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Imagining the future through the lens of the digital: parents' narratives of generational change

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Abstract

This chapter argues that, while parenting has always been inherently future-oriented and, therefore highly uncertain, the conditions of reflexive modernity amplify and individualize the burden of risk such that parents become increasingly anxious both because of their uncertain and risky task and also because of the judgments of others. Based on depth interviews with over 70 London families, we show how parents navigate this situation by tacking back and forth between their memories of their own (non-digital) childhood and their anticipations of their children's imagined 'digital' future in order to narrate for themselves and their children the values, identities and practices that are important to them. These narratives are sometimes romantic and other times instrumental; both narratives are highly agentic, allowing parents' visions of the future to shape their actions in the present. But, we explain last, it matters that the future is imagined through the lens of the digital.

In bringing up their children, parents commonly draw on their own childhood memories, replicating or reacting against the parenting they recall receiving themselves. At the same time, they try to imagine the world in which their children will live as adults, adjusting their present parenting to optimize desired futures. In thus looking backwards and forwards, parents face the twin challenges of recalling the world as it was several decades ago and anticipating the world several decades hence. In these retrospective and prospective feats of memory and imagination that span generations, integrating biographical and historical time (Bolin, 2016; Colombo & Fortunati, 2011), parents often focus on digital media. Thus in our interviews with London families we explored their 'digital imaginaries' (Mansell, 2012), seeking to understand how and why parents narrate for themselves and their children what it means to live in a 'digital age' - in the present and in an anticipated 'digital future.'

In this chapter, we situate parents' stories of parenting for a digital future within the broader recognition that, through continual narration and re-narration, identity is constructed as a "kind of structure holding the individual to one biography" (Goffman, 1963: 92) and, we can add, holding families together across generations. Storytelling is a crucial means by which parents and children perform their togetherness (Langellier & Peterson, 2006), negotiate difficult periods (Trees & Kellas, 2009), negotiate the actual "families we live with" in relation to the more idealized "families we live by" (Gillis, 1996), and "sustain a sense of agency in the face of disempowering circumstances" (Jackson, 2002: 15). Today, parents often tell these stories through the lens of the digital – as regards digital affordances, practices and transformations, leading us to wonder why the digital imaginary is so effective at crystalizing parents' concerns, notwithstanding that the social changes they are living through have multiple causes.

Narratives of both parenting and of the digital raise questions about the potential for social and individual change, and they propose strategies by which present actions may influence the future. Appadurai argues that the past provides a "map negotiating and shaping new futures" (Appadurai, 2013: 289), a resource to *imagine* the world that might be, *aspire* for a world that is desired or *anticipate* a world that is to be avoided. Or as Tavory and Eliasoph (2013) put it, "any action has a temporal dimension, projected futures are crucial for any discussion of action and agency" (p.910), meaning that since people must coordinate their actions in the present, these activities inevitably include a "relationship to a future" (p.909). Thus everyday interactions involve what Adams et al (2009) describe as a process of "*tacking back and forth* between futures, pasts and presents, framing templates for producing the future" (our emphasis, p.246) and, thereby, linking present and future through the work of the imagination, as Adams et al. (2009: 257) explain:

> "Anticipatory preparedness is speculative and reactive, in 'preparation for' the event and the trauma as if it were already here, rather than offering 'prevention of' it so that it never happens."

In his phenomenological account, Iser (1980: 113) captures the experience of narrating oneself (and one's children) into being:

> "As the reader's wandering viewpoint travels between all these segments [of a narrative], its constant switching during the time flow of reading intertwines them, thus bringing forth a network of perspectives, within which each perspective opens a view not only of others, but also of the intended imaginary object."

This experience of the 'wandering viewpoint' eloquently captures many parents' experiences of oscillating between at-times intense uncertainties surrounding one's child's future as an adult (Furedi, 2008; Nelson, 2010) and the continual re-visiting of one's earlier self as a child (as, for example, when a parent is forced to reflect on hearing themselves speaking the words he or she remembers coming from their own parent's mouths, or when their child's action provokes a memory from their own childhood, whether similar or contrasting). We interpret these experiences and anxieties by reference to the theories of reflexive modernity which prioritize the expectation –simultaneously as an opportunity and a burden - that the newly 'democratic family' living in an increasingly individualized 'risk society' must negotiate and take responsibility for its individual 'choice biography' (Beck, 1986/2005; Giddens, 1991). Meeting such expectations invites the on-going (re)evaluation of one's parenting (Reece, 2013) in the service of optimizing future 'choice' for children, in a wider context that holds parents individually responsible while underplaying the power of societal structures to limit choice in practice, especially for low income families (L. S. Clark, 2013).

