

# **Stretching mothering: Gender, space and information communication technologies<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

This research reports on interviews with 35 mothers in Hamilton, New Zealand, about their use of information communication technologies (ICTs) to develop and maintain emotional links with their children. It is informed by work on gender, communications, families, “stretched out communities” and transnationalism, which enabled me to think more deeply about this issue. Interviews revealed that the gendered spaces of mothering are now being stretched beyond the home. Cell phones, Skype (software application used to make voice and video calls), Facebook (social networking site) and email were among the most common ICTs mothers discussed as shaping their relationship with children, both those living at home and those who have left home. The research concludes, however, that this does *not* mean that the gendered discourses surrounding mothering are necessarily being radically reconfigured. Mothers continue to take a large share of the responsibility for running households and providing care for children.

## **Introduction**

This research aims to find out how a group of 35 mothers in Hamilton, Aotearoa New Zealand, and their children of a variety of ages (infant through to adult) are developing and maintaining emotional and familial links using a range of information communication technologies, namely cell phones (used for mobile calling and texting), Skype (software program used for making voice and video calls), Facebook (social networking site) and email (electronic mail used for exchanging digital messages).

Continual changes in technology, such as enhanced bandwidth and smartphones that connect to the Internet, are increasingly facilitating ways of keeping in touch. I am interested to see how these ICTs might be prompting new gendered subjectivities and embodied performances for mothers in relation to their children.

Elsewhere I have argued that I do not think there is a stable foundation, or essence, to being a mother, but that the practices and behaviors that surround mothering are discursively produced in a variety of spatial and temporal contexts (Longhurst, 2008). As Claire Madge and Henrietta O'Connor (2005:94) explain:

There is no preconstituted "body" on to which motherhood is inscribed; what it means to be a mother is constantly produced and reproduced through varying and competing discourses and practices from a variety of different people and places.

In addressing the issue of mothers using ICTs, I recognize that mothers use these technologies for a variety of purposes, not just for mothering. I also recognize that using ICTs is more important to some mothers than to others. For the purposes of this research, however, I am interested in how ICTs have become, in recent years, an integral part of mothering for many women. Given this, it is timely to address this topic.

As geographers and others have argued, the Internet is not a space that is separate or disconnected from the real world (Kitchin, 1998a, 1998b; see also Adams, 1997, 2007; Bell, 2009; Bell and Kennedy, 2007; Crang, Crang and May, 1999). Identities of individuals, families, communities and even nations are mediated through ICTs (Madianou, 2005). Interactions in cyberspace affect interactions in real space and vice versa (Graham, 1998, 2004). It is not surprising, then, that people develop and maintain relational and emotional links through technological interfaces such as the Internet and cell phones. Martin Dodge and Rob Kitchin explain that cyberspace "allows us to explore who we are, as well as changing who we are; it provides new spaces in which communities can develop" (2001:52).<sup>2</sup> "Real" space and cyberspace are both experienced through the body (Hardey, 2002; Shapiro, 2010). People conduct their personal, familial and emotional lives in a myriad of ways in a variety of spaces. Bodies and spaces—"real" and cyber—are entangled. This includes the bodies and spaces of mothers and children.

This article begins with a brief review of some of the recent scholarship that has informed this project. Second, I describe the methodological process used to carry out the research. Third, I address the various ways in which participants in this study are "stretching-out mothering" across suburbs, cities and countries and, in the process, potentially changing the ways in which families interact. Fourth, I conclude making some specific points about how mothering is being stretched in relation to gender.

## **Mothering and ICT**

While there is not a lot of scholarship on the topic of mothering and ICTs, there are at least two projects that stand out as vitally important in this area. One is Clare Madge and Henrietta O'Connor's project on Cyber-Parents, which they set up at the University of Leicester to "investigate how and why people use the Internet as a source of information about parenting" (Cyber-Parents Project, 2011). They argue that the Internet is changing the way people live their lives, and yet a neglected aspect of this change is how using the Internet is altering current parenting practices (Madge and O'Connor, 2002, 2005, 2006). Another project worthy of mention, although it focuses on children rather than on adults or parents, is Gill Valentine and Sarah Holloway's study on British children's use of ICTs. Valentine and Holloway address themes such as how children and adults negotiate the use of ICT at home and at school; how it is possible to rethink the home in urban geography; and processes of Americanization in British children's use of the Internet (Valentine and Holloway, 2001a, 2001b, 2002; Holloway and Valentine 2001a, 2001b, 2001c).

