members, cultures, and traditions.

In the final section, I introduce the two ethics of communication that I observed among upper- and middle-class families, on one hand, and "would-be middle-class" and less advantaged families. I do this by discussing how communication technologies both contribute to risk and are used to resolve it, how parents' patterns of communication have evolved to be responsive to these risks, how parents mediate the media as a means of overseeing their children's media environment, and how parents strive to keep their own familial goals in mind as they parent in spite of the host of other pressures they feel. I explore the ways in which even technologies that seemingly save time can add to the workload of the primary caregiver, who is usually but not always the mother.

The final chapter reviews the main themes of the book and presents a map for building a Parent App that will suit the needs of different families as they address themselves to the challenges and opportunities that digital and mobile media present to us all.

I have no interest in contributing to the already healthy amount of anxiety that parents have about technologies. Instead, I'm interested in understanding what's new about new media technologies as well as how these technologies are being used according to patterns that came before, so that we better understand how both factors are contributing to the changes we are all experiencing.

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Parts of chapter 2 appeared in Lynn Schofield Clark, "Doing Reflexive Ethnographic Work Among Parents and Their Teenage Children," in Radhika Parameswaran, ed., *Blackwell's International Companion to Media Studies: Audience Studies* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2011).

A longer version of Steph Kline's story (chapter 3) first appeared in L.S. Clark, "The Constant Contact Generation: Exploring Teen Friendship Networks Online," in S. Mazzarella, ed., *Girl Wide Web* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005).

Discussions of Norma and Veronica Domentary (chapter 3) and the Blayne-Gallagher family (chapter 8) were previously published in L. S. Clark, "A Multi-Grounded Theory of Parental Mediation: Exploring the Complementarity of Qualitative and Quantitative Communication Research," in K. B. Jensen, *A Handbook on Media and Communication Research: Qualitative and Quantitative Methodologies*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2011).

A discussion of the relationships between parenting styles and parental mediation theory (chapters 3 and 7) were previously published in L. S. Clark, "Parental Mediation Theory for the Digital Age," *Communication Theory* 12 (2011): 323–43.

The stories of Tanya Cortez (chapter 3) and Montana Odell and Gabriela Richards (chapter 5) were first analyzed in L. S. Clark, "Digital Media and the Generation Gap," *Information, Communication, and Society* 12, 3 (2009): 388–407.

Lower-income families' approaches to digital and mobile media (chapters 3, 7, and 8) were first discussed in L. S. Clark, C. Demont-Heinrich, and S. Webber, "Parents, ICTs, and Children's Prospects for Success: Interviews along the Digital 'Access Rainbow;'" *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 22, 5 (2005): 409–26, and L. S. Clark, C. Demont-Heinrich, and S. Webber, "Ethnographic Interviews on the Digital Divide," *New Media and Society* 6, 4 (2004): 529–47.

The stories of immigrant and refugee teens (including Iskinder, Santosh, Tahani, and others), as well as other parts of chapter 5, were previously published in L. S. Clark and L. Swywj, "Mobile Intimacies in the U.S. Among Refugee and Immigrant Teens and Their Parents," *Journal of Feminist Media Studies*, 2012.

An earlier discussion of mediatization (chapter 9) first appeared in L. S. Clark, "Mediatization: Where Media Ecology Meets Cultural Studies," in Knut Lundby, ed., *Emerging Theories of Mediatization* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

PART I | Digital and Mobile Media: Cautionary Tales

CHAPTER 1 | Risk, Media, and Parenting in a
Digital Age

THIRTEEN-YEAR-OLD RENEE VENUZZO COULDN'T wait to tell me what had happened earlier that day. As she got in my car for the short trip to my house for her babysitting job, she told me: "Me and Tessie were at the mall and some guy took our picture. And he had a laptop and everything." The words came in a rush, including something about the police and harassment.

"Wait. What?" I asked, trying to make sense of what she was telling me.

Renee told me that she and her friend had been walking around the mall on Friday afternoon when "some guy" took a photo of them, then quickly left. Renee didn't know what to do, so she called her mom at work and Tessie called hers. After asking if the girls wanted to leave the mall (neither girl did), the mothers told the girls that they should find mall security and tell them that an unknown man had taken their picture. The girls did so and continued shopping, but then they saw the man sitting in the food court. Renee and her friend alerted mall security again. The security officers brought him in for questioning and then asked the girls to come in and give a statement so that the man could be arrested for harassment. It turned out they weren't the only girls he'd taken pictures of that day. "It was weird, because he looked like such a normal, fortysomething guy," Renee said. Normal, except that he was carrying around a camera and a laptop in a mall on a Friday afternoon, taking photos of thirteen-year-old girls.

What is happening to young people like Renee and Tessie as they live in the electronic world? How are today's digital and mobile media affecting their experiences in and views of the world? And what are parents doing to help their children prepare to live as happy, independent, productive, and caring human beings in the digital age? These are the questions that form the core of this book.

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Renee and Tessie are members of what some have termed the "digital generation."[1] They can't remember a time when their homes didn't have laptops and mobile phones in addition to the more traditional electronic media of televisions, music players, and gaming consoles. They take for granted the freedom and independence that mobile connections have made possible for them, options that their parents and grandparents could not have even imagined.[2] These freedoms create more opportunities for young people to remain connected to their parents and other family members—and more opportunities for them to come into contact with potentially undesirable people from outside their immediate environment.

The events at the mall that day encapsulate several aspects of what it means to be a parent in the digital era, and they direct our attention to one of the primary concerns that all parents have when it comes to digital, mobile, and traditional media: they want their children to be safe, to be smart about any situation in which they find themselves. On one hand, there is the aspect of danger: who knew what the guy intended to do with the photos he'd taken of Renee and Tessie? Would he have tried to identify the girls? He might have planned to use facial recognition software to find other photos of them online so as to track who they were and where they lived or went to school. Or perhaps he wanted to post the photos online. Within minutes after taking them, he could have uploaded the photos, Photoshopped them, and even sold them as pornography. Digital media make horrifying things possible, often in ways we can't yet imagine—and wouldn't want to.

On the other hand, Renee and Tessie knew that in such an unknown and uncomfortable situation, they wanted to connect with their mothers—and because of mobile media, they were able to call them to ask for advice at a crucial moment. The girls' mothers could feel confident that they helped their daughters to address the situation in a way that would protect the girls' safety. And by reporting the man's actions, Renee and Tessie were able to avert potential danger for others as well.

