The Wild, Wild Web:

A Vital Part of Rethinking Adoption in the 21st Century

The Historic Impact on Adoption
Of the Internet, Social Media and DNA

Euradopt International Conference – May 29, 2019

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So . . . How Profound is the Impact Of the Internet and Social Media?

Internet + DNA = Fundamental Change

A small glimpse of what you get when you Google:

- Adoption and DNA – Over 11 million hits
- Children and adoption – 194 million
- Birthmother/father/parent, etc. – 90 million
- Adoption Facebook/social media – 56 million
- Thinking of adopting? – 43.4 million
- Thinking of placing a child for adoption – 31 million
- International/intercountry adoption – 15 million
- Adoption/adoptee search reunion – 10 million
- Foster care/child welfare adoption – 6 million

A Few Overarching Conclusions and Insights

- Online: A growing “commodification” of adoption and a shift away from the perspective that its primary purpose is to find families for children; that’s especially the case in infant adoption.
- Web and DNA: Finding birth relatives and information relating to origins, background/identity is becoming increasingly easy and commonplace, with significant institutional/personal implications.
  - Likely end of the era of “closed” adoption
  - Growth in relationships between families
- Traditional adoption practice is probably (almost certainly?) at risk.

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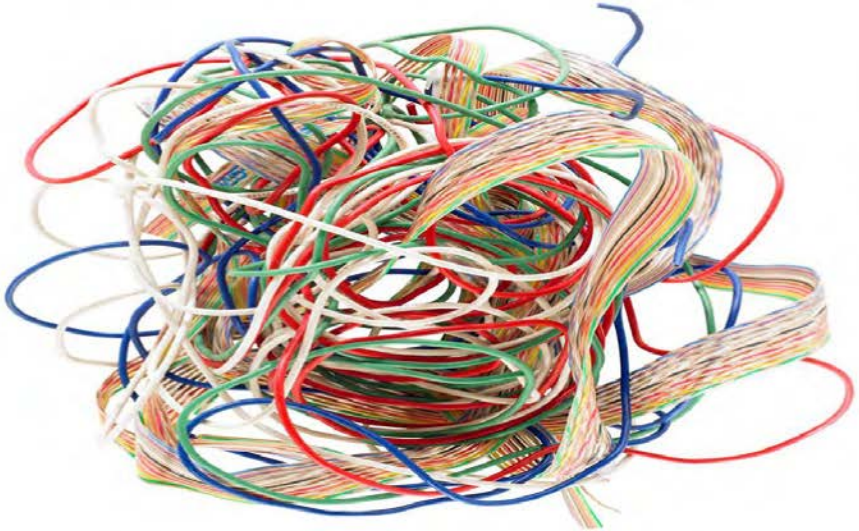
UNTANGLING THE WEB

