

### "The kids hate it, but we love it!": parents' reviews of circle

Cino, Davide; Mascheroni, Giovanna; Wartella, Ellen

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

#### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Cino, D., Mascheroni, G., & Wartella, E. (2020). "The kids hate it, but we love it!": parents' reviews of circle. *Media and Communication*, 8(4), 208-217. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v8i4.3247>

#### Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY Lizenz (Namensnennung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/deed.de>

#### Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY Licence (Attribution). For more information see:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>

Article

## “The Kids Hate It, but We Love It!”: Parents’ Reviews of Circle

Davide Cino <sup>1,\*</sup>, Giovanna Mascheroni <sup>1</sup> and Ellen Wartella <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Communication and Performing Arts, Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, 20123 Milan, Italy;  
E-Mails: [davide.cino@unicatt.it](mailto:davide.cino@unicatt.it) (D.C.), [giovanna.mascheroni@unicatt.it](mailto:giovanna.mascheroni@unicatt.it) (G.M.)

<sup>2</sup> Department of Communication Studies, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL 60208, USA;  
E-Mail: [ellen-wartella@northwestern.edu](mailto:ellen-wartella@northwestern.edu)

\* Corresponding author

Submitted: 11 May 2020 | Accepted: 10 August 2020 | Published: 10 November 2020

### Abstract

The contribution aims to present a critical analysis of Circle—a screen time management and parental control device—through the lens of parental mediation, children’s surveillance, and children’s rights to online participation. Circle promises to sell parents peace of mind by allowing them to monitor their children’s online activities. In order to investigate how parents themselves understand Circle, we conducted a quantitative and qualitative content analysis of a sample of 154 parental reviews about the device on Amazon and Searchman by parents of children from early childhood to adolescence, with respect to perceived advantages and disadvantages of the device, parenting styles, and (the absence of) children’s voice and agency. Results suggest an ambivalent relationship between parents and the device. Most reviews adhere to the dominant discourses on ‘screen time,’ framing children’s ‘intimate surveillance’ as a good parenting practice, and emphasize the need for the ‘responsible parents’ to manage their children’s online experiences with the aid of Circle. Others, in turn, criticize the device for failing to enable fine grained monitoring, while few reported the device could dismiss children’s voice and cause conflicts in the households. Overall, findings suggest that parental control devices may promote restrictive mediation styles hindering children’s voice and their exploratory and participatory agency online.

### Keywords

children; Circle; parental mediation; privacy; surveillance

### Issue

This article is part of the issue “Children’s Voices on Privacy Management and Data Responsibilization” edited by Ralf De Wolf (Ghent University, Belgium) and Mariek Vanden Abeele (Tilburg University, The Netherlands).

© 2020 by the authors; licensee Cogitatio (Lisbon, Portugal). This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).

### 1. Introduction

Mobile media are an integral part of family life today in the Global North. According to the Common Sense Census (Rideout, 2017), 98% of American households with offspring aged 0–8 hold at least one mobile device accounting for a third of children’s screen time, with the average child in that age range spending 48 minutes a day on it. Nationally representative data from over 16,000 8- to 18-year-olds in the U.S. found that by age 11.53% of children possess their own smartphones, with a rise to 69% by the time a child turns 12, with time spent on screen media for entertainment purposes ranging from 5 to 7 and a half hours a day (Rideout & Robb,

2019). Additionally, data from EU Kids Online report that among European children aged 9–16, 80% go online with a smartphone or mobile device, with the average child spending approximately 167 minutes a day connected (Smahel et al., 2020). Taken together, these studies suggest that using mobile devices is common practice for many children today in industrialized countries.

A peculiar characteristic of mobile media is their ubiquity, as users can access them ‘anywhere, anytime,’ crossing traditional boundaries of media usage within specific rooms in the domestic environment and contributing to “the geographical migration of technologies” in the household (Caron & Caronia, 2001, p. 43; Radesky, Schumacher, & Zuckerman, 2015). This means

that media use and Internet access can become increasingly privatized experiences for children who live far from their parents' supervision, potentially fostering a pervasive and unsupervised use at every moment of the day and night. In this regard, survey findings, for example, show that the 39% of teens owning a mobile device keep it within reach when sleeping. Of these, the 70% check it within 30 minutes before falling asleep, while 51% tend to wake up at night to check social media, and 54% wake up because of a notification (Robb, 2019). Such ubiquity of mobile media in the life of youth seems to worry many parents of children from early childhood to adolescence (Lauricella et al., 2016; Rideout, 2017; Rideout & Robb, 2019), for traditional parental mediation strategies are hindered by smaller screens and more personal devices. A national-representative study of U.S. parents with children aged 8–18, for example, found that 53% of them fear their kids may develop some addiction to their screens, while 85% agree that monitoring children's media usage is important for their safety, and 67% believe that it is more important than respecting their privacy (Lauricella et al., 2016). As children's screen time has been framed as a social, yet private, problem calling for parents' responsibility in handling it, many tools have been developed in the past few years to help parents in this task. In this regard, Common Sense data report that 31% of parents use third-party tools to govern their children's device use, such as Internet filters, Net Nanny, and Circle (Lauricella et al., 2016). These findings are further supported by children themselves, as among over 16,000 youth from the abovementioned study from Rideout and Robb (2019), half of all tweens and a quarter of teens with a smartphone or a tablet stated their parents use some apps or other tools to monitor what they do and how much time they spend online.

