

**Media Anthropology Network  
European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA)  
E-Seminar Series**

**<http://www.media-anthropology.net/index.php/e-seminars>**

**E-Seminar 62  
Parenting for a Digital Future**

**by**

**Sonia Livingstone and Alicia Blum-Ross  
London School of Economics and Political Science**

**Discussant  
Veronica Barassi  
Goldsmiths, University of London**

**6-27 March 2018**

Dear All,

On behalf of our e-seminar convenor Veronica Barassi, I am pleased to open the 62nd e-seminar of the EASA Media Anthropology Network.

The e-seminar runs from 6-20 March and discusses a text/chapter by Sonia Livingstone and Alicia Blum-Ross (London School of Economics and Political Science) entitled "Parenting for a digital future".

You find the text on the Network's website: <http://www.media-anthropology.net/index.php/e-seminars>

As usual the e-seminar kicks-off with the discussant's comments. Veronica Barassi (Goldsmiths, University of London) thankfully agreed to provide these comments. Sonia Livingstone and Alicia Blum-Ross will then respond to the initial comments.

Finally, the e-seminar will be opened to all. Everyone is welcomed to contribute to the e-seminar and the discussion!

Just keep in mind to send your message directly to the Media Anthropology Network mailing list ([medianthro@lists.easaonline.org](mailto:medianthro@lists.easaonline.org)).

Many thanks to Sonia, Alicia and Veronica for making this e-seminar possible!

Looking forward to a lively discussion!

Philipp

Dear Sonia, Alicia and All,

First of all, I would like to thank Prof. Sonia Livingstone and Dr. Alicia Blum-Ross for agreeing to present a chapter of their forthcoming book to the list. I am delighted to be acting as discussant.

I also would like to thank them for taking the time to explain the structure of the book and its overall epistemological and methodological framework. I can't wait to read it.

I deeply enjoyed reading the chapter, I found the empirical data exciting and fascinating and was curious to see how you made sense of it theoretically. As I was reading your work, I kept thinking that this must have been an incredibly difficult chapter to write. The issue of social class and inequality in relation to families and digital media is not only theoretically complex because we find ourselves engaging with key questions about the meaning of social class, inequality and social mobility; it is also complex because when we approach it empirically and we consider the lived experience of families, we are confronted with an incredible messiness. Too many different, interconnected and very personal narratives come into play, which include intergenerational meaning-making, perceptions of everyday struggles and of course imaginaries of the future. Your chapter beautifully brings together all these different dimensions, and it was a real pleasure to read.

As it can be expected, I have few comments and questions that I would like to share with you and the list, which hopefully can plant the seeds for an exciting discussion.

\* Qualitative Interviews/ The Position of the Researchers /

As far as I understood it, and correct me if I am wrong, the chapter is based on 73 in-depth interviews with different families across London. Although based on interviews, the chapter has a strong ethnographic feeling to it. When I was reading it, I could picture the doors, the living rooms, I could see the parents talking to you. What I felt was missing, was a more in-depth self-reflexive description about your positioning as researchers. I am aware that self-reflexive practices are usually attributed to ethnographic methods and that – especially in media and communication studies - we rarely find them amongst those scholars who carry out qualitative interviews. However, I really think the chapter would gain from a more thorough description about your role as researchers. Specifically, I would be particularly interested in finding out a bit more about

1) Your relationship with the families. Was it a one-off contact or did you have more prolonged relationships with some participants?

2) The role your own understandings and experiences of social class and mobility played in your research. There is a particular section, where I think the reader would gain from a better insight into your own positioning. “As a single mother earning less than £15,000 a year working as an

in-home care assistant we had assumed that Leila had wanted to be interviewed in part for the honorarium on offer, and yet she seemed taken aback at the voucher, then asking whether she could use it to buy a bicycle for her daughters/.” (p.5) It seems to me that your assumptions have been challenged by the encounter with your participants, and it would be great to see a bit more of this.

3) Your methodological choices. Can you tell us a bit more about the choice of the media tour? It sounds like a great idea. Can you also maybe elaborate on the choice of ‘paying an honorarium’? Was the honorarium for all participants?