Risks like these, involving digital and mobile media, are the focus of the first section of this book. This chapter begins by considering the current debates about how digital and mobile media heighten risks for young people, exploring research that has looked at the characteristics of these media and the social indicators that might point us toward particular areas of concern. The following two chapters then consider stories of young people who have experienced some of the dangers and difficulties that parents fear most in relation to these media.

In this book, I'm especially interested in how different families respond to what they perceive as the risks of digital and mobile media. Thus, although

this chapter and those that follow look at the risks these new media present, I aim to place these concerns in sociological context. I suggest that in order to understand the risks of digital and mobile media, we have to consider the important role the news media have played in constructing both how we think about these risks and how we think about parental responsibilities in the face of these risks. We also need to consider the ways that economic resources structure risk and our responses to it. Our heightened sense of childhood risk is related to what sociologist Ulrich Beck has termed the rise of a "risk society" in which a 24/7 marketplace, facilitated by ever more efficient communication media, has introduced instability into various aspects of our lives. We now feel that we as individuals are responsible for mitigating risk, even as our interconnectedness and inescapable vulnerability have placed the prospect of eliminating risk permanently out of our reach. I'm interested in how this sense of risk plays out differently among contrasting families.

Too often, our research on digital and mobile media, just like our news coverage of its risks, has focused on the middle- or upper-middle-class experiences of these media. This book aims to see what happens when we think about digital and mobile media and their related risks in comparative perspective, which seems an especially relevant approach given the economic circumstances of the vast majority of people in the United States and the rest of the world. But this book also aims to help parents across the economic spectrum as family relationships transition in relation to the new digital reality. I am a social researcher of new media in family life, but I am also a parent. I cannot separate my interest in describing family life in the digital age from my felt need for what I've called a Parent App, or a way of finding help and direction as I navigate parenthood in a digital age myself. You may find that there is a sense of urgency as I review various theories of parenting and media here, then, because I'm writing this book as much for me as I am for you.

Digital and Mobile Media as a Risk Amplifier

When risk and safety in the online realm are mentioned, parents' thoughts usually turn to things such as cyberbullying and sexual predators. Parents might also think about how young people can become involved in activities that are potentially illegal, such as downloading music or sexting.[3] Some parents worry that spending too much time online or with entertainment media can contribute to a child's social isolation, declining social skills, and depression.[4] Others are concerned that constant immersion in

digital media contributes to distraction, increases rates of ADD or ADHD, and leads to an inability to process information meaningfully.[5]

In many public venues, the Internet has come to be viewed as a "risk amplifier." People generally accept the idea that access to the Internet makes children more vulnerable to predators, that the Internet promotes and aggravates bullying, that it sexualizes, and that it corrupts through exposure to extremism. It's also believed that the Internet encourages anorexia and even suicide, and that it threatens academic and physical development.[6] Yet David Finkelhor, director of the Crimes Against Children Research Center, who put together this list of ways in which the Internet is thought to act as a risk amplifier, suggests that the idea that the Internet increases dangers for young people is largely unsupported by the evidence.[7] Finkelhor speaks about heightened "juvenoia" in relation to the Internet, noting that parents' fears tend to be articulated in relation to what the Internet makes possible rather than what has actually happened. Not only does the Internet afford predators easy access to vulnerable people, or so the thinking goes, but because it's easier than ever to be anonymous, people can act without regard to the moral norms that would otherwise govern behavior. And yet, as Finkelhor points out, in the years since the widespread introduction of the Internet, in the United States sex crimes against children have dropped dramatically, the percentage of teens who say that they have had sex has gone down, the number of teen suicides has declined dramatically (as has the number who have contemplated suicide), and we have even seen a decline in the number of young people who reported criminal victimization in school.[8] If the Internet were causing a major shift in the experiences of risk among young people, surely some of these indicators would show different results, Finkelhor argues. The main conclusion one can draw from this data, he says, is that bad things can happen to children online because they can happen *anywhere*.[9]

Parents are concerned that digital and mobile media heighten the possibility for risk, and yet all of the social indicators seem to suggest that these media do not create new risks or even increase the number of young people who experience negative consequences. Digital and mobile media may amplify the effects of problem behaviors, and they may also amplify the possibilities for addressing those behaviors insofar as they provide the means for young people and their families to find resources to protect themselves. What we need to attend to in order to evaluate risk, then, is how these media provide new means for amplifying, recording, and spreading information, as social media researcher danah boyd suggests, since these affordances of new media do change the landscape in which all human behaviors now take place.[10]

There are basically four characteristics of digital and mobile media that contribute to making problem behaviors more visible, as boyd has suggested, and what Renee and Tessie experienced illustrates these four key characteristics:

1. Digital media have introduced *persistence* to communication. Once uploaded onto the Internet, information (such as the photos of the girls taken in the mall) can be extremely difficult to remove. Contrary to the norms of interpersonal communication, on the Internet the norm is "persistent by default, ephemeral when necessary," as boyd has argued.[11]

2. Digital and mobile media are constantly changeable; they are *in perpetual beta*. It is now relatively easy to replicate, modify, and share materials online, making it difficult for us to distinguish originals from replicas, and creating new opportunities for those who wish to defame or defraud others.

3. There is a *scalability* to digital media. What might once have been an isolated prank can "go viral," whether the person who originally posted the content intended this or not. What's scaled is not necessarily "what individuals want to have scaled or what they think should be scaled, but what the collective chooses to amplify," writes boyd.[12]

4. Digital media are defined by *searchability*.[13] Anyone or anything can be Googled through a search engine, and with GPS and visual and voice recognition software, it is now possible for nearly anyone to be found and identified.

Parents need to understand how these characteristics of digital and mobile media have changed the environment in which teen actions occur, and they also need to figure out how to address their concerns about these changes. The chapters in this book's first section offer insights into how parents and their children are experiencing this changed environment. In the second and third sections of this book, we explore how parents respond to these changes, and how young people interpret those responses—sometimes in ways that differ from what their parents intended.

How the Media Participate in Constructing Risk

Parents across the economic spectrum wonder how they can keep informed about the risks that immersion in digital and mobile media may present to their children. Not surprisingly, perhaps, they turn to experts. Not only is there a burgeoning list of parenting blogs, websites, and self-help books

offering help, but online and broadcast commentators are also quick to provide advice. This media attention to the subject isn't surprising either—after all, parents (particularly middle-and upper-middle-class mothers) make up a highly desirable demographic for publishers and producers to target.