On such basis, the present exploratory study seeks to investigate parents' perceptions of and experiences with parental control technological tools as means of parental mediation of children's technology use. As an example of these devices, we specifically focus on Circle, a small box that connects to the home network for parents to monitor and regulate children's Internet use from all devices in the house, promising "to make families' lives better, online and off" (MeetCircle, n.d.). According to the website, its features allow parents to: limit children's online activities by filtering contents, setting time limits and pause the navigation; check patterns of individual Internet usage, visited websites, and trace children's location; keep balance, by setting a bedtime for children's devices, scheduling off times from the Internet, and giving motivational rewards by granting extra time online to give kids a "little boost for good behavior" (MeetCircle, n.d.).

Drawing on a broader project on the domestication of parental control tools, here we report on a quantitative and qualitative content analysis of users' reviews of Circle posted on Amazon and Searchman in order to explore how parents understand and rate Circle within

the household, with respect to parents' perceived advantages and disadvantages of the device, parenting styles, and (the absence of) children's voice and agency in the monitoring process.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Leisure Time, Screens, and Parental Accountability: What's New?

Media panics surrounding the relationship between children and the media have long historical roots, with every medium being cyclically considered a potential threat to moral order (Drotner, 1999), and worries about digital media use being a topical and daily source of dilemmas for many families in the digital age (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2020).

According to Furedi (2016), the emergence of commercial publishing during the 18th century and the increase in the number of books' readers led to the fear of a 'reading addiction' in terms of potential alienation of the consumers and, especially for the youth, copycat effects to emulate characters' behaviors and deeds. Similarly, the rise of penny newspapers in the 19th century spurred similar controversies, echoing concerns that came with every 20th century new medium in terms of their potential disruptive effects on children, from films to smartphones and tablets. On such bases, it has been argued that every medium has been accompanied by broader social discourses on its peculiar advantages and disadvantages, with society putting particular emphasis on parents as primarily responsible for their children's media-related opportunities while also protecting them from potential risks (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2016; Wartella & Jennings, 2000). This narrative contributed to a 'Jekyll-and-Hyde' phenomenon, where, on the one hand, parents receive social pressure to incorporate the media in the household in order for their children not to miss out on educational benefits, but on the other, they are invested with the burden of protecting their children's safety and wellbeing. Such an expectation is in line with the intensive parenting framework, according to which parents are to deterministically be deemed accountable for all of the functional or dysfunctional outcomes in their children's lives (Shirani, Henwood, & Coltart, 2012). When applying this risk-benefit ratio to govern media 'effects,' parents have been asked to focus both on the amount of time children spend using the medium, and on the effects of children's exposure to media content in terms of knowledge, values, and moral conducts (Caronia, 2010). In spite of policies aimed at controlling the access to, and the quality of media for children, society has historically framed parents as the primary gatekeepers for safeguarding children from media's potentially harmful effects.

Furthermore, as historical discourses on media tended to recognize their educational opportunities for kids (e.g., for school-related activities), questions of media

governance have always paid particular attention to children's leisure time, where the media could be used by kids on their own mainly for entertainment purposes, against socially accepted expectations on how this free time should be spent (Wartella & Robb, 2008). Governing children's time with the media, though, progressively became a complicated task due to the growing privatization and individualization of media use in the household (Wartella & Jennings, 2000). Once again, same patterns of social worries and reactions have been seen with new mobile technologies (Wartella, 2019), where opportunities for privatization of media use reach a whole new level.

In light of broader social discourses framing parents as accountable to find private solutions to public 'problems' (i.e., children's relationship with media and its broader societal impacts), specific parental mediation strategies have been developed to govern (digital) media in the household. The next paragraph will build on that, specifically on how new technologies themselves—such as Circle—can be used to surveil children's relationship with mobile media.

## *2.2. Digital Parenting: Extending Parental Mediation and Parenting through Space and Time*

Since most media use in childhood takes place at home (Lemish, 2015), as noted above, parents have always been called upon to regulate their children's relationship with the media by disciplining both time and content. The practices, values and norms through which parents attempt to regulate their children's use of media—for example, trying to find a balance between media use and outdoor activities or encouraging positive uses of technology—have been traditionally labelled as 'parental mediation.' Parental mediation materializes parents' attitudes and imaginaries—hopes and fears—towards digital media. However, parental mediation practices reflect more largely the overall parenting and childrearing cultures of each household (Clark, 2013). While the study of parental mediation started in relation to television (co-)viewing, research is in agreement in pointing out how digital media complicate parental mediation. First, as anticipated above, digital and mobile media favor further privatized access to and use of the Internet and technology, as opposed to shared activities of co-viewing and a communal family-centered media experience, which in turn hinders the simple transfer of traditional parental mediation strategies from television to digital media (Valkenburg, Krccmar, Peeters, & Marseille, 1999). Second, and most importantly, is the double-faced nature of digital media, that simultaneously represent both the object of parental concerns and their regulatory attempts, and resources for parenting through anxiety-reducing devices (Ribak, 2009). Indeed, digital parenting (Mascheroni, Ponte, & Jorge, 2018) indicates the profound incorporation and naturalization of digital tools in the everyday practices of par-

enting, including forms of remote parenting (Clark, 2013) and micro-coordination of family life, up to the emergent practices of transcendent parenting (Lim, 2020) and intimate surveillance (Leaver, 2017). Transcendent parenting refers to the mobile-based and online-based practices through which parents transcend physical distance, and the boundaries between online and offline interactions, in order to be always 'there' for their children. Mobile media and digital media, then, support an extension of parenting across space, by transcending the limits of physical proximity, and across time, enabling an intensive and timeless enactment of parenting and a continuous provision of care at a distance (Lim, 2020).