\* Social Class/Digital Divide/ Social Mobility

Your chapter raises a lot of issues in terms of the challenges we face when we want to engage with the concept of class at both theoretical and empirical levels. Drawing on Bourdieu, you mention the issue of cultural capital, and you show that low income/highly-educated parents do not fit into rigid classifications of class. You also challenge, at least in part, Lareau’s discussion on intensive parenting and the difference between working and middle class families. However, I have some questions for you in this regard:

\* How did you approach the issue of class with the families you worked with? Did you talk about it? How did they define themselves in terms of class?

\* Overall, in your chapter, you seem to have chosen to focus on the empirical data and do not dwell on theoretical definitions. I personally think this works beautifully. However, at times I was really curious to find out more about specific concepts. In particular, I am curious to understand why when you talked about social inequality you chose not to engage with the concept of digital divide.

I can’t wait to read the other parts of the book where you tackle the idea of future. In this chapter, however, it seemed to me that most of your participants discussed the use of digital media with reference to the future in terms of social mobility. Digital media enable education = future employability. In the chapter, however, I find that you only briefly engage with the notion of social mobility, when you mention statistics. Are there any other sections in the book where you explore imaginaries of digital futures by looking at the concept of social mobility?

I have many more questions and thoughts, but I will leave it here and I am looking forward to the open discussion.

Thank you again so much for the paper

All best

Veronica

UCU Strike/ Closing Note: I would like to thank Philipp for stepping in and opening the E-Seminar as a gesture of solidarity given the fact that – as a member of UCU – I am supporting the strike to protect our pensions. If you would like to know more about the strike action you can find all the full details here (<https://www.ucu.org.uk/article/9242/UCU-announces-14-strike-dates-at-61-universities-in-pensions-row>). I would like to specify, that I am writing the comments on Mar the 2nd and I am not breaching the terms of the strike.

**Alicia Blum-Ross** [alicialorna@gmail.com](mailto:alicialorna@gmail.com)

6 March 2018

Thank you to Veronica for her comments on our chapter. As she rightly noted we found this chapter to be one of the most difficult to write, but also one of the most important. We really value the feedback of this group in helping us shape it.

To respond to Veronica's questions:

### **Reflexivity**

Undoubtedly this is a key point. As Veronica pointed out in Media & Communications there are fewer established conventions about how to do this than in Anthropology where this has been an important part of ethnographic writing for decades. In the interests of brevity in this version we did not include an extended methods section but of course in the book we have a lengthier account of our methodological rationale and our epistemological stance in earlier chapters, and a more technical account of our methods, including how families were recruited etc. in an Appendix.

That said, our positionality within these interviews was undoubtedly extremely important and something we have reflected on before, during and after interviews. We are both academics, and so experience a relative degree of privilege and financial stability. We are both White – Sonia is British and Alicia is from the US, and so our accents, affect and demeanor all influence how people relate to us. Crucially, we are both mothers, although our children are very different ages (at the time of interviews Alicia had two-year-old twins, and Sonia's children were in their mid 20s). In many interviews we were asked questions whether we had and then about our children,

in particular what and how we had done/were doing with them in terms of ‘screen time.’ Many interviews ended with parents hoping we would give them tips and tricks, or reassure them as needed – although again this was different for each of us owing to our professional experiences and the ages of our children. We tried to avoid offering much advice during the interviews themselves, but did answer personal questions in general terms and certainly found ourselves building rapport in part around our own experiences (Alicia had a few notable interviews that started with discussions around mutual sleep deprivation!). We also built shared rapport through our narration of navigating London – so we would engage in quasi-neighborly conversations around schools, public transportation etc.