Looking backwards, looking forwards: qualitative research with parents

> "We live in a society that is hugely affected by technology in every single way… kids have got to learn a different way of thinking, learn a different way of doing things. I don't know if it's necessarily bad or what? But it's just different."
> (Henry Thompson, White British middle income father of children aged six, 13 and 16)

In our research project exploring parenting practices, values and imaginaries, *Parenting for a Digital Future*,[1] we interviewed 73 families in London in 2015 and 2016. [2] We recruited families with dependent children who were diverse in socio-economic status, ethnicity and age of child(ren). They are not entirely representative, however, as we specifically recruited some families who had, in one way or another, specifically sought a "digital future" - parents of children learning digital media arts, or attending after-school coding club, or "geeky" parents or parents who blog about their parenting (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017) or parents of children with special needs who hope the digital will provide a much needed work-around to socio-economic inclusion and a viable future (Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2017). Thus our purposive sampling strategy (Palys, 2008) encompassed the 'commonplace diversity' of London (Wessendorf, 2014) - parents from a wide variety of different ethnic and religious communities, living on annual incomes ranging from under £15,000 per year to well over £100,000.[3]

From the minute they opened the front door to us, parents were eager to discuss the meaning of the many digital devices that clutter their homes and occupy their children's attention. They easily looked *backwards*, comparing their childhood with that of their children. They found it harder to project *forwards*, though much of the emotion attached to present uses of digital media is attributable to the elusive nature of the future. When asked about the future, parents' anxiety over their lack of control, and their investment in knowing what they could not know, was palpable:

> "I have no idea, to be honest, because I look at her, I want to know actually, I want to say look, I think she will be this, but I can't." (Claudia Ferreira, mixed race Portuguese-born low income mother of children aged six months and nine)

> "I really don't know. I mean, I really can't predict. Things have changed so much even in the last ten years; it's unrecognizable from ten years ago. I've got no idea what will be around when, you know, 15 years' time or whatever." (Melissa Bell, White British middle income mother of children aged three and four)

What resources can support parents in shaping the present so as to optimize their child's future? Most readily available is the imagery from popular media and, sometimes, from public policy predictions about the future of education, work or commerce. Crucially this tends to be speculative and extreme, whether utopian or dystopian. Ariam Parkes, a Black Eritrean-born middle income mother of three daughters aged two to 10, drew on science fiction imagery in saying,

> "Sometimes it does sound a bit farfetched now but then, you know, a lot of stuff that we have nowadays would have sounded farfetched, you know, 50 years ago…So, you know, the thing about being microchipped or, you know, being, kind of, being able to pay for things just by, you know, putting your thumb in and that kind of... You know, I'm sure some of it exists somewhere."

Jay Cochrane, a Black British middle income father of three children aged six to 12, regaled us with terrifying tales from the news - the South Koreans who live alone and go online to watch others eat for company, the violence on our streets because young people don't know how to negotiate conflict peaceably face-to-face.

Compared with the future, the past is less uncertain, of course, though still open to interpretation, and parents often recall their personal histories through a nostalgic lens, this intensifying their concerns for their children's lives in both the present and the future. This father was typical in recalling how, when he was young, he would be:

> 'Round my friend's house, we'd be interacting… we'd have been going playing football you know, just doing things. These days, they're just in their bedrooms, like hermits." (Robert Kostas, White British Cypriot middle income father of teens aged 12 and 15)

Since for most parents, their childhood past was largely non-digital and their children's future is constructed as highly digital, no wonder that their children's present use of digital media is a source of tension. Like many of our interviewees, Florence Lewis (White British high income mother of two) is not sure how to explain her present anxieties, pointing both to technology and to the destabilizing effects of city living in late modernity:

> "I didn't grow up in London, and so I think, I had more family around, I had a bigger garden, you know, it was just a different way of being. And now I think everything feels more intense. I don't know whether that's because I feel under a lot of pressure and I'm working very hard and it feels like there's less time available to appreciate just being, sometimes."

