The Routledge Companion to Digital Media and Children

Lelia Green, Donell Holloway, Kylie Stevenson, Tama Leaver, Leslie Haddon

Supervised Play

Publication details
https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781351004107-17

William Balmford, Larissa Hjorth, Ingrid Richardson
Published online on: 28 Oct 2020

https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781351004107-17

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT
SUPERVISED PLAY

Intimate Surveillance and Children’s Mobile Media Usage

William Balmford, Larissa Hjorth, and Ingrid Richardson

Introduction

Contemporary homes have become environments within which appropriate times, spaces, and places for the use of screen interfaces are constantly contested and (re)negotiated. Mobile media further complicates these practices, as they are intimate and playful devices that are carried on the body (thus often with no designated place within the home), and their networking and social media capability renders them potentially risky for young users. This chapter focuses on parental monitoring of their children’s mobile media practices, contributing to extant scholarship that has explored the role of mobile media in redefining place (de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012), surveillance practices (Humphreys, 2011), privacy (Gazzard, 2011), and the impact of mobile technology on corporate and governmental surveillance in an age of Big Data (e.g., Andrejevic, 2006, 2013; Cincotta et al., 2011; Farman, 2011; Lupton, 2016). The authors suggest that new forms of social surveillance (Marwick, 2012) are becoming part of everyday life in domestic and familial settings, adding another — and, to date, under-researched — component to the practices of care and supervision of children in the home (Fitchard, 2012; Clark, 2013; Burrows, 2017; Leaver, 2017). Little research has been conducted into the friendly, informal modes of surveillance that take place within the family (Leaver, 2017; Hjorth et al., 2018), and especially across the range of different social and hierarchical relations that exist in domestic contexts.

Care has always had a complex relationship to surveillance (Bellacasa Puig de la, 2012), as it involves paradoxical notions of constraint, control, guardianship, and concern. Digital and mobile media complicates this imbrication further. Mobile technologies are frequently deployed as ambient forms of surveillance between family members (Matsuda, 2009; Clark, 2013). Misa Matsuda discusses such a phenomenon in her work on the use of keitai (mobile phones) (2009). Matsuda argues that alongside the growth of keitai in Japan, the Japanese family “now makes optimal use of the keitai in order to maintain their familial bonds” while engaging in other daily tasks (Matsuda, 2009, p. 62).

Likewise, Clark engages notions of the ambient to explore how mobile media allows for unobtrusive remote contact or what she terms “respectful connectedness” through more subtle surveillance, as an alternative to more conspicuous modes of monitoring teenagers’ mobile (and other media) usage, which she describes as “helicopter parenting” (2013, p. 205). Other forms of child surveillance have also been of interest to scholars, including research into school surveillance (Shade & Singh, 2016) and intergenerational ‘friendly surveillance’ (Hjorth et al., 2018). These
studies effectively recalibrate how we conceptualise surveillance, yet there is still more work needed to understand these quotidian modes of care and supervision as they are woven into and through the mobile media practices of children and parents.

This chapter seeks to explore the informal ways in which friendly, intimate, and careful surveillance plays out in domestic mobile media practices. How are parents and children deploying media in forms of ambient watching? And what do these current practices suggest in terms of future implications for the field?

The chapter draws on ethnographic fieldwork conducted as part of the Games of Being Mobile (GoBM) project. Over three years, the researchers conducted in-home interviews, participant observation, and play sessions in 60 households across five major cities around Australia. In what follows, the chapter begins with an overview of the GoBM study and a discussion of current debates around everyday surveillance and media. Then, drawing on the project’s findings, the chapter provide examples of how this is shaped in and by parents’ and children’s mobile media practices. The authors argue that the dynamic relationship between families and media use involves complex notions of intimacy, care, mediated sociality, and media literacy.

**Contextualising the Study**

The GoBM study was funded by the Australian Research Council (ARC) and is the first Australia-wide and longitudinal study of mobile gaming practices in the home. The project investigated Australian mobile gaming to better understand how mobility, play, and location are entangled in digital and networked media usage, particularly in domestic contexts. Ethnographic fieldwork was conducted over three years in 60 participant households across five cities (Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, Perth, and Brisbane). Throughout this chapter the authors draw on the experiences of several key participants that offer a variety of insights into the changing conceptions of informal surveillance in Australian homes. Throughout the GoBM project three key ethnographic methods were employed: informal interviews, play sessions, and participant observation.