One thing we found quite notable, and influenced our framing of the book as a whole, is how often mothers especially felt that we were judging them one way or another even when we asked them the same questions across different interviews. For example, when asked whether they had any rules in place about screen ‘time’ or context many interviewees worried vocally that we thought they were too lax – in other cases too harsh. Most often these intersubjective encounters happened in interviews with mothers who were more similar in demographics to us (educated, middle class) than with fathers or women from different socio-economic backgrounds. What was also striking was the number of interviews (not just with educated mothers) that ended with parents telling us the interview had been ‘like therapy’ or that they’d ‘never really talked about this before.’ This reminded us of an underlying principle that we reflect on throughout the book – that for many parents (regardless of SES) in post-Industrial cities in the Global North parenting is experienced as individualized and in many cases quite isolating. Many of these parents had not really been asked about their experiences as a parent, nor had they felt comfortable sharing this with others. So while our ostensible topic was digital media values and practices, at the same time we found ourselves considering the experience of parenting more broadly. We hope the book reflects this.

### **Social class and mobility**

Yes I think our assumptions have been challenged in a variety of ways – and I’d say that we tried to make sure this happened, since research that confirms what you already know isn’t rewarding. On the specific question of the honorarium, this is a tricky one. To the best of my knowledge, it’s always offered in psychology, not so much in sociology, and perhaps each social science has its own views. We did it partly as a thank you, since we were indeed interrupting people’s day and occupying their time, and partly for the practical reason that it seemed to aid recruitment. Our decision, then, to offer the same sum to all families generated its own oddities – it was a valuable sum to Leila, allowing a bicycle for her daughters; it was a trivial sum to our wealthiest families.

As we note above, in most cases parents gave it to their children or, occasionally, to the community learning centre. Some other assumptions were challenged because of our prior reading – I recall our early surprise, given all the literature on intensive and anxious parenting, when we began meeting families who were calm and cheerful about life, including about their children’s futures and about digital media – in our last chapter, we will focus on questions of the future more focally, trying to link parents’ ideas about the future to their actions in the present. In interviewing families with significantly disabled children, usually mental disabilities of various kinds, while not surprising we certainly gained an emotional insight into their sadness, frustrations and fear of the future though also some of their pleasures, and their deep love for their child.

In terms of concepts – yes, we are troubled by current theorisations of social class and social mobility, which is one of the reasons we look forward to this discussion. Practically, we didn’t explicitly discuss class with our families, but we did tell them – when asking them to complete a short demographic questionnaire – that we aimed to interview a wide range of families in diverse circumstances. And we did ask them, as part of our theme about the future, quite a lot about how they were brought up, with what parental expectations, and how they reflected on this in relation to their own parenting and expectations for their children. So quite a few did talk in terms of class, and more in terms of mobility – which we pursued in depth and will develop in the final chapter, as you suggest in relation to future imaginaries. The last section of the chapter is still in progress, in terms of revisiting key concepts in the literature, following our overview of the argument at the start of the chapter. One challenge is that we don’t know the future for these particular families, of course, so it’s tricky to weigh their own predictions except as statements about the present. Yes, many parents believe – and the government tells them so – that digital media enable education and thence employability, and we will revisit this, too, later in the book. The chapter could be read, we suggest, as a rebuttal of a simple account of the digital divide and an endorsement of how that literature has developed so as to recognize links between digital and social in/exclusion, and the importance of people’s own motivations and aspirations (rather than those expected of them). Maybe we’ll now make this more explicit!

**A few practical points:**

Honorarium - All parents regardless of income were offered a £40 post-office voucher that can be used at almost any shop in lieu of a credit card. Some parents whom we recruited through a non-formal learning site chose to donate the voucher to the organization. In most cases the parents said they would use the voucher to buy something for their children.

Recruitment - The families were recruited through a combination of different techniques. For some, who had children who attended digital media and learning sites, we had also conducted participant-observation during the child's class or activity and met the parent briefly earlier. In a handful of cases we conducted more than one visit to the family. However in most cases the interviews were one-off visits to the homes or interviews in cafes. We did conduct a few shorter interviews (20-25 minutes) on-site at fieldsites. However, all the families we quote in depth took part in interviews/visits lasting from 60 minutes to several hours.

Media tour – this is a technique that Sonia had used in previous research and had found generative.\* The idea is not just to observe the different devices and technologies present but also to see how they are situated in the home and how these different contexts are indicative of how the technology becomes 'placed' in the family's practices and lived experiences. For example in some homes the desktop computer was deliberately placed in the living room or kitchen so that everyone can have equal access and so that parents could keep an eye on children.