Summing up her ambivalent awareness of the entanglement between social and technological change, she says

> "I do feel that technology is almost a dis-enabler of families, because where it enables everyone to be so far apart… It's always a double-edged sword, isn't it? I think it has as many negatives as positives."

And yet most parents are sure they want a digital future for their children, not wanting their children to be left behind: as Habiba Bekele (Black Ethiopian-born low income mother of four young children) put it:

> "I do encourage them, because this is their future, that the technology, everything you know, the technology you know. Now the technology, they cover everything, so I want them to be given that technology."

Although the salience of the non-digital past and the powerful symbolism of a digital future leads parents to conceive of their role, in part at least, through the lens of the digital, there are nonetheless key points of distinction among them. Some are related to their class positioning, education or age of children. Others are endemic to parents' distinctive narratives about the future, which do not, as we show, map easily onto expected demographic categories. Situating our research in London meant that for several families the experience of migration also presents a significant incursion into the experience of parenting. Less radically, others had moved from the countryside into London in pursuit of professional or creative opportunities, and so their experiences of parenting were colored by memories of their different childhood landscapes.

Reading across our body of research we can contrast two kinds of parental narratives: the *romantic*, in which the future offers opportunities for the heroic individual to act, create and self-actualize; and the *instrumental* in which the future offers resources for the skilled and rational individual to get ahead. Both tend towards optimism – and parents do tend to be hopeful for their children, we found – in some ways drawing on utopian imaginaries in the

wider culture. But we also heard parents narrate a more anxious, oppressive or dystopian vision of the future that demands flexibility and adaptability in the face of lack of social mobility, the burden of individualized choices, and growing *precarity*. Although we distinguish these approaches in what follows, these are not to be mapped simply onto individuals, for not only do these narratives intersect but also parents move between and amongst them, in response to changing circumstances, emerging interests, as their children grow up.

Romantic hopes for the digital future

Wembe Kazadi came to the UK from Central Africa and lives with his son Bintu (10) and daughter Mani (5) in a government-provided studio apartment in South London, living on a miniscule income while waiting for his asylum claim to be assessed. Contact with his partner - still in their country of origin awaiting permission and resources to join her family in the UK - was limited to WhatsApp texts and video calls on Viber, the platforms that Wembe had used to maintain contact with his children before they had recently joined him. As he left Africa when his partner was pregnant, he hadn't met Mani in person before she came to the UK, his parenting being conducted exclusively through digital media for almost five years.

As soon as the interview started, Wembe recounted his fond aspirations for his children's futures, informed by his own experiences of seeking creative opportunities despite considerable adversity. Wembe had started making and acting in films in primary school in his home country, despite few opportunities to pursue his passion. He described how his own parents:

> "Didn't feel that it was a good job for me. I was intelligent when I was at school, that's why my parents think about doing something like, like being a doctor or doing something different, so they weren't expecting me, the way I was expecting doing this, art job, you know, an actor, they weren't expecting it. But that was my choice. I remember, I used to go to rehearsals without letting them know, it was like I was going to see a friend, but I was going to rehearse."

Wembe wants desperately to encourage this children's creative interests in contrast to the constrained parenting he himself had received:

> "A long time ago, even before they were born, I was thinking of having a family of artists… I didn't have this chance [because] people in my country… speaking about arts, people don't really pay attention to that, don't really see it as a potential job."

He lauded Mani's shy interest in fashion and design, and noted Bintu's interest in mechanics and technology, hoping they would "have the chance to have a good life. I will mentor them to have a good career in the future, something like that. I would like to see them having their dream happening." Wembe here demonstrates his commitment to what Beck (1986/2005) describes as a "choice biography," akin to Giddens' (1991) formulation of modern self-

identity which emphasizes the individual's capacity for reflexive self-determination. Yet while wishing to have "more artists in the family like me," he recognizes that his children may choose another path and this for him is even more important:

> "[They] have their own choice, I don't mind to support them in their choice… I think I won't like to put the rein on people, on their dreams, you know. I will encourage them anyway… I would like to see them having their dream happening."

The emphasis on choice biography is articulated through the metaphor of the "dream," capturing the romanticism and optimism of Wembe's approach to parenting. The Kazadis' limited resources mean that while Wembe wants to buy a computer for his children, he has not been unable to; and while he has his own laptop for his filmmaking, he does not let his children touch it for fear they will break it. Digital interests are encouraged if they are creative or educational, but like many other parents he describes himself as a "bit concerned about the games… I don't think it's really good for them, because they need to focus a bit more on learning as well."