Newer technologies, like mobile media, online platforms, apps and wearable devices become then part of the household's moral economy (Silverstone & Hirsh, 1992), by being acquired, domesticated, adopted and made meaningful in the context of the relation of care between parents and their children in line with the house's moral values and parents' orientation on parenting and the role they (feel they) are supposed to play in order to manage the relationship between technology and the offspring. In this way, the monitoring of children's lives—including their biometrics and health—becomes normalized as a good parenting practice. While providing parents with feelings of empowerment for adopting a caring and responsive parenting style, such emergent forms of 'intimate surveillance' (Leaver, 2017) or 'caring dataveillance' (Lupton, in press) situate business models and logics—namely datafication and 'surveillance capitalism' (Zuboff, 2015)—at the very heart of the intimate relationship between parents and children. The ambivalence of digital and mobile media as tools for empowerment, anxiety-reduction, and control within the parent-child relationship, first noted in studies of mobile communication (Ribak, 2009), is now turned into an everyday dilemma for parents (Cino & Dalledonne Vandini, 2020). In fact, the digital surveillance of children through various technologies of datafication is aimed at ensuring children's safety on and offline, while actually putting children's rights to privacy, protection and participation at risk (Mascheroni, 2018).

## **3. Methodology**

Informed by the abovementioned literature, the present article investigates parents' use of and opinions about Circle through a quantitative and qualitative content analysis (White & Marsh, 2006) of reviews posted on Amazon and Searchman. Our approach was informed by previous studies researching parents' appropriation of smart assistants like Alexa or pregnancy apps using the same platforms as sources of data collection (Barassi, 2017; Purington, Taft, Sannon, Bazarova, & Taylor, 2017). The rationale behind combining a quantitative and qualitative approach rests on our intention to both quantify basic descriptive information concerning how Circle is incorporated in the family environment, while also

interpreting these reviews to consider how they may reflect or resist broader social discourses on parents, children, and the media (Mascheroni & Holloway, 2017). This exploratory research aims to provide the basis for further inquiry on the topic in order to take a first glance at Circle's integration in the household. To this end, we seek to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How do parents' reviews evaluate Circle as a (digital-)parenting tool in the household?

RQ2: What types of parenting styles and parental mediation strategies, if at all, do these reviews reflect and how do they intertwine with broader social discourses on parents' media governance?

### 3.1. Data Collection

Data for this study were collected on the U.S. Searchman and Amazon reviews' section of Circle Home Plus, the currently available device which substituted the first generation of Circle with updated features (such as an upgraded hardware and a feature to monitor children's mobile device use even outside the home). As such, the reviews are reflective of American users' experiences with the latest generation of the device. After an initial screening of the reviews, a total of 154 posts were collected on December 2019, 11 of which were manually removed as under-detailed, for a final sample of 143 reviews (66% from Amazon and 34% from Searchman).

### 3.2. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed following a mixed inductive-deductive coding approach, where codes were either derived from the reviews or informed by specific theoretical concepts. After a preliminary analysis of the sample, the authors prepared a provisional codebook which was tested by two external coders. Following an initial training, the research assistants independently coded 20% of the sample, with Cohen's Kappa levels of agreement ranging from .71 to .92. Once disagreements were discussed and resolved, the sample was split in two parts, and each coder coded one.

Where available, coders coded for background variables in order to try to contextualize our findings. These include: authorship (with four codes being inductively derived from the reviews of parent, child, grandparent, and other— $\kappa = .90$ ), author's gender (female, male, or other— $\kappa = .83$ ), presence of author's age (present, not present, and if present specify— $\kappa = .92$ ), and presence of child's age (present, not present, and if present specify— $\kappa = .91$ ).

Four other variables were included in the coding scheme. First, the perceived advantages of the device. The coders coded for presence or absence of advantages reported in the review through a binary code ( $\kappa = .81$ ). The list of advantages was inductively derived by the

authors when creating the codebook. As advantages were not mutually exclusive, coders coded each pro with a binary code to indicate the presence or absence of that specific asset. Seven codes were used: easy setup, possibility to tailor the device to children of different ages, possibility to monitor different devices, setting online time limits, checking websites' history, filtering inappropriate contents, and preventing arguments. Levels of agreement ranged from .73 to .80.

Second, the perceived disadvantages of the device. Coders followed the same procedure as above, coding for presence or absence of disadvantages in the review ( $\kappa = .84$ ). Nine codes were inductively developed: difficult setup, slows down the Internet, crashes often, not flexible enough (used when the device would filter too many contents, even 'appropriate' ones), not enough monitoring, privacy risks in terms of data clouds, easy to circumvent, compromises parent-child relationship, and causes conflicts. Levels of agreement ranged from .75 to .82.

