Episode 63: Parental Angst and Acceptance in the Digital Age

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VOICEOVER
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JENNIFER COOK
Hello, and welcome to Up Close, coming to you from the University of Melbourne, Australia. I'm Jennifer Cook, and in today's episode we're going to the heart of the question, just what does it mean to be a good parent in the information age. Are families riding high upon a wave of global technology or are they drowning under a sea of mobile phones, a proliferation of screens, and increasingly faster internet access? How do we accurately measure the effect that Skype, Youtube, Facebook, MySpace or MSN have on our most intimate relationships? Is technology connecting us on a global scale at the expense of the family unit? To help us explore these issues, I'm speaking with Dr Michael Arnold from the University of Melbourne School of Philosophy, Anthropology and Social Inquiry; and Dr Martin Gibbs from the university's Department of Information Systems, Interaction Design Group. Firstly, Mike, perhaps you could take a moment to explain to us just how powerful a trigger new technology in the home has traditionally been for parents.

MIKE ARNOLD
New technologies have always been important in changing what the home is, how the home performs, and of course how people live their lives within the home, and these are sometimes quite surprising. For example, in the 14th and 15th century a new technology called the corridor began to enter homes in the medieval period. Even stately homes, the earliest stately homes, that is, didn't have corridors. They were one room open to another which opened to another, and to instigate some sort of privacy, to create different statuses of different rooms, human beings were used to guard entry. Of course those who didn't live in stately homes also lived in one and two roomed homes where everything was done. So different rooms for different purposes, corridors, those sorts of simple material changes like that have changed
the way a family operates and what a family is enormously.

JENNIFER COOK
So you still have this notion today, don’t we, of the gate keeper, the parent being the gate keeper?

MIKE ARNOLD
That’s right. Technologies have confounded this to speak of more contemporary technologies. The telephone was the earliest of the electronic devices to confound this role of the matriarch or the patriarch as the guardian of the household, the guardian in particular of the women of the household and the children of the household. With a telephone, anyone can call. How does one control that? Who answers the telephone? Should the butler answer the telephone? Should the nearest servant answer the telephone, or should the master or mistress of the house answer the telephone? All of this needed to be negotiated and worked through over decades and decades.

When I was a kid growing up in the sixties and seventies, the household telephone was a communal device. It was positioned in a communal place, for example in the hallway or in the lounge room. Anyone could overhear any telephone conversation in the house.

JENNIFER COOK
Indeed. With my mum it was the only way she could tell what was going on. She said that was how she kept a track.

MIKE ARNOLD
Yeah, exactly. Now, of course, as has happened with other technologies too, like television sets, musical devices: they’ve become dispersed. The children have their own telephones in their own rooms. The children have their own television sets in their own rooms, their own music devices. The communal nature of this technology and all that implies for family life, for power and authority et cetera, is changing along with those material changes.

JENNIFER COOK
So it’s gone from being one telephone to almost like an octopus with too many arms for the parent to even try and control.

MIKE ARNOLD
Well, there are more handsets, more active handsets in Australia today than there are people, and that is the case in several dozen countries, yes. So everyone has their own phone, and the age at which children get their own phone is lowering with each decade, and that’s something that parents need to negotiate.

JENNIFER COOK
That’s a really interesting point, because the age at which a child gets a mobile phone captures for us that dual nature of the technology, doesn’t it, because the parent often gets the phone so that they can keep control of the child, know where
the child is, keep tabs on, and then it becomes something else for the child, a
communication device, double-edged sword.

MIKE ARNOLD
Exactly. We?ve written about that in terms of the Janus face of many of these
technologies. The mobile phone is something which enables a child to be more
independent, in the parent?s mind, than they might otherwise be, but at the same
time the presence of the phone creates a dependency that the child wouldn?t have
without the mobile phone, because they?re not really on their own when they have
the mobile phone, nor are they together either.

JENNIFER COOK
Now, Martin, perhaps you can outline for us some of the technologies that are at the
root of these anxieties.

MARTIN GIBBS
I think in the contemporary Australian home certainly, as Mike outlined, the spread
of mobile technologies and their access by children is certainly creating a number of
anxieties. Also internet access and access to services and products like online
games and so forth also, I think, create interesting tensions within the home as well
in terms of how much time, say, for example, children are spending using these
technologies or playing these games as well as who they may be engaging with
socially through this kind of activity.
So, for example, recently the practice of ?sexting? has emerged as a big issue for
parents, and indeed, for law enforcement, ?sexting? being a practice of people
sending nude or provocative pictures of themselves to other people. And recently in
the US a number of young people who have been 16 and engaging in this practice
which you could interpret as amounting to sort of innocent kinds of flirting have
actually been charged with child pornography offences for the spread of these
images. So a 16 year old boy sends his classmates a picture of his naked 15 year
old girlfriend who ? she has originally taken the photo herself with a mobile phone
and sent it to him ? he?s now facing five years on child pornography charges. So
these examples and these stories are emerging in countries like the US and
Australia.

JENNIFER COOK
Which strikes great fear and great concern into the heart of any parent?