Other parents join in Wembe's formulation of a romantic future, filled with choice and agency in contrast to their own upbringing, although perhaps with a less dramatic account of a personal creative journey. They too valorize freedom and creative expression while struggling to assert practical control over children's time, development and interests. For instance, Daya Thakur, a British Asian low income single mum of four children, told us:

> "I don't know. I imagine them to... I just want them to be happy, and be independent, and find their means to whatever makes them happy, and be successful, and whatever.

Again the romantic vision prioritizes choice as the route to happiness:

> "You don't have to have one specific thing that you want to do… You can be diverse and find out what you like. So I'm not trying to pinpoint one thing, I'm trying to encourage lots of things. Then it's up to them."

Like Wembe, Daya describes her own upbringing as "traditional" and "strict" and yet (or therefore) connected to those around her, lamenting that now "people are just so… they've got closed lives now… I don't think anyone has time for anybody else." She explains that

> "my upbringing was a little bit different. We didn't have the technology, but secondly, it wasn't so much of... it wasn't that open with communication. So I've just, I've made that conscious effort to make sure that I know what they do, you know, as much as I can."

Daya links these changes in parent-child communication and the advent of the digital, seeking ways to share technology use with her son while also while establishing a closer

bond face-to-face. Interestingly, however, neither Wembe nor Daya consider that for their children, the freedom to choose – especially when expected to deliver success, happiness and fulfilled dreams – might be burdensome (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002).

Some parents take a hands-on approach to brokering or scaffolding digital opportunity for their children, contradicting the now-outdated conception of parents as 'digital immigrants' (Barron, Martin, Takeuchi, & Fithian, 2009; Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2016). For example, Rachel Ealy, a White British middle income mother raising Mia (8) with her partner in a terraced house filled with both Rachel and Mia's artistic creations, felt her own choices were limited by her gender and wants to resist this for her daughter. Rachel recalled how at school she had felt a burning passion for technical trades in woodshop but was not allowed to do

> "metal work or woodwork. That was a step too far. So in fact I sat on the sidelines of cookery and needlework, watching other people do it… At the time I went to school, boys were clearly channeled without choice down one route and girls down another. I cannot believe that so many years later we're not that far ahead."

Looking ahead to Mia's future, Rachel is clear that she does not want Mia to be pushed away from learning technical skills. Mia's school offers a coding club and although she was at the time too young to join Rachel was committed to teaching Mia the basics of coding so that she can "know that it's about making stuff happen, rather that passively receiving IT." At school Mia had learned the basics of a programmable robot so Rachel had downloaded an app that taught the underlying concepts of coding. More so than many parents, Rachel is aware that women in the tech world often get "sidelined into the kind of soft media stuff, rather than the stuff where you make a thing happen" and is keen that Mia will not be among those who "find themselves channeled down this bystander route rather than the person who is instigating the action, the maker, the doer."

Like many parents, Rachel is reflexive about her responsibility for shaping Mia's future, seeing herself as "determining to an extent what she would do when she is 35 and 40 and 50" and recognizing that "you vest all of this in your child and we only have to one so she's got a lot to carry on those little shoulders." Her romantic vision of a fulfilling future is, for Rachel, strongly motivating, and drawn in part in reaction to her own childhood and her sense of hopefulness that Mia, growing up with her two mothers, will grow into a world of possibilities:

> "[I hope she] gets to do a lot of stuff, that she doesn't just travel down one line. That she gets to do – that she writes poetry and does plumbing, you know, and climbs mountains and goes to hackathons. [That] she solves problems and she works outdoors and indoors… I am an optimistic soul so I view the future as a warm and inviting place. I guess there will be things that we haven't thought of yet. I think most of it would just be continuation of how things are now but better, brighter, stronger, and shinier."

Instrumental acquisition of 21st Century skills

Although Rachel's narrative is the articulate as regards the technologies that she wants Mia to have access to, in the romantic narratives more generally parents engage rather little with the specifics of digital media affordances or practices. A more common narrative about digital media is instrumental, pragmatically appropriating public policy discourses of 21st Century Skills to ensure that children "keep up" or "get ahead" in terms of the educational and professional opportunities afforded by the digital age (Ananiadou & Claro, 2009).