Third, the parental mediation. In line with Livingstone and Byrne (2018) we understand parental mediation as the strategies adopted by parents to manage the relation between children and media. Following the authors, reviews were coded as reflecting either a form of 'restrictive mediation,' 'enabling mediation,' or 'neither.' The 'restrictive' code was applied when the reviews' orientation pointed towards "restricting or banning or...supervising" (Livingstone & Byrne, 2018, p. 23) certain online activities. The 'enabling' code was used when, in turn, reviews spoke for an orientation towards "undertaking active strategies such as talking to a child about what they do online or encouraging their activities" but also "activities that might seem restrictive (use of technical controls and parental monitoring)...so that positive uses of the Internet can be encouraged" (Livingstone & Byrne, 2018, p. 23). The 'neither' code was used when none of the previous codes was pertinent. Agreement was high ( $\kappa = .79$ ). While many frameworks on parental mediation are available—generally based on active, restrictive, and co-using strategies (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008; Nathanson, 2001; Valkenburg, Piotrowski, Hermanns, & De Leeuw, 2013)—the one provided by Livingstone and Byrne (2018) and Livingstone et al. (2017) was particularly relevant here, since not only it clearly recognizes the use of parental monitoring devices (in line with the focus of this article), but also that such an use should be understood in situational and contextual terms, as parents' intentions may in fact be to enable their children's Internet experience instead of hindering it.

Fourth, the parental 'ethic' towards digital media. This variable was conceptualized following Clark's (2013) notion of 'ethic' as a complex set of principles helping parents adopt certain courses of action when it comes to managing digital media within the home. As such, reviews were coded as reflecting either an ethic 'of expressive empowerment,' of 'respectful connectedness'

or 'neither.' Reviews were coded as 'expressive empowerment' when reflecting an orientation toward encouraging children's media use and respecting their independence and privacy. The 'respectful connectedness' code was applied when reviews would speak for an orientation towards children's use of technology that would respect parental authority. The 'neither' code was used when none of the other codes was pertinent. Agreement was substantial ( $\kappa = .76$ ).

#### 4. Findings

The first step of this analysis was to look for posters' background information in order to better contextualize our findings, though this is not always feasible when working with natural online data. With respect to authorship, 67% of reviews were coded as authored by a parent, 4% by a grandparent, 2% by children. While contextual cues suggest that the remaining 27% of reviews were authored by parents as well (among the other reasons because Circle is specifically marketed as a parental device and targeted to parents), they were coded as 'other' since no explicit indications were present. Most of the time authors' gender was not clear (51%). When it could be inferred by nicknames or pronouns used in the review, though, 25% of the reviews were coded as authored by a man, and 24% as authored by a woman. Authors' age was never reported, while children's age was only reported for 11 children, 7 of which were teenagers, 2 were pre-teens, and 2 primary schoolers. Below, we report on parents' perceptions of Circle and parenting orientations and approaches to digital media in the household.

##### 4.1. Posters' Perceptions of Circle

Of all the reviews, 52% indicated at least a perceived advantage, while 72% at least a perceived disadvantage of Circle. In terms of advantages, 39% of reviewers appreciated the opportunity to set time limits to their children's Internet use, followed by 35% who indicated as a positive asset the possibility to use Circle's functionality with different devices. 34% liked the device for its ability to filter contents by limiting access to specific websites, 31% reported the device was overall easy to setup, another 31% appreciated the opportunity to check kids' navigation history. Furthermore, 20% indicated as an advantage the ability to tailor the device's functions according to children's age (so to differentiate settings for older or younger siblings), and 10% reported Circle could help preventing arguments about Internet use. When it comes to disadvantages, in terms of technical problems, 27% of reviewers lament the device is not flexible enough, as when using functions like the contents' filter. It would risk blocking not only websites parents found inappropriate, but also others they would have allowed their children to visit. 26% of reviewers reported the device was difficult to setup, with another 26% lamenting it would slow down the Internet speed, while

19% reported the device crashes often and needs to be restarted to function again. 18% of reviewers claimed Circle failed to offer enough monitoring, as different posters felt like they could not control their kids' overall online experience, while 11% stated children could easily find a way to circumvent it. Only 5% of reviewers reported that using this device could compromise parent-child relationships, 4% thought it could cause conflicts within the household, and just 2% thought it may lead to privacy risks for the information the device could collect and store in the cloud.

##### 4.2. Parenting Orientation and Approaches to Digital Media

Among the reviews analyzed, 73 made explicit reference to a specific mediation style, of which 89% were coded as 'restrictive mediation' and the remaining 11% as 'enabling.' With respect to the variable 'parental ethic towards digital media,' after excluding the entries coded as 'neither,' 55 reviews were left, of which 87% reflected an ethic of 'respectful connectedness,' while 13% an ethic of 'expressive empowerment.' A Chi-square analysis was run to investigate whether the two variables were related. Results suggest a significant association between the ethic of respectful connectedness with a restrictive mediation style and the ethic of expressive empowerment with an enabling mediation style,  $\chi^2(1, N = 55) = 38.46, p < .001, \phi = .83$ .

