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Lelia Green and Leslie Haddon

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Parents' reflections upon mediating older teens' online gaming practices

Lelia Green and Leslie Haddon

Abstract

This paper addresses the experiences of five parents from three families in a group of older gamers. It is unusual because the gamers are aged 16-17, and the parents recognise that their mediation role will soon be redundant. The gamers concerned have all played in the same gamer teams for a number of years and there are a range of indications from the parents' accounts that each of them is mindful of the circumstances under which the other team members are allowed to game. Indeed, it could be that the favoured game they all play, *DOTA 2*, was chosen because one gamer's family would not allow him access to 18+ games such as *Call of Duty*. The paper provides examples of where parents and children have each moderated their behaviour with the needs of the other in mind. It suggests that, as they reach the end of their active parenting role with their child moving into legal adulthood, parents become more willing to trust their own evidence of the impacts of their decision and are more likely to reject the cautionary tales of moral panics.

Gamers' and siblings' perspectives will be considered in a further paper, but parents' comments suggest that older teens are more able to see things from their parents' points of view and try to make it easier for the parents to make the decisions that both parties will find easier to live with. Unusually, this paper also considers the impact of siblings upon parents' mediation practices. It suggests that parents who have to take account of younger children in the family negotiate the impact of their individual decisions upon all the children in their care. It is clear that peers are also considered when it comes to parental regulation of older gamers' online activities. This paper suggests that parents of younger teens might feel more relaxed about their own children's online activities if they had more opportunity to talk to parents whose children have matured beyond the key early teen years of 13-16.

INTRODUCTION

This Media@LSE Working Paper arises out of Professor Lelia Green's Visiting Fellowship to LSE in the Autumn Term, 2014, in concert with a long-term Australian Research Council-funded project in which Lelia and Dr Leslie Haddon were co-Investigators (2011-15). The title of the project was *'Parents or peers: which group most affects the experiences of young people online, and how?'* and while most of the research was conducted in Australia this paper reports on a subset of interviews that took place with families in the UK in 2014.

The overall project addressed a research gap. While parental mediation has received some considerable attention, the influence of peers on children's online activities has been comparatively ignored. Hence the goal was to explore the nature of peer influence, how significant it was (and in what ways) compared to parental interventions, and the interaction between those two agents – e.g. how parents take their children's peer influences into account when developing their parental mediation strategies. The latter is a key focus of this current paper. The aim is to explore how parents of older teenagers in particular reflect on their parental mediation strategies, how their perspectives evolve over time and the extent to which they accommodate their children's commitments to peers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The new sociology of childhood underlines the social construction of childhood, noting all the societal discourses and institutions that shape our expectations of what children can and should do (James and Prout, 1997) while acknowledging that children are also active agents in this process (Prout, 2008). In addition, that literature also sees parenthood as a social construction, where child experts, the media and other stakeholders lobby to create an understanding of what constitutes 'good parenting'. This is the backdrop to the way parents in this study try to work out their positions as parents and decide what actions they should take in that role.

'Moral panics' (Cohen, 1972) are a specific strand of sociological enquiry and deal with historical concerns about children's experiences of ICTs like TV, video and more recently the internet (Cricher, 2008). The influence of moral panics are made manifest in current concerns about a variety of online risks, here referred to as the 'risk agenda' (Mascheroni and Haddon, forthcoming). This frame provides another context in which parents make their

parental decisions, and in the case of active gamers the most relevant risks discussed in the media relate to 'addiction' (Collins, 2011) and negative effects on children's sociability with peers (Mathews, 2001), given that some of those concerns have been specifically raised about gaming.

Sociologists have also pointed to change in family dynamics over time. The most prominent examples can be found in discussions of the de-traditionalization of the families, as they become less autocratic, entailing more intra-family negotiation and an interest in the child's perspective (Giddens, 1991). In practice, de-traditionalization is a broad umbrella term covering a range of approaches that some empirical studies have drawn upon when discussing negotiations between parents and children about mobile use (e.g. teenagers can stop out later with friends if they phone in to let parents know what they are doing.) (Williams and Williams, 2005) In keeping with this focus on increasing negotiation as children mature into young adults, others have referred to the part mobile phones can play as parents manage their child's increasing autonomy, seeing this is a step by step process whereby children earn more trust and responsibility on their way to adulthood (Nafus and Tracy, 2002). This is particular relevant here given the focus on older teens, a short step away from (at least legal) independence.

This general process of managing and gaining more independence also needs to be seen within the context of more recent social change as children have acquired greater autonomy over time. Pasquier (2008) discusses how children first acquired more spatial equality as many had their own bedrooms as personalised spaces, giving rise to bedroom culture (Livingstone, 2002). She adds how children gained more cultural autonomy in consuming technologies and cultural products mainly marketed at them and how they developed more relational autonomy in terms of their private communications with peers, enhanced by the mobile phone and the internet. Pasquier argues that many parents have come to respect a degree of privacy when it comes to their children; but children also guard their privacy, with any infringements being constructed as the equivalent of a parent looking at a child's personal letter, or their personal diaries. Livingstone (2009) has also commented on children's strong reactions to monitoring, noting a decline in electronic monitoring by parents because this does not fit with the democratic family ideal which is emerging in response to family de-traditionalization.