Other work that informed my project on mothers' use of ICTs to develop and maintain emotional links with their children is Sun Sun Lim and Carol Soon's (2010) study of how mothers in China and South Korea utilize ICTs to fulfil their maternal duties of managing homes and families. This is a useful example of an emerging literature on transnational mothering (see also Madianou and Miller, 2011). Michelle Bemiller (2010) addresses the issue of "mothering from a distance" from a different perspective, that is, from the perspective of mothers who live apart from their children most of the time because they do not have custody of them. In another project, Lim (2008) explains what she understands to be four processes that occur, namely "appropriation," "objectification," "incorporation" and eventually "conversion," when a technology is introduced into the household. Lisa-Jane McGerty (2000) is also interested in households and discusses the gender dynamics of using the Internet in domestic space (see also Royal, 2008). Mary Flanagan's (2000) interest lies in virtual spaces and she addresses how gendered concepts are embedded in the construction of online worlds.

Still other researchers have addressed specific ICTs in relation to families and mothering. For example, Friedman and Calixte (2009) have focused on blogging, while Horst and Miller (2006) have concentrated on phoning. Daniel Miller (2011) has researched facebooking, while Thompson and Cupples (2008) have examined texting. To date, I have focused on "mothers who Skype" (Longhurst, Forthcoming) and on mothers who post and watch videos of birth on YouTube (Longhurst, 2009). Clearly, a body of feminist and other work on mothering and ICTs has begun to emerge over the past few years (see also Cassidy, 2001; Koerber, 2001; Silverstone, Hirsch and Morley, 1992).

It is not possible to review all this literature here, but the above examples illustrate the kind of research that has provided a valuable context for the current project. Overall, what they show is that the spaces of mothering are changing, in that mothers are increasingly tending to the needs of their children (both those living at home and those who live elsewhere) via cables, wires and screens. Time and space are being compressed (Schwanen and Kwan, 2008; Valentine, 2006) and voice and images of bodies are now being transmitted across distances in ways that were inconceivable even just a few years ago. As Gill Valentine (2001:133) notes, via the Internet, communities are being “stretched-out.” So, too, are families.

### **Methodology: Talking with mothers**

Even though this research is about using ICTs, the methods used to conduct the project (perhaps somewhat ironically) involved face-to-face interaction. In 2010–2011 I talked with a total of 35 participants, including semi-structured individual interviews with 24 mothers; semi-structured interviews with two lesbian couples (both couples were interviewed together); and focus group interviews, one with four mothers in their early twenties, and the other with three mothers in their early thirties. Participants were recruited using “word of mouth” and “snowballing” methods. I told friends, acquaintances and colleagues about the research, and they often suggested women I could approach or whom they were willing to approach on my behalf. Also, after their interview, some participants suggested others who they thought might be willing to be involved. I followed up on all suggestions.

Each participant completed an information sheet at the beginning of the interview, which included her name, age range, number and ages of children, ethnicity, occupation and technologies used in the household. This information sheet enabled me to ascertain that the participants were a diverse group. The majority identified as New Zealand European, Pākehā or Kiwi while others defined themselves as Māori, Māori/Pākehā, Australian/European, Pākehā/Samoan, Middle Eastern Jew or European Jew. The 35 mothers have a total of 75 children. Of these 75 children, 49 live at home while the other 26 live away from the family or parental home.

The interviewed women ranged in age from their twenties to their sixties and were employed in a wide range of occupations. A few described themselves as “full time” or “stay-at-home” moms. The youngest “child” was 6 weeks old, while the oldest was 57 years old. Despite these differences in ethnicity, age and occupation, what unites the participants is that they are all mothers and they all use various ICTs as part of their practice of mothering.

I carried out more than half of the interviews, but had research assistance for the remaining ones. I transcribed more than half the interviews in full, but had assistance

with the remainder. This gave me a feel for the stories being told. It also afforded me an opportunity to see mothers, in most cases, at home, where they tend to use their computer to connect with their children (while keeping in mind that some technologies, such as cell phones, are not just used at home but are highly mobile). Most of the interviews and focus groups took place in participants' homes, but a few were conducted in cafés. It was explained to participants that the aim of the research is to further understanding of some of the social transformations that have occurred in mothering since the early 1990s, as more and more mothers have begun to use ICTs.

