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## MUSICAL.LY'S SLEIGHT OF HAND: CIRCUMVENTING FAMILY SOCIAL MEDIA GOVERNANCE

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### Introduction

Young people's engagement with networked publics, understood in boyd's (2011) terms as an imagined community restructured by social media, often raises public anxieties about possible risky encounters online. This anxiety problematizes governance of online practices, particularly for the parents of preteen children. Private spaces for young people are intrinsically mediated (Lincoln 2014) and social media is deeply entrenched in youth cultural practices such as identity construction, social interaction, experimentation and autonomy seeking practices (Livingstone 2014, 2008; Robards 2012; Campos-Holland et.al. 2015). As a response to increased uncertainty, parents often resort to more restrictive governance practices such as limiting time online or the type of online spaces and platforms children can access.

Through the example of Musical.ly, an emerging social media platform, this paper examines how preteen young people negotiate networked publics in the family context. Positioned as novice users and often still under (strict) parental authority, preteens face two difficult levels of negotiation as they simultaneously manage platform affordances and parental restrictions. In this paper, we provide evidence of how children appropriate Musical.ly to circumvent restrictions. In doing so, their actions can be understood through Lange's (2007, 2014) concepts of publicly private and privately public interaction; or, to put it differently, preteens '*manipulate media*' to achieve independence and create meaningful online spaces for engagement and interaction.

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## **Aim and Methods**

The interconnection between risk and opportunity becomes central to the parent-child dynamic that develops around digital media use. With new platforms like Musical.ly one of the difficulties is the flipped expertise dynamic, where young users are in many ways more proficient and knowledgeable than their parents (Savic, McCosker & Geldens 2016). This paper adds to research in this area by examining how networked publics are constructed, negotiated and accommodated within the family at the time of emergence and uptake of a new social media platform.

Our empirical data draws from a larger qualitative study of social media use within 15 Melbourne families with the eldest child between 10 and 15 years old. We focus here on four case study families. Data collection included separate in-depth interviews with the eldest child and one of the parents or carers in each family (8 participants in total). During the interview, the children had their handheld digital devices, pointing to aspects of their online practices. These 'social media tours' were audio and photo/video recorded to complement interview data. As an analytical approach, we examined data through selective coding focusing on themes addressing engagement with Musical.ly. We used Lange's (2007) framework of privately public and publicly private modes of engagement to identify patterns across the four families and to emphasise the way Musical.ly explicitly pushes these boundaries further than many other social platforms, and that these boundaries are understood differently by children and parents. We complemented the qualitative data with analysis of the platform context of Musical.ly.

## **Findings and Discussion**

Musical.ly presents challenges to family social media use, as a relatively new platform attracting a mostly preteen demographic revolving around sharing lip-synced music videos. Launched in 2014, it has seen rapid growth, with recent reports suggesting 130 million registered accounts in December 2016, and 40 million monthly users (Smith 2017). The app offers an easy to use tool for creating and sharing personal videos, but it also has all the functionalities of a social network site (i.e. user profile, followers list, like and comment features and messaging between users). Given that preteens' digital media use is driven mostly by play (Nansen et.al. 2012) and that music as a medium is often central to how young people relate to and make sense of personal space (Lincoln 2014), Musical.ly's popularity is understandable.

The app's own description positions it as 'the world's largest creative platform', and as a utility app rather than a social media platform. As a result, it can fly under the parental 'social media radar'. For each of the families in our study this factor shaped how Musical.ly was understood and used. For example, Emily, mother of 10-year-old Phoebe, said she is not really familiar with Phoebe's engagement with Musical.ly: 'I'm familiar with Instagram but then, like with the Musical.ly, I had no idea what it was about; She is showing me videos and I didn't even realise it was a social media'. Emma, a mother of 11-year-old Sophia, won't allow her daughter on Instagram until she is 13, but Sophia can use Musical.ly as Emma sees it as a place for fun and play: 'She is improvising, or acting/playing to music. So that's what I understand of it'. For both Emma and Emily, Musical.ly is not perceived as a platform that reflects their social media fears so they allow

their daughters more freedom, while at the same time completely or partially restricting their use of other platforms (i.e. Instagram).

The young participants in our study recognise how their parents see Musical.ly as different to other platforms and use it as a buffer to negotiate and push set limitations. For example, consistently among parents in our study the primary concern was the possibility of contact with strangers, and therefore each imposed rules to keep profiles exclusively private and connections only with persons they know in real life. While all our young participants adhered to private practices on Instagram, their practices with Musical.ly was more nuanced falling into two distinctive categories: publicly private and privately public (Lange 2007). The first category implies practices in which they might provide personal and identifiable information but with limited access to their profile. While others withhold personal information, but make their profile accessible to everyone, engaging with Musical.ly in a publicly private manner. Clearly, both practices negotiate the minimum of parental requirements while also allowing children to appropriate the platform to their needs, negotiating and circumventing their parent's uncertainty about Musical.ly's status and functioning as social media.

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