Executives at legacy media such as television, radio, and print news know they can capitalize on parental fears by reporting on such potentially sordid phenomena as ChatRoulette.com, HotOrNot.com, and IsAnyoneUp.com, garnering desirable ratings in the process.[14] Sometimes news media attempt to advocate for young people, such as when the *Sioux City* (Iowa) *Journal* devoted the front page of its Sunday edition to an anti-bullying editorial in response to a gay teen's suicide, mentioning Facebook and cell phones as some of the locations where bullying can occur.[15] Unfortunately, the media do not always report accurately about children's and teens' use of social media, choosing instead either to make unfounded statements themselves or to find and quote experts or law enforcement officials who may make exaggerated statements for them. In this way, as Barry Glassner pointed out in his book *The Culture of Fear*, the news media along with advocacy groups and politicians have contributed to the perception that danger has increased in relation to these media, despite evidence to the contrary.[16]

Let me offer a brief review of one such example of questionable reporting from a Spokane, Washington, television news station, which broadcast a report titled "'Sexting' Takes on New, More Dangerous Form."[17] The segment begins with an older male news anchor noting that "Spokane County sex crime detectives say more and more people are using the Internet to prey on children." Then an attractive, young, and earnest female reporter offers this attention-grabbing introduction: "Every time you log onto a social media site, you open yourself up to a host of dangers, and it is even riskier for kids who don't have much online awareness." The report cites no evidence of an increase in predatory behavior, and no evidence that young people without "much online awareness" are at greater risk than their more technologically savvy peers. The Spokane County detective who speaks on camera for the story, in fact, does not discuss either of these issues. Nevertheless, the reporter then offers another unsupported statement: "Sexual interaction between children and adults is skyrocketing," she says, as the detective is shown researching possible Internet predators online. The report concludes with a familiar admonishment: "Unless more parents help to educate their children, this scary online world will stay a reality."

Imagine how this news story might have been presented differently if indeed sexual interaction between adults and children was "skyrocketing"

in Spokane. Wouldn't a reporter be expected to back up this claim with evidence? Wouldn't viewers expect that such a story would feature information about the victims of these unwanted interactions and about specific law enforcement efforts to stop the perpetrators? Yet this story leads with the purported dangers of the Internet and concludes with the suggestion that responsible parents should attend an upcoming law enforcement workshop on social media. Given the lack of facts relayed in this two-minute segment, one might wonder why this story was thought worthy of attention. The reason may have been revealed in the reporter's seemingly incidental mention of the workshop on social media at the end of the segment: perhaps it was a news release from law enforcement rather than "skyrocketing" sexual interaction that prompted this story. In other words, the story may sound frightening, but it's a promotional announcement posing as news.

This story fits the general pattern of crime reporting identified by researchers, who have noted that magnifying problems of crime benefits both news organizations and law enforcement. Such reports strengthen the felt need to watch more news and suggests that law enforcement and news organizations share common purposes in keeping individuals safe and informed.[18] Modifying the age-old television news adage "If it bleeds, it leads," crime coverage researchers Brian Spitzberg and Michelle Cadiz summarize this titillating if misleading approach to news this way: "If it terrorizes, it mesmerizes."[19] Researchers have found that heavy news viewers are more likely than light news viewers to believe that we are living in a "mean and scary world," and therefore reports such as these contribute to our collective sense that new media should be a reason for concern.[20]

Because of the commercial structure of the U.S. media, there is a built-in incentive for news media outlets to churn out material warning about the dangers of sexting or highlighting arrests of Internet predators.[21] Books and editorials with titles such as *Endangered Minds: Why Children Don't Think and What We Can Do About It* or "Hooked on Gadgets, and Paying a Mental Price" provide the same promise of tantalizing information to an interested and concerned audience, thus ensuring that reports exploring the relationship between digital, visual, and mobile media and increases in attention deficit disorder, autism, and the inability to think critically will inevitably be a part of our public record for a long time to come.[22]

Whereas it's worth considering carefully how digital and mobile media have brought about changes in our lives, it's also important to recognize hyperbole. Even if the fears are not always warranted, the rise in the *perception* of fear is having real consequences in our lives. Fears about the

Internet, mobile phones, and social media are often related to a larger cultural anxiety concerning "stranger danger."[23] Journalist Lenore Skenazy has been tracking the rise of worries about "stranger danger." She argues that in the past several years we have seen an increase in the number of statutes, laws, and policies that purport to increase safety for young people but which actually may be making childhood more restrictive and parenting less effective.[24] We need to address this rising anxiety before it undermines our best parenting efforts.

Just as news organizations can benefit from fear-mongering, so too can others benefit as they lay claim to a moral high ground regarding parenting and digital and mobile media. Sometimes this claim of moral concern can be downright amusing if examined in context. For instance, consider the news report titled "Study: Parents Don't Care if Kids Play Violent Video Games."[25] After rhetorically chiding several parents who explain their reasons for allowing their children to play these games, the reporter goes on to cite a purported expert who exhorts, "Parents must take responsibility." Without irony, the article credits this precious insight to the head of a gaming trade organization—who benefits from taking the moral high ground while also selling games to those who allegedly shirk responsibility. What I'm especially interested in is the way in which moral discourses such as these—those that frame reports of "stranger danger" and mediated exposure to risk—feed into our collective sense of who should be taking responsibility for addressing these alleged problems.[26] Several voices in our cultural conversation emphasize that it's the job of the parent alone to address problems, regardless of a particular parent's access to support and resources to manage such problems on her own. The message in the media seems to be that because *some* children have encountered danger, we must *all* be vigilant, but only about our own children. And, by extension, the cultural message seems to be that if a child engages in problem behaviors, it's primarily the fault of the parent. It's easy to get involved in this discussion of morally correct parenting: just look at the comments section of the *New York Times* blog *Motherlode* for an example of how quickly people jump to judging the parenting philosophies and practices of others.