Since the focus of this paper is on parents' perspectives on their children's online activities and how they intervene (or do not) in that process, it is worth noting that there is a literature

focused specifically on the parental mediation of children's ICTs experiences that is psychology based and heavily quantitative in nature. To make a link with the previous section, this involves using research evidence to inform the policy advice to parents noted above. This tradition has developed typologies of parental mediation strategies, originally in relation to television (e.g. Desmond, *et al.*, 1985; Austin, 1993; Valkenburg, *et al.*, 1999) and subsequently adapted to the internet (Eastin, *et al.*, 2006; Livingstone and Helsper, 2008).

On the basis of these Livingstone *et al.* (2011: 103) identify five different kinds of parental mediation, upon which this paper will draw:

- i. co-use – the parent is present, even sharing the activity with the child,
- ii. active mediation – the parent talks about content (e.g. interpreting, critiquing) to guide the child,
- iii. restrictive mediation – the parent sets rules that restrict the child's use (e.g. by time or activities),
- iv. monitoring – the parent checks available records of the child's internet use afterwards and
- v. technical restrictions – use of software to filter, restrict or monitor the child's use.

Although there have been some reflections in the psychology literature on, for example, 'domains' of life where children might resist parental interventions more (Smetena, 1995), on the whole this approach has not investigated the child's perspective (Haddon, 2015). Nor have the nuances of parental perceptions been explored through qualitative studies. Both of these have been addressed in the work of the *EU Kids Online*¹ network, and its sister project *Net Children Go Mobile*², the latter looking more specifically at children's experience of smartphones and tablets. The *EU Kids Online* survey quantitative research asked about children's perspectives on and responses to parental mediation (Livingstone *et al.*, 2011) and both projects involved qualitative research that looked at understandings and negotiations within families (Smahel and Wright, 2014; Haddon and Vincent, 2014). Given its interest in intra-familial processes, the current project draws in particular on these sources.

The first point to make from these studies is that parental mediation is complex. The *EU Kids Online* survey found variations in practices across countries while other studies had emphasised class differences within countries (e.g. Hollingsworth, *et al.*, 2011 for the UK).

¹ www.eukidsonline.net

² www.netchildrengomobile.eu

The qualitative work found differences in the degree to which parents could articulate their concerns about risks (Haddon, 2014) and differences in parental views about when children were mature enough to be responsible for mobile phones and smartphone (Haddon and Vincent, 2014). It is worth noting that parents did not always present a united front in giving advice. This was sometimes clearest where families had split up, and children reported somewhat different mediation practices when staying with mothers or fathers. Of particular relevance to this paper, is when parents themselves adapt in the face of the responses of their children, as when some children were unwilling to hand over smartphones for inspection because it was an invasion of their privacy (Haddon and Vincent, 2014; a similar point was made in Australian research on internet privacy in general: Green, *et al.*, 2004).

The focus of the original Australian project on which this paper is based is the relationship between parents and peers. Yet this theme only appears in glimpses in current published research, as when the demands of peers and parents clash. For example, previous research on children's use of social networking sites has shown that while parents may be concerned about what personal information children reveal about themselves, children noted that they have to reveal something about themselves to be interesting to their peers (Livingstone, 2010). Meanwhile the *EU Kids Online* qualitative research found that while some parents tried to ban or warn their children about talking to strangers online when using social media or playing games, children tend to talk about mundane (yet for them interesting) subjects with their peers from outside their known friendship circle (Haddon, 2014). This echoes the way in which early radio pioneers, including children, found pleasure in meeting people, however briefly, over the radio waves (Douglas, 1986). Given the focus of the overall project on parents and peers, a key dimension to be developed in this paper looks at parents' perceptions of what they have learned from mediating older (male) gamers.

Finally, the role of siblings in influencing these familial mediation processes is very under-researched. The *EU Kids Online* qualitative material showed how siblings might be the ones to introduce children to online risks, although they also tried to protect younger siblings from problematic experiences, sometimes in response to encouragement from parents (Farrugia and Haddon, 2014). We have almost no research, however, on such matters as how parents' earlier mediation experiences with their older children subsequently affects what they do with their other children, or, of interest in this paper, how the very presence of younger siblings may have a bearing upon how parents interact with their older brothers and sisters.

Based in part on this literature review the following research questions were developed from the original interest in parents' mediation of older teens' online experiences:

- How do parents' perspectives and interventions evolve over time when mediating their older teens' online activities?
- How do they feel about issues of privacy and autonomy when it comes to monitoring older children's online activities?
- To what extent are parents willing to negotiate around family rules to accommodate their adolescent child's responsibilities to their peers, here specifically as a member of an online group of gamers?
- How do parents and older teens deal with the fact differences in parental mediation practices within a particular circle of friends?
- In what ways does the presence of younger siblings in a family impact upon parental responses to their older children's online activities?

METHODOLOGY

The original aim of this Australian Research Council Discovery Project, jointly awarded to Lelia Green and Leslie Haddon, was to investigate negotiations between parents, children and peers around young people's collaborative activities as gamers, fan fiction writers/readers and social network users with a view to identifying the different influences at play at different ages within these negotiating groups. Most of the research was conducted in Perth, Australia, where it proved difficult to recruit collections of families whose children collaborated together online. However, towards the end of the data gathering phase, through the Investigators' extended social networks, an opportunity arose to fulfil the original intention to interview members of families of a number of teens collaborating within an established and coherent group of online gamers (the rationale for this choice is explained in the next section).

