Family Communication in the Age of Digital and Social Media is an innovative collection of contemporary data-driven research and theorizing about how digital and social media are affecting and changing nearly every aspect of family interaction over the lifespan. The research and thinking featured in the book reflects the intense growth of interest in families in the digital age. Chapters explore communication among couples, families, parents, adolescents, and emerging adults as their realities are created, impacted, changed, structured, improved, influenced and/or inhibited by cell phones, smartphones, personal desktop and laptop computers, MP3 players, e-tablets, e-readers, email, Facebook, photo sharing, Skype, Twitter, SnapChat, blogs, Instagram, and other emerging technologies. Each chapter significantly advances thinking about how digital media have become deeply embedded in the lives of families and couples, as well as how they are affecting the very ways we as twenty-first-century communicators see ourselves and, by extension, conceive of and behave in our most intimate and longest-lasting relationships.

Carol J. Bruess (Ph.D., Ohio University) is Professor of Communication and Journalism and Director of Family Studies at the University of St. Thomas, Minnesota. She is the author of four books and dozens of journal articles and chapters, and is a regular contributor to the media on contemporary family issues.
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Family Communication

in the Age of

Digital and Social Media
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Edited by Carol J. Bruess
This volume is dedicated to everyone who kindly puts up with my over-use of emoji in text messages, email, and on Facebook, thereby embracing my crazy-expressive self! 😊👍👏🎉
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I am delighted to write the foreword for this important volume. This book, which explores challenges and opportunities experienced by families communicating in the era of digital and social media, is both fresh and timely. The topic is a critical one, as all the authors in this volume acknowledge when they cite the ubiquity of social media, as well as the enormous impact social media exert on family communication practices. This idea was vividly brought home to me because during the time I was preparing this foreword, the Supreme Court decision on same-sex marriage was announced. The way the decision was communicated highlights how social media intertwines with issues of family. Partners texted one another, #SCOTUSmarriage became a trending hashtag on Instagram, Facebook profile pictures were overlaid with rainbow filters, and families appeared on social media expressing their feelings about this landmark decision that clarified the definition of marriage. Certainly, now the time is ripe for scholars to examine relationships among family and technologically assisted communication.

This book, expertly edited by Carol J. Bruess, brings together an interdisciplinary group of authors to do just that. *Family Communication in the Age of Digital and Social Media* contributes several things to our knowledge of family communication: 1) it is no longer sufficient to ask whether social media helps or harms the family; 2) multiple, current theories are useful in our studies of social
media and family; and 3) it is critical to think about practical applications for our research on technology and family life.

First, I applaud the authors in this collection for avoiding a “good or bad” dichotomy when probing the impact of social media on family life. Instead of fixating on WHETHER technology brings families together or drives them apart, the authors here opt to interrogate HOW digital and social media penetrate and affect the communication practices of families. In so doing, it becomes clear that media have both positive and negative impacts on family (as Webb clearly articulates in Chapter 1), and researchers should move to more nuanced investigations, such as those provided within this volume. For example, in Chapter 2, Child and Petronio unpack how families address privacy concerns given that social media make a great deal of information public that we might have previously thought belonged within the realm of privacy. In Chapter 8, Hall and Feister argue persuasively that communication technologies impact the transition from childhood to adulthood. Piercy and his colleagues address a unique topic in Chapter 10, and cogently discuss how social and digital media might be used during couples therapy. Vaterlaus and Tulane, in Chapter 20, explore the different uses of interactive technology employed by adolescents, who are digital natives, and their parents, who are, for the most part, digital immigrants. In all the chapters, the authors focus on multiple impacts of social media and technology, and thus their findings are informative and reveal subtleties. As an example, in Chapter 15 Daws points to the complex way that “wedsites” (wedding websites) use new technology to reinforce the old norms of heteronormativity.

Second, this collection makes clear both that research of this type should and can be theoretically sound, and that many of our existing theories are still useful in examining issues of technology and family. For instance, theories including, but not limited to Uncertainty Reduction Theory (Chapter 18), Uses and Gratifications (Chapter 20), Ecological Theory on Parenting (Chapter 16), Privacy Management (Chapter 2), Narrative Performative Theory (Chapter 15), and Systems Theory (Chapter 6), illustrate both the theoretical grounding of this collection, as well as the utility of “old” theories to frame and explain “new” communication contexts and channels. In Chapter 18, Sharabi, Roache, and Pusateri, for example, find that a theory from 1975 (URT) can help us understand how parents use Facebook to seek information, and reduce uncertainty, about their children who are away from home in college.

Finally each chapter includes an application section, revealing how theory and practice easily coexist within the topic of family life and social and digital communication. For example, Blumer and Hertlein in Chapter 22 illustrate how
the traditional genogram can be modified to a technological genogram. With these technologically focused genograms, it is possible to answer research questions such as how families communicate across generations using social media. But, it also likely that these genograms can be applied in a variety of employment settings as well as medical contexts for assessing things such as cancer risk, for instance.

This collection excites me, and I invite you to enjoy its range and depth. It will be an absorbing read, inspiring you to think about family, communication, and life in our contemporary world in many different ways. This book makes it clear that family communication is altered by the presence of digital and social media, but still remains vibrant and can be investigated using theories and methods available to researchers today. I invite you to learn from each of the chapters, and to be motivated to study this ever-evolving, relevant topic yourself.

—Lynn H. Turner, Professor, Communication Studies and Director of the Interdisciplinary Family Studies Minor, Marquette University
Family Communication in the Age of Digital and Social Media, expertly edited by Professor Carol Bruess, represents a bold and significant step forward in the research literatures of lifespan communication, family communication, and digital media. Globally, digital communication technologies have been fast-woven into the everyday communication fabric of family life, and as this volume highlights, have spotlighted new paths as well as challenges for families. Included among these challenges are cultural concerns such as the commodification of intimacy (Karraker, this volume), misconceptions about technology (Webb, this volume), “technoference” (McDaniel, this volume), privacy issues (Child & Petronio, this volume), the role of digital media and optimal child development (e.g., Fletcher & Blair, this volume), and parenting in the digital age (e.g., Tikkanen, Afifi, & Merill, this volume). Yet, with mindful use, we also find digital media opening new paths toward deeper understanding and appreciation of family history (Blumer & Hertlein, this volume), potentially higher levels of personal and relational satisfaction, feelings of closeness, and inventiveness at home (Piercy et al., this volume), and new, creative family-presentation rituals via Facebook (Bruess, Li, & Polingo, this volume). This groundbreaking volume is a must-read work that will, like all of the other volumes in Peter Lang’s Lifespan Communication: Children, Families, and Aging series, spark research, conversation, and contribute important insights into life’s dynamic and ever-evolving communication processes from first words to final conversations.
To my husband, Brian, and my beautiful teenagers, Tony and Gracie: You are the model of support, love, and joy—even when I’m stressin’. Thank you!! To Tom Socha: You are an inspiring managing editor and scholar, even when I’m asking too many novice questions. Thank you! To Tammi Polingo: Your cheerleading and micro-attention to every detail has been priceless, even when I’m sending you 126 emails a day. How can I ever thank you?! To Mike Stoffel: Your eagle eyes are a gift. Thanks for sharing them with this project. To Kate Woodman Middlecamp and Tammy Brice, your combined artistic brilliance made the cover come to life. Wow—thank you! And to all of the authors in this volume: Your passion for studying and discerning families in the digital age is beyond impressive. Without all you, this book wouldn’t be a thing! Thank you for trusting me with your beautiful, smart work.
Section One

Plugged-In Families: Characteristics, Frameworks, and New Realities in a Digital Age
Research on Technology and the Family

From Misconceptions to More Accurate Understandings

Lynne M. Webb
Florida International University

Introduction

For more than a decade, the popular press in the United States has featured news stories on the negative impact of new media on children. As a result, parents are repeatedly urged to monitor their children’s Internet use. Media panic concerning children’s safety was particularly fueled at three points:

• In 2003, and for the 10 years following, various national and international jurisdictions began arresting users for illegally downloading copyrighted material, primarily music and films but also videos of sports events and videogames. The arrested and prosecuted users included minors as young as 12 years old. Parents were urged to more closely monitor their children’s online behavior and discourage illegal downloads.