The transcripts were analyzed using a discourse approach. I was less interested in the moment-by-moment conversational coherence of the interview and more interested in the themes or discourses that emerged as a whole. By reading and rereading hard copies of more than 500 pages of single-spaced transcripts generated from the interviews, I was able to identify these recurring themes. They included staying in touch, being in contact, checking in, phoning, texting, using Facebook, sharing photos online and Skyping. After reading the transcripts, I also searched (using MS-Word's search function) for key words, such as home, away, mother, belonging, care, love, everyday, feeling, emotion, phone, Facebook and Skype. This approach enabled me to become very familiar with the data.

All of the participants live in Hamilton, which is New Zealand's fourth largest city. It has a population of approximately 200,000 people and is located in the North Island. In New Zealand, more than three quarters of the population use the Internet (World Internet Project, 2011; see also Bell et al., 2008). Younger people tend to be higher and more effective users of the Internet, but older people are also increasingly going online (Bell et al., 2008:i). In relation to socializing in New Zealand, 77% of users check their email every day. Every week 28% take part in social networking sites. Interestingly, for the purposes of this research, 65% of users reported that the Internet has increased their contact with others, especially overseas. According to 64% of users, it has also increased contact overall with friends. Another 66% thought it has also increased contact with family, although 22% reported they now spend less time face-to-face with the family they live with (World Internet Project, 2011).

While I do not draw explicitly on autobiography in this article, I want to acknowledge that my own experiences of communicating with my two children using these various ICTs has helped inform the research. On occasion I text my 16-year-old son to tell him dinner is ready instead of climbing a flight of stairs! We stay in touch via cell phone when he is away from home, especially in the evenings. I also phone or Skype most weeks (sometimes a couple of times a week) my 20-year-old son who has left home. In this way, I recognize the inseparability of researchers from their research. Knowledge is constructed by embodied researchers, and therefore it is important to reflect on the multiple social, cultural and political relations invested producing knowledge (see Rose, 1997).

### **Lived spaces: Children at home**

Mothers and children are now staying in touch in ways that were unimaginable even just a few years ago (Holloway and Valentine, 2001a). Gill Valentine (2006:370) states:

The Internet expands the opportunities for daily meaningful contact between family members locked in different time–space routines at work, school, travelling and so on. In this sense online exchanges and daily Internet use are adding a new dimension, rearticulating practices of everyday life and lived spaces.

A useful example of changing everyday contact between family members through the use of technology (although, in this instance, cell phones rather than the Internet) emerged in the interview with Helen, who explains the changing time–space routines she experienced as a teacher. Even just ten years ago, during the course of the school day, mothers, teachers and children used to remain, for the most part, in separate spheres. Nowadays, this is not always the case. Helen (who herself has two children aged 6 and 1) explains:

As a teacher I had a work cell phone and we were able to text parents for good and bad behavior. And the students, there was an initiative called the “phone home partnership” with Vodafone and they sponsored our school and gave us so many phones and we had to use up so many minutes and that was like with the students like calling home for good and bad things, and letting their parents know how they’re doing with their learning.

Although Helen mentions “letting *parents* know,” in most instances it seems that interactions of this nature tend to be with mothers, who are more likely than fathers to be engaged in the full-time care of infants, toddlers and school-aged children. During the day, even though children and mothers occupy different places (homes, workplaces, schools, cafés), contact can be, and sometimes is, made.

Anna, a doctor with two sons aged 17 and 20, says she used to keep in cell phone contact with one of her sons when he first started high school. In this instance, teachers were not involved; in fact, the school discouraged children and parents from texting each other, but this did not dissuade Anna and her son. Anna explained that, for separated or divorced parents, ICTs, including cell phones, provide a way of keeping in touch or stretching networks of care across two or sometimes even more households. Anna’s two sons each got a cell phone when they were aged 11 and 14, respectively (6 years ago). She says: “so we’ve been texting for years.” When “her boys” were staying at their Dad’s house, it was difficult to contact them, so providing each of the boys with a cell phone enabled Anna to communicate with her sons, which was very important:

When they went to high school ... you are not supposed to text. Like [they texted from] under the table and in their pocket. And initially I was like, “I won’t text him when he is at school,” but they can multi-task. So, you know, when he was in his first few weeks, he was like [says in a whispered voice because they weren’t meant to be texting at school], “I have entered steeplechase and cross country,” you know, this list of things he’d entered and I’d go “Great!” Then he’d text back “what is steeplechase?” [laughs]. Those ones I used to keep because they are just so cute.