THE INTERNET'S TRANSFORMATIVE IMPACT ON ADOPTION



POLICY & PRACTICE PERSPECTIVE

December 2012

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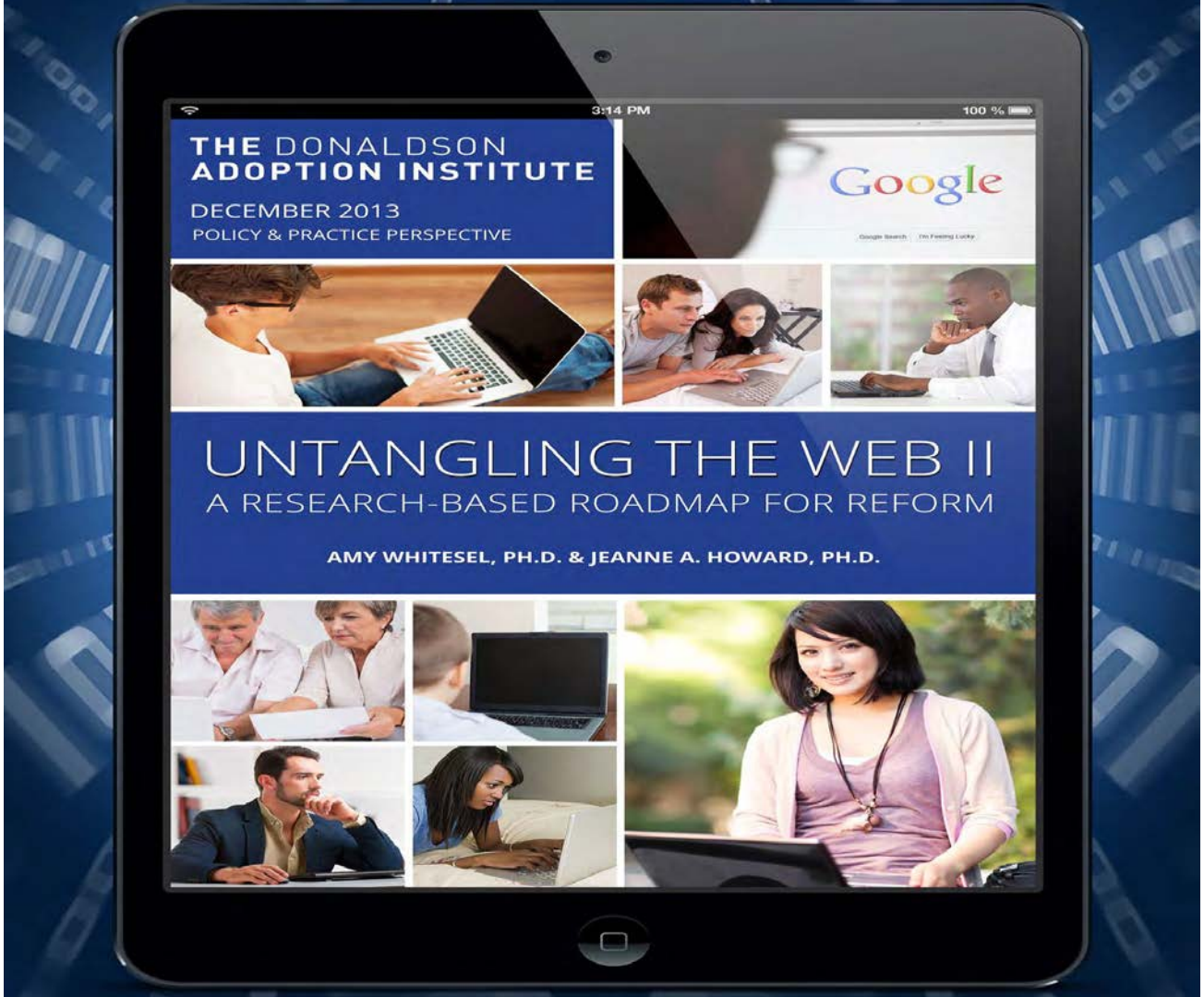
EVAN B. DONALDSON
adoptioninstitute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THE DONALDSON
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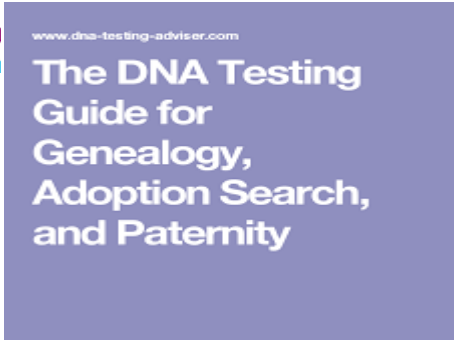
DECEMBER 2013
POLICY & PRACTICE PERSPECTIVE
Google
UNTANGLING THE WEB II
A RESEARCH-BASED ROADMAP FOR REFORM
AMY WHITESEL, PH.D. & JEANNE A. HOWARD, PH.D.

What can adoptees learn
from 23andMe?



Caveats and Context

- The internet's greatest impact to date is on infant adoption, where the most money is at stake.
- A lot of good, thoughtful, ethical practice is occurring, and progress is being made (reunions, support, etc.).
- Unethical, illegal and dubious activities have always gone on, but now the opportunities are far greater.
- What we need: a national discussion on impact, regulation, monitoring, protections . . . and reform.