These potential participants were located in an affluent suburb within the British Midlands and the gamer group had been playing real-time strategy and role-playing games together for some years. Ethics permission was sought and received to recruit British-based participants and ten interviews and two focus groups were conducted. Each participant was interviewed separately from the others. Additionally, the parents' and teens' (separate) focus groups were held in one family's home involving participants who had previously been interviewed.

Individual semi-structured interviews (Green, 2003) preceded the focus group sessions, with the latter designed to investigate differences between individuals' approaches and experiences. Although both parents and gamers were included in the research, along with one sibling, this paper is based on parents' perceptions. A separate paper, still in development, addresses gamers' perspectives. In general terms, there was significant overlap between what the parents said about the mediation practices in their homes, and the practices recounted by the gamers.

As with the Australian data, all interview and focus group materials were transcribed and analysed for themes and comments using a constant comparative approach (Fram, 2013). This approach provides the rich, deep data which informs the 'thick description' that Geertz (1973: 10) identifies as necessary to capture the nuances of ethnography and interpret culture. In the case of the research reported here, the participants are known to each other and the work can form a case study (Yin, 2009) of family responses to collaborating gamers. All names and some identifying details of the participants have been changed to help ensure confidentiality. The interviews around the gamers involved five parents from three families, two couples, including the mother/father in each couple, and a gamer's mother from another family. To maintain confidentiality, parents are referred by fictitious names with no specific link implied to the speaker's family (and therefore spousal) ties.

The families involved in this research are broadly middle class, which is important because previous research has shown that parents from this background are more confident in their ability to mediate their children's online experiences, and more likely to encourage them to be more independent (Hollingworth, *et al.*, 2011). The gamers concerned achieve academically in the top quarter of their age group cohort. These three gamer families form the majority cohort of the gamers' 'inner circle', with another five or so families making up the extended gamer networks. At the point at which these interviews took place, in 2014, the gamer sons had already been playing *Defense of the Ancients* (DOTA2), their preferred online game, for a couple of years.

Given that parental mediation practices reflect a range of influences, practices vary between the families. While the research reported here is specific to these families in the context of this group of teen gamers, the aim is to explore more general factors and concerns considered by parents when mediating their children's online activities, here online gameplay, especially considering their child's commitments to their peers.

ONLINE GAMING

This research deals specifically with the family circumstances of a group of teens who actively participate as a 5-person team within the strategy-rich multiplayer online battle arena game *DOTA 2*. In the original Australian proposal the aim was to include peer groups that had particularly close bonds based around a common interest (for example, a fan fiction reading/writing circle was also sought in Australia). The aim was not to find ‘typical’ groups of peers, and indeed in some senses these do not exist, but rather some particular groups of peers whose common interest and related interaction was such that it would highlight how parental mediation might take peer culture into account. The specific nature of that commitment is now explained. The case of online gaming was also interesting because of wider moral panics about the ‘addictive’ nature of gaming and its potential detrimental effects on young people (Greenfield, 2008), in part due to the fact that high level gameplay is time-consuming. It was assumed, correctly, that the parents would have encountered these discourses and that this was a context in which they made their decisions.

DOTA 2 is a modification of *Warcraft* (3), itself from the stable collectively known as *World of Warcraft*. The fact that *DOTA 2* was free was one of the reasons why this team of players adopted it. While a single player version is available, the vast majority of the global *DOTA 2* gameplay involves the multi-player version, with the most challenging and complex games harnessing the skills and energies of ten experienced players in two teams of five players each. The five-player-per-team version is the preferred game format played by the participating team, since it maximises the complexity, strategy and difficulty required. A group of gamers that plays together maybe called a team, clan, guild or faction, featuring a core of preferred gamers and a number of ‘floating’ associates, rather like substitutes, available to join a game if one or more of the key participants is not available.

The sense of commitment felt by each member to other people in the team, and their dependency upon each other as a team, is an important element of the inter-personal responsibilities and dynamics, potentially impacting upon parents’ mediation strategies. Each team-member is aware of the responsibility not to ‘do shit’. As forum member FreudianTrip posted in response to Dean’s (2014) article,

In fighting games, if you do shit/are shit, I win. In *DOTA 2* and it's [sic] various clones. If you do even slightly shitty plays compared to the average skill level and you're on my team, I've lost. [...] This is about 8-15 minutes into a game and 'we' (read 'I') have lost. Yet

a game normally lasts around 40 minutes and you don't want to concede. So I have to waste 30 minutes of my time losing.

As becomes clear in the next section, the particular requirements of older children's participation in a specific game such as *DOTA 2* with, for example, a forty-to-sixty minute timeframe, are integrated within the discussion points upon which parents base their mediation strategies.

THE FINDINGS

This paper generally concentrates upon the parents' perspectives. The sections are structured according to the five research questions addressed in the Literature Review.