• From 2004 to 2007, NBC broadcast the “reality” television program To Catch a Predator in 11 two-part episodes, in which pedophiles were lured to pretend children for sexual encounters; the show’s host and website warned parents to talk to their children about predators trolling the Internet for victims.

• In 2005, MySpace was purchased by News Corporation for $580 million dollars. Under the intense media monitoring that followed, MySpace began experiencing a series of safety issues, including hacked accounts. At that
time, MySpace users were primarily adolescents and marketers targeting adolescents; parents were advised to warn their children about placing personal and financial information such as credit card numbers on social media websites, as this information could be easily stolen during a security breach.

Currently, the traditional news media cover a wide variety of stories about families and their online behavior. In 2014 alone, stories appeared on the effects of smartphones at the dinner table, parental-control options on smartphones, and video-monitoring children’s bedrooms to proctor Internet use. One headline read, “OMG, the Internet Can Be a Scary Place with Kids!” (Byers, 2014).

Like many phenomena featured in contemporary news stories, negative reports garner the most attention—even though such negative outcomes are rare and the stories often contradict research findings concerning the phenomenon. Nonetheless, as these stories settle into our collective consciousness, we begin to believe (and perpetuate by sharing with others in our social networks) multiple cultural misconceptions about how families use personal communication technologies (PCTs) such as cell phones, tablets, and laptop computers. We might fear for the future of the prototypical American family as more and more of us acquire laptop computers for individual use, as children begin using cell phones at younger and younger ages, and as entire families “play” on their tablets while they eat dinner together at the neighborhood eatery, speaking only to the wait staff and rarely to each other.

In contrast, the original research reviewed in this chapter paints a picture quite different from the news depictions described above and from the cultural misconceptions and misunderstandings surrounding such representations. For example, family conflicts about children’s use of PCTs tend to occur when parents attempt to regulate children’s access to the Internet via conversation rather than simply employing parental control settings on cell phones. The conflicts rarely originate with strangers or with children’s actions on the devices, per se. Instead, it is typically the very attempt to keep children safe that leads to ongoing parent–teen, parent–child, and/or parent–adolescent conflicts that can significantly disrupt family life.

This chapter identifies eight widespread misconceptions about families and their PCT use. The misconceptions include notions such as ever-present Internet “stranger danger,” children’s overuse of technology as the etiology of parent–child conflicts, and the availability of the Internet prompting users to focus on relationships with users outside the family versus face-to-face interaction with family members. Each of the eight misconceptions is either completely false or an oversimplification of the facts according to the latest research. This chapter clarifies the eight misconceptions via a review of the published research concerning
families and their technology use. Because the misconceptions are so far-reaching, the chapter also provides a broad overview of existing research about families in an age of digital and social media.

Eight Misconceptions about Families and Personal Communication Technologies

Misconception One: Children’s Use of PCTs Prompts Family Conflicts

The existence of family conflicts surrounding PCT use is well documented. However, what is not as widely known or acknowledged is the source of these conflicts. Contrary to popular belief, typically children’s PCT use does not prompt family conflicts; most technology-related family disagreements are the direct result of parents’ communication when attempting to monitor or limit their children’s Internet access. Furthermore, a growing body of research indicates that intense monitoring is largely unnecessary and that the parents’ fears that are driving such behaviors are largely unfounded.

Conflicts are parent-provoked. Parents’ attempts to regulate their children’s Internet use often provoke family conflicts (Mesch, 2006b; Mesch & Frenkel, 2011) and lead to verbal arguments. From the child’s viewpoint, parents should trust them to make well-reasoned, sound judgments concerning Internet use. From the parent’s viewpoint, keeping their children out of harm’s way constitutes a primary parental responsibility—and the Internet offers many forms of harm including seductive online advertising (Cornish, 2014), cyberbullying (Schrock & boyd, 2011), gaming addiction (Lemmens, Valkenburg, & Peter, 2009), online harassment (Lindsay & Krysik, 2012), online pornography (McCartan & McAlister, 2012), and sex texting (Lunceford, 2011). Parents might view adolescent children as especially susceptible to such “harms,” given their inexperience with such matters, their desire for positive adult attention, as well as their naïve attraction to gaming and sexual matters. See Fletcher and Blair (this volume) for a recent assessment of the dangers of visual online media to adolescents. A recent 25-country multinational study (Mertens & d’Haenens, 2014) documents that parents’ primary reason for mediating their children’s Internet use is concern for their children’s well-being. According to Mertens and d’Haenens, the only cultural dimension related to parents’ level of concern was uncertainty avoidance: The more parents desired to avoid uncertainty and increase certainty, the more they expressed concern and attempted to mediate their children’s Internet access.
Mertens and d’Haenens’s finding raises the question of whether parents attempt such mediation purely out of concern for their children or rather, at least in part, to increase their own sense of security and certainty. For instance, Tikkanen, Afifi, and Merrill (this volume) found that parents who experience longer-than-expected delays in their child’s cell-phone response time experience more uncertainty about their child’s activities than those who do not experience such a delay. Furthermore, Sharabi, Roache, and Pusateri (this volume) found that uncertainty reduction can drive parents’ viewing of their young adult child’s Facebook posts.

Related research indicates that motivations for parental mediation of cell phones in particular can differ by sex (Mascheroni, 2013). Mothers tend to serve as the enforcers of family rules governing children’s PCT use. Mothers also tend to see cell phones as tools for safety, connection, and monitoring—and are more likely to view cell phones as providing opportunities to call their children at any time to discover where they are and what they are doing. Fathers tend to view cell phones as providing children with educational opportunities, given the Internet access availability on smartphones.

Clark (2013) identified four primary types of parents, based on their mediation beliefs and behaviors concerning their children’s cell phone use:

- **Engaged parents** favor active mediation and will use parental controls built into the cell phones to limit their children’s Internet access;
- **Helicopter parents** favor restrictive mediation but are ambivalent about using parental controls built into the telephones; they might restrict their children’s cell phone use, for example, to two hours after homework is complete;
- **Permissive parents** appreciate the arguments in favor of mediation but do not engage in much regulation of their children’s media use; and,
- **Digital immigrants** believe that mediation of their children’s media use is simply futile.

Interestingly, Dworkin, Walker, Rudi, and Doty (this volume) examine the multiple ways parents use new media technologies to fulfill and understand their parenting responsibilities, including seeking support and ideas from other parents in online communities about how to manage PCT use of their child(ren).

Parents’ regulation may be so limited or so subtle that children fail to perceive it (Sorbring & Lundin, 2012). In one study (Wang, Bianchi, & Raley, 2005), 61% of parents reported regulating their adolescent children’s Internet access, whereas only 38% of their adolescent children reported such oversight. Adolescents might fail to perceive parental regulation as actual regulation because they can easily circumvent it (Byrne & Lee, 2011) using various technological affordances such...
as screening parents’ calls, deleting browser histories, and posting on social media websites under assumed identities. Such circumvention might explain why many parents do not attempt to regulate their children’s Internet use even when they perceive the Internet as dangerous (Staksrud & Livingstone, 2009). Many parents report attempting to balance concerns about online risks with the educational benefits of Internet access (Tripp, 2011). In sum, parents are more likely to take either a hands-off approach to their children’s PCT use or attempt to monitor and limit their children’s Internet access (which both practice and research suggests might be virtually impossible).