Principal Findings – Untangling I

- A growing number of minors have contact and/or relationships with birth relatives, often without guidance, preparation or parents' knowledge
- A rising number of sites that improve the prospects of adoption for "waiting" children, notably including those with special needs
- More and more places to get information, education, networking, services and resources
- Additional benefits such as greater opportunities for affiliation, support and information-sharing

The Good (Benefits)

- Internet is immediate, efficient and private
- In foster realm, better recruitment and placement
- Resources, research, support more available than ever: Rudd, NCAP, Gateway, etc.
- Expectant/first/birth parents: affiliation, options info, cautions, connections to others like them
- Pre-adoptive/adoptive parents: guidance, specific knowledge (ex., LGBT), post-adopt services
- Adopted persons: exploration of adoption/selves, affiliation, search and reunion, advocacy

The Bad and the Ugly (Risks)

- Internet is immediate, efficient and not-so-private
- Commerce/profits over child (and adult) welfare, including aggressive and extensive marketing
- Sometimes-singular focus on doing it quickly rather than thoughtfully, ethically and well
- Exorbitant fees, babies who don't exist or go to the highest bidder, inability to identify red flags
- Lack of options counseling/guidance for expectant mothers; instead, recruitment and inducements
- Who will keep the records for the future?

For Now, More Questions than Answers

- Adoption Practice: What's the impact on ethical professionals when internet providers promise babies quickly and incentives to pregnant women?
- Search and Reunion: What should professionals tell clients? What should parents tell their kids? What guidance, support, resources does everyone need?
- Law and Policy: How do we address possibly unsafe or traumatizing contacts for children? Do legal obstacles to acquiring information make sense?
- More and More: How do we best utilize all the new opportunities, resources, research and supports?

A Prism for Assessment: Accepted Ethical/Best Practices

- Preparation, counseling and representation of prospective parents and expectant mothers/fathers
- Education, resources about openness/relationships
- Transparency regarding payments and services
- Non-coercive (including financial) procedures
- Access to post-adoption resources for all parties
- Supervision and boundaries for children's safety when adopted from foster care

What is Happening with Infant Adoption on the Internet?

“Complete your domestic adoption, on average, within 3-12 months.”
“We connect with states where birth parents cannot revoke consent.”

* Learn more about the safe alternative to abortion... adoption.
* Financial assistance is available. * FREE housing is available.

Advertising and Recruitment

- Agency A: “Most couples were selected in less than FOUR months [as a result of] marketing & extensive Nationwide Internet advertising specifically targeting suitable Birthparents knowing the Internet is the most widely used medium of this demographic. … We spend millions yearly advertising to pregnant women using aggressive grassroots marketing and outreach programs.”
- Agency B “aggressively reaches out to more Birthmothers. Unlike many state-regulated agencies B is not confined by state-mandated budget restrictions. B spends over $1m in advertising for Birthmothers annually. As a result of these extensive advertising and outreach efforts, most matches are made in less than 9 months. With a track record like that, it is no wonder hundreds of families turn to B each year to realize their dreams.”

Nondirective Options?

- Site X offers help to pregnant women in crisis, explaining that they have a range of options, then (accompanying photos of affluent, happy couples in their lovely homes) asks questions including:
  * Can I provide financially for my child?
  * Will my child have a father figure in his life?
  * Will I have time to properly care for a child?
- Another section of the site offers “Facts and Myths” about abortion, adoption and parenting.
  * Fact on abortion: “Over 70% of women have negative feelings.”
  * Fact on parenting: “You cannot rely on family members to help.”