\*See Livingstone, S. and Sefton-Green J. (2016) *The Class: Living and learning in a digital age*. NY: NYU Press.

**Philipp Budka** [ph.budka@philbu.net](mailto:ph.budka@philbu.net)

7 March 2018

Dear All,

Thank you Veronica for your comments and thank you Alicia and Sonia for your response.

The e-seminar is now open for discussion on "parenting for a digital future". Please direct your comments and/or questions directly to the list.

We had some technical problems with the mailing list. E-mails could not be sent to the list, please re-send if your message didn't get through.

Thank you and all the best,

Philipp

Dear Alicia, Sonia and all,

First of all, thank you for presenting such a rich and stimulating paper. With the danger of repetition I must say that I greatly enjoyed the ethnographic descriptions, they set a wonderful scene for your analysis.

I am looking very much forward to the discussion and would like to contribute with two initial questions.

I find your focus on future-oriented parenting interesting, particularly in the context of fears of new technologies, which you write you engage with in an earlier chapter. You write on page 1:

\* We contend that imaginaries of the future are important for understanding present practices, for parenting is itself inherently future-oriented: each act of parenting has a double meaning – as an intervention in the present and an effort to bring about a particular future, even if this cannot be fully named. So parents create ‘projected futures,’ by “tacking back and forth between futures, pasts and presents, framing templates for producing the future.”

So my question is, how did imaginaries of the future and the perceived media practices in the present that would help bring about desired futures intersect and contradict understandings of what was desirable media practices \*for \*the present? In other words, if parents found digital skills crucial for their children's potential career paths but concurrently feared negative contemporary consequences of 'too much screen time', how did they navigate, reconcile or make sense of this? I think your description of parents' unease about whether they are too strict or too lax in this regard speak to a productive friction that I would be intrigued to learn more about.

Secondly, I would like to ask a more practical question about your methods. How have you gone about handling such a large amount of interviews, particularly when you have co-produced them? Have you listened to each others interviews? Or only read transcripts? Have you coded the material and in what ways? My own experiences with collaborating on such material speaks to the difficulties in making others' interviews matter the same as your own, so I would be happy to learn from your experiences.

Thanks again for a great read!

Cheers,  
Nina

**Elizabeth Costa** [e.i.g.costa@rug.nl](mailto:e.i.g.costa@rug.nl)

12 March 2018

Dear Alicia and Sonia,

Thank you very much for this inspiring and exciting paper. And thank you Veronica and Nina for your stimulating comments. I would like to contribute to the discussion with one short question. I am wondering what role children's gender plays in the way parents envision future and approach digital media? Do parents have different imaginaries of daughter's and son's future? Do digital media have a different role in the imagined life of daughters and sons ? What about actual practices?

Thank you again for the great paper

Best,  
Elisabetta Costa,

**Alicia Blum-Ross** [alicialorna@gmail.com](mailto:alicialorna@gmail.com)

12 March 2018

Thank you both so much for your questions.

1. In terms of gender

I would say that, overall, we found more differences in parents' narratives with regard to the gender of the parents, than in terms of their orientations towards their children. This was also borne out in our survey <<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/parenting4digitalfuture/2018/02/06/in-the-digital-home/>> research, where we saw that mothers vs fathers had more differences in terms of values and practices than parents in general did for daughters vs sons. these differences played out in a few different ways:

Mothers put more pressure on themselves to act as 'good' parents, including restricting screen time (sometimes seeing their partners, if they were in mixed gender couples, as too lax and experiencing pressure on their couple from those differences).

Some mothers expressed having felt limited in their own careers and therefore wanted more options for their children in general but especially their daughters, so this did demonstrate some difference in terms of future imaginaries but overall the ‘digital future’ rhetoric seemed fairly shared by parents regardless of the gender of their children.

Mothers played more of a central caregiving role (not for every family but for many) and so therefore set the rules and were looked to to arbitrate them. In some families fathers worked away from home during the week and did not see children as frequently so weekends were spent ‘relaxing’ which often included screen time.