Parents' evolving perceptions of and support for their teens' online activities

Like many other parents, Gill (a gamer mother) is aware of the media panics around online gaming. At the same time, she is beginning to trust her own view of the situation:

Rather than just accepting what you read in the paper and saying "Oh, this is bad for us", we're thinking "Well, hang on a minute, our boy seems to be doing well at school, he seems to be having friends, [...] What are we worried about? What are our complaints?"

Here we see a parent of an older child starting to develop a more nuanced response to their child's gaming practices. Gill also reflects critically on public concerns about children's declining sociability:

All the psychologists have gone on about boys not communicating and not talking to each other. And I said, "When they have their friends round [gaming]' [...] they never stop talking!"

In other words, this parent has transitioned from constructing online gaming as a potential challenge to seeing it as a way in which her son actually relates to his peers. Now that this is her dominant perspective, it has prompted a change in her own attitudes to gaming: 'Up until probably about a year ago I was anti the gaming.' Even so, Gill has always felt that she had to balance what she saw as her responsibility in terms of mediating her son's online activities as

a 'good parent' with a recognition that peer group friendships are a critically important part of a young person's life.

But I wouldn't have ever stopped it [online gaming] coming in because [...] I don't think you can take your children away from their peer groups [...] that would just seem unnecessarily cruel.

Mothers Jane and Cath talked less about their changed attitude to gaming and more about the general growth in their trust that their child could manage complex transactions online. Jane talks about her teenage son buying things on Steam:

He has to give me the money, obviously, but he always comes and asks. [...] We've left the [credit card] details on there [Steam] because it actually got to be a bit of a pain, always having to put them in. So there's a high level of trust in that respect.

In fact, Cath has already moved on from letting her son use her credit card to enhancing his autonomy by supporting his wish to take responsibility for his own financial transactions at 16, the youngest possible age he could do so:

[Mike] wanted his own debit card [so] that he could do it himself [...] He does seem to know exactly what he's doing [...] because before that it was our credit card that was on there. And I wasn't really comfortable with that because, you know, the sky's the limit but with his debit card he can't go overdrawn. The only worry is fraud.

On the one hand father John is amused at how his son responds to computer glitches and faults.

He just gets angry with it and then if the thing isn't working, or it's broken, or the system he's talking to is broken, whatever [...] he can't stand back from it and say "Well being angry is no good, I've just got to devise a way of getting through it" [...] He's just furious it's not working now so he can't suspend that fury for long enough to fix it.

In these circumstances, this dad comes to his son's rescue: 'So he'll ask me.' In this older age group this is the closest example offered to co-use mediation. However, even though he notes how hard it is for his son to take 'the time, plodding through logically', and dealing with the challenges as they arise, John is very impressed by his son's developing independence through his commitment to gaming: 'His machine's very high spec so, he chose it himself. He

saved up his money and he bought it himself.' Within this discussion is a sense that this parent is noting both his son's impatience but also his determination, and working with both to support a positive experience of growing up.

As parents grow to appreciate the possible benefits from gaming, they also recognise a range of ancillary advantages and some admiration for the skill set required by *DOTA 2* players. Cath says of her son Mike:

He's very fast on his computer, very fast. His reactions, sometimes [pauses] I stand and watch him and I can't believe he's almost doing three or four things at the same time. Amazing.

Gill acknowledges that she herself is learning from her parenting role:

You grow up yourself in recognising that, you know, there isn't just one way the family's living, or one way a boy's living in the family. There's [pauses] other ways.

These families seem to indicate that parents' perceptions of risk reflect media and public discourses and are then moderated by the daily experience of parenting. Over time they begin to appreciate benefits in various aspects of their child's online behaviour which had previously been a subject of concern.

Privacy and autonomy when monitoring older children's online activities

With younger children, many parents choose to use active or monitoring forms of mediation, for example sitting with the child, or reviewing the history of their online session after they leave the computer. With this older age group, parents tend to be more concerned about the time their children spend online and the comparative difficulties some older teens have in turning off the computer when they are asked to do so. In this respect, *DOTA 2* gamers have some specific issue to negotiate. For example, since this is a team game, if one player is kicked off the game by an irate parent, it is not just that player who is banned for a period of time, but the whole team is impacted. Gill shows that she is sensitive to some of the constraints of the game:

If you came out of a [*DOTA 2*] game before the game had completed, you couldn't go on the game for the next 24 hours, or 48 hours [... I've] never pressed the button on it,

switched it off, I've wanted to and thought perhaps we ought to, and I've heard of other parents [who] do it. I just couldn't bring myself to do it. [It] just seemed too rude.

But even when acknowledging the nature of the game, these interpersonal responsibilities take some negotiating. As Gill laments,

[you] find he's suddenly gone on a game and it's going to last an hour and you know he's got a dentist appointment or we're just about to eat, you know, and he's saying "Well, I can't come off it", and you're thinking "This is ridiculous, our life is being determined by one-person-in-the-family's game!"

Cath has three children, two boys and a girl, but her oldest child is son Mike, currently the only person to have a computer in his bedroom.

When he [Mike] first bought his own computer and built it, and it was up in his bedroom, it was a long time before I was comfortable with it [...] just frequently popping in and out of his room just to see what he was doing [...] and every time I went in there he was just on the game.