Anna kept these texts because they were meaningful to her. They provided evidence of the love and care embedded in the maternal relationship.

Other mothers explained that children, typically young teenage daughters, often express their emotions, such as telling their mothers they love them, using text messages. Fay’s eldest daughter, now aged 15, has had a cell phone since she was 11. Fay comments: “actually she has *two* so that she can access both networks [Vodafone and Telecom].” I ask Fay if her daughter texts a lot.

Fay: Yeah.

Robyn: Is it usually for arranging things, or just to tell you what is going on at a particular moment?

Fay: Yeah. Both. Yeah, it’s not just, you know, I would say that there is a level of socializing between us that goes on for sure.

Robyn: Does she use ever them [her two cell phones] for quite emotional things?

Fay: Ah huh. Yeah. Yeah ... a lot of the texts end with x. So it’s a little [kiss—Fay puckers her lips and kisses the air].

Cell phones (including conversations and texts), emails, sharing information on Facebook and Skyping can be used to express emotions, such as love, kindness and care, but also anger, frustration and annoyance.

More often though, cell phones are used by mothers and children simply to facilitate daily activities, such as organizing drop-offs and pick-ups and keeping track of each other’s movements. I asked Ngaire: “Do the girls stay in touch using their phones when they are out?” to which she replied: “Yes ... like we will say ‘where are you?’” Ngaire notes that this is very different from when she was a girl. She remarks: “I think we know where they are a lot more, whereas in our day I mean Mum and Dad never knew where we were.” “The girls,” however, also like to keep track of where their mother is and berate her if her phone is not fully charged. Ngaire says: “Like the other day it [battery] was flat and she [daughter] was like ‘your phone is always flat!’” As Lee Thompson and Julie

Cupples (2008:95) note in relation to young people using cell phones in New Zealand, it is not simply about adults constantly seeking to regulate young people's use of space, young people may also seek to regulate adults', including mothers', behaviors. Young people tend to use phones in a manner that is highly "tactical" (for example, having them in silent mode so they can receive texts without others, often parents and teachers, noticing).

While mothering stretches beyond the home in relation to children, it also stretches beyond the home in relation to contact with other mothers. In the second half of this section, therefore, I consider the various ways in which mothers use various ICTS seeking support from other mothers concerning the upbringing of children. Consider, for example, Thelma, a hairdresser in her late twenties, who is part of a network of mothers she found using Facebook. Thelma says that her group "is kind of just spread out really, all over. I think the majority of people are in Hamilton, you know there might be some people that are in Auckland or Wellington or just kind of all over." Women from "all over" share their experiences of and knowledge about mothering. Thelma explains: "it's nice to know that you are not alone and that you are not the only one dealing with these kinds of issues, there are other people who have gone through it." She says that she still talks to other family members and friends about issues, but it is helpful to talk to other mothers of a similar age who have children of a similar age (see O'Connor and Madge, 2004).

Kathy, a lawyer, also enjoys communicating online with a group she describes as her "circle of moms." She notes that, especially when you have a newborn, "you don't get out as much." Kathy continues: "so if I'm bored and just wanna see what is out there ... I just jump online." This illustrates that mothering has been stretched not only by way of mothers and children being able to stay more in touch with each other across distances, but also by mothers being able to stay more in touch with other mothers (and others), often reducing feelings of isolation when confined to the home with an infant or young child.

Some participants, however, reported feeling less positive than others about being in contact with other mothers and seeking advice and reassurance online. A focus group of three mothers—Courtney, Meredith and Ariana—all of whom have young children aged between 14 months and three years old, discussed accessing information online. They all agreed that, whenever they wanted information, the Internet was the first place, and often the only place, they looked.

