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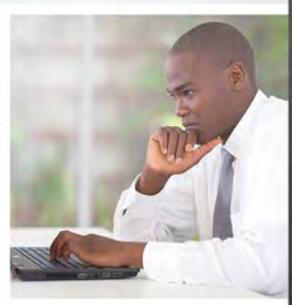**ADOPTION INSTITUTE**

DECEMBER 2013
POLICY & PRACTICE PERSPECTIVE

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UNTANGLING THE WEB II
A RESEARCH-BASED ROADMAP FOR REFORM

AMY WHITESEL, PH.D. & JEANNE A. HOWARD, PH.D.
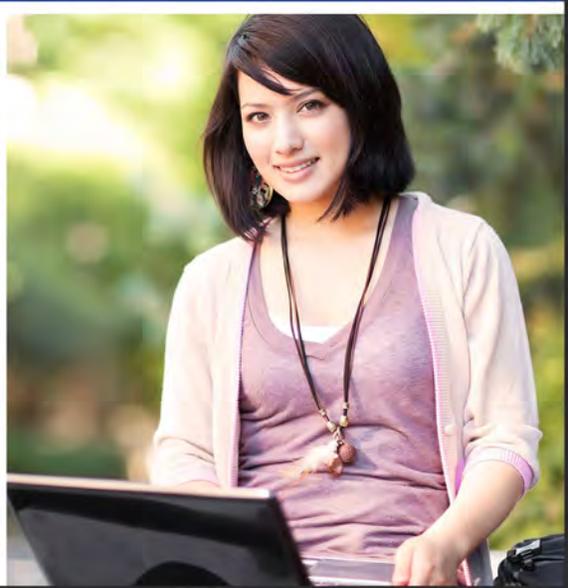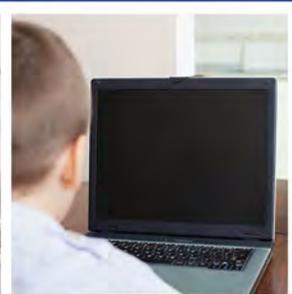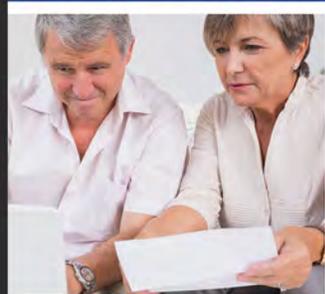
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In an unprecedented lawsuit, Illinois Attorney General Lisa Madigan last month charged an online adoption provider with violating a state statute designed to protect children, expectant parents and prospective adoptive parents during the adoption process. She also sent letters to Yahoo and Facebook, asking the cyberspace giants to police their sites for problematic activities such as "re-homing," in which struggling adoptive parents use the Internet and social media sites to place their children into new families with no monitoring or regulation.

The Donaldson Adoption Institute (DAI) focused national attention on the Internet's transformative impact on adoption – in its publication titled "Untangling the Web" – a year ago, yet the Illinois suit is the first concrete legal action taken against the kinds of legally and ethically dubious activities identified in our report. There are now growing signs, however, that policymakers and law-enforcement officials are finally starting to pay attention, especially in the wake of a recent Reuters series on the web-based practice of "re-homing," by which adoptive parents have privately placed their children into new families without oversight or regulation – and sometimes with tragic results. A bipartisan group of lawmakers in Congress, for instance, held a briefing in Washington last month and called on the U.S. General Accounting Office to conduct a study on the subject. And, at the state level, Wisconsin and Florida have joined Illinois in holding legislative hearings.

Against this backdrop, and as part of its multi-year initiative to reshape adoption-related laws, policies and practices so that they address the historic changes being instigated by the Internet, DAI is publishing "Untangling the Web II: From Research to Reform." This report presents the findings, conclusions and recommendations from the most-comprehensive study conducted to date on the impact of the Internet – and, in particular, of social media – on adoption as an institution, as a process and, most of all, as a daily reality for millions of people.

The core of this groundbreaking nationwide research (with some responses from abroad as well) was an extensive survey of over 2,000 adoptive parents, adopted individuals, birth/first parents and adoption professionals who reported on their adoption-related uses of the Internet, their concerns about its perils, and their praise for its power as a tool for creating connection and community and for easily gaining access to a wealth of information. The data we collected provide the first research-based support for what was previously only anecdotal evidence about the scope and impact of the Internet and, at the same time, we also identified issues that we did not anticipate. The major findings of the study include:

- **The Internet has greatly increased the commercialization of adoption** and the reach of for-profit adoption brokers who advertise/market themselves aggressively; respondents in all groups were troubled by the commodification of children and of the adoption process.