The qualitative analysis of the reviews led to the emergence of two main parental figures associated with the abovementioned mediation styles and ethics towards digital media: the anxiety-reducing restrictive caregiver (as in Ribak, 2009) and the reflexively enabling caregiver. As we shall see, these social figures both reflect and resist broader social discourses on the relationships between parents, children, and the media, which also contribute to the construction of the child as a passive or agentic actor in the process.

##### 4.2.1. The Anxiety-Reducing Restrictive Caregiver

Reviewers echoing a restrictive mediation style and an ethic of respectful connectedness generally expressed enthusiastic views towards the device, framing it as an 'answer to prayers' and a 'must in every house' and emphasizing its function of empowering parents in being 'in control' of their kids' use of the Internet. These reviews stressed the asymmetrical role between parents and children, where the former has the right to decide whether and how the offspring can access the web while neglecting the latter's voice in the process. This excerpt from a father's personal communication exemplifies that:

Kids not responding to you? Pause the Internet. I can pause everyone or select an individual person or device. This is helpful in our house....My kids don't like

Circle, but we feel more in control of their usage so it's a winner for us.

The words of this father are reflective of a recurrent dichotomy we found across reviews, which can be conceptualized as 'Parent > Child.' While children have traditionally been framed as savvy users of technologies who can deceive their parents when using media (Facer, 2012), these posters reclaimed their right of turning the tables on their offspring, building on the monitoring opportunity offered by Circle. A mother, for example, praised the device for its being 'life changing' and 'well worth every cent': "No more haggling with the kids over rules and enforcement. You can control everything. I needed something to limit my kids multitasking on our laptop when he was supposed to be doing homework. Success!"

Matters of 'control' were recurrent in our corpus of data with the ability not only to monitor, but also stop children's use of digital media making feel parents confident in this task. These agentic feelings contribute to what we call the construction of an empowered parent, who finds in Circle an ally to his/her parenting and an anxiety-reducing tool. The above-mentioned excerpt suggests that according to some the device would allow parents to avoid traditional discussions on media use, functioning as a 'deputy' caregiver. Such an idea was reinforced by posters who praised the device for allowing them to successfully ease the task of setting rules with their kids. An example of that was having children respect bedtime during schooldays, which was seen as a 'much more manageable' effort thanks to Circle. The following excerpt reports on a parent who stresses that. As using technology would prevent the offspring from respecting bedtime rules, the device allowed to enforce this family's policy by tackling the problem at its root:

I could not stand constantly telling my children to get off the computer and then arguing with them, 'just 5 more minutes.' Now at bedtime, Circle just turns off the Internet. Much better than my nightly attempts to pry them off. If they want more time, they have to come to me and ask....Unfortunately, we still have to do some parenting.

Overall, Circle was framed as a needed solution to deal with parenting challenges that these posters were no longer able to face through mediation strategies involving dialogue and authoritative rules with their kids. Conversely, the possibility to turn the Internet off and on whenever they wanted, led some parents to embrace a 'behaviorist' approach where allowing more or less time online could be used either as a positive reinforcement or a punishment. A poster, for example, stressed she appreciates the ability to "monitor each device and adjust rewards or punishments accordingly" in terms of additional or less time online, or—as in the words of

another parent—to "give rewards like more time online when they do their chores."

Apart from parents' right to set rules limiting screen time, many posters emphasized the importance of monitoring kids' online activities and the contents they interact with on the Internet as a necessary strategy in line with their role of 'good' caregivers, stressing the need to protect children from online dangers within the "repertoire of official reasons" (Caron & Caronia, 2001, p. 44) for adopting Circle. This was evident in many reviews taking a moral stance towards the use of the device which was described as 'amazing for a family,' for it allows to "keep children safe and their screen time to the right amount" while giving parents peace of mind with respect to "the contents they come across often" and, as in the words of this mother, "sleep at night knowing that my kids are being safe online." Again, these example shows how Circle is discursively constructed as an anxiety-reducing device, which relieves parents from the burden of protecting children from exposure to online risks.

The topics of online safety and the 'right' amount of screen time work here as moral imperatives to justify one's parenting strategy as 'good' and 'caring.' The technologically enabled restrictions and surveillance through Circle are legitimized as a practice of care. The following excerpt exemplifies this ethical duty referring to the alleged news stories about "naïve" children victim of the web, providing a morally oriented rationale for making the adoption of Circle socially acceptable and even desirable for a caregiver:

Each day we are bombarded with terrifying stories in the news about how children are exploited online just because they are naive, and with Circle Home Plus I am able to keep an eye on their online activity....I find this to be a wonderful tool for protecting your children.

Overall, the reviews supporting an 'anxiety-reducing and restrictive caregiver' discourse converged in disregarding children's rights to have a voice when making decisions about their online access and use. Parents who are enthusiastic about Circle seemingly found in the device a precious ally to enact forms of restrictive- yet morally informed-mediation while reinforcing an ethic of respectful connectedness that emphasizes parental authority when using the media within and outside the domestic walls.