Courtney: I am just trying to think of when I've used something else other than the Internet ... I've Googled heaps of stuff ... Was it [x] that said at our class, though, stuff we were allowed to Google and stuff we weren't. At our antenatal class I



remember someone saying “you’re allowed to Google ‘swaddling techniques,’ but you’re not allowed to Google “why is my baby crying?” Or ‘what does it mean if my baby [does this or does that]’?” ‘cause [daughter’s name] was a “head banger” for ages and if you Google that, it’s like your kid has autism or every really bad thing you could imagine. So that’s the stuff *not* to Google! [Courtney’s emphasis]

Meredith: It is a danger, it’s just like [there are] so many awful things to read out there.

Ariana: There are. I think when you’ve got your first child you do ... I think it becomes almost obsessive. I had a friend and her husband he put a restriction on so she couldn’t during the day for certain hours because she was just getting so upset by reading “my child’s not normal because I did this” ....

Courtney: Actually [partner’s name] has told me off sometimes for looking up too much stuff.

Stretching the bounds of mothering beyond the immediate home and engaging in conversations with strangers rather than with family, friends or representatives of local organizations equipped or accredited to deal with offering advice on parenting, it would seem, is not always advantageous (or approved of by partners or husbands). It can result in mothers feeling supported, but it can also result in poor quality information and/or information overload.

### **Stretching mothering: Children who have left home**

For mothers of adult children who have left home, rather than texting or talking with children on a cell phone numerous times a day, the mothers in this study were more likely to get in touch with their children once or twice a week using Skype or Facebook. For example, Gay, a medical secretary who has two adult children aged 24 and 27, has been using Facebook for the past 12 months. Staying in touch with her children was her primary motivation for signing up. Both her children are on her “friends” list.<sup>3</sup>

Gay: Sometimes late at night if [daughter’s name] is on[line], I will go on the instant chat part, it’s easier than ringing up and waking the whole household. Yeah.

Interviewer: And so you can see photos?

Gay: Of [granddaughter’s name], yeah. And the same with [son’s name], like with

him being overseas, it was easier for him to post the photos and let us know that they're going to be on, like sometimes he will text and say he's just put a whole lot more on ....

Interviewer: And do you find it useful to be able to stay in touch with them?

Gay: Oh yes, especially with [son's name], because boys are terrible, he's terrible, you know, you only get one-word answers from him if you ring him up. You seem to get more out of them, more information [laughs] ... 'cause he doesn't always tell his mother [laughs].

As Mary Holmes (2004:184) points out, in relation to intimacy in distance relationships: "the performance of both emotional sharing and of practical care is ... highly gendered." This is the case not just for children, such as Gay's adult son who appears not to want to impart too much information to his mother, but also for parents. It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that this research revealed that in most cases it is mothers rather than fathers who initiate and engage in online caring practices. This division of labor in many households means that it is mothers rather than fathers who are most likely to contact children and grandchildren living in different households, cities, regions and countries. Mothers are often the glue that hold together diasporic families whose members are scattered across space and time zones (see Lim and Soon, 2010).

While Gay found Facebook to be a useful ICT to stay in touch with her son, not all the mothers interviewed like to use Facebook to communicate with their children or with their own mothers. Melissa, who has two pre-school children, says that she "has a thing about Facebook" and is "boycotting it," because if she uses it she fears it will take up too much of her time. Melissa does, however, phone, text and email her own mother. For example, she says sometimes her mother emails her when she has a recipe that she wants. During interviews, although participants were asked about their own mothering practices, they often pointed out that they themselves use various ICTs to stay in touch with their own mothers and sometimes their partner's mothers who like to keep lines of communication open, especially with their grandchildren. Kathy, who has two pre-school children explains:

If my mum had it her way, it [Skyping] would practically be daily, but my parents live in Australia, so yeah we are on that quite often talking to either them or [partner's name] keeps in contact with his parents and brothers through Skype as well, so, yeah, that actually get's big use ... I mean that's the only way they really get to see their grandchildren ... it's become more and more important as [the older son] has gotten older, because he can interact a lot better with them now over Skype, but also they can catch a glimpse of [the younger son] as he is growing up.