Single mother Anisha Kumar – born in Nigeria to Indian parents and now living in London earning a middle income in her parents' business – checked out prospective primary schools for her three-year-old son. She told us excitedly:

> "There is so much computer-based stuff! I went to an open day last week and this one school here and in their music room they had their keyboards attached to Macs.... And these kids were basically creating their music on Garage Band which was a tool on the Mac. And I thought that's so amazing, you know, we just played [music] or whatever. And so I think technology is the way forward. So although, you know, we want to, kind of, have our children still want to play outside and go outdoors I think there is a lot of space... there needs to be a lot of space in their lives for technology because that's the way their lives are going."

Lena Houben and Avery Dahl, White Dutch and Australian middle income parents to Miriam (12) and Marko (8) also value digital skills in preparing their children for the future. Lena is a former academic who left her profession reluctantly after having children, wants her children to have the professional opportunities she felt she was denied. Thus she is pleased Marko is starting to pick up coding skills at school because it would bring him "skills beyond what I've got… I can see that we're entering a world, a status in which they absolutely have to have other kinds of tools."

While Wembe sought to manage what he saw as a risky present (for example, by controlling screen time, especially gaming) while opening up a creative and digital future for his children, and while Rachel tries to steer her daughter past the barriers to reach a future of opportunity, Lena seeks to prepare her children for what she sees as a risky future by opening up alternative pathways – digital and non-digital – in the present. She too recalls a strict and limiting upbringing, but for her its legacy was a tendency to be strict as a parent herself, it proving a struggle for her to relax around her daughter:

> "My parents were very strict, and I was sent to bed very early and I couldn't watch what everyone else was watching, I couldn't join in the discussions. I just started to realize that she [Miriam] was probably going to survive without my being excessively protective, and that I needed to kind of let go a little bit and let her experiment. That was fine when she was still eleven, but it's the snowballing, and we've suddenly

> ended up with three devices in a very short space of time, all my anxiety has come back."

Lena's more "conservative" and anxious approach to instilling the "old ways" (in her words) in her children contrast with her husband Avery's avowedly optimistic approach. Having recently returned to work in television after a period of unemployment, he describes himself as "more front-foot on new technology," enthusing that coding is "the Latin of our era" and that he wants "the kids to be as fluent in code, in the grammar of coding, as they can while their minds are still plastic."

It is not that all digital endeavors are equally embraced. In a recent family conflict over Miriam's secretly uploaded video of Miriam dancing with her friends to YouTube, it was Lena who protested. On the other hand, Lena encourages her to share her writing online, encouraging her to blog her emerging interest in poetry and creative writing while her father fears that her "juvenilia" could damage her future 'brand' - while Lena sees her early writings as beginning an archive of future benefit. Thus both parents are highly future-oriented, debating which digital skills and activities should be supported in the present – but coming to conflicting conclusions in the face of manifest uncertainty.

Samantha Scott, a White American high income mother of three boys (10, 14 and 16) is similarly conflicted. On the one hand she celebrates her oldest son Niall's achievements, regaling us of tales of his term as the captain of the robotics team at his elite private school. In Samantha's analysis for Niall this is "really more exciting than any academic subject. He loves the programming. He's taking computer science AP this year. He loved Java last year." Echoing Lena Houben's use of the language metaphor, Samantha notes that digital skills are important not only for discrete activities such as robotics but also as a set of wider competencies or "life skills:"

> "It's certainly something that you can take with you wherever you go, and, you know, as long as the [programming] language that you learn doesn't become obsolete… it's just handy stuff to know, it's useful; that's the world they live in and it's probably only going to become more heavily digital as the decades pass…You know, as you have older generations who aren't tech savvy dying off and new generations who really are just purely screen-oriented coming of age that you're going to continue to see a greater and greater shift away from print media to digital media, and that's the world they're going to live in, so, you know, they need to be as fluent in that world as possible."