#### 4.2.2. The Reflexively Enabling Caregiver

Although strikingly lower in number, reviewers echoing an enabling mediation style and an ethic of expressive empowerment took a more critical stance towards the device, framing it either as a complementary means which helped some parents "to surface a lot of deeper conversations with kids about why and how we all use the Internet," or as a tool to avoid conflicts in the

family environment. While slightly counterintuitive at first sight—if anything because one may wonder why an enabling caregiver may want to use this device—such a parental figure is theoretically in line with the enabling mediation style highlighted by Livingstone and Byrne (2018) and Livingstone et al. (2017) where seemingly restrictive technologically-supported strategies, such as adopting forms of technical controls, are not intentionally aimed at preventing children from using the Internet on their own. Rather, by ensuring that children’s exposure to inappropriate content is minimized, technology restrictions are adopted within parental mediation strategies aimed at encouraging ‘positive’ and ‘constructive’ use of the medium, and promoting children’s autonomous exploration of the Internet. Moreover, the device is appropriated as an intermediary between the child’s online experience and the parent’s mediating role, so as to minimize parents’ supervision and control. The following excerpt offers some insights on how Circle can be incorporated in the family life while still respecting children’s rights to online participation and privacy:

We’re involved parents who understand the benefits of video and the Internet but also recognize the existence of inappropriate content for our kids’ ages and fact that it could become ‘all consuming.’ We don’t want to eliminate screen time altogether but simply want to help manage our kids’ overall consumption. So far Circle Home Plus offers the best solution we’ve found to manage online access in the house.

In the words of this parent, while children’s right to go online should be safeguarded, Circle could help managing this experience to promote a ‘healthier’ approach to the Internet. This was also evident in the words of another poster who claimed that children themselves appreciated the role of the device for its being incorporated within a broader framework of family rules and conversations about Internet use that helped providing structure to their relationship with digital media. As this father states:

Circle paved the way for conversations when I’ve seen excessive use of certain social media/websites/video streaming. The older teens have actually appreciated having limits and bedtimes/off-times to allow them play-time/break-time on their phones without the stress of being sucked in and losing hours of study or sleep time.

On the other hand, few reviewers denounced the fact that using Circle could dismiss children’s voice in the process, causing conflicts in the households, and warning parents to “be ready for some major complaints and very unhappy kids.” A parent, in particular, claimed: “If you want to torment your children, purchase this app and watch their hopes and dreams be flushed down the toilet,” alluding to a possible decay in terms of children’s trust towards their parents and overall wellbeing. Such

a view was interestingly reinforced by a poster who was allegedly a child reviewing Circle as a tool limiting children’s ability to explore the Internet on their own, denouncing the loss of privacy and overall unhappiness this caused him/her:

I used to feel happy with what little privacy and Internet time I had but you made the little into none. If I could have rated a 5 stars then I would have. Now I feel that I have no privacy. Thanks for ruining my life!

All in all, this corpus of reviews framed the child as an active actor with the right of reclaiming agency against the backdrop of restrictive mediation strategies.

### **5. Discussions and Concluding Remarks: Empowering Parents, Disempowering Kids?**

Taken together, our findings show that parents who choose to adopt Circle broadly adhere to the hegemonic discourses on children online, reinforcing the polarized identities of youth as ‘vulnerable victims’ and adults as ‘protectors’ (Facer, 2012). Circle offers a solution in line with the idea that in order to keep children safe from risks, their participation online should be restricted and controlled through strategies of ‘helicopter’ parenting (Clark, 2013). The alignment of parental imaginaries and practices with hegemonic discourses on children and media is also reflected in the recurrent preoccupation with the amount, more than the nature, of screen time (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2018). Parents who share their views on Circle appear to have fully incorporated the dominant advice on screen time, that suggest regulating the use of media mainly, if not exclusively, with time limits. Moreover, the analysis confirms parents’ ambivalent attitudes towards technologies, which are perceived as both solutions to reduce parental anxiety and provide temporary relief from intensive parenting, and simultaneously as threats to parental authority and children’s safety. This explains why most reviews are suggestive of a parenting style and childrearing culture that responds to online risks through an ethic of respectful connectedness (Clark, 2013). However, anticipating risks online is not straightforward, as opportunities and risks are positively correlated. Limiting children’s time on the Internet through restrictive mediation is associated with lower skills, lower opportunities, and lower exposure to online risks, but greater vulnerability to the harmful consequences of online problematic experiences, since lacking experience with the Internet is associated with lower abilities to cope with situations where risks translate into harm (Livingstone & Helsper, 2010; Livingstone, Mascheroni, & Staksrud, 2018).

Nonetheless, the analysis offers a more varied portrait of parents adopting technological restrictions such as Circle, revealing that reviewers’ understanding of the device speaks for different levels of consideration for children’s agency. Indeed, the adoption of technical restric-



tions can take place within a repertoire of enabling strategies in contexts where parents struggle to find a balance between hopes for a digital future (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2018), concerns for online risks, and anxieties over societal pressure on parents, positioned as the only gatekeepers to children's wellbeing and safety.

In line with recursive historical trends of parental worries about media (Wartella & Jennings, 2001), these reviews suggest that Circle can help parents face "the geographical migration of technologies" in the household (Caron & Caronia, 2001, p. 43). Whether the child will be framed as an active or passive actor in the process, though, depends first and foremost on parents' intentionality, which may reinforce or resist broader discourses on parental mediation. Thus, Circle's adoption needs to be understood as a situated interactional process taking into account not only the device itself but also the actors' context and background.