**Parental fears disproportionate to reality.** Much evidence suggests parents’ fears of Internet dangers are not well founded. For example, recent advances in Internet monitoring have led to successful automatic monitoring of cyberbullying (Van Royen, Poels, Daelemans, & Vandebosch, 2015) and email screening software typically prevents pornographic messages from reaching users. Furthermore, research suggests adult predators stalking children on the Internet are rare; more often, middle school and high school students engage in cyberstalking and harassment of peers (Schrock & boyd, 2011). On the rare occasions teenagers attend offline meetings with strangers they have met on the Internet, the teens cite “the discrepancy between expectations and reality as the core reason” for their negative feelings about the meetings; they do not report molestation, rape, or robbery (Dedkova, Cerna, Janasova, & Daneback, 2014, p. 327).

Recent research suggests that children might need less guidance on Internet use than parents imagine. In one survey of more than 600 college-student users of Facebook, the more popular users (those reporting larger numbers of “friends”) were more likely than unpopular users (those with fewer contacts on Facebook) to say nothing on their Facebook page that would surprise their offline family members (Zywica & Danowski, 2008). The more popular the young adult users, the more likely that their “friends” included multiple offline contacts such as family members, and thus the more likely to present an honest and accurate portrayal of his or her offline life on Facebook. Such findings suggest that the more embedded the young adult child is on Facebook, the less parents needs to worry about him or her engaging in inappropriate or embarrassing online behavior.

Similarly, Mostmans, Bauwens, and Pierson’s (2014) study documents that, at least among their sample, even younger children articulate rather sophisticated ideas about digital age choices. The pre-adolescents in their study could easily imagine “the moral consequences of disclosing personal information [online]. Their moral reflections were embedded in a more general concern for children’s vulnerability to other, more powerful information circulators in their social networks, such as older
children, siblings, but also parents or the Internet crowd” (p. 347). Given that one of parents’ primary concerns is their children’s willingness to disclose personal information—allowing online adult predators to find them offline—the results of this study provide powerful evidence that parents’ concerns may be misplaced, and that the need for training in Internet use might be exaggerated.

Nonetheless, many parents attempt to regulate their children’s access to the Internet and such attempts can (and often do) lead to conflict (Mesch, 2006b; Mesch & Frenkel, 2011). Regulatory strategies vary with parenting style and not with adolescents’ amount of time spent online (Eastin, Greenburg, & Hofschire, 2006). More frequent and intense conflicts occur when parents employ authoritative and permissive parenting styles (Byrne & Lee, 2011) rather than consultative and deliberative decision-making. Additionally, as Mesch (2006a) explains, “intergenerational conflicts over the Internet were higher in families in which parents expressed concern over the potentially negative consequences of Internet use” (p. 473). Such conflicts can lead adolescents to perceive their parents as difficult to talk to about the very matters of concern: online dangers.

Because most children and adolescents use their PCTs for direct and private access to peers (Ling & Bertel, 2013; Ling & Ytrri, 2002), they often perceive attempted parental regulation as privacy invasion (Mascheroni, 2014). Children typically defend against such privacy invasions using the same medium that the parents attempt to regulate (Ledbetter et al., 2010). For example, adolescents often maintain a Facebook page that parents can access and a second Facebook page for peer interaction that their parents cannot access. Such tactics avoid conflict and maintain privacy. If children maintain only one account on a given social medium, they often manipulate their privacy settings to prevent parental monitoring of peer interactions (Mascheroni, 2014). For a detailed discussion of online privacy in family communication, see the Child and Petronio chapter in this volume. For examples of recent research on marital communication and privacy/boundary issues, see two other chapters in this volume: Cravens and Whiting, as well as Hertlein and Blumer.

Given ubiquitous access to smartphones and wireless Internet access around the globe, children typically experience unlimited online access. Middle school aged children report taking advantage of free Wi-Fi and hacking into their school’s Wi-Fi (Mascheroni, 2014). If parents deny their children cell phones and access to the Internet via the family computer, parents often fail to account for their children’s friends who are happy to share their unlimited access to such technology with their phoneless peers.
Limiting children’s Internet access might inflict social harm. An argument can be made that parents who deny their children PCTs are inflicting social harm. Given that by 2008, 57% of children ages 7 to 17 owned their own cell phone (Kennedy, Smith, Wells, & Wellman, 2008)—and it is likely the percent has since increased—the phoneless child can become an object of pity or ridicule among peers. Additionally, many offline peer conversations discuss games and information garnered online (Lee, 2009). Denying a child access to those bits of information is tantamount to denying him or her much of the social currency of face-to-face interchange among age-appropriate peers.

Children without ready access to the Internet may become vulnerable to undue influence from others who will provide such access. The access provided by a peer or an adult outside the family might involve activities the parents would deem as not age appropriate, such as viewing pornography. Nonetheless, the child may feel compelled to engage in the activity because his or her parents limit any opportunities for Internet access. Conversely, if the parents provide the child with his or her own cell phone, the parents could activate control settings that significantly reduce the odds of the child viewing material that is not age appropriate.

In sum, parents often prompt family conflicts by attempting to monitor or limit through oral argument their children’s access to the Internet—a virtual impossibility; in contrast, cell phone control settings provide an easy, no-conflict method of limiting children’s Internet access. The fears driving parents’ desire to protect their children from Internet harm are not well founded given that negative elements appear to be rapidly disappearing and/or nearly nonexistent. Parents who fail to provide children with cell phones or Internet access might be doing more harm than good by limiting or reducing their children’s social currency with peers.

Misconception Two: Technology Is Primarily Being Used in Family Member–to–Family Member Interactions to Stay in Touch with Out-of-Town Relatives

From grandparents texting their grandchildren to free Skype chats across continents, PCTs offer families multiple means to stay in touch, especially for family members living in far-flung locations. Inexpensive technologies and widespread Internet access allows every U.S. citizen to interact (should they desire to) with every known, living family member every day. A recent Pew survey revealed that more than half (60%) of surveyed users thought the Internet and cell phones made them better informed about their family than they were 5 years ago (Purcell & Rainie, 2014). To what extent do users avail themselves of these opportunities? Two lines of communication research address this question:
• A number of researchers are documenting the ways geographically distant families employ technologies, often in fairly challenging circumstances such as during military deployment or catastrophic illness.

• Other researchers are examining simple, often mundane relationship maintenance behaviors in face-to-face family relationships and the ways technology assists and challenges such maintenance.

Relationship maintenance in face-to-face family relationships. Social media such as Facebook allow users to “keep up with” face-to-face friends, colleagues, and family members (Bruess, Li, & Polingo, this volume; Young & Quan-Haase, 2013). Research documents that most social media contacts are people that users know in their offline lives (Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfield, 2006), including family members. Multiple studies document users’ tendency to employ technology to interact with immediate family members (Bruess, Li, & Polingo, this volume; Dorrance-Hall & Kenny, this volume; Kennedy et al., 2008; Smith, this volume), often people the user sees every day. Such interactions can address both social goals (e.g., e-birthday cards) and task goals (e.g., planning birthday parties; Boase, Horrigan, Wellman, & Rainie, 2006). Pew data indicate that couples with children in the home often use their cell phones to “coordinate their lives” (Kennedy et al., 2008, p. ii). For example, cell phones can facilitate fluid task achievement, such as deciding who will pick up the children from daycare or who will stop at the grocery store after work. Families often employ such so-called microcoordination (Ling & Yttri, 2002) to manage family obligations simultaneously with other activities such as volunteering and work demands (Webb, Ledbetter, & Norwood, 2014). Indeed, users report that technology has “blurred the traditional lines between work and family” (Kennedy et al., 2008, p. iii).