This snippet indicates that Cath feels some reassurance, that it was 'just' a game and she was not catching Mike involved in other activities. Asked if she would ever feel like using monitoring mediation, checking Mike's internet history, Cath says: 'No, I wouldn't check it, actually. [...] I don't know, just teenage boys. I don't know what I'd find on there!'

Gill is less worried about what she would find if she checked on her older-teenage child, and more worried about how she would feel doing so, since that form of mediation would imply that she had been spying on him and would be detrimental to the sense of trust in their relationship.

It's disturbing to be stalking your children, because it will just pull you into a different world you wouldn't want to know about, possibly. 'Cos if you do [find] something [then] you think "Well, now I've got to tell them that I've looked at their PC and do I want to do that?" I've got no reason to look at it. I'd rather notso no, I don't.

In fact, Gill finds her son's willingness to follow parental rules to be very positive: 'He leaves his laptop, he doesn't even take his phone into his bedroom at night because we've always said "No electronics in the bedroom"; [it] stays out.' In this family, the parents and their

children all have their electronic devices charging in the kitchen overnight, so the parents model the behaviour that they are pleased to see in their children.

Jane has some concerns about the content that her 15 year old son, a younger brother of one of the gamers, watches:

We have Netflix, and there's a couple of things that he's watched that we haven't watched and we've now seen [them] and said, "[Jason], not really sure they're appropriate" [...]. "Well", I said, "I would rather you were watching drama that's maybe a little bit above your age group than you[re] searching for porn on the internet." And he got a bit awkward about it and he's going "Oh, it's one of those conversations" and "Ohhh". So they don't like it but we kind of just plough ahead and hope that the message gets through.

This parent is choosing to acknowledge issues as they arise even though it may involve some discomfort on the part of her and her son. At the same time, she is affirming the value of adult-themed drama as preferred content to what she considers to be internet pornography. This discussion illustrates active mediation and the complicated acknowledgement that the mother knows what her son has been watching, and feels bound to comment upon it, but is not policing or overtly restricting the content he is allowed to watch.

John indicates that, in his mind, viruses are a bigger issue than pornography:

We've got firewalls and we've got virus protection and a lot of my strictures are on them, are about not going to websites and downloading special tools [...], 'cause they've generally got viruses in them and will take your PC down.

Describing his approach as 'laissez faire', this father explains his approach to parental mediation: 'I kind of think they've got to negotiate that world [internet content] for all their life.' Hence he does not see the point in saying 'we'll monitor everything and once they're 18 they can watch anything they like... I think that's probably more destructive.' Together these vignettes around permission and acceptance indicate the difficult path trodden by parents and children as they negotiate growing independence and autonomy. At the same time parents are learning that a child's priorities, although influenced by parental attitudes, do not necessarily reflect them.

Negotiating family rules to accommodate a child's responsibilities to peers

There are some rules about online behaviour that many parents feel very strongly about. Thus Jane talks to her children about staying safe when gaming online and says that she has 'drummed it into them never to give their name, never to give their address, never to start a friendship with somebody [when] they don't know who they are.' Gill has almost given up on this rule, but still resonates some aspects of the moral panic agenda around 'stranger danger'. Her son meets a number of unknown people during his online gaming

He goes "Oh, I've met so-and-so, you know, or a French person, or this German person in the games.", [So I ask him] "Is he a paedo?"

[He responds] "Yeah, mum, he is."

"Hmm, thought he might be", yeah. So it's turned to much more [of a] joke [...] But it's still my little element of warning which is ... I just feel that I'm doing that, like, you know, "Careful, careful."

In these different ways, these two parents – Jane and Gill – are using their sons' gaming activities to remind them about online risks but also to affirm the responsible behaviours that they see their sons developing. As we have noted, over time, parents can appreciate how their sons' gaming demonstrates new skills and allows parents to find new perspectives on their own role.

Father Ben sees himself as being 'quite firm' about his son's gaming.

I think he should plan his gaming time, especially if he's been on there for quite a few hours [...] But when I see him playing it [...] I think there's a lot more involved in the thought process between ... because they're all communicating with each other as well.

At the same time, he sees his son resisting the restrictive mediation strategy adopted by these parents

It's trying to find that happy medium, isn't it? All the time. And we lay down rules and he agrees to those rules, but within a couple of days he's just starting to push the boundary again [...] "I should have been off at 9.00, but the game's nearly finished"; so it goes on to ten past nine.'

That said, Ben has a very positive impression of his son's gaming team, and says that they're

very pleasant young men. They're welcome here any time [...] because it's not that sort of game. It's a fun game ... I know it's intense but it's a fun game they play. You know, there's no level of violence that I'd consider to be extreme.

The implication here is that this family is trying to balance their own views around suitable content and what constitutes a suitable commitment to an online pastime with their son's obvious passion for his gaming. Positives in this include the general likeability of other members of the clan and the fact that the game itself is something that requires thought and planning and is not gratuitously violent.

Parents can find it particularly challenging to monitor older teens. While discussing her son's game-playing, Jane acknowledges that

sometimes the routine just goes and I'll be going up to bed and walking into bedrooms and saying "You need to go to bed now". [I say ...] "You know when you've got to go to bed, and you should be going to bed", but they don't always do it.