Story after Story Like These

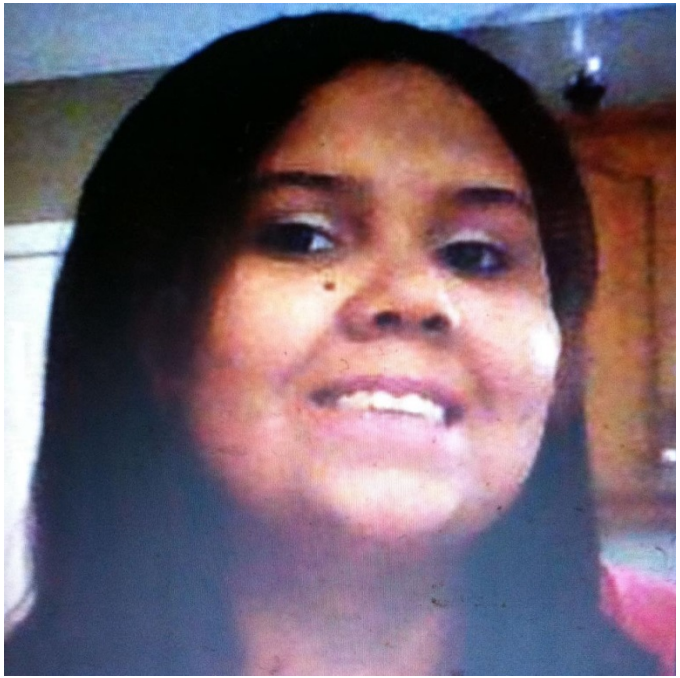
"I read a story in Time in which Mr. Pertman talked about the phenomenon of [search] through social media. Last night, my 12-year-old daughter's birth family contacted her through Facebook. We are devastated. She wants very much to meet them. … What advice and literature can you provide us to deal with this? It is living hell."

"I had been looking for my mother and siblings, if I had them, for years … Finally, with Facebook, I found them and they have added immeasurable joy to my life. My adoptive family is still my `real' family but now I have more."

A Tiny Glimpse at the New World

I am looking for my birth parents, I was born in Akron Ohio on or around 4-14-1965 and adopted by two loving parents in Toledo Ohio. …. *I am searching for my niece and nephew. My nephew was born May 4, 1993 and my niece was born June 21, 1994. Their names were …* I am searching for my adopted brother, born 1/11/1960 at the Florence Crittenton home in Sioux city Iowa [and] adopted out at birth in Woodbury County/Sioux City Iowa … *I'm looking for my biological grandparents. My Mother, Angela was born December 30 1969. She says she was told she was adopted from Warren County N.C. She says she thinks her first name was "Gwendolyn"* …

I AM Looking for
My Daughter
Born ShirLeen Ann
March 30, 1966
St Mary's Hospital
Syracuse NY



my name is latoya i was placed in fostercare in missouri birth place is greene county i think springfield i have a brother named joe and james and cecil we were all placed in fostercare and adopted i dont know my mother or fathers names but heard that i have a sister named tamika I was born jan 11th 1984

In a Nutshell . . .
What's Happening Out There?

- There are more reunions and more relationships, giving people what they've wanted and needed for too long. But some searchers are children without counseling, supervision or, sometimes, even parental knowledge
- There are more resources, more opportunities for permanency for children with special needs and older youth. But there also are practices that are dubious at best, untrained practitioners, antiquated laws, etc.
- Some children's safety – emotional, psychological and perhaps physical – may be put at risk
- What else have you seen or heard?

Untangling II: Research Participants

Data from over 2,000 participants

- Adoptive parents (N=1216)
- Adopted Persons (N=392)
- First/Birth Parents (N=235)
- Adoption Professionals (N=182)

Yes, Everyone is Using the Internet!

Across types of respondents and across age and time since child placement/relinquishment, all groups make regular use of the Internet in a variety of ways related to adoption.

What We've Learned

- Groups differ in nature of use and, to an extent, opinions of value and risk. All see considerable benefits.
- Many report they are still blocked by closed records or are daunted by the process itself.
- The Internet and social media facilitate ongoing contact among adoptive and first/birth family members.
- All respondent types lauded the regular and immediate access and ability to share information.
- Very few noted problems with unwelcome contact or failure to "follow the rules." (Same appears true for DNA.)

What We've Learned (cont.)

- Major concern across groups was the commercialization of adoption by "entities" that are driven by the bottom line.
- All groups identified particular risk to pregnant women who might be vulnerable to inducements to relinquish.