Yet she notes with trepidation when digital media also prevent Niall from being successful. He has been diagnosed with ADHD so Samantha describes herself as "policing" his interests a little bit more. With his "weak impulse control" Samantha has to work with him to decline gaming invitations from friends, installing an app called "SelfControl" both on his home laptop and the one issued from school. She worries about Niall's abilities to self-regulate once he gets to university, comparing to her depiction of herself as a highly-motivated young woman. She muses:

"Well, certainly when they go off to college and they don't have the policeman there going, turn on your SelfControl. I'm not there yet, so I don't know how it's going to work…you just have to learn those limits by yourself. There's no better way to learn them. But, you know, I suppose, you know, there's a little... back in my head going, what if they go and they just stop going to class and just play video games all the time and you'll become one of those professional gamers who actually gets sponsored and paid to play the game all the time? .... It's not the end of the world, but on the other hand, I don't see that as really contributing to the greater good in any significant way. So I would prefer them to choose a path that had a more direct correlation to making the world a better place in some way, shape, or form.

Samantha goes on to list several ways in which Niall's interests in computers and engineering might be the skills that help "make the world a better place" – demonstrating how instrumental narratives are not of-necessity individualistic. And yet these interests also cause conflict in the here-and-now, with Samantha even going as far as to establish an informal support group for other mothers in Niall's social circle who struggle with pointing their children towards the "right" digital activities, a group they call the "gamer enablers."

Flexibility and precarity in facing the neo-liberal future

Underpinning both the romantic and the instrumental narratives is the awareness, also, of the changes in the structure of the present and future labor markets wrought from decades of increasing neoliberalism and consequent precarity (Neilson and Rossiter, 2008). For higher-income parents, Giddens' (1999) notion of "colonizing the future" captures how these narratives can be read as 'security strategies' to shape the future so as to reproduce their own privilege (Lareau, 2011, Villalobos, 2014). For low income parents, the pressure to keep up with their more privileged counterparts means that they are often judged as 'deficient' (Dermott and Pomati, 201), and are faced with a more insurmountable, and yet similarly individualized, burden in trying to help their children 'get ahead' in the face of such a changeable labor market and so much future uncertainty (Watson, 2016).

For Peter Rowntree, a White British middle income communications and IT worker, this precarity was experienced the hard way, when he was unexpectedly made redundant. Commenting that the days of "jobs for life went a long time ago" his life philosophy now is that in a precarious world one must be as flexible as possible:

"I think what gets you on, if you're flexible, and you will try your hand at different stuff, and you're not, oh I can't do that, I can't do that. I helped out, for example, some people at work doing a tender bid on Thursday, didn't have to, but they were very grateful for that, and that will probably stand me in good stead in the future."

He looks back on “a lousy childhood” as a mixture of “rules, rules, rules” yet parents who “didn’t really spend any time with me” to explain how parenting – perhaps especially fathering – is different today. He has a theory of learning that dovetails with the affordances of technology, as he sees it, asserting that he and also his three sons, each geeky in their way, prefer practical learning to talk-and-chalk. He says of his sons’ digital video-making, “it might be good, it might be okay, but it doesn’t really matter, it’s not the point, they’re learning through it.” His is so much not a romantic commitment to creative expression as an instrumental concern that his sons should gain the skills that will give them vital flexibility; as he put it, “I think if you can show people your added value you will do okay.”

Not all are so confident that flexibility will suffice. Anna Michaels, a Black British single middle income mother of two children (aged 10 and 13) observed,

> “Technology is the future but technology is not reliable. It’s not reliable and you can’t... I think that you should be able to read and write, not technology doing everything for you. Do it yourself.”

Such ambivalence, in turn, reinforces parents’ emphasis on independence and skill as the qualities they should instill in their children to help them face future uncertainty. Speaking of technology, Mary Peterson, born in Kenya, in a middle income artistic household with two small children, says:

> “It’s the way forward in terms of anybody’s work nowadays, technology is somehow involved in every profession, so for them to be literate on these things, but also to understand the dangers, but to be literate on these things is essential now.”

For parents facing relatively extreme difficulties – such as those whose children have special educational needs – even precarity promises improvement over the current status quo that marginalizes those who are different. Nina Robbins, White British middle income mother of Iris, aged nearly eight, has given up a professional career to homeschool and care for Iris who has Autism and Sensory Processing Disorder. As an “Autism mum” (a term she uses, but also contests) Nina finds it complicated to visualize Iris’s future, seeing and wishing to encourage Iris’s strengths and aptitudes, yet also acknowledging the difficult path ahead.