MARTIN GIBBS
Certainly.

JENNIFER COOK
? that, one, your 15 year old daughter would be taking the photo in the first place,
then having it exposed, but then worse that?

MARTIN GIBBS
And potentially posted on the internet on Facebook or something like that as well.
JENNIFER COOK
Exactly. A great loss of privacy, but then the full swing of the pendulum to a young boy being charged with child pornography and all the ramifications.

MARTIN GIBBS
Indeed, for what may be innocent flirtation. So the other side of that is, of course, parents want their children to be connected, to have good social lives, to have friends and that sort of thing, and access to these kinds of technology, these communication technologies, are very important for young people to maintain their social networks. So, again, this is again that notion of a two-edged sword where on the one hand there are a number of problematic behaviours that parents worry about. On the other hand, there is a perceived social good that children derive from having access to these technologies. It?s in this tension, I think, that parents have to negotiate exactly what it means to be a good parent, or the notion of a good parent.

JENNIFER COOK
Also, within your own research, trying to measure these things is quite difficulty, trying to get responses from children, from adults, that you can actually inform and make valid conclusions about.

MARTIN GIBBS
It is. We describe it as a tangled ball of thread, where one anxiety or concern or desire is interwoven inextricably with others. So going to parties is an anxiety parents feel about their teenage kids going to parties is interwoven with the kids? sexuality which is interwoven with accessing pornography on the web which is interwoven with who will be at the party. Will they be strangers? Will they be friends? Where do they live? Who are their parents? Are they people like us or are they different? All of these things intersect through technologies in some way, insomuch as communication is playing an important role in these arrangements and in these behaviours and performance and so forth, but the technology can?t be separated from the anxieties about all the other things.

JENNIFER COOK
So how have the two of you gone about developing a research model to measure this? Could you take us through your approach?

MARTIN GIBBS
In our approach to this, we?ve adopted an approach that was developed by some people in the UK called cultural probes. The idea of the cultural probe is to, like a deep sea probe or a space probe, is to send out instruments into the wild, into deep space, into the depths of the ocean, and have then the probe ? if you like, the instrument ? send back data to the researcher. Part of the problem with doing research in the home, if you want to do qualitative, rich data collection and so forth, is getting access to what people do in the home, because the home is quintessentially a private space. So immediately by entering into that space, does a researcher disturb that space and change what?s going on. The idea behind the probes was to give people materials to reflect on their daily
practices with technology and then to inform us of them. The way we set about doing it was, we go round to visit people, we ask them to take us on a tour of the home, a technology tour, where they introduce us both to themselves, the various spaces in the home, the technologies that live in those spaces and so forth.

MIKE ARNOLD
So we do it room by room. We ask to be introduced to the refrigerator, introduced to the television set, told of something of its provenance and its character and so forth, and whether it fits in and whether it doesn?t and that sort of thing. It?s all quite playful, you see.

MARTIN GIBBS
Who spends time with it and when they do, and that sort of thing. Then we leave them with a box full of scrapbooks, pens, coloured paper, inks, a variety of languages. We found old fashioned Polaroid cameras to be particularly good, particularly useful in this work, but also digital cameras and digital recording devices, local maps, regional maps and world maps with stickers to indicate sources and destinations of communicative acts. The underlying theme with these probe devices is to attempt to give control of the agenda back to the household. We?re trying to do better than a situation where we enter the household with our series of questions which reflects our agenda, and ask for responses to that series of questions. What we?re trying to do instead, by inviting the household to compile these materials, to leave these probe traces, the photographs and the drawings and the diary entries and so forth, to take control of the research in so much as they determine what they are concerned about, what they?re pleased about, what they?re anxious about and so forth, rather than us trying to pre-suppose that ?a priori?.

MARTIN GIBBS
So they can choose what they decide to tell us about. We then revisit the home and, if you like, review the materials that they?ve collected and how they?ve collated them and ask them to tell us the stories. In that way we find that we get very rich interpretative stories which, if you like, we co-interpret with the participants in the study.

JENNIFER COOK
And that touches, Mike, on an interesting part of your research: that children felt a bit of resentment towards the parents and the school for taking over what they essentially saw as a fun technology and using it, hijacking it, for homework and serious school stuff.

MIKE ARNOLD
Yeah. Children ? they?re very sophisticated and they have very high standards, and it?s quite difficult for schools to come in on this sort of territory. What the schools think of as multimedia, the kids, who?ve been playing World of Warcraft for years, don?t think of as multimedia. The dynamic is interesting, too, where the teenager is
much more familiar with the technology often than the parent, so the usual role where the parent is more knowledgeable and experienced than the child doesn’t apply in this circumstance. But it’s still something that the parent feels that they should be controlling and that they should have authority over.