This study was limited in nature and scope, relying only on natural data providing little demographic information, and a relatively small sample of reviews reflecting North American perspectives on the matter that may differ in other countries. Additionally, being a parent who uses a device such as Circle suggests some sort of media literacy and technological skills, and in general suggests an enhanced level of concern and involvement with children's media-related experiences. This and the fact that these parents also went online to provide their feedback on the device gives the idea of an 'elite' sample of reviewers, whose experiences and opinions should be understood situationally in relation to this study. Future research, though, can be informed by our findings to better investigate how the incorporation of devices like Circle impacts on family dynamics and children's wellbeing, triangulating these results using other approaches that would help better contextualize them. Furthermore, researchers can investigate whether and how the unprecedented challenges caused by the Covid-19 pandemic shaped parents' perceptions of and use of such devices: In a context where screen time is required for children to attend classes, do their homework, and connect with family members and friends, how do matters of time spent with technology evolve and what role may devices like Circle play in family life? Last but definitely not least, future inquiry on the topic should actively include children's voices in the research process, in order to promote a multipart conversation and better consider how devices thought for empowering parents may, depending on their use, end up disempowering children.

### Acknowledgments

The authors wish to thank research assistants Erica Demmi and Silvia Mirone, students at the University of Milan-Bicocca, for coding the database and providing insightful feedback throughout the data analysis process.

### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

### References

- Barassi, V. (2017). BabyVeillance? Expecting parents, online surveillance and the cultural specificity of pregnancy apps. *Social Media + Society*, 3(2), 1–10.
- Blum-Ross, A., & Livingstone, S. (2016). *Families and screen time: Current advice and emerging research* (Media Policy Brief 17). London: London School of Economics and Political Science.
- Blum-Ross, A., & Livingstone, S. (2018). The trouble with "screen time" rules. In G. Mascheroni, C. Ponte, & A. Jorge (Eds.), *Digital parenting: The challenges for families in the digital age* (pp. 209–218). Gothenburg: Nordicom Clearinghouse Yearbook.
- Blum-Ross, A., & Livingstone, S. (2020). *Parenting for a digital future: How hopes and fears about technology shape children's lives*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Caron, A. H., & Caronia, L. (2001). Active users and active objects: The mutual construction of families and communication technologies. *Convergence*, 7(3), 38–61.
- Caronia, L. (2010). The family's governance of children's media consumption as a moral arena: Theoretical framework, methodology and first results of a study. *RPD: Journal of Theories and Research in Education*, 5(1), 1–20.
- Cino, D., & Dalledonne Vandini, C. (2020). "Why does a teacher feel the need to post my kid?": Parents and teachers constructing morally acceptable boundaries of children's social media presence. *International Journal of Communication*, 14, 1153–1172.
- Clark, L. S. (2013). *The parent app: Understanding families in the digital age*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Drotner, K. (1999). Dangerous media? Panic discourses and dilemmas of modernity. *Paedagogica Historica*, 35(3), 593–619.
- Facer, K. (2012). After the moral panic? Reframing the debate about child safety online. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 33(3), 397–413.
- Furedi, F. (2016). Moral panic and reading: Early elite anxieties about the media effect. *Cultural Sociology*, 10(4), 523–537.
- Lauricella, A. R., Cingel, D. P., Beaudoin-Ryan, L., Robb, M. B., Saphir, M., & Wartella, E. A. (2016). *The common sense census: Plugged-in parents of tweens and teens*. San Francisco, CA: Common Sense Media.
- Leaver, T. (2017). Intimate surveillance: Normalizing parental monitoring and mediation of infants online. *Social Media + Society*, 3(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305117707192>
- Lemish, D. (2015). *Children and media: A global perspective*. Chichester: Wiley.
- Lim, S. S. (2020). *Transcendent parenting: Raising chil-*