However, in terms of families that defined themselves as ‘geeks’ (these were somewhat exceptional families but very interesting nonetheless, we have a whole chapter about them) there was much discussion about the role of gender and how girls were less likely to consider themselves ‘geeky’.

2. In terms of how desired futures and how these fit with desirable media practices in the present:

This is a great question and something we are still unpicking. One of the things we found hard in our fieldwork is that while parents were highly reflexive about their parenting challenges in the present, when we turned to talk of the future their responses often became generalised or even banal, saying ‘I just want them to be happy’ etc. therefore we had to look for future talk in what Ruth Levitas (Utopias) calls ‘archaeological mode’ - seeing some present activities as oriented towards an imagined future even if the parent didn’t quite describe it as such. For example one low income family had an extended family member who was an engineer working at Gatwick. The mother took her son to visit this cousin so he could see what an engineering job (mechanic on airplanes) looked like in practice. She did not articulate this necessarily as orienting himself towards his future career but we can see an element of futurity in her description of why this was important to do.

3. Co-analysing interviews

We each conducted interviews with families, and wrote up extensive fieldnotes after our visits. The fieldnotes and interview transcripts were all imported into NVIVO - we then created an iterative coding scheme by coding sample interviews and inductively generating our codebook - this included the 2 of us but also a research assistant and 2 other colleagues. Once we had the

codebook the interviews and fieldnotes were all coded by us and a team of 2 PhD students. For each family we wrote a 'pen portrait' based on this coding - a one-page 'cheat sheet' of some of the most salient points from the interviews. Then when we came to write chapters we've used a combination of going back to original transcripts and generating queries from NVIVO.

This process (& team approach) is not as common in Anthropology as it is in other qualitative social sciences, and I think has both strengths and weaknesses. Even now when we know all of the material really well we both default to some of 'our' families since we can remember, viscerally, having been in their houses and even copious fieldnotes can never approximate that experience. That said, the team approach allowed for a more comprehensive analysis and also a greater number of families, and we feel satisfied that we've take the time to do the analysis so we can 'check' our assumptions against a diversity of different sources pretty easily. We have mostly relied on the transcripts rather than the original audio recordings - I'd be curious Nina for your thoughts on what you think is gained or lost by this?

Thanks so much!

Alicia

**Nina Grønlykke Mollerup** [ninagmollerup@gmail.com](mailto:ninagmollerup@gmail.com)

14 March 2018

Dear Alicia, Sonia and all,

Thank you for your thoughtful answer.

Your study sounds like quite an impressive team effort - it's great to get a little practical insight to how you have made that work. I am not sure I have much to add regarding what is gained or lost, but perhaps my reason for asking - a recent experience with collaborating around with interviews - is telling.

I am currently collaborating with my colleague, Mette Mortensen, on a project about local war photographers from Aleppo, Syria. I have carried out interviews on Skype in far from perfect Egyptian Arabic (which differs somewhat from Syrian Arabic though native speakers would generally be able to communicate). The internet connections were often unstable and the topics covered in the interviews grave, making for a quite difficult interview situation.

We had the interviews translated and transcribed in English. Mette, then, was dependent on the English transcriptions whereas I had conducted the interviews and also relistened to passages.

As we started analysing and writing, I noticed how we were paying attention to different interviews and different quotes. While there are many things at stake here, I found one thing to be crucial, namely the voices of the interviewees. One photographer, whose interview I particularly favoured, had a very calm voice. This gave me a sense of thoughtfulness and honesty whereas another photographer, whom Mette particularly favoured, had a more argumentative and determined voice, which made me unsure how to contextualise his words. For Mette, the tone of voice had no influence on how she read the interviews, whereas this mattered significantly to me.

So while I would argue, of course, that tones of voice and other audial cues are significant to the knowledge we coproduce with research participants, I actually think it was a strength that Mette was able to engage with the material in a different way than me. Perhaps you would have experienced something similar when writing 'pen portraits' - depending on whether you wrote them collaboratively or on the basis of interviews you had yourself conducted?