While it might be tempting to think that ICTs such as Skype are used primarily for connecting people across vast distances, this is not always the case. Hilary, who describes herself as a “stay at home mom” and “tertiary support person,” says that her family Skyped her partner’s mother when she was in Libya but Hilary also Skypes with her mother who lives just “down the road.” Hilary explains: “Mum said, ‘oh we can Skype you,’ and I said ‘or you could just come the 100 meters down the road and see us’ [laughs].”

Walking down the road to “see” one’s child means that one can also “sense” one’s child—feel, touch and smell the familiarity of their bodies. This point is so obvious that it is almost tempting to overlook it. ICTs, however, produce “digitally rendered space” rather than space that is “gravity bound” (Flanagan, 2000:76), or as one of the participants, Stacy, puts it: “If you need a hug, you can’t get that through the computer.” Mothers are able to “connect” with children using ICTs but often not in a visceral sense. Skype offers possibilities for seeing images of loved ones on the screen, but the physicality of bodies touching is missing in these mother–child relationships. However, the image of bodies, or text, or photos, or voice stand in for what in the past would have been largely an absence of contact.

In this way, mothering now seems more enduring both in terms of frequency of contact and in compressing physical distance than in the past. This led me to ask participants if at times they feel like mothering never stops, even when children leave home. Unlike in the past, daily and weekly contact often continues. The vast majority of participants replied that they liked being and staying in contact with their children. For example, when I suggested to Jan, aged in her late fifties and working in retail, that in the past, by the time children were in their thirties they were “way gone” and that “you wouldn’t necessarily know what they were doing” on a daily or weekly basis,” she replies:

There was a period when she [her daughter] was in the [United] States for a year and I didn’t have that much contact with her. At times I couldn’t even track her down by phone. That was 1999. It was quite different. I mean at one point I didn’t know where she was and I even wrote a letter to the mother of the boy I thought she was with, saying “I can’t track down my daughter but if this reaches you please can you open it”.

I reply: “So this time now with her away [in England] it is very different from then?”, to which Jan responds, “yes,” and that she likes to stay in touch using Facebook and Skype:

There is no one else in my life. I’ve really only got, you know, my children and my family, so I need to focus on something, so, not that I focus on them, I mean I have no control over anything. It’s just kind of good to keep track in some ways.

Ngaire, a chartered accountant who has four children between the ages of 16 and 25, also likes to stay in contact with her adult children, but perhaps less so than Jan. She recognizes that:

We know more about what our kids are doing than our parents did. ... like James, like he is 25, we don't need to know he is living with some lady. I don't need to be in contact all the time. He might ring once a week or something like that.

However, it is worth noting that Ngaire is in contact with her other adult son, who lives in Australia, approximately *four* times a week via email. She says she does not contact him daily, though: "He is 22 and he's got a good job over there [Australia] teaching. If he was still looking for a job or something like that, I'd be ringing him [daily]." Even contact four times a week, however, is far more than most mothers a decade ago would have had with their adult children. Mothers repeatedly told me that they welcome this contact. I had a sense, though, that maybe some might indeed desire less contact with their adult children, but this is not easy to tell a researcher because discourses surrounding mothering suggest that "good" mothers want to stay continually connected to and part of their children's lives (Longhurst, 2008).

What these examples illustrate is that ICTs such as cell phones, emailing, Facebook and Skype are changing the various forms of sociality between 'mothers' and children by facilitating the possibility of "doing" family over distance.<sup>4</sup> Physical proximity is no longer required in order to forge familial bonds and share emotions. Women can perform their maternal roles and relations at a variety of times and across a variety of spaces. Family members no longer necessarily need to live in the same place in order to maintain familial relations.

## Conclusion

The aim of this research was to see how various ICTs might be prompting new gendered subjectivities and embodied performances for mothers in relation to their children. It was to ascertain whether ICTs have opened up new possibilities for "doing" mothering differently. In concluding, it seems that ICTs have enabled women to stretch the horizons of mothering, taking themselves into spaces physically distant—such as the schools of their children and the homes of their adult children and grandchildren who live in different towns, cities, regions, countries and time zones. These technologies have created possibilities for opening up the lives of mothers and children in more immediate and visually present ways than in the past. Family members used to go off each day and lead their own lives with little contact with other family members, reconnecting later in the day or evening in the family home. When family members left home, they would maintain contact by sending telegrams, letters,

postcards, gifts and sometimes making national and international toll calls which were often expensive. However, as I have argued elsewhere:

Increasingly the dwelling places of bodies are not just rooms in houses where mothers and children's flesh and emotions rub up against each other on a daily basis but screens across which images are shared (Longhurst, Forthcoming).