    Respondents also said **the Internet increased risks to expectant**

parents; for example, they described sites that actively seek out pregnant women, promise a range of enticements if they surrender their babies, and do not provide them with the counseling and full exploration of their options – including ways to help them parent their children – that are the ethical responsibility of licensed, not-for-profit agencies. **A further concern was the risk to prospective adoptive parents** of fraud, misleading information (such as ads promoting the quick, easy adoption of infants) and large fees, which were often not clearly spelled out, paid to facilitators or brokers.

Adoption professionals were the most likely of the respondents to report seeing overly commercial or unethical practice in the online community.

- Despite the acknowledged risks, **the Internet is an important and regular part of how respondents live their lives in relation to adoption**. In particular, it provides an invaluable source of community and connection for adoptive parents, birth parents and adopted people. Respondents often spoke of the importance of support and information from others sharing their experiences, and how easy the Internet makes it to get such help.

- **The Internet and social media greatly expand the ability of adopted persons to search for birth/first family members**. Respondents found it a powerful and irreplaceable tool in enabling them to locate, learn about and connect with members of their families of origin, although they often are still blocked by sealed records and restrictive state policies. Some also reported feeling daunted by the process or uneasy about actually making contact once biological relatives are found.

- **The Internet and social media facilitate ongoing contact between members of adoptive and birth/first families**, enabling regular and quick exchanges of information. An unexpected finding was that many of those involved appreciated the "contact with distance" that the Internet provides. It allows for connection, but feels less intrusive and sometimes less personal than visits or phone calls. Birth/first parents reported that the Internet allows them to feel more connected and involved in their children's lives.

- **All groups sometimes use the Internet or social media to follow others in their extended family of adoption** (birth/first parents or other relatives, adoptive relatives or adopted individuals) without their knowledge. This was most commonly reported by adoptees, sometimes because they had been denied direct contact with members of their birth families. Of those who answered this question, a majority of adopted people and of birth/first parents, as well as about one-third of adoptive parents, reported keeping track of others connected to their adoptions without their awareness.

- **A significant majority of professionals do not receive training** about the Internet's use in adoption or on how to prepare clients to safely and effectively use this technology. In particular, few were trained to prepare adoptive parents for the likelihood of contact that the Internet enables, even in ostensibly closed adoptions.

- Despite concerns about the potential for unwanted contact, **few respondents reported that the Internet or social media had led to unwelcome intrusions.** Generally, parties were cautious and respectful about imposing themselves on others.

- **The Internet provides a valuable outlet for adopted people, and especially for birth/first parents, to express their ongoing struggles and pain with others** who understand their feelings. The isolation felt by many first mothers in the days of secrecy and shame evidently has been reduced by the communities of support that the Internet provides.

This study provides thought-provoking findings that can inform ongoing efforts to render the Internet less risky and more beneficial to those involved with adoption. The information in our surveys, including the hundreds of comments made by respondents, suggests many ways in which the adoption field – and the parties to adoption themselves – should move forward to assure that the Internet and social media serve ethical practice rather than undermine it. Toward that end, the Donaldson Adoption Institute recommends:

1. State and federal policymakers, legislators and law enforcement authorities, in coordination with major Internet companies such as Facebook, Google and Microsoft, should work with ethical adoption experts and organizations to create best-practice standards relating to adoption on the Internet; delineate illegal, problematic and unethical behaviors; establish regimens for monitoring adoption-related marketing and other activity; and create regulations and laws, including punishments, with the aim of providing protections for children, adults and their families.

   The fields of adoption, foster care and child welfare also need to coalesce around the critical issues raised by DAI's research. Further, Attorneys General nationwide should follow the lead of states like Illinois to end the provision of services by unlicensed providers and curb advertising and outreach by out-of-state brokers or those who engage in unethical practices. To that end, DAI is conducting a survey of Attorneys General to determine the extent of complaints they receive and the actions they are taking in response to Internet-based abuses.

2. Leaders in the field of adoption (including foster care) should collaborate on the creation of an awareness/education campaign about the impact of the Internet and social media – and, perhaps most important, should develop and disseminate best-practice standards, training materials, ongoing educational programs and other relevant resources so that social workers and other professionals can guide everyone concerned about the safe, effective use of these transformative tools.

   Almost two-thirds of adoption professionals responding to our survey had not received any such training and, given the lack of research, it is probably safe to assume that the existing training varies in quality and usefulness.

Professionals should receive education, training and resources that enable them to – among other things – assess the quality of sites and services offered online, teach others to protect their safety and privacy, and effectively provide information in areas such as support services, ethical practices, and search and reunion.