Gill's strategy is to try to ensure that late night sessions only occur at the weekends and holidays:

Sometimes we say, just, you know... it doesn't have to be overnight, doesn't have to be a 24h [...] marathon. You can just do it for a few hours. But I suppose he's already doing it for a few hours [on normal weekdays] with all his friends, chatting to them.

This mother appears to be rationalising the fact that her son likes spending [some of] his holidays online because she articulates as significantly different the occasions where the team gathers together to do an intense, protracted, gaming session: 'They all come round, they all bring their laptops, they plug [in] and they sit in one room and they play [for] hours with each other but they're in the same room.' The co-present activity makes it special for the gamers but also more social in Gill's eyes.

For one family, the shared meal time around the dining table is a particularly important ritual which parents welcome as a time to catch up with each other and with their children. In the early years of their son's gaming, this family experienced considerable stress around

the fact that their son would resist joining them for the evening meal until after his game was over. But with age things have changed.

He's very good now, we just know that we give him a warning [...] And he can see, he's intelligent. He can see that obviously the meal thing is a big issue, that we can't all sit down and wait and have the food go cold.

This gamer has modified his behaviour to take into account the fact that a DOTA 2 game will typically last 40-60 minutes or so. His mother notes that these days he will come and quickly check and say "Is it OK if I go on a game?" So sometimes I go, "Yeah", [or] "No", [or] "That's fine." So mentally I have to allow them an hour.' Both mother and gamer have changed their behaviour to respond to each other's priorities.

Some parents worry that gaming will have an impact upon school grades. Amongst this group of gamers, however, one has a particular reputation for his exceptional study habits. Jane, speaking about Glynn (17), explains how he uses his gaming as a reward for achieving study milestones.

He said to me: "Sometimes my friends joke, 'cause I'll say 'I've got homework to do'. And they're like: 'You've always got homework to do!'" [... When he was] using it as a reward, he would wait till [he's done his work and] he's ready to go on and then see who's online and start saying "Anyone ready to start a game?"

John thinks that things might be different if his son were struggling with his school work:

If he was going down the toilet in terms of scores [you could say ...] "Well it's obviously down to the hours and hours and hours you spend online." But you can't really say that [because] he's doing really well.

These exchanges demonstrate that parents are willing to negotiate family rules and that older children can sometimes take responsibility for complying with their parents' expectations. In these circumstances, the adolescents are seen to be working towards a win-win outcome whereby they are able to enjoy their gaming but are doing so in a manner that causes least disruption to the wider household. At one point, when her son was younger, Gill found herself in constant conflict with him over his passion for gaming.

I'm just going [speaking to myself ...]: "Actually, you know, he's a lovely boy. Do we want to spend our lives in complete conflict? He's not going to change. He's not voluntarily going to give this up. It's not affecting his school work." Well, maybe it has, maybe he could get better marks but, you know, who knows? [...] Maybe not. Maybe he'd just be depressed or something.

This perspective offers an example of a parent putting her son's online gaming into a wider context and finding that, on balance, she is happy with the status quo – gaming and all.

Negotiating the different parental mediation practices within a particular circle of friends

Gill highlights the comparative isolation of parenting an older child. Whereas parents of younger children are sometimes thrown together as a result of shared practices in shepherding children to and from their various commitments, once those children are autonomous the opportunities for parents to exchange views reduce.

You don't have the mothers at the [school] gate. You don't have the contacts [...]. I've met one or two of them [parents of gamers], chatted to them and I know they feel the same [...] "Why are they always inside on the game?" That's all I know about them, so I don't know whether they control the [online time] a lot more for their children or a lot less.

Whereas Jane is uncertain about the parental mediation practices in other families, Cath assumes that the restrictive mediation strategies that she adopts are shared by parents in the inner circle of the gaming team:

[Mike's] close-knit friends, probably all have very similar rules in their house. And then it just might be the slightly extended circle of friends that are allowed to stay [up], or actually deceive their parents by going back on it after their parents have gone to bed.

In fact, this perception of being the norm is at odds with her son's statements and with the evidence of the other parents interviewed. As she notes in her interview, Cath's household has

a time at night where the computer has to be switched off. And [Mike] will say that a lot of his friends will be allowed to game much later than he is. And my reaction is just: "Well,

I'm afraid this is the rules in our house" [...] We've said: "At this time your computer goes off, you have a bit of relaxation time and then bed."

Gill has clearly heard the rationale for this restrictive mediation approach as practiced in Mike's family, but has been unable to enforce it in her own home:

According to, you know, guidelines, you shouldn't be playing games, or you shouldn't be on a screen, within, is it half an hour, or an hour of going to bed, because of the blue light plus the adrenaline and stuff, all the rest of it. And [Rob] said he never has any problem in going off to sleep.

Gill seems willing to accept her son's argument that going straight from a computer into bed does not cause problems with him getting a good night's rest. Ben describes how, when his gamer son was 14:

He wanted to get *Call of Duty*, which is an 18 game.

And we said "No".

And he said: "Well, so and so's playing it."

And we said: "Well sorry, but that's up to their parents. We're not going to let you play that. It's an 18 for a reason, they're age rated for a reason."