Interviews were informal and semi-structured, most often conducted within participants’ households. Each household was interviewed on three occasions, in which their history with and ongoing use of mobile media was explored. Follow-up interviews often included ‘play sessions’, which involved playing videogames with participants, predominantly on mobile devices. Participants chose the games to be played and the sessions were crucial in highlighting intersections between device use and being-at-home and capturing typical scenarios of media practice. Through the play sessions researchers were able to informalise their position as researchers and better observe ambient mobile usage within the home. The other key method used during the GoBM fieldwork was participant observation – viewing and engaging in activities with participants. Although the play sessions conducted were a form of participant observation, other activities, such as family dinners, board game nights, or ‘no screen’ occasions, were also observed as a way to extend the authors’ ethnography into the everyday routines of the participants’ lives.

Each of these techniques were deployed across one or more of three key meetings with participant households, which included an introductory meeting, a return meeting six to 12 months later, and a final meeting another six to 12 months after that. Recruitment for GoBM consisted of a plain language statement (PLS) and accompanying call for interest on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Digital communities such as Reddit and Gumtree (an online community marketplace) were also engaged, with potential participants being contacted through direct messaging. Potential participants were also ‘snowballed’ from existing social networks. As the GoBM project sought to engage with a variety of age and literacy demographics, a simplified PLS was written for participants who were under the age of 18. In these more vulnerable participant cases, a simplified PLS was especially useful to ensure ongoing informed consent. These
accommodations allowed research to be conducted with a variety of groups including families with younger children – an important focus of this chapter.

Understanding Informal Surveillance

Practices of monitoring media use within domestic settings – or everyday, interpersonal, careful, and caring modes of surveillance – require a rethink of what surveillance means outside traditional corporate or governmental contexts. Lee Humphreys identifies three kinds of surveillance within social media practice: the voluntary panopticon (“voluntary submission to corporate surveillance”), lateral surveillance (“asymmetrical, nontransparent monitoring of citizens by one another”), and self-surveillance (monitoring oneself through technology) (2011, p. 577). These various forms of surveillance correspond in various ways to the different styles of intimate and careful parental monitoring of children’s mobile media usage that will be explored later in the chapter.

While surveillance is often immediately thought of as something carried out by government bodies or large companies, there are many more types of surveillance – horizontal and vertical, benevolent and malevolent – that move in and out of daily practices. These practices are indicative of new forms of social surveillance (Marwick, 2012) within families that are creating additional – and to date under-researched – layers (Clark, 2013; Shade & Singh, 2016). Where Clark’s The Parent App (2013) explores how families are adapting to the growing presence of digital technology (with mobile phones being a particular focus), Shade and Singh discuss the growing trend of student social media surveillance by schools in the United States (2016). These two works both explore how contemporary media are layering new formal and informal modes of surveillance across everyday life contexts. The emergence of this ongoing surveillance is potentially problematic, with Shade and Singh arguing that “surveillance of young people can erode their trust in parents, authority figures, schools, and the state; it can stifle the development of autonomy, resilience, and agency” (2016, p. 9). Due to such potential risks, many stakeholders (including families) are seeking less blatant forms of social surveillance.

For Alice Marwick, ‘social surveillance’ is distinguished from traditional forms through three axes – power, hierarchy, and exchange. Utilising Foucault’s notion of capillaries of power, Marwick argues that social surveillance assumes “power differentials evident in everyday interactions rather than the hierarchical power relationships assumed in much of the surveillance literature” (2012: p. 378). Marwick identifies some of the common notions of surveillance such as lateral (Andrejevic, 2006), participatory (Albrechtslund, 2008), social searching (Lampe et al., 2006), and social (Joinson, 2008; Tokunaga, 2011). Where lateral surveillance refers to the observation of peers, participatory modes invite a more playful framing, understanding surveillance as potentially ‘positive and empowering’ (Marwick, 2012, p. 381). Social searching – the use of social media to learn more about one’s family and friends – is one example of how participatory surveillance can be perceived in a more positive light (Marwick, 2012). As Marwick notes, social surveillance differs from traditional models insofar as it is focussed around micro-level, decentralised, reciprocal interactions between individuals.