The problem with this judgmental approach, however, is that ultimately it does not help our own children, who live in a culture that includes children who struggle. Being the idealist I am, I wonder how different our collective lives could look if our first response was one of compassion rather than judgment toward other parents and the children who struggle (and I admit to participating in the judging). I also wonder how digital and

TECHNOLOGY AND MORALLY CORRECT PARENTING

University students are wonderful sources of knowledge about morally correct parenting. Here's a sampling of what I've heard when I've discussed parenting and technology with them:

- "My parents didn't let me have a phone till I was fifteen, and that was a good decision, so I can't understand why any parent would consider getting their child a phone at a younger age."
- "No one younger than thirteen needs to be on social networking sites, so why would parents even consider allowing their kids to have access to Facebook?"
- "Why do parents let their preteens see movies like the *Hunger Games* series? Those films are so violent that it could damage vulnerable young people." (Sometimes this is followed with a caveat: "Well, I wasn't that vulnerable when I was that age, but I know that kids today are.")

Here's my response. We all tend to think that it's morally wrong to engage in certain kinds of parenting practices. But let's start with the big picture of what we agree on: physical, psychological, and emotional abuse of children is always wrong. Those are the most egregious risks that children face. Let's then also note that parents who engage in these activities are punished, both legally and socially. When we're talking about media practices, we're on a different level of moral decision making. Parents might make wrong choices about media practices (for me, the dad who fired his gun into his daughter's laptop in February 2012 comes to mind; see chapter 5), but these choices will hardly ever fall into the same realm of moral and legal infractions. Some choices might be indicators: a neglectful parent might allow a young child to watch television all day. But that doesn't mean that every mother who's allowed a youngster to watch *Teletubbies* in order to get a much-needed shower is neglectful or engaging in a morally question-able activity.

Let me simply suggest here that there are a lot of parental decisions that look clear-cut and morally wrong until you're a parent yourself. One of my best friends still loves to tease me about the pronouncement I made before I became a parent that my children were never going to watch Disney movies. I still remember her knowing smirk a few years later at my then-four-year-old daughter's Disney princess party. So I guess I've learned the hard way: parents usually are trying their best, and they have reasons for what they're doing when it comes to media. They may not always be what we think are good reasons, but I believe it's worth exploring why parents make the decisions they do. Just be slow to judge. Someday you too might find yourself hosting a Disney princess party.

mobile media might be utilized in partnerships as well as in individual families to help address problems of social inequity. In this book, after we have heard how families of differing backgrounds have addressed issues of digital and mobile media in their lives, we will return to these questions of compassion and social structure in the book's concluding chapter.

Somehow, despite all of the changes we are experiencing, most parents and their children are managing fairly well when it comes to the actual situations of risk they encounter, and our views of new technologies tend to become more tempered over time, as we will see in the chapters that follow. In fact, a recent study revealed that when considering how to limit their children's media use, parents reported that they were primarily concerned with the extent to which these media prevent their children from getting enough physical exercise or from spending time on other activities.[27]

But there is no question that news stories about Internet predators, cyberbullies, and Internet-related crimes that affect young people are articulating some very real parental concerns. Underlying our concerns about digital and mobile media is, perhaps, something deeper. Western society seems to have developed a discomfort both with the developmental processes of growing up and with the role of parents and digital and mobile media in these processes.[28] Perhaps parents are worried that they have not adequately prepared their preteens and teens for the adult world available to them through digital and mobile media. Maybe they do not quite trust their children to act responsibly and sensibly, or they worry that their offspring will not know what to do under pressure, given all of the various mediated temptations they will encounter. Or perhaps parents across the economic spectrum are concerned that their children's peers, or even the commercial media industry itself, might have more influence over their children than they do. I believe that our contradictory feelings regarding digital and mobile media in our children's lives mask a more fundamental concern: we are worried about the process of growing up and becoming independent in a world dominated by risk and uncertainty, particularly in relation to a media environment that seems less familiar to parents than it does to their children.

Living in a Risk Society

The risks associated with growing up in today's world extend far beyond those of the online realm that young people encounter through their mobile phones or laptops. Discussions about risk relate to the media environment in

two different yet intersecting ways. Communication technologies continue to shape the economic landscape of family life, as I explain below. They also provide the means through which parents can respond to the dilemmas that arise within that economic landscape as they seek to balance work and family needs.

First, media have significantly shaped the economic landscape in which parents work, and in which children themselves will someday work. Numerous sociologists have commented on the changes Western society has already undergone over the past hundred years as we have moved from being an agrarian and rural society to being an urban and industrialized one, and from a society organized by groups in physical co-presence to one in which social and media networks constitute the primary mode of organization.[29] Thanks to the interconnectedness of digital media, the work environment is increasingly shaped by a 24/7 networked global economy. And modernization, as the German sociologist Ulrich Beck noted, has introduced a series of new hazards and insecurities that arise from our heightened interdependence in this increasingly urban and networked society, as illustrated both by the prospect of coordinated transnational terrorist acts and the near collapse of the world's financial markets. Beck notes that we now live in what he terms a "risk society."[30] Sophisticated systems of communication technology have been employed to *control* risk, and yet these systems have also *contributed* to risk. For instance, the risk of human-generated disaster is heightened when people can decide in one part of the world to deploy chemical or biological weapons in another.[31] Accordingly, communication technologies have fundamental importance to the development of globalization, as labor, money, and correspondence travel easily from place to place, allowing relationships, both of enrichment and of exploitation, to develop in new ways.[32]

We have come to realize that there may be no permanent solutions to the problem of risk, and that in many ways, the more mundane uses of communication technologies—particularly those related to digital networks—are increasing exposure to risk on a global scale. The U.S. public has largely lost faith in the ability of societal institutions to manage risk, particularly in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis and the well-publicized 2011 failures of U.S. government bodies to reach bipartisan solutions to enduring problems. This heightens parental anxiety in general, as parents sense that they have less control than they might wish over the shape of their own lives and their children's lives. People now increasingly look for ways to put preventive measures in place to reduce their exposure to risk, at both the societal and individual levels.[33]

The second way in which risk in general is related to the media is more specific to media practices in the home. As adults in both single-parent and two-parent families feel obligated to work longer and longer hours in an increasingly unstable economic environment to reduce their family's exposure to risk, they rely on a variety of arrangements for supervising and engaging their children in activities while they address the demands of their work lives. The rise in media use among young people, therefore, is not unrelated to the demands of parents' work lives. At the same time, parents feel obligated to oversee and control their children's increased media use. As we will see in the stories presented in the third section of this book, many parents feel that leisure time spent with media is wasted time, and given the uncertain economy, they fear that there is no time to waste in preparing children for a competitive job market.[34] Even as U.S. middle-class income has declined in real terms since 2002, incomes have been surging in Brazil, Russia, India, and China.[35] As resources for schools and enrichment programs have become a battleground in the United States, young people have come to be viewed less as a resource in which society invests than as participants in a competition; it's "economic Darwinism," as Henry Giroux has argued.[36] And unfortunately, many of our young people are not faring very well in this competition. Risk, even risk related to digital and mobile media, looks quite different depending on one's economic circumstances.