"The vast majority of the websites I was directed to, (even post-adoption and while simply looking for information), made me sick to my stomach with their barely concealed attempts to coerce vulnerable women to give up their children. Everywhere I went online, I was bombarded by ads, filled with beautiful models, which urged me to 'do the right thing for my child.' "

- The Internet and social media greatly expand ability to search for and develop connections with birth relatives.

What We've Learned (cont.)

- A high majority of adoption professionals receive no training about Internet use for themselves or how to prepare clients.
- Given the lack of knowledge in this area, it's reasonable to assume much of the existing training is inadequate.

"I don't think adoption agencies really understand how social media and the internet can really be used to reach others; a lot more needs to be done, such as focus groups and community discussions, to better understand how it can be used, what's ethical and appropriate, accessibility and the language that should be utilized. There doesn't seem to be any communication amongst ... professionals on best practices, etc. Much more needs to be done here."

What We've Learned (cont.)

- Unexpected benefit: "connection with distance," somehow less intrusive, allows gradual "getting to know" process.
- Invaluable affiliation, support and connection to others who share their feelings and experiences
- Isolation and shame felt by birth/first mothers in the era of shame and secrecy was reduced by online community.

"Knowing there are other Birth/First Parents out there who are going through the same thing you are, is a GREAT knowledge. Being able to contact them, ask them questions, receive sympathy from, etc. has helped me through difficult times."

- All groups sometimes use the Internet, social media to follow others in extended family of adoption without their knowledge.

The Role – and Training – of Professionals

- Professionals provide ethical options counseling to expectant parents, prepare those considering becoming parents through adoption, and guide and support both types of parents – as well as adopted persons – throughout the adoption process and beyond.
- In Untangling the Web II, only 34 percent of respondents said their agencies provide training on the use of the Internet and social media in adoption. Private agency workers were slightly more likely to have received such training than were public agency workers. Of those who got training, only 17 percent rated it as comprehensive.

Research-Based Recommendations

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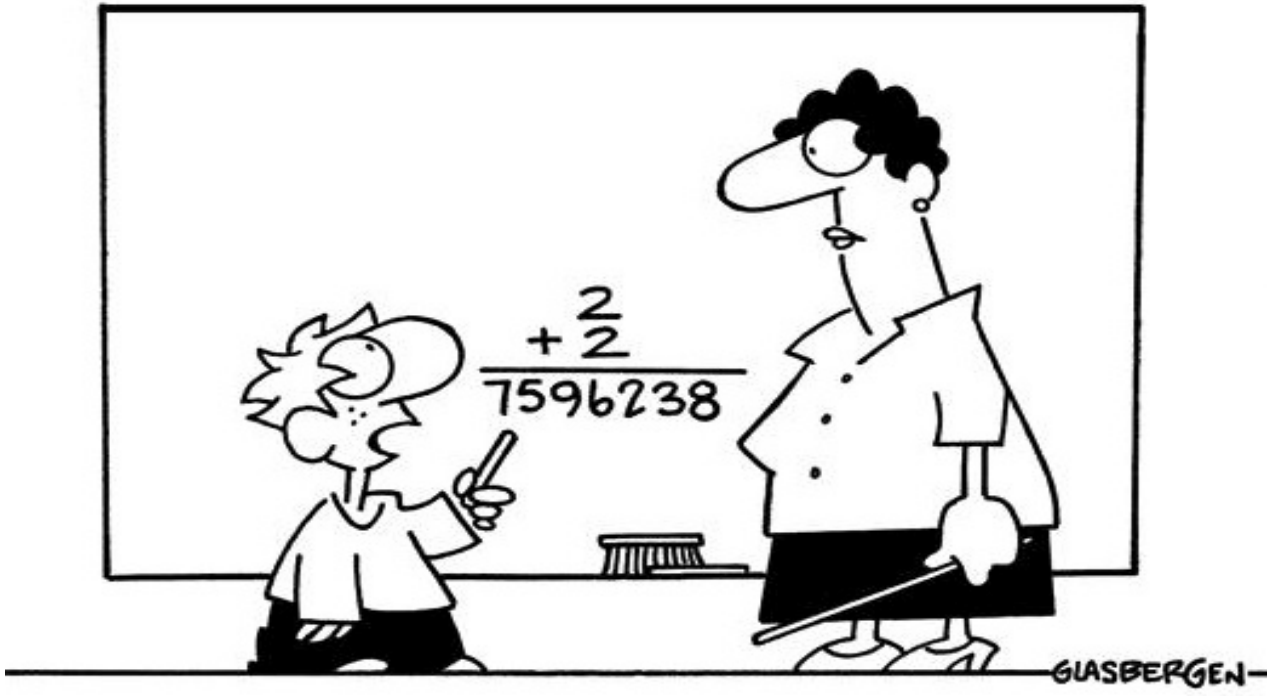