The parent–child surveillance relationship has been extensively written about in popular media, particularly in terms of digital and online privacy, and is commonly referred to as ‘internet parenting’ (Bakardjieva, 2005; Valcke et al., 2010). The terminology refers to the myriad of approaches parents take to protect, teach, and manage the online media consumption of their children (Bakardjieva, 2005). As Sonia Livingstone has argued, the issue of risky media engagement by children has become ever more difficult to monitor as interfaces have shifted from stationary positions within ‘collective family space’ to mobile and online devices that are used in “individualised, personalised, and, for children, unsupervised spaces” (2009, p. 156).
Leaver discusses the perceptions and manifestations of such surveillance, arguing that parental monitoring both of and through media usage is contributing to the “normalisation of intimate surveillance, where to monitor, mediate, and publicly share media about infants become markers of good parenting and culturally appropriate levels of care” (2017, p. 8). Likewise, Hjorth, Heather Horst, and Sarah Pink have written about the ongoing shift towards intimate surveillance, paying particular attention to the idea of ‘friendly surveillance’ (2018). Friendly surveillance speaks to the geographies of care that infuse everyday life with benevolent modes of watching (Mol, 2008; Marwick, 2012) and the use of technology to enable care from a distance.

It is this body of research concerning ‘friendly’ and intimate surveillance to which this chapter contributes. Through an exploration of parental surveillance in Australian households, the authors argue that mobile media engages discourses and practices of ‘friendly’ and ‘careful’ surveillance in new and ambient ways. The following sections provide detailed scenarios of use, with a particular focus on the ways these routines of surveillance involve both ‘ambient presence’ through social mobile media and networked gameplay, and the co-located implementation of usage boundaries within the physical space of the home.

Checking In and Friending: Ambient Surveillance

Margaret, aged 50, often worries about her 17-year-old daughter Chrissy while she is out of the house. Living in Melbourne’s outer suburbs with her husband Frank, Margaret has noticed that over the school holidays Chrissy spends most of her time out and about in Melbourne’s inner-city areas. Fearful of “overwatching” her daughter (as Chrissy put it) she instead tries to carefully surveil Chrissy through the mobile games they play together. When Chrissy was younger the mother and daughter would often play Scrabble on family holidays or during quiet weekends. Now both have smartphones, through which they play the Scrabble-like game Words With Friends. The game enables them to play at a distance, a capability Margaret often takes advantage of. As she explained during one interview, she will play a word while Chrissy is out, feeling that “really it is just saying ‘well hey I’m here’, without actually having to make a phone call”.

Alongside her turn in the game, Margaret will also frequently send a short message through the game’s chat function. She explained she does this because it is less overt and intrusive than a text message. She described this form of communication with her daughter as “a sort of secret corridor”, a private communication line to her daughter. Many of the participants referred to what is termed the phatic nature of their communication in mobile social games – micro-social interactions such as sending a gift, taking one’s turn in a game, or messaging “Hi” – as a means of verifying that the channel of communication is open and working, or as a way to say “I’m here (for you)” (Jakobson, 1960). The use of mobile and social media as enablers of phatic or ambient communication, through texting, online communication, playful mobile apps, and gameplay is well recognised (Kirman et al., 2009; Hjorth & Richardson, 2014; Balmford & Davies, 2019). For Margaret, phatic communication with her daughter through Words With Friends is an instance of both ambient play (Hjorth & Richardson, 2020) and ambient surveillance.

The way in which Margaret uses Words With Friends also echoes ideas of “geographies of care” and “care at a distance” (Mol, 2008; Marwick, 2012). Through the act of game playing she is able to reach out and make contact with her daughter, displaying affection and a kind of low-stakes or unobtrusive concern through the application. This app-negotiated surveillance is similar to the scenarios of use Leaver details, however it plays out in a different manner (2017). Where Leaver explores parental mediation through image sharing and texting – often through very public “influencer” accounts (2017) – Margaret’s intent was to enact subtle and careful
surveillance, seeking to register contact with her daughter to “let her know I’m here (if she needs me)”, without exposing this concern to her daughter’s wider social circle. This careful negotiation was important as Chrissy, nearly 18, desired a certain amount of freedom from her mother’s oversight.