Multiple researchers examine parent–child Facebook interactions (Young & Quan-Haase, 2013) and document the benefits of such interactions, particularly in contentious relationships (Binder, Howes, & Smart, 2012; Child & Westermann, 2013; Kanter, Afifi, & Robbins, 2012). Bruess et al. (in this volume) found that Facebook served as a ritual of connection between family members and served multiple positive functions for families, including reminiscing, increasing knowledge of each other, and reestablishing ties with extended family. Vitak, Ellison, and Steinfield (2011) reported that “ friending” family members was associated with increased perceptions of social support.

Interestingly, most “Facebook fights” involve a primary users’ contacts disagreeing in the comments sections of one of the primary user’s recent posts. Such disagreements typically occur at sites of social diversity such as where family, friends, and work associates converge (Binder et al., 2012). Often these socially
diverse groupings include one or more family members who have never met the user’s other “friends” face to face. Indeed, Binder et al. reported a connection between the number of Facebook disagreements and the number of family members who were Facebook friends with the user. In other words, the battling commenters are arguing with complete strangers online but know offline associates of the primary user, whose account has become the site of the “Facebook fight.” The primary user might then hear comments at the next face-to-face family gathering about, for example, his or her “weirdo Facebook friends.” One way to reduce online arguments of this type is to create groups of contacts and then post to specific groups. Another is to hide all posts from certain individuals, including contentious family members.

In addition to “keeping up” with the day-to-day events in family members’ lives, social media afford families the option to stay in daily touch when crisis strikes. For example, some blog hosting websites such as caringbridge.com provide a venue for caregivers to keep family members informed about serious health-related events such as surgeries and cancer treatments. When a natural disaster such as a hurricane strikes, family members might be scattered across locations; social media (such as Facebook) provide venues for family members to reconnect and share information (Knight, 2013)—and to do so quickly to reduce the anxiety caused by ambiguity about the health status and location of loved ones.

**Communicating with geographically distant family members.** Modern communication technologies provide workable venues for interaction among geographically distant family members (see Karraker, this volume). Indeed, more than half (52%) of the survey respondents in a Pew survey viewed PCTs as particularly useful for staying in touch with family members who live at a distance (Kennedy et al., 2008). Furthermore, the communication technologies employed by transnational families has significantly changed across the past three decades (Webb et al., 2014): Families moved from biweekly postal mail contact before the 1990s, to phone contact facilitated by decreasing long-distance rates in the mid-1990s, and then to email and other online contact by the end of the decade (Wilding, 2006). Today, family blogs allow multiple family members, regardless of geographical distance, to maintain regular contact as they have time and interest (Nardi, Schiano, & Gumbrecht, 2004). Choice of online venue for family communication can vary with family size and patterns of communication (Cramer & Edward, this volume).

In addition to regular interaction, new media allow far-flung family members to “be there” during important moments. For example, instant-messenger services allow male American military personnel to maintain a sense of being present at their children’s births while they serve overseas (Schachman, 2010). Via Skype or
FaceTime, family members at multiple locations can sing “Happy Birthday” to a child as he or she blows out the candles on the cake; a doting aunt never need miss the look on a young adult’s face as he or she opens a special graduation present.

Linking distant family members can be enjoyable and beneficial—but not in all cases. Sometimes family members “migrated precisely because they found their home country socially or culturally stifling or their kin dominating and difficult. An increased capacity to connect with home [may enable] feelings of suffocation and restriction to extend across time and space” (Wilding, 2006, pp. 135–136). Thus, although modern communication technologies offer geographically distant family members the means to stay in touch as if they lived in the same neighborhood, some family members elect to not exercise that option.

Beyond transcending geography, research in the communication-accommodation theory tradition recognizes that age differences can hinder communication between family members (Soliz & Harwood, 2006). However, telephone and written media (including email) can effectively transcend generational barriers, with increased contact positively associated with relational quality and relational satisfaction in grandparent–grandchild relationships; indeed, grandparents and grandchildren tend to initiate email contact with equal frequency (Harwood, 2000).

In summary, the notion that families use new media to stay in touch with geographically distant relatives is borne out by research. But, the misconception that families use PCTs exclusively or even primarily to stay in touch with out-of-town relatives provides too limited an understanding of the “reach” of the stay-in-touch function of social media. Families also use new media to maintain relationships with family members they see daily and to achieve important coordination and task goals. Modern communication technologies provide multiple venues for family members to communicate, whether they live in close proximity or in distant geographic locations. Pew reports that 64% of surveyed users reported staying in touch with family was their major reason for using social media (Smith, 2011). Using PCTs to maintain family relationships, both near and far, has become so common that family genograms of technical connections can be mapped (Blumer & Hertlein, this volume). Additionally, PCTs allow a sense of social presence at special moments across locations and generations.

Misconception Three: Internet Use Threatens Healthy Family Functioning

Communication technologies are not inherently bad for family relationships. In fact, many users think that PCT use can increase family closeness. Pew researchers report “25% of our survey respondents feel that their family is now closer than
when they were growing up thanks to the Internet and cell phones, while just 11% say their family today is not as close as families in the past” (Kennedy et al., 2008, p. iii). The balance of their respondents (approximately 60%) reported that PCTs had neither increased nor decreased their family’s closeness.

PCT use can impact family functioning in both positive and negative ways. In many circumstances, family functioning is supported and/or restored via social support provided by specialized online communities (e.g., bulletin boards for parents of children with cancer). Facebook interaction can renew and enhance family relationships across space, time, and generations, serving as a highly desirable digital-age family ritual (Bruess et al., this volume). Family members can offer social support to college students during their first year away at college (Smith, this volume). Romantic and married couples also create digital love letters and keep digital mementos of relationship experiences and feelings (Janning and Christopherson, this volume).

When they are not interacting with family members, users might spend time online engaging in family-related activities such as buying birthday gifts online for family members and answering e-invitations to family gatherings. Additionally, when users interact online with non–family members, they often discuss family issues and engage their family identities (Webb et al., 2014), as exemplified in the following research reports:

- Foster parents write, read, and discuss their adoption stories with other foster parents on narrative blogs (Suter, Baxter, Seurer, & Thomas, 2014).
- Grandparents may spend time on grandparenting websites discussing their grandparenting role (Harwood, 2000).
- Engaged couples construct wedding websites that present a relationship narrative and couple identity consistent with what they believe their families expect (Daws, this volume).

In other circumstances, of course, family functioning can be negatively affected. The marital relationship is especially vulnerable to damage via online interactions with non–family members (e.g., cyber-affairs).

**The potentially negative impact of cyber-cheating and -sex on marriage.**

Online interactions with users outside the family can harm existing family relationships, especially the marital relationship. Research indicates that many married men and married women participate in cyber-cheating (Millner, 2008). Multiple websites will match partners who desire extramarital cyber-affairs (e.g.,
nostringsattached.com and marriedsecrets.com). Other websites match married users who desire “discreet” affairs with other married users who do not want to “get caught” (e.g., AshleyMadison.com). Explanations for cyber-cheating include the recreational hypothesis (cyber-cheaters are sexually permissive sensation seekers) and the compensation hypothesis (cyber-cheaters look for others to compensate for their own inadequacies) (Peter & Valkenburg, 2007). Cyber-cheaters can experience online sexual harassment and cyber-stalking (Kelly, Pomerantz, & Currie, 2006; Philips & Morrissey, 2004) that disrupts family life.

