Surveillance & Society

Heitner's Growing up in Public: Coming of Age in a Digital World

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Book Review

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Devorah Heitner is an American author and public speaker who specialises in guiding children, families, and schools through digital lives. After spending her early career as a media studies and communications academic, she has spent the past ten-plus years working as an author and public speaker focusing on children and their digital engagement. *Growing up in Public* (2023), written to target a general audience of American parents and educators, seeks to provide them with insight into the technoculture contemporary children are growing up in. This is a culture where older notions of "public" and "private" lack meaning, much to parents' concern.

This book starts with content relevant to surveillance, later shifting towards content aimed at assisting parents in guiding their children and teenagers towards adulthood: there are chapters on sexting, what to do during a moment of public shaming/"getting cancelled," and college admissions. One of the core features of Heitner's book is the balancing of different perspectives. Parents' voices as heard and so are those of children/young people, educators, and researchers. This measured approach serves the author well, as it allows her to insert nuanced arguments into difficult topics. For example, Heitner cautions that sexting "can be nothing more than another form of healthy teenage sexual exploration" (171).

Another area where Heitner shows discernment and balance is in acknowledging not only that surveillance does exist (and it can be harmful) but also that some fears surrounding it are exaggerated. An example of the first is her discussion on classroom apps such as Class Dojo and PowerSchool that allow for instantly transmitted information about behaviour and grades. Heitner is very sceptical about apps like this, writing of the many issues associated with their use: data privacy problems, a lack of narrative feedback, the near-impossibility of opting out of their use, and the development of an almost Foucauldian sense of self-monitoring in children. An example of excessive fears is, interestingly, also based in schools: many individuals (parents, children, and teachers alike) are concerned that colleges (to be understood as the American higher education system) and their admissions offices are constantly monitoring teenagers' digital footprints for misdeeds; Heitner cautions that, from her conversations with professionals who work in this sector, that this is not a standard nor widespread practice. While her supportive information here may be both personal and anecdotal, it presents a unique perspective that is worthy of further research.

Heitner makes an important contribution to public discourse with her conceptions of "small" and "big" privacy. She describes small privacy as a relational matter between a child and those in their "own network: parents, extended family, friends, and their (hyper) local community" (93). This is contrasted with big privacy, which is about the relationship between a child, their datafied selves, and various digital platforms. Heitner's conceptions offer the general-public audience of her book a useful characterisation of privacy in clear, focused language, with guidance on how the (adult) reader can discuss these concepts with children in their lives.

Overall, Heitner's book takes a calm and measured approach to highly emotive issues. There are, however, some curiosities in her work. A key principle that frames much of Heitner's work is the encouragement of mentoring as a parental practise, which she generally favours over technologised monitoring (and certainty favours over covert forms of this). However, Heitner neither defines mentoring nor provides overarching guidance on how parents can engage in this. The book would benefit from her laying out her assumptions about what mentoring means, particularly as dialogue-heavy forms of parenting are most typical of the middle classes, and thus parents in other socioeconomic situations may need further support.

While this may be a book with a general audience, the author is clued-in to relevant academic discourse. Heitner refers to the work of the Pew Research Centre and Annette Lareau, amongst others; this provides an element of robustness to her arguments and is particularly effective in the chapter on sexting. However, more could have been done here. There is a whole chapter on sharenting that does not take into account the work of Sonia Livingstone and Alicia Blum-Ross, which is an oversight. Given Heitner's interest in surveillance and privacy, one would have hoped to see more from key authors in this field such as Tama Leaver, Valerie Steeves, Tonya Rooney, and others.

Throughout the book, Heitner uses the word "parent." There is one exception to this, in the chapter on sharenting. The author remarks that mothers experience a greater degree of social judgement for engaging in sharenting, and that they are engaging in a form of emotional work by being "in charge" of a family's public image. This, coupled with an earlier remark that "social media can be a place to chronicle and celebrate concerted cultivation" (82), indicate that Heitner does have an awareness of parenting as a gendered practise. It is understandable that, for a mass market book, such seemingly neutral language would be appropriate. But given how steadfastly gendered parenting remains, I cannot help but wonder how parents of different genders would engage with the book.

Growing up in Public is a compelling and timely exploration of the challenges faced by today's youth in a digitally surveilled world. Heitner's interdisciplinary approach, combining media studies, psychology, and education, provides a comprehensive understanding of the issues at hand. Her practical recommendations and advocacy make this book a valuable resource for parents, educators, and policymakers, while also appealing to academics via its insights into the intersections of surveillance, privacy, and childhood. It challenges readers to reconsider the norms and practices surrounding digital surveillance and to advocate for a more equitable and respectful treatment of young people's digital lives.