Likewise, Margaret wanted to promote such independence in her daughter while still ensuring her safety. To this extent Margaret admitted there was an element of subterfuge in her surveillance. Rather than the explicit purpose of communicating through a text message, her communication through *Words With Friends* was obfuscated through a layer of play. In this way her surveillance was more ambient – interwoven with social media and game practices that are already embedded in everyday-life routines and habits.

Chrissy, present during a follow-up interview, explained that her mother’s surveillance was perhaps not as subtle as Margaret intended. “I know exactly what you’re doing mum!” she laughed as her mother revealed her secret strategy. However, despite her knowledge of the inner workings of the practice, Chrissy acknowledged that her mother’s attempts were still appreciated. She explained that it was preferable to a phone call or text as it was less “in the way”, meaning it allowed her to respond when she felt like it, rather than “demanding” a response. In this negotiation, the friendly monitoring and concern Margaret employs through *Words With Friends* allows for a more lateral form of surveillance in which members of the social group are perceived as more equal, rather than hierarchical.

Other writers have identified similar phenomena, detailing how mobile media allows groups ‘to keep a friendly eye’ on each other (Hjorth et al., 2018, p. 1220). Hjorth et al., for example, explore this friendly watching in their work on locative media practices among same sex couples (2018). For these couples, locative media services such as geotagged Facebook posts or tracked Uber rides allowed partners to monitor the location of their significant other, deriving comfort and security through the intimate surveillance that the technology afforded (Hjorth et al., 2018). Much like the friendly eye of locative media highlighted by Hjorth et al., Margaret offers a maternal hand to her daughter; she can reach out if she needs to and a returning move lets Margaret know her daughter is ok. Marwick’s interpretation of social surveillance, particularly her recognition of how it can operate at a decentralised and micro-level, is clearly visible in the subtle, friendly (and careful) surveillance that takes place between Margaret and her daughter. Similarly, despite the lack of geolocative technology, Margaret employs technology to surveil her daughter for similar reasons to Hjorth et al.’s participants, out of a desire to maintain feelings of closeness without direct interference (2018). As they write:

> The term careful surveillance describes the way we monitor and watch our intimates as cohabitants subject to our care. Yet, it also deliberately implies that surveillance should be a careful practice, one that we consider very carefully in terms of its impact on others. 

*(Hjorth et al., 2018, p. 1220)*

These notions of impact are particularly relevant in parent–child relationships, where duty of care intersects with a desire to promote independence and resilience. To this extent it is important to note that the mobile-oriented careful surveillance Margaret employs was possible in part because of Chrissy’s age and her overt ownership of a mobile phone. Nearly an adult, Chrissy holds a certain amount of agency in how she negotiates the world, and the speed with which she responds to her mother. The next examples this chapter offers explore a different scenario, one in which the children being surveilled are of a younger age.

Chloe and Elish (both 13) live in Adelaide with their mother Vicky (45). Vicky, a single mother, recently allowed her daughters to get Instagram accounts, which they access both
through their smartphones and the several iPads they have at home. Vicky was hesitant about allowing her daughters to use the social media platform. Many of these concerns revolved around the unexpected consequences of posting content online: “there’s bad people out there, but even just innocent things like, you know, like if you take a photo of yourself . . . inadvertent things can happen”. She attempted to educate her daughters on these risks, explaining issues of privacy and exposure, but she still felt the need to monitor their usage.

Vicky achieved this monitoring in two ways. The first way was to follow her daughters on Instagram, explaining that: “I suppose that’s why I’m on Instagram too so I can check what they’re doing”. Furthermore, she expanded this friendly surveillance into the social circles of her children, saying that “I follow a lot of their friends as well”. She explained that she follows her daughters and their friends largely to keep track of her daughters’ activities. Through this considered surveillance, Vicky was able to ‘check in’ on what Chloe and Elish were up to without explicitly making a phone call or sending a text message.