MARTIN GIBBS
And indeed, parental anxiety around new technology seems to lessen as the parents themselves adopt the technology. So, for example, as we’ve looked at families over a period of four years or so, and even in four years there has been remarkable change in things like social network technology in the spread of mobile phones and so forth. So we find that where once parents were perhaps anxious about things like MSN or social networking sites such as Facebook and stuff, now as they start to use the technology themselves, they see the benefits, perhaps, that their children would derive from using these technologies as well. And also, if you like, it loses its exotic nature and becomes ordinary for the parents which then makes them feel safe about their children using the technology.

MIKE ARNOLD
And makes the technology much less attractive to the children.

MARTIN GIBBS
Indeed, indeed.

MIKE ARNOLD
We had one terrific example of that, where we first visited four years ago in about 2004. In this particular family the parents were very anxious about their teenage son, about the hours that he was spending on the internet, about the ephemeral friends that they had never met and that he had never met, and time wastage and all of this. The mother, in particular, was expressing her anxiety to us in very clear terms. The son, at the same time, was dismissive of his mother in the way teenage sons are. She’s just silly, you know, this foolish woman.

JENNIFER COOK
And he actually enjoyed it, didn’t he? He felt it gave him that social connectedness. He could communicate better with girls, he felt.

MIKE ARNOLD
That’s right, using MSN, because he could consider what he typed somewhat before he typed it. He certainly felt much more at ease in his dealings in particular with girls, and this was also anxiety provoking for his mother. Even small things like the use of shorthand; she remarks how the use of ? it seems to her to be just a series of letters, omg, and, you know, btw, and you know, it’s not even English.

JENNIFER COOK
It’s code.

MIKE ARNOLD
It's code. But when we visited four years later in 2008, we found that the mother in the family was ensconced on e-bay for hours a day, could recall no anxiety about the internet whatsoever, has always been a big fan of the internet?

MARTIN GIBBS
Insisting that her daughter must be on social networking sites and MSN because otherwise she'll miss out on social connection.

JENNIFER COOK
And was quite anxious that she wasn't on them enough, wasn't she?

MIKE ARNOLD
Wasn't on them enough. We would read from transcripts from her diaries, and she would deny flat that she'd said these things, and that she'd you know? that this was the case.

MARTIN GIBBS
And the son who thought MSN was the best thing since sliced bread now thought that was rather passé and not indeed a thing that only kind of?

MIKE ARNOLD
Very rarely uses the internet now. Very rarely uses the web. And we asked him why, and two reasons: he gets as much of that as he can deal with at university, as university has encroached on this territory, you know, for work purposes, it becomes less attractive. And he's got a car. And one form of technology here has disposed another.

MARTIN GIBBS
If you go back and visit the same family four years later, you get a good sense of how things have changed for that family over time and, by implication, how things may well be changing for other families over time as new technologies come into play in their lives. What we really noticed, change in the last four years is the way the organisation of space in the homes has been transformed, if you like, through the advent of wireless technology and mobile computing into the home. Whereas perhaps four years ago there would be a home office with a dedicated computer and, if you like, that was a separate space that was occupied by a personal computer, now the personal computer is kind of set free and roams around the house with people connected with the wireless network.

So, for example, we then found examples of where people would lock themselves away in rooms to work, now they were working on the kitchen table, and again that created different kinds of disputes between family members. Is the kitchen an appropriate place for someone to work on the computer, or in fact should they take that into the office? Who has priority? Should I be able to watch TV in the lounge room while my mother is working?

MIKE ARNOLD
On e-bay.
MARTIN GIBBS
? on e-bay or doing something on the computer, or does she have the right to ask me to turn off the TV?

JENNIFER COOK
Also, a child taking their laptop into their bedroom.

MIKE ARNOLD
As Martin said, with wireless technologies, things can be anywhere. Now, that causes the parents and the children to negotiate around a set of different strategies. Where you have wired technology, space is important. Where you have wireless technology, time is important. Now, while wireless technologies have destroyed that spatial demarcation. The strategy of demarcation needs to occur on a temporal basis. So what we?ve seen in 2008 is families setting aside times for paid work and times for family life; times for e-bay and times for TV; because the spatial thing doesn?t work any more.

JENNIFER COOK
So juggling that classic home/family/work life balance?

MIKE ARNOLD
Through time rather than through space.

JENNIFER COOK
Thank you both for your time today. We?ve been speaking with Dr Mike Arnold from the University of Melbourne?s School of Philosophy, Anthropology and Social Inquiry; and Dr Martin Gibbs from the Interaction Design Group in the University?s Department of Information Systems. Thank you both again.

MARTIN GIBB
Thank you.

MIKE ARNOLD
Thanks.

JENNIFER COOK
You?ve been listening to Up Close from the University of Melbourne, Australia. Relevant links, a full transcript, and more information on this episode can be found on our website at upclose.unimelb.edu.au. You can leave a comment on any of the sites of Up Close by clicking at the link at the bottom of the page. Melbourne University Up Close is brought to you by the Marketing and Communications Division in association with Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne, Australia. Up Close is created and produced by Eric van Bemmell and Kelvin Param. Our audio engineer is Russell Evans and our theme music was performed by [Sergio Ecole]. I?m Jennifer Cook. Until next time, thank you for joining Up Close. Goodbye.

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