"In an increasingly complex world, sometimes old questions require new answers."

What You Can Do on Your Website

- Should clearly identify and take credit for how your focus/resources differ from for-profit providers (on the Internet) and should spell out the risks of using such providers to arrange an adoption.
- Should be easy to navigate and should highlight important services, such as counseling and post-placement support and/or education, etc.
- Should offer links to opportunities for more education, training, resources and services on the range of issues about which clients need information.

A Few Suggestions/Goals for Professionals

- Collaborate on developing an ethics-based “Code of Conduct,” with recommendations on do’s and don’ts, related to Internet and social media use.
- Make it an integral part of your jobs to help all parties in their online searches, including with education, resources, counseling, etc.
- Make it an integral part of your jobs to help all parties manage their online relationships.
- Never tell any clients – or anyone else for that matter – that they can be assured of a closed adoption.

Collaboration to Improve Law/Policy

Policy-makers, advocates and law-enforcement officials should work together with Internet firms to create/implement best-practice standards:

- Delineate illegal, problematic, unethical practices through research, hearings, etc.
- Establish regimens to monitor adoption-related marketing, and take action against bad practices
- Create laws and regulations to protect and minimize risks for adopted people and expectant, first/birth, prospective and adoptive parents
- Repeal laws that impede or prevent parties to adoption from gaining important information

Collaboration to Improve Practice

Adoption leaders should work together to create an awareness/education campaign, including:

- Develop and disseminate best-practice standards.
- Develop training materials for all affected parties relating to the Internet and openness in adoption.
- Provide ongoing educational programs for social workers and other adoption professionals.
- Devise and provide training and materials for professionals that enable them to assist growing number of people seeking search/reunion help.

Conclusion

The list of positive, negative and complicated changes occurring in the world of adoption as a result of the Internet goes on and on, with many already in place and others still evolving. The common denominator among them is that they are not best practices derived from lessons learned from research and experience; rather, overwhelmingly, they are transformations that are happening simply because new technology enables them to happen.

Now What Do We Need?

- Fund, conduct and learn from research for knowledge, tools, best practices, training, etc.
- Information, resources, guidance, supports and training for professionals and parents.
- Monitoring and regulation to mitigate scams, steer people to “good” sites, hold “bad” actors accountable.
- Updated laws, policies and practices. A big task, to be sure, but we’re overdue on even getting started.

Final Thoughts and Next Steps

- Best practices should entail not only forming families, but also helping them succeed
- Professionals, policymakers need to re-conceptualize goals to include a continuum of education, services and supports
- Education and training must incorporate realities of the Internet, social media and DNA testing – and must be ongoing
- Everyone's rights, needs must be respected and included

Final Thoughts (cont.)

- Parents should be educated (again and again) to understand that asking for help is a strength, not a weakness
- Policy-makers, media, public must be educated on today's realities to facilitate ethical best practices, laws and policies
- Words matter, so let's include "successful" in our messaging
- Mental-health professionals, teachers and others who deal with adoption's participants need education and training
- Practitioners and policy-makers need to move toward the "family success" model in language, budgets, resources, etc.
- Pre- and post-adoption services should be developed and provided for all parents and families
- We can do this (and we have to)