As one respondent commented:

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

We agree. As part of our ongoing work to inform the field, DAI will publish a *Guide to Internet Use in Adoption* in early 2014 to advise all parties about how to better use this technology while reducing its risks. The guide is being developed by a team that includes experts on adoption practice, research, Internet use and legal issues. The Institute earlier this year issued a publication with preliminary cautions, "*Proceed with caution: Asking the right questions about adoption and the Internet.*"

3. Adoption professionals – as a matter of routine – must educate expectant, prospective, adoptive and birth/first parents that most, if not all, adoptions may one day be open, no matter how they begin. As part of the process, professionals should provide everyone concerned with information and resources about openness in adoption, how to shape and navigate relationships and other related subjects.

   The likely end of the era of closed adoption is one of the most profound changes brought about by the Internet. Social media sites, personal blogs and many other online mechanisms exist that expedite searches, reunions and connections – with significant positive, negative and unexpected consequences. For instance, as we noted in our previous paper: "Untangling the Web I," minors already can – and sometimes do – locate and connect with biological relatives, and they are sometimes contacted by birth family members without their parents' knowledge. Adoptive parents need to be informed about this possibility and be equipped to talk with their children about this subject and to manage their need and desire to know.

4. Given concerns about fraud, commercialization and manipulation, systems must be devised – in coordination with law-enforcement authorities, Internet providers and ethical adoption organizations – to provide better information to consumers and the public about the differences among the various types of web-based adoption services; in particular, it is vital to explain the differences between charitable, tax-exempt, licensed, not-for-profit agencies and online brokers/facilitators who are not bound by ethical professional requirements or, often, by sufficiently protective laws or regulations. Indeed,

brokers sometimes claim to be "non-profit" even when they do not have the required governmental [501 (c) 3] status.

Adoption is big business, and online brokers boast that they spend "millions of dollars" advertising to expectant mothers or "marketing" to prospective adoptive parents. Adoptees, adoptive parents and birth/first parents in our study reported incidents of "trolling" by businesses on sites where pregnant women look for support or information. Such dubious and unethical practices must be brought to the attention of users and law-enforcement authorities, and must be stopped wherever feasible. At the very least, the field must work to educate expectant parents and prospective adoptive parents about the importance of working with ethical service providers.

Conclusion

For a host of reasons, it is clearly important for many if not most people with adoption connections – personal or professional – to understand the sometimes-invisible role that the Internet already plays in their lives. And, as trends continue toward more-extensive and more-advanced online and mobile communication, greater knowledge and better resources will become increasingly vital. The Donaldson Adoption Institute has provided a few publications to help fill the void of evidence-based information on the Internet's impact on adoption, and will continue to do so with its *Guide to Internet Use in Adoption* in a few months and "Untangling the Web III" in late 2014. For the sake of the millions of children, adults and families for whom adoption is a reality of everyday life, it is our hope that these publications will become a foundation on which law enforcement authorities, policymakers, legislators, Internet companies and adoption professionals will build.

INTRODUCTION

The Internet and social media have had profound effects on adoption in the United States and around the world. From the mid-20th Century on, what was largely the province of not-for-profit agencies with trained staffs, whose work was often regulated by state law, has become an increasingly unregulated marketplace. Prior to the advent of the Internet, adoption had already been migrating beyond traditional agencies to lawyers, facilitators and adults wanting to adopt working independently with pregnant women. But most adoptions were handled through relationships with trained professionals whom expectant mothers (and sometimes fathers) and prospective adoptive parents could meet and assess for themselves, and who had the approval of a state or professional licensing or accrediting body.

Today's reality is far different as a result of the Internet, and the changes – some for better, others for worse – are accelerating every day. That means people who want to make connections are being enabled to do so more easily and more quickly than had ever been possible before, but it also means that for-profit brokers and facilitators are expanding their reach, with virtually no monitoring or regulation. And so, for instance, highly commercialized and aggressive marketing is being aimed at expectant mothers and prospective adoptive parents, promising easy and quick solutions to very complex human situations. Ads pop up alongside almost any search related to adoption, sometimes offering "a baby in less than 3 months" or "a free college education" for women who place their infants. Would-be families advertise online, describing an almost perfect future for any baby they might adopt, the kinds of ads one adoptive parent in our study described as "butterflies and rainbows," while ignoring the pain, loss and grief inherent in adoption. And "desperate" mothers-to-be (who may not be desperate or even pregnant) reach out over the Internet to offer unborn children in exchange for money.