Contrasting Stories of Risk and Resources

Just as the news media have played a role in constructing how we think about risk, these media have helped construct how we think about what it means to be middle-class. Commercial media stand to benefit by reaching those of us who prefer to think of ourselves as middle-class. We tend to put ourselves in this category if we have sufficient income to purchase at least some of the goods and services that advertisers—those who support the media—are trying to sell.[37] In reflecting our experience, advertising confirms for us our sense that we are a part of that group. Too, publishers know that those with higher incomes purchase more books, e-books, newspapers, and other reading materials than those with lower incomes, and this provides a built-in incentive to speak to middle-class audiences about middle-class experiences. The majority of people in the United States today, in fact, self-identify as middle-class.[38] However, most of us recognize that people have vastly different life experiences depending on their income, assets, education, aspirations, and occupation.

In contrast to this chapter's opening story of Renee and her friend's experiences with dangers that were vaguely related to the Internet, Gerardo Molinero, another young person interviewed for this book, was much more reserved when discussing his experiences with risk and the online environment.[39] His friends pressured him to join Facebook, he said, but he had refused. Adopting a stance of bravado among his mostly lower-income friends, he said he didn't care about sites like that. Later, however, Gerardo admitted that his mother, who had family members who had started the process of acquiring citizenship but were residing and working in the United States without documentation, had expressly asked him and his brother to refrain from establishing profiles on Facebook. Her fear was that such a public display might attract unwanted attention to their family. And so, because he wanted to protect the interests of his family, he did not establish a profile. He had also asked friends not to post pictures of him on their profiles, although that request often went unheeded. Gerardo wasn't especially worried about the fact that his pictures were on his friends' Facebook profiles—but he had chosen not to tell his mother about it, just in case.

Families from varied economic backgrounds experience and respond differently to the risks related to the introduction of digital and mobile media into their family's lives. Here's how the concerns of Gerardo and his mother relate to the four key characteristics of digital media. Gerardo's mother did not want photos or information about their family members online because she implicitly recognized the *persistence* of digital information: anything put online could be available online for a long time afterward. Moreover, both Gerardo and his mother recognized that the decision to avoid participating in social network sites was one that they would have to revisit over and over, as the nature of communication as something *in perpetual beta* meant that someone could put a photo of Gerardo online at any time, and Gerardo's mother wanted him to remain vigilant and request that they be taken down. *Scalability* was not a direct concern, but Gerardo's mother definitely worried about the *searchability* of digital information and the fact that a person who was so inclined could piece together stories of who they were and the circumstances under which they and their family members were living.

Gerardo, Renee, Tessie, and their mothers all recognized certain risks present in the digital environment, particularly in relation to personal safety. In each case, mothers felt justified in their fears that the Internet was a gateway to an outside world full of potential dangers: creepy people like the guy in the mall might find you, or law enforcement officials might use information about you to gain access to a family member who would

prefer to remain hidden. However, in these examples we gain some insight into how people whose life experiences differ may consider digital, mobile, and even traditional media in some ways that are similar and in others that are quite different.

Families like Renee's and Tessie's live in a cultural milieu that responds to risk through what I will call an *ethic of expressive empowerment*. I use the term "ethic" to refer to the body of principles and values that are distinctive to a particular group. Among wealthy, upper-middle-class, and some middle-class U.S. families such as Renee's and Tessie's, "good parenting" is associated with raising children who are self-confident, caring, self-reliant, honest, and capable of expressing their views and emotions while exercising self-control. Intellectual curiosity and a desire to achieve are also prized.[40] Renee and Tessie were praised for using their cell phones in a way that demonstrated their self-confidence and their self-reliance. Ironically, they demonstrated this self-reliance by calling their mothers for advice.[41]

Other families appreciate many aspects of this approach to good parenting, but for them the emphasis is slightly different. Families like Gerardo's live in a cultural milieu that responds to risk through an *ethic of respectful connectedness*. Among these families are those that might be described as "would-be middle class" or "less advantaged" as well as some middle-class families, and for them, good parenting is associated with raising children who are loyal, respectful, patriotic, and caring toward both their families and their communities, because family bonds are seen as the greatest defense against risk. A good sense of humor, leadership, and resilience in the face of adversity are highly prized.[42]

Renee and Tessie were able to use their mobile phones to stay safe by remaining in contact with their mothers, just as Gerardo similarly maintained strong relationships with his family. Each of these young people lived in a family in which parents wanted to supervise their children and help them minimize their exposure to risk. Yet Gerardo was strongly encouraged to avoid social network technologies to safeguard not only himself but also extended family members living at the margins of society; he was expected to respect his family's needs and to want to help them to stay safe as well.

Reframing the Discussion of Media and Risk: The Digital Trail

Whenever a new communications technology is introduced, our lives as individuals and as a society are forever changed.[43] In many ways, then, this book seeks to follow the lead of communication scholar Joshua Meyrowitz,

who several decades ago made a compelling argument about how television was reshaping family life. In his book *No Sense of Place*, Meyrowitz observed that television changed the "situational geography" of social life.[44] Before television, there were some situations that were simply inaccessible to certain people, whether for geographic reasons or because people behaved differently behind closed doors than they might in public. Electronic media tended to "expose many features of what was formerly the 'backstage' of social life," he argued.[45] Television made it possible for people to know more about situations that previously had been hidden from them. Because of television, it was harder for parents to keep certain aspects of adult life hidden from their children—a problem that policy makers, media literacy experts, and parents have been attempting to address ever since. What I liked about Meyrowitz's book was that it was attentive to the concerns that parents and others had about young people growing up in a mediated environment, and it also emphasized how important it is to consider the bigger picture of how social change happens when new technologies introduce challenges to existing patterns of social behavior. What I add to his approach, which he terms "medium theory," is a more comprehensive understanding of how parents and their children are actually incorporating new media into their lives, and how these patterns of use, as well as the characteristics of those technologies themselves, are shaping the emergent digital and mobile media environment and our lives within it.[46]

With the rise of television, Meyrowitz argued, children could see what adults might not have wanted them to see. With the emergence of the digital and mobile media environment, parents—along with everyone else—can also witness what children and those who wish them good or ill may not want anyone else to see. We have unprecedented access to children's experiences, a situation that produces both more knowledge about what is happening among a variety of children (information, for instance, about sexting, bullying, online predators, and human trafficking) and more anxiety about what could happen to our own children. This increased access to information gives parents greater opportunities to anticipate problems, but it also heightens anxieties about what could emerge that would make our own children vulnerable.