Her vision of the future builds on Nina’s enthusiasm for what digital media offers her child. Echoing Rachel’s positive language (“brighter, shinier”), Nina describes herself and her husband as “cautiously, hysterically excited” about the potential that digital media bring for Iris, who often cannot leave the house (due more to her sensory difficulties than her Autism). Nina contemplates how

> “50 years ago [Iris] would’ve been institutionalized… so now, even when she’s feeling very anxious, even when her sensory problems are really bad, she can still virtually travel the world, interact with different types of people. She isn’t just, you know, literally peering out through the curtains wondering what’s going on out there.”

Noting how Iris uses video calls to keep in touch with friends and family, Nina hopes that this might allow her to eventually "tele work or whatever the latest, you know, work from home" – allowing Iris to play to her strengths in seeking out work she enjoys but not having to be tied to an office.

While parents discuss the need for flexibility, they rarely go so far as to echo the language of 'precarity' found in critical academic studies on, for example the ways in which digital media intersect with the casualization of labor (Fish & Srinivasan, 2011), or how the so-called 'gig economy' contributes to a growing 'precariat class'; Stilwell & McGregor, 2016). Rather, in response to dystopical cultural narratives, they tend pragmatically to focus on securing strategies to navigate precarity, with more or less success, since "being reflexive, and successfully negotiating future risks, both real and perceived, constitutes privileged cultural capital" (Threadgold and Nilan, 2009, p.48; see also Neilson, 2015). This may not leave them sanguine. While Lena Houben appreciates that her children are "entering a world… in which they absolutely have to have other kinds of [digital] tools," she also anticipates a techno-dystopian future with obvious dread:

> "It's perfectly obvious to me that we are heading towards for a kind of virtual and robotic cyborg future, where …our interaction with kind of techno is going to become subtler and subtler, our interaction with machines is going to become more and more fine-tuned and our processing of knowledge is going to become kind of mediated ever more highly through kind of virtual spaces."

Conclusions

For today's parents, their children's interests, desires and frustrations often seem heavily centered on the digital media in their pockets and ears, and so too do society's wider hopes and fears, predictions and panics. When they look back, they recall their own largely non-digital childhoods, brought to life vividly as they contemplate their children's present. And when they look forward, little fills the imagination as vividly as science fiction accounts of a future dominated by technology (Dourish & Bell, 2011), often supported by policy predictions that the jobs of the future will be "digital jobs" requiring technological skills and flexibility (House of Lords: Select Committee on Digital Skills, 2015), and countered by popular media panics about digital risks and alienation (Turkle, 2011).

Not only is the digital highly visible and evocative, but other forms of change can be comparatively elusive, difficult to articulate in ordinary terms and for their practical effects. While the long-term and deep-seated effects of globalization, capitalism, individualization and mediatization continue to unfold (Krotz, 2007), the West has recently undergone several decades of relative stability and growing prosperity (Brown et al., 2011), with fewer experiences of war, migration or economic collapse to divide parent and child generations than is typical of earlier generations (or other parts of the world). In this period of stability, it is media and consumer culture that have come to provide the dominant markers of

generational difference (in terms of rapid changes in lifestyle, fashion and values; Ziehe, 1994), including popularizing the very notion of 'the generation gap' (Abrams, 1959, even if these remain intangible to parents unless they have themselves undergone migration or suffered family breakdown or unexpected unemployment.

Since "late modernity further destabilizes naturalized futures", Tavory and Elisasoph (2013: 928) suggest that people "must constantly orient themselves toward multiple possible futures." Such orientation requires them both to imagine the future(s) and to marshal their resources – economic and cultural capital in the present, memory and other symbolic resources from the past – to try and optimize the future and avoid risk. Yet as sociologists tell us, while each generation tries to provide better for its children, this is becoming difficult, especially for the already high-achieving middle-classes, resulting in intense anxieties for most. Through the construction of parenting narratives which vest effort and values in ordinary tasks associated with digital media, we have shown how parents are constructing an everyday calculus of what is worth doing, why and what the costs and benefits might be. Thus they seek to navigate the uncertain path between past, present and future., whether with hope or dread, or a more prosaic sense of resigned or comfortable continuity.

The romantic and instrumental narratives discussed in this chapter, especially in their more utopian versions, tend to be strongly agentic, suggesting that individualized choices make a difference and that established barriers to opportunity can be overcome. This marks a notable difference between parental narratives, which are generally hopeful about children's future prospects, and the critical social science literature with its often-gloomy predictions about the march of neoliberalism, in which flexibility is configured as precarity and inequality, while sociality and solidarity are threatened. Another difference is the relative absence from parental narratives of the *social justice* imaginary important in the academic literature (Ito et al., 2013; Jenkins, Shresthova, Gamber-Thompson, Kligler-Vilenchik, & Zimmerman, 2016), although some parents do talk of digital media as offering their children the future potential for voice, expression and mediated participation.