Internet pornography poses a unique threat to marriages. Men often view Internet pornography as visual stimulation for masturbation with no emotional attachment (Limacher & Wright, 2006), but their heterosexual spouses often hold an alternative viewpoint. “Getting caught” by the partner can transform a safe and loving relationship into one of mistrust and distance (Hans, Lee, Tinker, & Webb, 2011). In heterosexual relationships, wives who discover their husbands viewing Internet pornography typically decode the situation as the wife being no longer attractive to the husband; the wives typically experience emotional pain from the husbands’ “involvement” with other women (Hans et al., 2011). The higher the frequency of the heterosexual husband’s pornography use, the greater the marital issue in the wife’s view (Hans et al., 2011). Research on wives’ cyber-affairs and the impact of such affairs on their spouses is virtually nonexistent; however, it is easy to imagine any spouse's negative reaction to the realization that his or her marital partner is “seeing other people” online.

A more common PCT problem among marital dyads is partners’ use of devices, especially mobile telephones, to communicate with non–family members during family or couple time together. Spouses who work outside the home are especially susceptible to the desire to, for instance, finish one more work-related email before turning back to a conversation with partners and/or children. McDaniel (this volume) examined the nature of “technoference”—the tendency for technology to interfere with couple relationships and couples’ parent–child time. Piercy, Riger, Voskanova, Chang, Haugen, and Sturdivant (this volume) also uncovered, through their national surveys of marriage and family therapists, ways couples face difficulty when technology creates conflict and difficulties for couples. Furthermore, Iaccheri and Tyma (this volume) found, through a Critical Discourse Analysis of couples’ discussions about technology in their relationship, that sometimes unhealthy power dynamics are created and maintained in couple relationships around the technology.

**The positive influence of social-support communities.** Many online interactions facilitate healthy family functioning in communities of social support (for instance, see Dworkin, Walker, Rudi, and Doty, this volume, for an examination
of parents’ use of new media to support their parenting practices and choices). Especially in times of crisis or when offline family support is unavailable, online social support communities can stabilize the family system. For example, if a young married couple is living far from family and experiences the birth of their first child—a child with Down Syndrome—they can find information and advice via online social-support groups of parents who have children with Downs. Online social support communities are available for parents on almost any relevant topic.

Benefits of social support to individual family members include positive changes to perceptions of self, strategies for coping with stress, and an enhanced sense of self-worth and stability (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Social-support communities have broad appeal to parents. Dworkin et al. (this volume) examined demographic differences in parents’ use of digital media and the ways parents develop complex communities to support parenting; among many differences across gender, income, ethnicity, geography, education level, and age, they report rural parents participated in online classes more frequently than suburban parents, potentially a reflection of convenience and access. As Walker (this volume) reveals, social media is not a platform that has singular effects on parent development, knowledge, attitudes, or behavior, but influences both the structure and processes of parents’ relationships.

PCTs often provide access to support resources that are unavailable, inconvenient, or perceived as intimidating in offline settings. Family members coping with stress, illness, or loss can easily locate online venues for social-support provision. Illness blogs provide online social support, often substituting for support unavailable offline (e.g., Donovan, LeFebvre, Tardif, Brown, & Love, 2014; Rains & Keating, 2011). The death of a family member can prompt users to seek online social support; approximately 10% of Internet support groups are for bereaved parents (Carlson, Lammert, & O’Leary, 2012). Such groups are more likely to draw bereaved fathers, who historically are less likely to attend offline bereavement groups (Carlson et al., 2012).

Finally, family members facing stigma can seek social support in online communities. Websites for families with gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender members provide educational material, discussion boards, and information about support groups. Online support is available to families who depart from cultural ideals (Baxter et al., 2009) such as large families with four or more children (Arnold, 2005) and transnational/transracial families (Meyers, 2014), as well as family members who depart from cultural ideals such as birthmothers who relinquish parental rights (Baxter, Norwood, Asbury, Jannusch, & Scharp, 2012) and stepmothers (Christian, 2005). Members of almost any type of family system can seek and find social support online.
In sum, interaction with non–family members via PCTs can challenge healthy family functioning when users violate implicit relational contracts (e.g., cyber-cheating). Conversely, and primarily, online interactions with non–family members can enhance and improve family functioning, especially in challenging situations, when family members avail themselves of the opportunity to receive social support from online communities. Access to others via the Internet is a neutral phenomenon; how family members use this potential resource determines its impact on family functioning.

**Misconception Four: Using Technology Leads to Fewer Face-to-Face Family Interactions**

Although a few early researchers reported that technology reduced the amount of time family members spend in face-to-face interaction, very few contemporary scientists believe that PCT use displaces face-to-face interaction. In fact, a major Pew Research survey contradicted the early research; their participants reported that their increased time online did not reduce the amount of face-to-face time they spent with family members but rather reduced the amount of time they spend watching television (Kennedy et al., 2008). Today, scholars believe that communication via PCTs largely augments and enhances offline relationships, including family relationships.

**Early research.** Some early research linked Internet use to negative outcomes, such as increased depression and loneliness, reduced face-to-face interactions with family and friends, and neglect of close offline relationships (Brenner, 1997; Kraut et al., 1998; Mesch, 2006b). Negative outcomes widely reported about children’s use of a personal computer in bedrooms (rather than use of a family computer in a common room in the home) increased parental fears of social isolation (Roberts, Foehr, Rideout, & Brodie, 1999). Other researchers linked increased Internet interactions with strangers (such as fellow interactants on fan blogs) to shrinking family and community interaction in everyday life (Turner, 2004). Such tales of doom and gloom are largely irrational; most recent studies cannot replicate these early findings.

To assume that PCT use will displace face-to-face interaction in the family engages a zero-sum view of time use (Lee, 2009) and is grounded in the assumption that multitasking is not a possibility. Research suggests users often multitask by communicating via multiple communication channels simultaneously, often in the presence of a face-to-face relational partner (Turner & Reinsch, 2011). For example, an entire family can watch a movie being live-streamed onto a computer and talk about the movie while they watch it. Face-to-face family visits can occur
among geographically distant family members via Skype or FaceTime. In other words, engaging on PCTs can increase face-to-face family interaction.

**Recent research.** Recent research documents that many users employ social media precisely to stay in touch with offline family and friends (Haythornthwaite, 2005; Wasike & Cook, 2010; Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008). Indeed, the closer the relationship, the more likely users are to employ multiple media to maintain contact and communicate regularly (Haythornthwaite, 2005), including face-to-face interactions, Facebook, Twitter, email, and texting. Some users view PCTs as absolutely necessary to maintain close relationships with their family members; for example, nonresidential parents extensively employ technology for daily communication with their children (Kartch & Timmerman, this volume). Mobile phones function as a favored device to maintain close relationships (Kim, Kim, Park, & Rice, 2007).

Use of PCTs can reduce conflict between family members (Child & Westermann, 2013; Kanter, Afifi, & Robbins, 2012). For example, rather than two adult siblings quarreling about factual matters (e.g., Who won the 1987 World series?), they might discover factual information with a quick Google search. Similarly, when children ask parents challenging questions (e.g., How does photosynthesis work?), parents could quickly research the answer on a smartphone and share it with their children. Internet-streaming educational programs (e.g., *Sesame Street*, *National Geographic* documentaries) can enrich children’s lives; parents may be grateful that such media exposes their children to the world beyond their neighborhood in a positive way and thus broadens their children’s horizons.