- dren in the digital age*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Livingstone, S., & Byrne, J. (2018). Parenting in the digital age: The challenges of parental responsibility. In G. Mascheroni, C. Ponte, & A. Jorge (Eds.), *Digital parenting: The challenges for families in the digital age* (pp. 209–218). Gothenburg: Nordicom, The Clearinghouse Yearbook.
- Livingstone, S., & Helsper, E. (2008). Parental mediation of children's Internet use. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 52(4), 581–599.
- Livingstone, S., & Helsper, E. (2010). Balancing opportunities and risks in teenagers' use of the Internet: The role of online skills and Internet self-efficacy. *New Media & Society*, 12(2), 309–329.
- Livingstone, S., Mascheroni, G., & Staksrud, E. (2018). European research on children's Internet use: Assessing the past and anticipating the future. *New Media & Society*, 20(3), 1103–1122.
- Livingstone, S., Ólafsson, K., Helsper, E. J., Lupiáñez-Villanueva, F., Veltri, G. A., & Folkvord, F. (2017). Maximizing opportunities and minimizing risks for children online: The role of digital skills in emerging strategies of parental mediation. *Journal of Communication*, 67(1), 82–105.
- Lupton, D. (in press). Caring dataveillance: Women's use of apps to monitor pregnancy and children. In L. Green, D. Holloway, K. Stevenson, L. Haddon, & T. Leaver (Eds.), *The Routledge companion to digital media and children*. London: Routledge.
- Mascheroni, G. (2018). Researching datafied children as data citizens. *Journal of Children and Media*, 12(4), 517–523.
- Mascheroni, G., & Holloway, D. (Eds.). (2017). *The Internet of toys: A report on media and social discourses around young children and IoT*. DigiLitEY.
- Mascheroni, G., Ponte, C., & Jorge, A. (Eds.). (2018) *Digital parenting: The challenges for families in the digital age*. Gothenburg: Nordicom, The Clearinghouse Yearbook.
- MeetCircle (n.d.). About Circle. *MeetCircle*. Retrieved from <https://meetcircle.com/about>
- Nathanson, A. I. (2001). Parent and child perspectives on the presence and meaning of parental television mediation. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 45(2), 201–220.
- Purinton, A., Taft, J. G., Sannon, S., Bazarova, N. N., & Taylor, S. H. (2017). "Alexa is my new BFF" social roles, user satisfaction, and personification of the Amazon Echo. In G. Mark & S. Fussel (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 2017 CHI conference extended abstracts on human factors in computing systems* (pp. 2853–2859). New York, NY: Association for Computing Machinery.
- Radesky, J. S., Schumacher, J., & Zuckerman, B. (2015). Mobile and interactive media use by young children: The good, the bad, and the unknown. *Pediatrics*, 135(1), 1–3.
- Ribak, R. (2009). Remote control, umbilical cord and beyond: The mobile phone as a transitional object. *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 27(1), 183–196.
- Rideout, V. (2017). *The common sense census: Media use by kids age zero to eight*. San Francisco, CA: Common Sense Media.
- Rideout, V., & Robb, M. B. (2019). *The common sense census: Media use by tweens and teens, 2019*. San Francisco, CA: Common Sense Media.
- Robb, M. B. (2019). *The new normal: Parents, teens, screens, and sleep in the United States*. San Francisco, CA: Common Sense Media.
- Silverstone, R., & Hirsh, E. (1992). *Consuming technologies: Media and information in domestic space*. London: Routledge.
- Shirani, F., Henwood, K., & Coltart, C. (2012). Meeting the challenges of intensive parenting culture: Gender, risk management and the moral parent. *Sociology*, 46(1), 25–40.
- Smahel, D., Machackova, H., Mascheroni, G., Dedkova, L., Staksrud, E., Ólafsson, K., . . . Hasebrink, U. (2020). *EU kids online 2020: Survey results from 19 countries*. London: London School of Economics and Political Science.
- Valkenburg, P., Krcmar, M., Peeters, A., & Marseille, N. (1999). Developing a scale to assess three styles of television mediation: Instructive mediation, restrictive mediation, and social covieing. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 43(1), 52–67.
- Valkenburg, P. M., Piotrowski, J. T., Hermanns, J., & De Leeuw, R. (2013). Developing and validating the perceived parental media mediation scale: A self-determination perspective. *Human Communication Research*, 39(4), 445–469.
- Wartella, E. (2019). Smartphones and tablets and kids: Oh my, oh my. In C. Donohue (Ed.), *Exploring key issues in early childhood and technology: Evolving perspectives and innovative approaches* (pp. 27–31). London: Routledge.
- Wartella, E., & Jennings, N. (2000). Children and computers: New technology, old concerns. *The Future of Children*, 10(2), 31–43.
- Wartella, E., & Jennings, N. (2001). New members of the family: The digital revolution in the home. *Journal of Family Communication*, 1(1), 59–69.
- Wartella, E., & Robb, M. (2008). Historical and recurring concerns about children's use of the mass media. In S. L. Calvert & B. J. Wilson (Eds.), *The handbook of children, media, and development* (pp. 7–26). Hoboken, NJ: Blackwell Publishing.
- White, M. D., & Marsh, E. E. (2006). Content analysis: A flexible methodology. *Library Trends*, 55(1), 22–45.
- Zuboff, S. (2015). Big other: Surveillance capitalism and the prospects of an information civilization. *Journal of Information Technology*, 30(1), 75–89.

### About the Authors



**Davide Cino** is a PhD Candidate in Education in Contemporary Society at the University of Milan-Bicocca. He is also appointed as a Research Associate at the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, Milan, and a member of the Center on Media and Human Development at Northwestern University. His research interests include children's online experience and presence, digital parenting, and digital skills.



**Giovanna Mascheroni** (PhD) is an Associate Professor of Sociology of Media and Communications in the Department of Communication, Catholic University of Milan. She is part of the management team of EU Kids Online, and member of the Executive board and WP leader in the H2020 project ySKILLS. Her work focuses on the social shaping and the social consequences of the Internet, mobile media and Internet of Things and Toys for children and young people.



**Ellen Wartella** studies the role of media and technology in children's health and development. She is particularly interested in addressing public policy questions about children's use of media and technology. She is the Al-Thani Professor of Communication Studies, Chair of the Department of Communication Studies and Director of the Center on Media and Human Development at Northwestern University. She also holds appointments in Northwestern's School of Medicine, Department of Psychology and School of Education and Social Policy.