Likewise, monitoring their online activity allowed her to observe any potentially problematic posts or online behaviour – an increasing concern for many parents, as noted by Clark (2013). This ‘checking in’, enabled by the convergence of mobile and social media in communication practices, can be described in Mark Paterson’s terms (2009) as a form of “mediated social touch” (p. 61). Similarly, for Farman (2011), ‘social proprioception’ refers to this embodied awareness of distant others that is intrinsic to communicative experiences on social media platforms and through mobile media. For Vicky, Instagram affords a mode of ‘ambient presence’ (Hjorth & Richardson, 2014) that allows her to ‘be with’ her daughters and simultaneously engage in a kind of soft surveillance that avoids more direct or intrusive pathways of communication.

Similar to Elish and Chloe, the way in which Brisbane children Sophie, aged 12, and Max, aged 14, are allowed to use mobile social media came with the caveat of ‘being friends with Mum’. Even getting a mobile phone was predicated upon this agreement. As Sophie explained with much frustration: “she was like, ‘You can only buy it if you’re friends with me’”. Her brother Max explained that being ‘friends’ with their Mum had a significant impact on how they used their phones while online and out of the house: “it means you can’t like inappropriate stuff”. Interestingly, Sophie felt that some of her friends did not adjust their practices to parental surveillance. She exasperatedly remarked:

I see some pretty inappropriate things that my friends have liked. I’m just like, ‘You want everyone to see that you’ve liked that?’ Just like, wow. I’m like, ‘Are you actually that stupid? Everyone can see it, and you can get into trouble’. Well, you can’t really get into trouble for liking it I guess, but if you shared it or something.

The experiences of Sophie, Max, Elish, and Chloe all highlight a phenomenon common across the GoBM research in which parents, alongside using mobile devices to monitor their children’s physical presence, carefully surveilled their children’s online lives as well. In these cases, the children’s mobile media practices were closely linked to social engagement with friends, a type of “messing around” (Lange & Ito, 2010) on Instagram and other social media as a mode of connection and involvement in social worlds. Parents’ monitoring of these behaviours reflect the fears and risks of online behaviour Clark and other scholars have identified (Livingstone et al., 2012; Clark, 2013). However, they also highlight practices of careful surveillance through mobile technology and social media. Where direct surveillance through explicit contact was often perceived by children as obtrusive, the ambient surveillance mobile social media afford allowed parents to take a more considered and covert approach. As outlined above, such monitoring was deemed commonplace, reflecting Leaver’s argument that intimate surveillance is increasingly seen as a crucial responsibility of the parent (and to not do so would be to ‘fail’ as a carer) (2017). By
deploying careful surveillance through social media posts on mobile phones, parents are able to enact this responsibility through a lens more tolerable to their children.

**Playing Together: Co-Located Surveillance**

It’s not terribly strict, but there are times when we’ve noticed they are playing for too long. We do have to kick them off it and force sharing among them. Like, recently we changed the password so they had to come to us to get into it. So they couldn’t get into it while we weren’t paying attention and stay on it for hours. We kind of try to limit it a little bit.

The quote above comes from Helen, 29-year-old mother of Amy (four) and Penny (eight). Helen, her partner Charlie (also 29), and their two children live in Brisbane. A young family, they are one of the only couples within their social circle with children. They often find themselves having to watch their children’s ‘screen time’ for fear of over-use. Such management and monitoring tactics are common among the other families she knows, with nearly all limiting children’s access to devices (both mobile and static). Furthermore, these periods of time were often also spatially restricted, such as being confined to the living room or kitchen, where their engagement could be easily monitored by parents co-located within the domestic space. These examples show scenarios of use where limited mobile device access, combined with spatial limitations to particular spaces, was employed as a parental management and surveillance strategy. Techniques such as removal of the device after there has been ‘enough’ of a certain activity, or use within only certain rooms of the home, were frequently employed by GoBM parent participants.

The restriction of screen time has been an ongoing topic of interest in popular media and is a common method of device management for many parents (Clark, 2013). In *The Parent App*, Clark argues against the implementation of such restrictions unless a reasonable alternative is suggested, as imposed limitations without reasonable alternatives are likely to be unhelpful and contribute to feelings of obtrusive surveillance (2013). Instead, Clark suggests management strategies that “can offer an alternative that demands that [you], too, stop what [you’re] doing in favour of a different activity”, such that parents enact the behaviour they desire to see in their children (2013, p. 220).