In sum, rather than assuming every moment spent online is a moment not spent in face-to-face interaction, PCTs can be more accurately viewed as a tool to augment face-to-face interactions, decrease conflict, and expand family members’ horizons. PCTs offer means to supplement rather than displace offline interaction.

**Misconception Five: Families Abuse Technologies, Using “Screens” as Babysitters and to Avoid Face-to-Face Family Interaction**

Children sometimes use their parents’ tablets to play games and watch cartoons (Rideout & Hamel, 2006). However, the characterization of such technology use as “babysitting” is too narrow and negative to accurately describe how most parents and children together engage in PCT use for mutual benefit.

**PCT use to facilitate family functioning.** There can be no denying that some parents use mass media programming and interactive online activities (e.g., the popular digital game *Angry Birds*) as means of keeping children occupied
while parents engage in alternative activities such as completing household chores, scheduling appointments, and running errands. Parents quickly learn that children’s emersion in PCT use can ease transitions, keep children quietly engaged rather than quarreling with siblings, and become a part of helpful bedtime routines (Rideout & Hamel, 2006). However, no research to date documents (1) that parents are not present with children while the children use PCTs; (2) that parents are using PCTs as “babysitters” and thus ignoring their children during the PCT use; or (3) that children using PCTs for short periods has any adverse effect on family functioning. In fact, the published research paints the opposite picture: Parents employ PCTs to facilitate family functioning, as described above, and engage in cooperative activities as described below.

**Family use of PCTs for cooperative activities.** Families with children often employ PCTs to engage in cooperative activities, such as playing games together (Aarsand & Aronsson, 2009) and co-viewing films or television shows (Clark, 2011). Joint game playing allows family members of diverse ages to interact as peers and learn from one another (e.g., *Words with Friends*). Many parents find that co-playing video games is an effective mechanism for mediation of sexual and violent content. As Nikken & Jansz (2006) noted, “parents more often co-play video games with their children when they expected positive social-emotional effects from gaming” (p. 181).

Additionally, families have been watching television together since the advent of the medium, and often consider such joint viewing as quality time spent together. Streaming television shows, films, and cartoons via laptop computers and tablets operates in precisely the same way, allowing joint viewing and accompanying discussions. Joint watching enables family members to share their favorite genres of television shows (e.g., mysteries) and sporting teams (e.g., “I married into a Green Bay Packer family”). Joint viewing can provide the catalyst for challenging but timely discussions between parents and adolescents on such topics as safer sex practices, as well as drug and alcohol use (see Kam & Lee, 2013, for a thorough review of the research documenting this phenomenon).

Finally, Pew researchers note that family members often go online together for joint activities (Kennedy et al., 2008). Additionally, family members individually may view something interesting on the Internet, but then bring their PCT device to other family members to share in the experience: a “Hey, look at this!” experience (Kennedy et al., 2008, p. iii).

In sum, parents strategically use PCTs to assist family functioning (e.g., easing the transition from school to home by allowing the child to watch a cartoon in the car), but there is no scientific evidence that parents use PCTs to babysit their
children. Additionally, parents and children together use PCTs for collaborative engagement such as playing online games together, co-viewing streamed films, and sharing interesting content. Such collaborative engagement facilitates more family together time and conversation.

**Misconception Six: The Family Elder as a Source of Wisdom and Reliable Information Is Being Replaced by “Googling the Internet”**

We can reasonably question the credibility of many Internet sources. Only the most naïve user would think that all statements on the Internet are true. Conversely, many highly credible sources employ the Internet for information distribution, including, for example, the U.S. government, the Mayo Clinic, and scholarly journals. Therefore, users often turn to the Internet to seek information. “Googling” a question is a common activity among PCT owners. They turn to the Internet to learn when a game will be broadcast, when the sun will set today, what food is on sale this week at their local grocery store, and how to reduce a fever. Typically users seek information from the Internet under two conditions:

- The information they seek is not immediately available from a trusted face-to-face source.
- The user believes that the most accurate information on the subject is available on the Internet.

These conditions also apply to information related to families and family functioning. A user might text his or her mother to ask for the date of an uncle’s birthday or email a family member to ask for grandmother’s apple pie recipe, but users are less likely to contact a relative to ask when the sun will set today or when the game starts tonight.

**Gathering information related to family concerns.** It should come as no surprise that many family members search the Internet to address a wide variety of information needs related to both individual and family concerns. The Internet offers information on how to cook the family’s Thanksgiving Day turkey, how to “come out” to the family, how to have DNA tested for inherited diseases, for ideas about birthday gifts for older family members in nursing homes, as well as countless other family-related topics. New mothers and fathers visit parenting websites to learn about pregnancy and childbirth (e.g., Johansson, Rubertsson, Radestad, & Hildingsson, 2010), parenting skills (Radey & Randolph, 2009), as well as children’s health and nutrition (Atkinson et al., 2009; Knapp et al., 2011). Some new parents perceive online information from fellow parents as more current and relevant than information from other sources, including relatives and
healthcare providers (O’Connor & Madge, 2004). Plantin and Daneback (2009) observed: “Today’s parents are no longer satisfied with simple descriptions of parenthood, but instead require knowledge that conveys the experiences of others in similar situations as themselves” (“Parents go online—needs and motives,” para. 2). Given that knowledge about child development, medicine, and nutrition is constantly increasing, perhaps current information from fellow contemporary parents on the front lines of childrearing might be perceived as more accurate and credible than grandparent’s recollections of child-rearing practices from the past. Furthermore, online information about child rearing comes without unwanted advice and hurtful comments from in-laws (An, 2014).

**Gathering information about the family itself.** If an Internet-user wants to learn the outcome of a cousin’s surgery, a family member is likely the best source of such information. However, there may exist more accurate or credible sources of information about a family than family members themselves. Sometimes family members lack the knowledge or the willingness to share needed or desired family-centric information. Indeed, older adults often carry family secrets to the grave. In such cases, PCTs provide access to Internet-based records that might provide desired and useful information.

Many users search the Internet to discover information about their biological family, especially in cases where detailed information cannot be gathered in face-to-face conversations with family members. For example, an Internet search is adult adoptees’ primary means of seeking information about their biological relatives (Powell & Afifi, 2005). Similarly, online genealogical research is an increasingly popular pastime fueled by the proliferation of genealogical websites and easy-to-use online search tools for mapping biological family trees (Bishop, 2008). Offline conversations with family members might precede an Internet search to guide users’ efforts. Such conversations might further encourage explorers to dig for information on the Internet, information revealed only in bits and pieces in family stories. Conversely, many fruitful offline family conversations can surround the Internet findings.

In sum, the family elder may be consulted, but there are two cases in which users tend to turn to the Internet for information to augment offline conversations with family members: when the user perceives that more accurate information is available online (e.g., new parents seeking medical advice), and when live conversations fail to reveal the information sought (e.g., genealogical research revealing information long forgotten by or never passed along from living elders in the family). Family members seek information on the Internet related to family concerns (e.g., relevant medical information) as well as searching information about the family per se (e.g., using genealogical websites).
Misconception Seven: Children Are Technology Experts in Families Because They Possess Greater Knowledge Than Parents

Some children indeed possess greater technical knowledge than their parents about PCTs, affording them technological authority in the family (Belch, Krentler, & Willis-Flurry, 2005). Such a position comes with drawbacks, as detailed later in this section. However, recent evidence calls into question the assumption that technology is a young person's game (Eynon & Helsper, 2015). Eynon and Helsper argue the future of technological expertise might lie with parents; it is often the parents who use a wider variety of hardware and software for a wider variety of purposes; many parents use PCTs extensively for work and many work 40 or more hours per week. Similarly, Vaterlaus and Tulane (this volume) call into question the very nature of a digital “generation gap.”