The information that parents can access about their own and other people's children pales in comparison to the vast array of information to which we *all* now have access. As economics and communication researchers Martin Hilbert and Priscila López have observed, our combined technological memory has increased exponentially over the past twenty-five

years.[47] To illustrate, they note that if all of our technological memory were stored on double-sided paper, in 1986 all of the world's land masses would have been covered with a single layer of paper. Since then, our storage capacity for information has doubled roughly every three years. By 2007, the world's land masses would have been covered with one layer of books, and by 2011, with two layers of books.[48] Over the same period of time, our capacity for communicating with one another has also increased exponentially. In 1986, each person conveyed the equivalent of two newspaper pages of information per day to other people, and received the equivalent of 55 entire newspapers per day. By 2007, people were conveying to others the equivalent of 6 newspapers of information per day and receiving the equivalent of 175 newspapers of information.[49] We also have much greater capacity to process this information than ever before, and to do so more quickly. Hilbert and López observe that if 2,200 people carried out manual calculations from the big bang until 2011, they could execute as many instructions as computers could carry out in *one second* in 2011.[50]

Our ability to *access, process, and manage information* has become an important marker of mental development in the contemporary world, and it is related to how we must begin to rethink risk as well as parenting.[51] Parents, and in particular mothers, have much more to manage as a result of this change in technology. For women, technologies such as mobile phones can be useful, and they can seem liberating, as they allow women greater control over their means of communicating with others. But they may not necessarily lighten the workload for women, as historian Ruth Schwartz Cowan first observed in her study of household technologies "from the open hearth to the microwave."[52] Feminist researchers note that women use technologies in ways that sometimes challenge and sometimes reproduce power relations. These uses happen not as a result of conscious rational thought but as women seek to address particular situations in relation to their felt needs. In the realm of parenting, the rise of the information age has coincided with what Anthony Giddens terms the "reflexive self," and specifically with what my colleagues and I have called *reflexive parenting*.[53] Mothers are expected to make conscientious decisions not only about digital and mobile media but also about everything else that shapes the environment in a child's life. They do not make these decisions by rationally assessing risk; rather, they make them in relation to their interest in promoting their children's well-being, experiencing well-being themselves, and being a "good parent." Being a self-conscious parent is touted throughout the self-help literature for mothers: "think and then respond," or engage in "love and logic," as several popular parenting texts

geared to middle-class parents exhort. This approach does not assume that people are rational; rather, it assumes that they are guided by emotions and must self-consciously adopt a rational position. Parenting advice books may be good indicators of the "emotion work" parents engage in as they manage life and information overload in the digital age.[54]

Of course, digital and mobile media have made communication multi-directional and about much more than just sharing information. Rather than simply being permitted to *observe* social behavior, as was the case with television, we are all *participating* in new forms of social behavior via communication technology platforms that bridge the private and the public. Every time we are online, we participate in creating our own digital trail: one that is visible to many, that is not created exclusively by us, and over which we cannot exert full control. This digital trail is part of who we are because it plays a role in how other people and organizations view us and interact with us, but it is also neither completely separate from nor completely aligned with our embodied selves. It is also not merely information but related to a kind of knowing.

In addition to children being inadvertently exposed to the vagaries of adult life, then, in today's digital and mobile media environment everyone is potentially capable of knowing a great deal about everyone else, and we all relate to one another through an ever-expanding repertoire of communication practices facilitated by digital and mobile media as a result. As sociologist Anthony Giddens has asserted, we are now all "communicatively interdependent."[55] This situation is reshaping our experiences of privacy, authority, identity, and tradition. It presents all of us with new challenges, and parents are on the front lines of enacting how these challenges are lived out in our most intimate relationships.

To figure out what children and parents are experiencing in the emergent digital environment, we have to pay attention to the fact that not everyone in society experiences the same thing when it comes to communication technologies, and that this in itself is part of a much longer-term change in our mediated environment. A mere half century ago, television was a homogenizing force in society. At least for a time, we all watched the same programs on the same few networks. Even if you were in a social community that didn't feel well represented (or represented at all) on television, or even if your family didn't have a television, you knew what the choices were: you could watch, or you could not watch and have a pretty good idea of what you were missing. In contrast, with today's plethora of communication technology options, the patterns of ownership and use of communication technologies seem almost limitless. In our own homes,

four people can be seated in the same room engaging with four different forms of media.

The patterns of difference increase exponentially as we consider different patterns of communication and media use that are occurring in differing neighborhoods. Not all families have the same level of access and skill, and not all young people are "digital natives," as the popular phrase has it.[56] This book contends that we have to pay attention to these differences if we are to recognize how differing patterns of communication that existed prior to the emergence of the latest technologies are shaping their use today, and how, in turn, these new technologies are reshaping family life.[57]

Despite all the talk about how young people are more adept at technologies than their parents, what is much more obvious is an enduring *economic* gap in which both younger and older people who have greater access to resources are generally more adept and more engaged in the digital landscape than those who have less access to such resources. Simply put, some people are better situated than others to manage in the new communication environment. Whether it's because of the limits of time, limited space in the household, limited technological skills, or limits on how many cell phones or what kind of cell phone plan the family can afford, differences in usage patterns persist. This challenges the facile assumption that someday everyone will "catch up" and have the same experiences with digital and mobile media that the wealthiest in the United States, northern Europe, and East Asia now have. Evidence is mounting that technological advances are contributing to widening income inequality.[58] Therefore, as we think about the Parent App that is needed for our families and our society, we have to take into consideration the fact that families' experiences with technology vary greatly depending on how they are able to incorporate such technologies into their lives in the first place.

In the stories of Renee, Tessie, and Gerardo and their families, then, we can see that there are similarities and overlaps in how these families approach digital and mobile media in their lives. All of the parents aim to make themselves accessible to their children for support, and they expect that their children will contact them if a difficulty arises. There are also differences in how these families attach meaning to the cultural objects of digital, mobile, and traditional media. How they incorporate these things into their lives can't be directly tied to their economic situations. What the differences in these stories point to, and what we will see in the chapters that follow, is that there are certain patterns in how families are incorporating digital and mobile media into their lives. If we want to understand how these media are changing family life in the United States, we need to

consider that perhaps families that are situated differently in relation to resources may be having incommensurable experiences with these media.