More recently, Ito (2017, 2018) and other scholars such as Blum-Ross and Livingstone (2016) have maintained that screen time limitations are based on ineffective measures of whether mobile device usage is positive or negative. They claim that quantitative limits ignore the ubiquitous nature of mobile phones and call instead for management strategies that focus on context, content, and connections over quantity (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2016). Context concerns the situation in which the device is being used (both mediated and actual), content refers to the ‘what’ of mobile interaction (what is being shared, communicated, or engaged with), while connections comprise the social bonds and networks involved (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2016).

Charlotte (37), a mother of four children living in Sydney with her husband Oscar, explained that her two older children are now adults living out of home, but that she approached the issue of screen time a little differently with her two younger children Michael (aged ten) and Stephan (aged six), who are currently very invested in mobile videogames. In an effort to combine surveillance with ‘quality time’, she actively played the games her sons were interested in. As she explained:

> I helped them with their games and so I’d get to know about their games. I’d help them play, I’d learn, I’d get interested . . . So, I’m sort of playing with them, making
sure it is ok what they’re playing and they’re having fun. So a lot of my gaming has been side-by-side with my boys.

Charlotte’s screen-time monitoring was therefore enacted in a more companionable and supportive manner, one that better aligns with Livingstone and Blum-Ross’ advice regarding the “content, context and connections” of device usage (2016, p. 4). That is, what may be understood as a form of surveillance is closely entangled with maternal caring and ‘quality time’ (as Charlotte explained). What constitutes surveillance here becomes interwoven with practices of co-located intimacy and play. Charlotte deliberately avoided explicit monitoring and prohibitive rules around mobile gameplay, and through such engagement her surveillance of her children’s mobile media use was more considered and careful, oriented positively around togetherness and opportunities for co-located interaction. Though similarly based on co-located management strategies, Helen and Charlie preferred explicit temporal and spatial restrictions. For both families, their considered oversight and monitoring practices are salient instances of informal, intimate, and ‘domesticated’ surveillance.

**Implications and Conclusion**

As mobile media becomes increasingly ubiquitous, parents will continue to worry about how to monitor and control their children’s engagement with such technology. This chapter has explored how such monitoring is achieved through the use of ‘careful surveillance’ (Hjorth et al., 2018). The chapter identified two main modalities of parental watching: ambient or mediated co-presence (through social mobile media and gameplay), and co-located supervision via temporal and spatial restrictions and collaborative play. Each are managed through different modalities of presence and are partially dependent on the age of the children.

Throughout the GoBM project, ambient or mediated surveillance was most often observed in parental monitoring of older teenage children, where the fostering of independence and self-determination is deemed important by both parent and child. In contrast, co-located intimacy and spatial/temporal boundary work are far more common strategies for management of younger children, and, ideally, the specificity of content, context, and connections is recognised. In both of these manifestations of careful surveillance parents often sought to balance the wellbeing of their children alongside a desire to not appear overly determining – recalling Marwick’s (2012) reframing of surveillance as potentially empowering and playful.

The implications of careful surveillance in the home and familial contexts will continue to be felt as mobile devices become thoroughly embedded in everyday life. How parents monitor and surveil their children’s mobile device usage is crucial to how technology is perceived and taken up by coming generations. Surveillance through and of mobile media involves a complex interplay of power, agency, affect, and enjoyment. In the already emotionally charged parent–child relationship, such surveillance is both important and potentially risky.

As this chapter has shown, approaches deploying ‘careful surveillance’ appear better poised to promote ongoing considerations of the content, context, and social connections pertaining to mobile device usage. Further research into the various informal and intimate routines of watching and managing children's media engagement might explore other scenarios of use, such as school-based monitoring or the interwolved supervision of older siblings, providing further insight into the ways mobile media practices both demand and afford diverse modalities of domesticated and everyday surveillance.

**Notes**

1 GoBM was an Australia Research Council (ARC) discovery project.
2 All participants have been given pseudonyms to ensure anonymity.
By 2016, 70M families will keep tabs on each other with GPS.