Disadvantages of children’s tech savvy. Researchers find that children who believe their parents perceive them as technological experts can experience difficulty talking with parents about online dangers. For example, Mesch (2006b) reported “adolescent–parent conflicts over Internet use proved strongly related to the perception that the adolescent was a computer expert” (p. 473). One possible explanation for these negative outcomes is that the adolescent as family expert represents a reversal of traditional family roles; usually the parents provide adolescents with guidance and expertise (Mesch & Frenkel, 2011). Such a reversal of roles might present an interpersonal communication challenge for family members who need to quickly “reverse back” when the adolescent seeks advice from parents about how to address cyber-threats. However, future generations of parents will be increasingly tech-savvy, closing the intergenerational knowledge gap (Webb et al., 2014) and potentially providing parents with a distinct advantage that can be used for the mutual benefit of multiple family members.

Mixed research findings. If we assume tech-savvy children are helping their parents with online access, then we might assume parents’ Internet use should be related to their children’s technological savvy. However, a recent multinational study failed to document such a relationship; children’s Internet savvy did not predict parents’ use of the Internet (Eynon & Helsper, 2015). The best predictors of parents’ Internet use included parents’ age, educational level, and social capital (Eynon & Helsper, 2015). Social capital is the primary reason users of all ages engage in social networking—to gain relational contacts and to use those relational contacts, including relationships with family members, for personal gain, most often to acquire needed information to achieve personal goals (Vitak & Ellison, 2012).

Scales tipping in the parents’ favor. Today, many parents know much more about communication technologies than do their children, given that parents
increasingly work online, employing a wide variety of technologies (Mesch & Frenkel, 2011). Their children (and most adolescents), on the other hand, typically use only applications that are popular among their peer groups (Back channel, 2015). Given that social media and tablet-based applications are extremely user-friendly, little technical knowledge is required for parents to become sophisticated users of such formats. The readers of this chapter might be among the last generation to witness a youth advantage in technological expertise.

In summary, children who serve as family technology experts might encounter difficulties, including reluctance to talk with parents about online dangers. Recent research fails to document a relationship between children’s and their parents’ Internet use, perhaps indicating a decline in the number of children serving as family technology experts. Given PCTs’ increasing ease of use and the increased demands for technological know-how in the workplace, parents might be rapidly becoming more technologically knowledgeable than their children.

Misconception Eight: Families Are Formed and Then Use Technology

U.S. families, of course, preexist the Internet. Indeed, the concept of family appears eternal and has existed since pre-civilization. Tomb drawings and statuary depict families in ancient Egypt; medieval depictions of Madonna with the infant male child were quite common. From this viewpoint, the Internet is a relatively new invention and its use by families a recent innovation. Generalizing from this historical perspective to the misconception that all families predate the Internet is simply inaccurate for many U.S. families in the first quarter of the twenty-first century. Many families now form on the Internet, and they do so in three ways: via online dating, via adoption websites, and via surrogacy websites.

Online dating. Many online daters are looking for fun and casual relationships. Others, however, desire what so many dating websites advertise: the opportunity to meet their permanent life partner, to marry, and to begin a family (Heino, Ellison, & Gibbs, 2010). Online dating websites employ a marketplace orientation to finding a life partner (Webb et al., 2014) by providing opportunities to peruse multiple profiles, begin conversations with those that appear attractive (while ignoring those less attractive), abruptly end budding relationships at the first sign of incompatibility, and “test drive” as many potential partners as desired before committing to one.

Adoption websites. The market metaphor also aptly describes online facilitation of adoption (Webb et al., 2014). Hopeful adoptive parents market themselves as ideal families via parent profiles and “Dear Birth Mother letters” on adoption websites.
Birth mothers become online consumers who select parents for their unborn child. Moreover, such websites encourage hopeful adoptive parents to construct particular notions of adoption and family, including depictions of adoption as the primary and preferred means to parenthood, as a process of gain rather than loss, and as the birth mother being a good parent who can elect continued contact with the adoptive family (Wahl, McBride, & Schrodt, 2005). Such positive frameworks counter the stigma surrounding adoption but ignore the negative aspects of the online adoption experience, such as hopeful parents who remain unchosen by birth mothers. Wahl et al. summarized the situation as follows: “On one hand, the technology makes it seem easy to start your own family, but through commodification, family members can now be bought and sold” (p. 291).

**Surrogacy websites.** Finally, the market metaphor also can be applied to online facilitation of assisted reproductive technology (Webb et al., 2014). Infertile couples often access the Internet to locate surrogates (May & Tensek, 2011), obtain donor egg and sperm (Terman, 2008), and negotiate reproductive-related international travel (Speier, 2011). Such services are available offline, of course, but the Internet affords access to more options (Terman, 2008) and offers anonymity that protects users from the potential embarrassment often associated with infertility (Ishikawa & Keaveney, 2001). Many users believe that the online fertility market creates mutually beneficial situations. However, critics contend that the online fertility marketplace potentially exploits all parties involved (Tober, 2001).

In sum, access to the Internet assists in creating new families; nonetheless, the online reproductive marketplace comes with potential complications and negative consequences. As noted above, U.S. families engage new media in a wide variety of ways, most notably and simply to stay in touch with one another, but also to enact family identities, to seek social support for family roles, and to manage the work/family interface. At least equally important is the recognition that individual users employ PCTs literally to form new families that endure long into the future.

**Conclusions**

What can we conclude from this discussion of misconceptions concerning technology and the family? Certainly, the situation concerning families and their use of digital communication technologies is far more complicated than previously thought. Thoughtful and considerate use of technology holds the potential to improve family relationships by providing family members with additional means and opportunities for communication and, when used skillfully, technology-mediated communication holds the potential to build lasting, positive family bonds.
Perhaps most importantly, the Internet and twenty-first-century communication technologies are, in so many ways, simply tools and channels of interaction. They are neutral—neither inherently good or bad for individual users, for their families, or for our society. Tools and channels are simply the means to a variety of ends. A knife can be used to kill, but also to perform lifesaving surgery, and more commonly to simply prepare food for family dinners. Similarly, the Internet and PCTs function as commonplace communication tools and social utilities among family members and in households (Kennedy et al., 2008). Users can employ PCTs to benefit and/or to harm their family members. The notion of neutrality is consistent with Walker’s (this volume) view that social media provide frameworks and platforms but not outcomes. Family members remain in control of their discourse and thus can shape the outcomes of their online interactions.

As with any tool, PCTs can be used to facilitate change or to maintain the status quo, to improve the quality of life for the individual family members and the family unit. For example, Ye, Sarrica, and Fortunati (2014) make a compelling argument that online bulletin boards are changing the traditional concepts of marriage and family in contemporary China by offering younger family members more compelling options and opportunities to engage in more individualistic rather than collectivist conversations regarding family matters. Conversely, other studies suggest that multiple social-support groups offer opportunities for family members to strengthen family ties in times of crisis (Carlson, Lammert, & O’Leary, 2012; Donovan et al., 2014; Rains & Keating, 2011).

Family conflicts surrounding PCT use seems to fall into two categories that might be usefully avoided: conversations concerning attempts to control another family member’s Internet use (e.g., parents attempting to regulate children’s usage) and violating family norms and rules for behavior using the PCTs (e.g., cyber-affairs) and privacy. Indeed, the ability of PCTs to link family members in new and multiple ways raises important privacy issues (Holladay & Seipke, 2007).