The resources to which parents and their children have access make a big difference, and they give a particular shape to the ethics of expressive empowerment and respectful connectedness that in turn shape parental approaches to digital and mobile media. Yet so far, most analyses of how digital, mobile, and traditional media are playing a role in family life have explored either middle- and upper-middle-class experiences or those of the digitally excluded; they have not compared the two.[59] Recent works by digital media researchers Sherry Turkle and danah boyd have included both middle-class and non-middle-class people in their studies, as have large-scale surveys, but these studies have not delved into the different patterns between these groups.[60] On the other hand, works that explore how digital, mobile, and traditional media are reinforcing economic barriers for the less advantaged have focused on individuals or on policy and large-scale statistics rather than on families.[61] I wanted to address this gap. In this book, I recognize one pattern among those who are wealthy, upper-middle-class, and middle-class, and a different pattern among those who are lower-middle-class, working-class, and working poor (whom I prefer to term the *would-be middle class* or the *less advantaged*).

Sociologists have long used the term "social class" as a way to understand groups of people in relation to a combination of factors—income, education, assets, and occupation—that influence their lived experiences.[62] In recent years, observers of social class in the United States have noted that even though upward mobility still exists, the opportunity for a significant change in class status has lessened significantly over the past thirty years.[63] As American cultural and literary historian Paul Fussell once noted of how this situation is experienced, "Because the [American] myth conveys the impression that you can readily earn your way upward, disillusion and bitterness are particularly strong when you find yourself trapped in a class system you've been half persuaded isn't important."[64] Even those most averse to looking at America's enduring patterns of inequality have been adjusting their perspectives. As Daniel Larison wrote for *The American Conservative*:

> Social and economic stratification is happening, reflected by growing income inequality, and it is being exacerbated by changes to the U.S. economy that are raising barriers to upward mobility and by the mass immigration of poorly educated, unskilled workers that are at risk of being trapped in a perpetual underclass.[65]

Today, people across the economic spectrum passionately disagree about what to do with regard to social stratification and limited opportunity, and they may also disagree about what the continued influx of immigrants means for society (for, contrary to Larison's statement, many are not poorly educated or unskilled), but few deny that such social and economic stratification exists.[66]

Middle- and upper-middle-class approaches to parenting have received quite a bit of attention lately, most recently with the 2011 publication of *The Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, Amy Chua's celebration of the parenting-on-overdrive approach.[67] Chua discusses her own strict and uncompromising approach to parenting and relates it to her Chinese heritage, setting her approach in contrast to the indulgent and permissive "Western" style of parenting she believes is rampant in the United States today. Her memoir, which includes a fair amount of humor as well as some self-congratulation about the highly successful daughters she and her husband raised, generated a fair amount of controversy. But the debate that arose among the book's largely middle- and upper-middle-class readers wasn't about whether Eastern- or Western-style parenting is better; rather, it became a call to arms against overdoing what sociologist Annette Lareau termed "concerted cultivation."[68] Concerted cultivation refers to a parenting approach popular among middle-class parents in which parents encourage children, preteens, and teens to be involved in organized activities meant to provide them with opportunities to develop their talents and to enjoy the benefits of working as a team with their peers. My use of the term "empowerment" in the ethic I ascribe to middle- and upper-middle-class parents is meant to recognize the embrace of this approach.

Both the Western and Eastern styles of parenting that Chua describes emphasize the importance of empowering young people through such activities. U.S. middle- and upper-middle-class parents want their children to feel good about themselves, and they believe that children feel good if they're achieving; these parents also believe that childhood achievement leads to positive life outcomes (particularly economic ones). Middle- and upper-middle-class Western and Eastern parents both seem to worry a great deal about how children spend their time, and both encourage the productive use of time.[69] Critics consider Chua's approach, which involved renting music practice rooms while the family was on vacation and refusing bathroom breaks until a piece of music was perfected, as going a bit too far. But many also believe that most Western parents could stand to go further in our parenting efforts, as Hannah Rosin argues in the *Wall Street Journal* to her middle- and upper-middle-class readers: "We

believe that our children are special and entitled, but we do not have the guts or the tools to make that reality true for them."[70] Certainly from Rosin's perspective, communication media are mostly a distraction and a problem, and Amy Chua would agree.

Among the would-be middle-class and less advantaged families interviewed for this book, there are some similarities to Chua's perspective, in particular the assumptions that children are strong, not fragile, and that children should respect their elders. Yet whereas Chua suggests that instead of softness, children need hard or heavy-handed concerted cultivation, the less privileged parents whose stories are told in this book see the goals of parenting differently. They voice the belief that the goal of parenting is to help their children become responsible for themselves, not to encourage them to push themselves in front of others in the race to high achievement. The less privileged parents I studied want to encourage young people to value their relationships with their family and community and to place goals of individual achievement, as well as their uses of media, within that wider framework. For families embracing an ethic of respectful connectedness, leisure isn't altogether bad. Indeed, one of the interesting reasons to foreground the ways in which digital, mobile, and entertainment media figure in U.S. family life is that it helps us explore the ways that U.S. society treats the relationship between work and leisure, and examine different attitudes about this relationship—attitudes that depend greatly on a person's place in the socioeconomic order.

There are, of course, a range of ways in which the would-be middle class and the less advantaged could be defined. Yet the number of people in these categories and the choices and constraints under which they live does suggest the possibility of a *habitus*, to use sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's term, that differs from that of the upper middle class. A habitus is a set of norms imbued with a certain constellation of tastes and dispositions and associated with a complex array of resources, including access to certain social groups and to what might be called local knowledge or "street smarts."[71] It is important to pay attention to the variety of life experiences found among those whose income and other resources make middle-class life hard to maintain, and it is also important not to romanticize these differences. However, people in this group share life experiences and meanings that are not the same as those of the more financially stable and largely white upper middle class, and it is worth considering how they might be different.[72]