It may be relevant to note here that this family also includes younger siblings. Interestingly, none of the gamers could remember why they play *DOTA 2* apart from the fact that it was free to start with, and they began playing it and enjoyed it. A possibly motivating factor may have been Ben's family and their reluctance to allow their son to play the well-known 18+ games which are the focus of many teenage gamers. This inter-family difference may have had an impact upon the kinds of games that Ben's son could play, and this dynamic might have impacted how the decision to play *DOTA 2* arose.

Sometimes the differences between families have as much to do with technology as with rules. Mike was finding that his gameplay was affected by the broadband package in his parents' house. Cath tells the story this way: Mike said

"I'm lagging behind and, yeah, can we just look for something that's faster, faster broadband speeds?" And [we ...] then researched and found an affordable ... well the fastest speed at an affordable price for us [...]. But Mike did actually say that he was

prepared to contribute [money] to a faster internet 'cause it affected his gaming so much if it was slow.

In part, this story updates an earlier dynamic before this group of gamers went online. According to Gill, at an early stage it became important that this group of friends all had access to the same console games. The games were

expensive, about 40 quid you know, the FIFA, the games and stuff like that. So your friend had to buy it and you had to buy it as well. So you're going to be led a lot by who your friends are what games they've got.

Peers would appear to have an influence on other peers' parents, as well as upon each other.

The effect of younger siblings upon parental responses to older children's online activities

Jane has three children at home, including one in primary school. She adopts technical mediation to help manage their internet activities: 'We do have a filter. It's through our provider. It is quite an effective filter actually, because sometimes we'll try and look at something and not be able to [...].' With regards to her older son, however, Jane believes that the filter is less of a block and more of an inconvenience: 'I'm sure they can get around them anyway [...] I'm sure techno-savvy teenagers know what to do to get around a basic filter system in a house.' This view indicates that Jane might not worry about filtering content for her eldest child, and believes in any case that the filter is only effective until children reach a stage of 'techno-savviness'.

Cath's household is unusual in having a night time curfew, even though she has previously expressed a view that most of her son's 'close-knit friends' are likely to experience similar rules around internet access. Notwithstanding these earlier comments, however, Cath recognises that she is more restrictive than most.

We're one of the strictest [sets of parents ...] because he's got younger siblings and a lot of his [other] friends are the youngest child [...] If he's on his computer all night [...] then I have the younger siblings saying "Oh, that's not fair."

The experiences of Jane and Cath, both of whom have younger children in the house, demonstrate that parents recognise that children need different rules and supports, including

different mediation strategies, at different ages to use the internet safely. Although parents are comfortable with having different rules for different aged children they are also conscious of matters of perceived fairness and balancing the rights of older children to be treated as near-adults and of younger children to feel as though they are not being dealt with unfairly.

Ben notes that his son 'built his own computer', possibly so that he could game better but also because his previous computer was a laptop which now 'just sort of hovers around and he [the gamer] doesn't use it at all really. So it just, sort of, became the family computer.' The lack of computer options in this home impacts upon access. According to Ben:

We could probably do with two laptops, to be honest, because when they're all doing their homework at the same time and they all need to research something then [...] we have to, sort of, work out who's going to go first based on bedtimes or extra-curricular activities. So it does get a bit tricky.

This story might indicate a techno-savvy child in an everyday technological family who is aware that there will be increasing demands upon his laptop from younger siblings and builds his own computer while donating his laptop for general family use. According to Ben, the family had previously been unhappy with Glynn having a computer 'upstairs [because] we can't see if they are doing their homework, so that didn't work out.' But they accepted that the gaming computer that their son had built could stay upstairs for his personal use, and to game with. In this case it is possible that the presence of younger siblings led Glynn to 'donate' his laptop, and led the parents to accept that the own-build gaming computer could stay in his room, exclusively for his use.

And we say (to the younger siblings) "Well Glynn's older, he will get a little bit longer, as he does when he stays up a little bit later, as you will when you're his age. You'll get exactly ... everyone's been treated the same. As you've grown up, you've all been treated exactly the same for your age. You know, no-one's been treated any differently. Glynn didn't stay on his game until nine o'clock when he was Jason's age, 14, 15, so ... but he is now, he can stay on it later, he's older." That's what they tend to struggle to get their heads around, that they all think they should be getting the same amount of time on the games. But there is a ... like I said there's a pecking order and they have to ... Glynn set a precedent when we had Glynn.

This discussion makes clear the significant impact upon parents of considering fairness in their mediation responsibilities, as these have repercussions for younger members of the family. This is an under-researched area.

DISCUSSION

While no set of parents is typical, this group is unusual because of its mainly middle class background – with parental occupations in the professions and specialist trades – and because the sons are all high achievers at school. Hence, parents are only slightly concerned that their sons' online gaming might be having a negative impact upon academic scores. The gamers concerned are older than most children involved in qualitative research around online gaming. Partly because these young people are on the brink of adulthood, parents have a sense of their impending autonomy and can be interpreted as rationalising their attitudes and actions as being positive indicators for the future. There is a clear sense of parents being less willing to battle for compliance and more willing to negotiate for shared outcomes. Hence there is more active mediation of their children at this age stage, and in some cases we see glimpses that some restrictive mediation is no longer working anyway. These parents indicate that they have learned more about themselves, their children and (potentially misleading) media panics as a result of mediating their teens' online activities. They seem more able than some parents of younger children to see their child's gaming as delivering social benefits and developing technical skills and competencies.