PCTs offer the opportunity to regularize family communication among far-flung as well as nearby family members via easily accessed and inexpensive venues such as Skype and FaceTime—but only if family members are open to mediated conversation. Although most online, text-based venues offer a limited number of nonverbal cues and can involve time lags between the visual and audio signals, nonetheless PCTs provide the means to regularly enact communicative closeness among family members, should users choose to do so. The question becomes: Will families avail themselves of these new, unprecedented, and unlimited opportunities? Or, conversely, will they allow the largely unfounded cultural misconceptions and the negative hype to prevail?
Application

For Family Members

PCTs offer the tools to achieve diverse, positive outcomes, including staying in touch on a day-to-day basis with family members near and far, as well as staying in touch in times of crisis and disaster. They offer tools to maintain relationships, to revitalize relationships, and to discover new family relationships (e.g., adoptions and searching family histories). Given the many potential positive outcomes, family members might benefit from learning the basic technological skills to take advantage of these affordances.

For Family Communication Theorists

PCTs offer many new and exciting channels of communication. Like television, which presented a new communication channel that necessitated new and innovative thinking to explain the communication phenomena surrounding it, PCTs offer similar challenges. The sooner we stop comparing online communication to offline communication, the sooner we create opportunities for new and helpful insights into the communication surrounding PCTs. Our most frequently cited family communication theory, the theory of family communication patterns/environments, was initially developed to theorize about how families watched and together decoded television news. What amazing new theory will evolve next to explain how families use PCTs?

To Family Communication Researchers

Large quantities of online data exist for the harvesting (Webb & Wang, 2013). Family communication scholars have only begun to harvest and analyze the vast trove of existing dialog that awaits analysis (e.g., Suter et al., 2014). Insights into family communication, both on- and offline, are there for the taking. Never before has so much data been so available to so many with so little effort. Communication researchers could greatly benefit from embracing these opportunities.

To Students and Professors of Family Communication

Through service-learning projects, so much of the knowledge in this book could be conveyed to appropriate community groups. Through class projects, including workshops, websites, and dedicated Twitter accounts, information could be conveyed to first-year students and their families that could smooth the transition to college and improve retention; inform parents about the many communities of
support available via mediated forums; remind couples of power dynamics in how technology is perceived, positioned, and used, as well as help families of all shapes, sizes, and life stages make informed choices about technologies—choices that ultimately move them toward strengthening their family systems and subsystems.

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Introduction

Over the last decade, social media and interactive communication technologies have had a dramatic impact on the way family members interact with one another, creating a number of challenges (Padilla-Walker, Coyne, & Fraser, 2012). Privacy management, in particular, is a main concern for parents and children (Petronio, 2010). The way family members manage their privacy online amid so many possible ways to use interactive communication technology is often confusing and can lead to privacy turbulence and ultimately privacy breakdowns (Child, Haridakis, & Petronio, 2012; Petronio, 2010). Given the newness of these communication options, families have had to develop unique sets of privacy rules for the way members regulate the flow of personal and family information online (Child & Westermann, 2013).

Families manage privacy among family members in many ways, but the ones that prove most difficult are the ways parents regulate children’s choices about managing private information online—information both about themselves and other family members. For example, a mom writes about purchasing a smartphone for her young teenage son (Italie, 2013): It is the first time he has had a smartphone, and his mom is concerned about the disclosure choices he might
make online. She is not sure what her son might think is acceptable to tell others
about himself and his family. She also worries that her son might not be as open
with her as now he has a vast audience of friends and others online to which he
instead might confide his emotions, activities, and thoughts. Mom feels that if
she sets some clear rules to guide her son in his decision making about privacy
management using a smartphone, he will be better equipped to make good choic-
es (see Fletcher & Blair’s chapter in this volume; Italie, 2013; Petronio, 2013).
This and other stories—such as those about negotiating Facebook disclosures and
parents’ access to their children’s passwords (Hone-McMahan, 2013), as well as
unexpected issues like problems relatives might have accessing a deceased family
member’s Facebook account (Gambino, 2013)—are examples of how families
are confronted with learning how to navigate privacy control and ownership of
information related to social media use.

No doubt you have experienced challenges not only establishing new privacy
rules for yourself but also negotiating such rules among your family members. Have
you thought about whether you want any of your family members to have access to
all of your social media content? Think about a time when you were surprised that
your sister or brother did not understand which of your posts on Facebook they
should not have told your parents. How do you feel if your privacy expectations
could be violated by Facebook independently releasing your password to a family
member after you passed away? As a parent, how might you deal with privacy issues
and concerns related to social media use by your children? Finally, if you were a child
or teen negotiating with your parents about getting your first smartphone, what
privacy rules would be important to you? These questions help family members of
all ages consider the intersections between social media use, privacy management,
and family communication. In this chapter we present the theoretical framework of
Communication Privacy Management (Petronio, 2002, 2013) as one way to consid-
er these and other related issues about communication through social media, as well
as interactive communication technologies used by and among family members.

Contextualizing Social Media Use and the Family

The list of unique social media sites continues to rapidly grow as individuals create
new ways to expand networking and social interactions on the Internet. Broadly
speaking, social media refers to a series of online, Web-based platforms and appli-
cations that allow members to interact and share information (and user-generated
content) with one another in a networked group (Child et al., 2012). A social
media platform is simply the website or location where the computer-mediated
communication (CMC) occurs, like Facebook.com, Myspace.com, or Twitter.com (Child & Petronio, 2011). The content that people share varies from platform to platform and includes text, images, website links, and videos. Some of the most popular types of social media include personal journal or diary blogs (e.g., Myspace.com, LiveJournal.com, and Blogger.com), social networking websites (e.g., Facebook.com and Linkedin.com), micro-blogs (e.g., Twitter.com), and video and/or picture-based social media (e.g., YouTube.com, Pinterest.com, and Vimeo.com). Amid this range of social media options, Facebook.com is still the most visited social media site in the United States, accessed by more than 70% of U.S.-based Internet users (Edison Research, 2012; Nielsen, 2011). Approximately 58 million Americans incorporate social media use into their daily routines (Edison Research, 2012), which means social media present a convenient and popular way for many people to keep in touch with family and friends.

Facebook allowed anyone to create a webpage for the first time in 2006. This move essentially opened up the Facebook social media platform to greater use for family communication. Since the loosening of membership restrictions, the makeup of Facebook has drastically changed from the primarily 18–22-year-old audience (Lenhart, 2009; Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009) to a middle-aged and older audience of users. Current users across age groups increasingly use Facebook to interact with their closest confidants, including family members (Bruess, Li, & Polingo, in this volume; Child & Westermann, 2013; Hampton Goulet, Rainie, & Purcell, 2011). In fact, parents and older adult users of Facebook reflect one of the fastest growing demographics adopting and using the social networking site (Edison Research, 2012; Facebook, 2014; Hampton et al., 2011; Lenhart, 2009; Nielsen, 2011; Qualman, 2009). Across a two-year time span (2008–2010) the number of people using social networking sites doubled, and the average age of users shifted from 33 to 38 years old (Hampton et al., 2011). The longer an individual maintains a Facebook account, the more frequent their usage patterns are for all of the interactive functions offered through the site, including status updates, commenting on content, tagging and liking behaviors, and sending private messages (Hampton, Goulet, Marlow, & Rainie, 2012). Collectively, evidence suggests Facebook users are currently older, more interactive across time, and comfortable integrating Facebook interaction into daily routines.

This chapter presents research from a range of social media platforms and considers how family members communicate through social media and enact privacy management strategies. We highlight more information about Facebook above simply because of its prominence and use today by multiple generations of the family, which is not the case with other forms of social media.