Sociologists of U.S. family life have been working for a long time to help construct better understandings of how families live within today's

stratified systems and how such stratification reproduces itself through the practical actions of groups of people. Whereas there are some shared national traits of U.S. culture—a strong belief in innovation and in individual effort, for instance—there are also key examples of how members of a particular group within U.S. culture share certain taken-for-granted ways of seeing and experiencing the world that differ from the ways other groups see and experience it. We all exist within "webs of significance" that we ourselves spin, meaning that although we have the ability to create and modify our own lives, we are situated within cultures and communities that serve to define our worlds and give meaning to our actions.[73] Annette Lareau has argued that social class powerfully impacts childhood experiences, and she observes that at least two different cultural patterns exist in the United States that relate to the economic differences between families. Similarly, in a study of how parents buy consumer goods for their children, sociologist Allison Pugh has noted that parents with fewer means tend to invest in what she terms "symbolic indulgence," whereas those with greater financial resources engage in practices of "symbolic deprivation."[74] In observations closest to my own, sociologist Margaret Nelson has pointed out that whereas parents with fewer financial advantages tend to practice "parenting with limits," those in the upper middle class engage in what she terms "parenting out of control," particularly in their use of digital and mobile media as tools for surveillance of their children.[75] And sociologist Wendy Griswold has shown that although two groups of people in two different countries may read the same novel, they may interpret it quite differently based on their country's relative position in the world.[76] The same television program, fashion style, or (in this case) smart phone or laptop can be imbued with meanings that are quite different depending on one's particular community of identity.[77]

The Research for This Book

This book draws on research I have led for more than ten years, as my colleagues and I have been exploring how families experience and negotiate media use in their lives together and as individuals. The book reports the results of interview and observational research conducted with nineteen middle-class and twenty-seven less advantaged families with preteens and teens. More interviews and observations were conducted with an additional eighty-eight middle-class parents, twenty-six middle-class teens, and thirty-four less advantaged teens. Most of these interviews and observations took

place in family homes and apartments located in urban, suburban, and rural areas of Ohio, Pennsylvania, New York, California, Colorado, Washington, D.C., and Illinois. Although I reflect on national survey data throughout thanks to the excellent work of the Pew Internet and American Life Project and other similar efforts, my research is qualitative. Stories produced and analyzed in qualitative research are, in researcher Brene Brown's characterization, "just data with a soul."[78]

Of the nineteen middle-class families, fifteen of the families had two resident parents, and single parents headed the other four. All of the parents in the two-parent households were married except for one same-sex couple; three of the couples were in their second marriage. Twelve of these families identified themselves as of European heritage, four were European and Hispanic/Latino, one was European and African American, one identified as Asian, and another was Asian and European.

The twenty-seven would-be middle-class and less advantaged families had annual household incomes of less than $50,000. Twelve of these families had incomes of less than $25,000 in the year in which they were interviewed. Thirteen families had two parents who were either married (first or second marriage) or cohabiting, and fourteen were single-parent families. Twelve of the families identified themselves as being of European ethnic heritage, one was Hispanic/Latino, three were European and Hispanic/Latino, and two were Hispanic/Latino, Native American, and European. One family was African American, three were European and African American, and one was African American and Native American. The final three families were Asian and European, recent immigrants from Eastern Europe, and recent immigrants from East Africa.

As a result of my interest in including families of all backgrounds in this study, my research team and I interviewed members of families that were affluent and members of families barely subsisting near the poverty line, although most fell somewhere in between and were either relatively more or relatively less advantaged. To complement our interview-based research, we attended seminars on parenting, went to book talks, guest-taught in schools in disadvantaged areas, and participated in media literacy events. We went to informal neighborhood gatherings and school events, were present at functions at churches and synagogues, and attended teacher-training sessions. We reviewed and consulted on nationally representative surveys designed to better understand parents, teens, and digital media uses and participated in international and cross-cultural comparisons. As my own children grew into their preteen years within an economically diverse school district, I became even more immersed in the questions of how media were

LOCATING MYSELF IN RELATION TO CLASS
AND BACKGROUND

Despite all my caveats about how the media construct the category, I consider myself middle-class, like most people. I'm one of the lucky ones: I have a full-time job, unlike many of my peers with Ph.D.'s and my peers struggling in the would-be middle class. My children go to public schools, and we have no aspirations for Ivy League schooling. My partner is a small business owner, and we live in a nice if rather unremarkable ranch house. I'm not as fashion-conscious or as confident as most of the upper-middle-class women you'd meet, and I talk about money all the time, which no self-respecting upper-middle-class or wealthy person would do.

My life experience is unusual only in one fairly significant respect: my mother was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis when I was about eleven years old. At the time it was a very unfamiliar and little-understood chronic illness, and my parents were understandably reluctant to tell many people about her diagnosis because people would inevitably protest that she looked so healthy. And so, throughout my own preteen and teen years, I was constantly on the lookout for what "normal" family life was like, so that I could participate in presenting my family and myself as such. Just as people around me were embracing their diversity and difference and I was participating in celebrating their uniqueness, I was busily concealing my own family's struggles. My family members and I did this for a variety of reasons, chief among them preserving my mother's dignity and living through the uncertainties of the illness ourselves. As a teen, I was independent and mature in some ways, developing a thoughtful, serious, and well-rehearsed response to the inevitable question "How's your mother?" But I was immature in other ways, acting out my rage at the injustices of chronic illness. I would like to say that I've learned to live in the moment as a result, but I think I also learned that time may not be on your side. Through the research I conducted for this book I learned that my personal struggle as a parent in a digital age is not really about figuring out the safest or most productive way to utilize technology for education or bonding. It's really about resisting the temptation to engage in technologically aided multitasking in order to make the most out of every moment simultaneously. A secondary struggle is about constantly worrying whether the parenting I'm doing is good enough. I've learned, however, that in their own ways each of these struggles can seriously undercut goals of connection. Whether it's trying to catch up on emails during family movie night or middle-of-the-night trolls through psychology websites to try to determine whether my children are healthy, digital and mobile media are implicated in my bad middle-class parenting moments as well as in my good ones. Like every story featured in this book, my own viewpoints are shaped as much by my social class as by my own experiences of parenting and being parented.

playing a role in the lives of middle-class and less advantaged families. Throughout this work, I have found that parents and their children have been engaging in a great deal of nuanced decision making, a fair amount of discussion, and a significant number of emotional exchanges when it comes to the role of digital and mobile media in their lives. How they manage these things has a great deal to do with the challenges they experience in relation to the economic landscape. Families look to digital, mobile, and traditional media to solve certain problems, even while these media seem to create other, new problems for them to solve. In the next two chapters, then, we consider how parents approach some of the problems that they perceive are most closely related to the risks of new media as their children grow up in a digital age.