In this age group, parents are keen to be seen to be respecting their child's privacy with one parent commenting that it was almost unthinkable to imagine challenging their child over something that would indicate that parent's breach of the child's privacy. This suggests that parents are beginning to construct such a breach of privacy, such monitoring mediation, as an equal or even worse act than the kinds of rule breaking that such surveillance might uncover in their sons' activities. The exceptions to this rule are parents who justify the use of filters, an example of technical mediation, as being for the benefit of younger children in the household. These parents negate the implications of this for their gamer son's privacy and autonomy by suggesting that 'tech-savvy' teens are able to work around technical mediation devices such as filters.

The evidence presented here suggests that parents are willing to negotiate family rules, to moderate any restrictions, to accommodate their son's responsibilities to other members of his online gaming team. There are a number of indications, however, that this has not always been the case and that parents had been surprised at the impact of their family rules upon their son, and upon the wider gaming team. Partly because the *DOTA 2* gamer environment is so punitive of teams and players abandoning games, the gamers themselves appear to acknowledge a responsibility to parents as well as each other to check that it is possible to

finish a game before they start it. In this exchange of responsibility, both parents and children are learning to consider the impacts of their own actions upon each other rather than either assuming the right to impose their own will. Once again, this might be more evident in the experiences of seventeen year olds than it is in the lives of fifteen year olds.

Within this network of parents there is some evidence to suggest that inter-family differences are accommodated in direct proportion to the strong bonds between the gamers concerned. It is possible to hypothesise that the refusal of one family to condone the 18+ rated first person shooter games such as *Call of Duty* may have been part of the process which led to this group of gamers choosing instead to focus upon *DOTA 2*. In this context, the family with the stronger rules may have had an impact upon the entire gaming team. At the same time, there is evidence of a range of different parental approaches that have not been adopted throughout the circle of families. Examples of these differences include the charging of personal electronic devices in a public space (the kitchen) overnight; and forms of restrictive mediation such as the computer curfew at around 9.00pm on school nights and the enforcement of a 'no-screen period' before sleep. However, the data suggest that parents and children are able to negotiate and respect the different family cultures, agreeing to relax these at weekends, over the holidays and when the gamer team is physically co-present in a gaming party.

This gamer team includes a mixture of older siblings and younger siblings. The parents of gamers who had younger siblings were willing to use the presence of younger children in the family as a justification for some of their mediation activities, such as the use of a filter. They were also very aware of the power of precedent, balancing the impact of their mediating decisions on not only the older child, but upon the expectations of the younger siblings. In comparison, the parents of the gamer who was the youngest person in his family describe their parenting as 'laissez faire'. How much this reflects the absence of younger siblings, and how much it is a reflection of the parents' attitudes and life choices is difficult to judge. Even so, the comments quoted indicate that parents may become more accommodating of their children's priorities and activities as their children age, and that parents may worry less about how they mediate when there are no younger siblings to consider.

As previously indicated, it appears clear that the presence of younger siblings has an impact upon the parents' mediation strategies with older children. It also appears likely that experience with a previous child may translate into a more laissez faire mediation style with children who are the youngest in their family. Thus prior parental experience and sibling

order both have an impact upon the mediation strategies of a parent. The evidence is less clear about the impact of inter-family difference within parents' negotiations around managing online access for a gamer group, although these are matters of interest for the gamers themselves. This research offers the possibility that the gamer group will try hard to accommodate the individual circumstances of gamer team members whose 'house rules' impact upon the team as a whole, perhaps by choosing a game that allows all key participants to be included.

This research project indicates that young people who near 18 experience reduced levels of mediation compared with younger teens, and parents themselves are willing to view their responsibilities in a very different light. It might be that parents of younger children would feel more relaxed about their responsibilities if they had ready access to the wisdom and experience of parents whose children had reached adulthood, surviving the various challenges of the teen years including serving a significant apprenticeship as a passionate gamer.

CONCLUSION

The research reported here addresses clashes inherent in the opposing demands of parents and peers, and the negotiations around these, as experienced by parents from three British families of 16-17 year-old boys who regularly game online together in *Defense of the Ancients*, *DOTA 2*. In particular, it addresses parents' statements about how they change their mediation strategies in response to learning and understanding more about the impact of their approach upon their child and upon their child's peer relationships.

Returning to discussions of the social construction of parenthood, the paper shows the processes of trying to work out how to be 'good parents' including the fact that perceptions of their child's online world and appropriate (and inappropriate) parental innovations can change over time. Here that process also involves parents questioning discourses and expert opinion about online gaming based on their own ongoing evaluation of the role of gaming in children's lives. A good deal of the negotiation and appreciation of children's perspective described in writings about the de-traditionalization of the family can be observed here, including the ways in which parents help children to move towards greater autonomy. Arguably this is even more visible precisely because as older teenagers they have earned more independence and rights to privacy compared with younger siblings.

The main contribution of this research is to capture the complexity of those parental judgements evolving over time, how the presence of younger siblings affects the negotiation with older children and, more central to the main narrative here, how parents and peers interact. This is not just a question of competing demands but involves parents appreciating and taking into account peers' interactions in their mediation practices while peers accommodate the particular parental concerns and rules operating in their friends' families.

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