While we do not wish to overplay the importance of the digital in today's society, for many long-term societal shifts are arguably more profound, and while we are aware that we asked the parents in our fieldwork precisely to reflect on the digital in accounting for their parenting, we would still suggest that the digital is crucial to imagining the future – perhaps it could hardly be otherwise. There are several reasons why this might be.

First, the driving force exerted by the political economy of the digital should not be overlooked. In just a few years, the world's most profitable businesses are no longer from the world of manufacture or natural resources but, rather, the big corporates of the digital world (Wooldridge, 2016); and, distinctively, it is precisely their business to fill our time and imaginations in particular, often heavily mainstreamed ways. In the public and academic imagination, the powerful binary of utopian and dystopian futures predominates. Discourses of the future are particularly potent because there is no certain knowledge against which to judge them or rein in their excesses, and although social critics often focus on the dystopian,

parents feel they cannot afford to miss the possibility of utopian benefits of digital media for their children.

Then, there is a synergy between society's long-established conception of children and childhood – flexible, creative, peer-focused and optimistic, yet also transgressive, childish, risk-taking – and society's more recent conception of the digital environment, also flexible, creative, networked, transgressive yet potentially transformative. No wonder that the notion of the "digital native", linking the young and the digital, took such hold of the public imagination, promising wonderful opportunities along with the more panicky claims that surround children and technology.

Last, the media are highly self-referential, delighting in their every digital innovation, framing each through evocative imagery and investing them with the heightened emotions of utopian or dystopian predictions. The news media trumpet each latest technological innovation as potentially transformative for society, unfolding lively scenarios of what the future might hold and what technological impacts could aid or hasten society's many ills. At least in the capitalist West, to think of the future is in significant part to think of the transformative power of technology. And whether or not digital media will define the future, people often believe they will.

Much of the anxiety attached to digital media can be attributed to the sense of socio-technological speeding up whereby so-called 'media generations' or 'digital generations' seem to get ever shorter, falling "well below the period of biological generation" (Williams, 1976, p.142). Coping with a 'runaway world' (Giddens, 1999) while simultaneously dispossessed of the authoritarian culture of parenting that they themselves often experienced as children leaves parents feeling destabilized. And while many of these changes are surely beyond their control, paradoxically parents and children often see digital media as a welcome opportunity for the exercise of agency.

Knowing they are responsible for the influx of digital media into their homes and their children's lives presents a keen dilemma for parents. Rather than demonize the children who clamor for them, it is often easier to demonize the digital media as symbolic objects that prove so intractable to domestic negotiations over time, attention and values. But perhaps unlike the arguments over loud music, long hair and drug culture that typified earlier generational conflicts, parental anxieties about today's digital media are far more ambivalent (Critcher, 2008). The same media that seem to present such dangers also promise cherished learning resources, creative opportunities and workplace skills. Thus parents seek to narrate a present that marks out stepping stones towards a promised digital future of opportunity.

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Notes

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[2] Each parent was interviewed face-to-face, separately or as a couple or with their children, generally at home although occasionally parents were interviewed opportunistically while they waited for their children to complete activities at learning sites. Interviews lasted between 30 minutes and several hours, averaging around 90 minutes. We took an ethnographic approach (Spradley, 1979), complementing our semi-structured interview protocol with a 'media tour' around the home where permitted and including some creative participatory methods to elicit participation from very young children (A. Clark, 2010). A key part of our interview protocol invited parents to look back to their own childhood, and how they were parented in pre- or early-digital times, and forward to their own child as a parent. Interviews were analyzed using NVIVO (a qualitative analysis software) using codes drawn from the research literature and developed inductively from our fieldwork. Particularly, we looked for "future talk" across our interviews, acting in what Levitas (2013) describes as an "archaeological mode" in order to excavate "shards and fragments" to assemble into a cohesive delineation of a desired future.

[3] Throughout this chapter we refer to 'low income' parents as those with yearly household incomes of less than £25,000, 'middle-income' as those with incomes ranging from £25,000 - £100,000 per year, and 'high income' as more than £100,000 per year.