Cheers,  
Nina

**Sonia Livingstone** [S.Livingstone@lse.ac.uk](mailto:S.Livingstone@lse.ac.uk)

18 March 2018

Thanks Nina

Your collaborative ethnographic work sounds very interesting. Yes, I think we all bring our different interests, assumptions and starting points to the work and, as Veronica observed earlier, it's valuable to interrogate these and reflect on them together. That's something Alicia and I have done a lot of over the past few years, also with our research assistants and colleagues, sometimes over coffee after a joint visit to a family or field site, sometimes sitting together with the interview transcripts, sometimes discussing our provisional write ups. As an audience researcher I have learned never to underestimate how different someone's perspective can be on material that I myself thought obvious in its interpretation! And more generally, it's really helpful to have others reflect with you on your own assumptions.

I'm now revising and completing this chapter draft, so any thoughts that folks on this list have would be really welcome and timely! Questions in my mind include:

- how much should we contextualise parental experiences specifically in London (global city, creative industry context, particular history of migration etc.) and how much are we capturing experiences of wider relevance?

- also, for the theorists amongst you, are there key sources on social class that we should be sure to discuss, and how best shall we intersect class with a discussion of ethnicity and, perhaps, generation, amongst other factors shaping parenting cultures?

All the best, Sonia

**Philipp Budka** [ph.budka@philbu.net](mailto:ph.budka@philbu.net)

20 March 2018

Thank you very much Sonia for your comment and questions, and a big thank you to Alicia and to all the people who contributed to this e-seminar so far!

To have more time for discussion and to reflect upon specific and/or related aspects of Sonia and Alicia's text, we will extend this e-seminar for another week until 27 March 2018.

Everyone on this list is welcome to read the text and post comments, questions and thoughts. And if you know someone who would be interested to join the discussion, please forward the info you find here: <http://www.media-anthropology.net/index.php/e-seminars>

All the best,

Philipp

**Sahana Udupa** [sahana.udupa@lmu.de](mailto:sahana.udupa@lmu.de)

27 March 2018

Dear Sonia and Alicia

Thanks for a highly stimulating paper, and an engaged discussion. This work speaks to the urgent concerns of parenting in the digital age, and theoretically exciting to see the intersections between studies of futurity and digital media ethnography in a compelling thematic setting. My question is on ethnicity that Sonia has already highlighted. With the right-wing sentiments brewing in the digital world, how does ethnicity mark parental anxieties over children's digital

practices and their aspirations around digital competence? How are ethnicities and negative stereotyping understood by parents? One specific area of concern is the ethnic and religious stereotyping in online games.

Best wishes  
Sahana Udupa

**Sonia Livingstone** [S.Livingstone@lse.ac.uk](mailto:S.Livingstone@lse.ac.uk)

27 March 2018

Thanks Sahana

Good questions. You make me realise that we could pay more attention - perhaps in some of our chapters-to-come - to the content of the digital media children are engaging with. One of our concerns has been that although parents are gaining the skills to use digital devices and services of different kinds, they struggle to find a language of value that enables them to guide their children towards certain kinds of 'beneficial' content in videos or games or away from stereotyped or unimaginative or simplistic media, of the kind you imply may be problematic. This may be because taste cultures aren't much developed and seem hard to articulate in everyday digital culture - compared, say, with known genres of television or publicly recognised prizes for books or films. Interestingly, it was in some of our ethnic minority families, especially in relation to religion, that parents were most confident in steering their children towards or away from particular media.

Best, Sonia

**Philipp Budka** [ph.budka@philbu.net](mailto:ph.budka@philbu.net)

28 March 2018

Dear All,

The EASA Media Anthropology Network's 62nd e-seminar is now closed.

On behalf of the network's organizing team, I would like to thank Sonia and Alicia for providing their text and for engaging in discussions and Veronica for her opening comments. A big thank you to all who participated to the e-seminar.

The transcript of the e-seminar will soon be online: <http://www.media-anthropology.net/index.php/e-seminars>

Please remember that the network and all its activities rely on voluntary support. If you would like to support the network, e.g. by transcribing e-seminars, or if you would like to discuss your media anthropology related work and research in an e-seminar, please get in contact:

<http://www.media-anthropology.net/index.php/contact>

Thank you and all the best,

Philipp