Now children move away, but distance does not necessarily mean that closeness and familiarity stops. Many of the participants in this study tend to their children's needs not only when they are in the parental home, but also beyond the home, although the participants reported enjoying this extension in contact.

Although mothering practices are being reconfigured in ways that stretch out over long distances, interestingly they appear to have changed little in terms of the substance of the relationship. Existing gender roles and relations remain for the most part similar in that mothers continue to shoulder a large share of the responsibility for running households and providing care for children. ICTs do not seem to have radically altered the gendered discursive spaces of mothering.

This is perhaps not surprising given that, as previously mentioned, geographers (e.g., Adams, 1997; Kitchen, 1998a) have argued that "real" space and cyberspace are not separate. Madge and O'Connor (2005:83) note there is a "simultaneity of online/offline worlds in cyberspace mothers' lives." ICTs can help people produce new selves in some form, but these selves always have enduring attachments to embodied subjects, experiences and practices (see Madge and O'Connor, 2005). ICTs do not make material expressions of gender (or sexuality, race, ethnicity, class or disability) suddenly insignificant; instead, "real" and cyberspace are mutually constituted (Crang et al., 1999).

What I have presented in this article represents a preliminary piece of research that speaks to a broad range of performative relationships that exist between technologies, gendered spaces and maternal bodies. Future research could consider different ICTs separately in relation to mothering. For example, the moving "live" image, accompanied by voice, of mother and child(ren) offered via Skype with video may prompt different interactions from viewing comments and photos on a social media site such as Facebook, or from simply hearing a voice on the phone. The experiences of using ICTs for mothers of young children, it would seem, are quite different in some respects than for mothers of adult children. Mothers who occupy different socioeconomic positions are likely to also have very different experiences. So, too, are mothers who do not have custody of their children (see Bemiller 2010). It would also be useful to know more about mother-child relations conducted through various ICTs from the perspective of children—younger but also adult children.

These are just a few areas of potential research to explore this theme in more depth. ICTs are changing rapidly and have a major impact on the way that many (but not all)

of us live our lives. It is evident that some women join online support groups for new mothers, engage in projects for social change, seek online health and medical advice, shop online for goods such as maternity wear, post and view messages and photos of their children (often adult children) on social networking sites such as Facebook, “game” with their children, and send messages from home, work and public spaces using email and iphones. Also, technologies such as the Internet have implications for women who want to work from home, making porous boundaries between private and public space. Some crèches have set up blogs for parents and installed cameras that allow parents to see their children during the day. I have not been able to address all these themes in this article, but little is yet known about the specific ways in which mothers are engaging with such technologies and how they understand these new spaces and communities of practice.

While scholars have begun to examine online relationships involving community groups, gaming, online dating and sex, there has so far been a lack of attention paid to online mothering. Yet mothering is one of, if not the, most important of all social practices. We all have mothers. Mothering is the bedrock upon which many other familial and social relations rest. Finding out more about mothers using ICTs as part of their maternal performance has implications for a range of social practices, including infant–mother relationships, family violence, happiness, recreation, leisure, work, communications, health, home and housing. It is important, therefore, to find out more about how mothers and children are developing and maintaining emotional, familial and community links via such technological interfaces. Finding out that while ITCs help mothers keep in touch with their children (stretching motherhood across time and space), they have *not* appeared to alter gender roles and relations in any marked way, represents but one small step in this journey.

### Notes

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- 2 On deaf communities, see Valentine and Skelton (2008); on queer communities, see Bryson (2004); on sex, love and romance, see Baker (2000), Ben-Ze'ev (2004), Chow-White (2006), Cornwell and Lundgren (2001), Cupples and Thompson (2010), McLelland (2002) and Schaeffer-Grabel (2004).
- 3 Children under 20 are less likely to want to have their mothers as “friends” on Facebook, sensing it as an invasion of privacy (“Mothers against daughters against mothers using Facebook,” 2011).
- 4 See Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan (2001:37) on thinking about family not as a noun, but as a verb—something we “do.”

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