The commercialization of adoption via the Internet, as well as its use to circumvent state laws, has led to legal action in at least one state. Early in 2013, in the wake of the Adoption Institute's initial "Untangling the Web" report, the Attorney General of Illinois issued a "cease and desist" order to a dozen online adoption brokers and recently filed a lawsuit against one of them: the Adoption Network Law Center (ANLC) (Ludden, 2013). These actions were possible because Illinois had enacted the Adoption Reform Act of 2005, expressly to prohibit unlicensed, for-profit adoption companies from doing business in the state, including advertising their services. The Attorney General found that the ANLC had continued to provide such services in Illinois, even though it was unlicensed in the state (or anywhere else); and that it continued to market itself in Illinois through ads on Internet searches and by targeting expectant parents and prospective adoptive parents in the state.

Illinois permits adoptions only by licensed, tax-exempt, not-for-profit agencies in an effort to remove financial incentives in the process and to promote professional, ethical practices. Many online brokers charge significant fees to prospective adoptive parents and market their services in ways that are ethically questionable. For example, the ANLC website includes this inducement: *"Birthmother housing includes a spacious living area, large swimming pool and an extensive exercise*

facility with the latest equipment available." The site reports that these "*facilities allow Birthmothers to be discreet and avoid conflict with family and friends about their decision."* Moving pregnant women away from their home communities and separating them from family and friends when they are in the throes of an extremely difficult, life-altering decision calls into question whether their best interests are front and center. The Law Center also boasts that it spends "*millions of dollars a year marketing to Birth Mothers*" and that due to this aggressive advertising, "*most Adoptive Parents that were selected by a Birth Mother were presented with an adoption opportunity within 4 months of being marketed.*" Commercialization, manipulation, dishonesty and outright fraud are not new to adoption. The Internet and social media, however, make unethical or ethically questionable practices much more possible. The very aspects that make these technologies appealing – easy access, broad reach, anonymity – also make them potentially dangerous for people in vulnerable positions.

Most of what we know about these risks and the benefits is anecdotal and sensational. An important recent example is the stories surrounding "re-homing" – the use of the Internet by adoptive parents to find new families for their children, typically without vetting or oversight. (See the Donaldson Adoption Institute's recent report *A changing world: Shaping best practices through understanding the new realities of intercountry adoption* for a fuller discussion of re-homing). A Reuter's investigation into the practice found at least eight active online groups where parents could advertise their desire to place their children with others or where those who sought such children could make their interest known. Such practices are indeed alarming, but they are likely only the tip of the iceberg since very little is known yet about the range of problematic practices occurring online.

At the same time, there is considerable evidence that the Internet brings significant benefits as well. Those separated by adoption are much more likely to be able to find one another, those in open adoption arrangements have more ways to share information and remain in contact, and there are many more opportunities for support, education and information for everyone. Birth/first parent blogs and online support groups, affiliation sites for adults adopted from a particular country, search tips and guidance for those looking for original family members, connections across distance for many, many adoptive parents, the opportunity for information, sharing and support – these are but a few examples of the many ways that adoption is being enhanced by the Internet and social media.

The most powerful impact of this still-young technology is probably on search and reconnection for parents and children who were in closed adoptions. There also are numerous stories of couples who hope to adopt, successfully reaching out on Facebook or through personal websites used to expand their reach beyond the expectant parents known to their agencies. And many others have used social media to locate members of their original families from whom they were separated. Such stories make clear that the Internet is an important, and positive, tool.

Our awareness of the benefits and the risks of the Internet in adoption is growing; the Donaldson Adoption Institute first explored the subject in it 2012 report *Untangling the Web: The Internet's Transformative Impact on Adoption*.

To gain a fuller understanding of how those affected by adoption use the Internet and social media, and are affected by it, the Institute has conducted the first significant research on the subject with an online survey of users. The survey targeted members of the adoption "triad" – adopted adults, birth/first parents and adoptive parents – as well as child welfare and adoption professionals. A number of strategies were used to reach possible participants. The study was announced via DAI's website and monthly newsletter; in addition, online interest, advocacy and support groups were asked to publicize the study, and agencies were asked to announce it through their newsletters, websites and social media.

When we began analysis of the data on October 15, 2013, slightly more than 2,000 participants had responded. Adoptive parents made up the largest cohort (1,216), followed by adopted persons (392), first/birth parents (235) and adoption professionals (182). The Institute continues to collect data from these groups and, at the time of this report's publication, had more than 3.000. DAI will continue analyzing these data to increase understanding of the Internet's impact.

In "Untangling the Web II," we present the findings from this groundbreaking nationwide examination of the Internet's use in adoption. Because the survey sought to learn more about an area that has been little studied, we included many open-ended questions that allowed participants to explain their perceptions and experiences. This report includes many of their comments, in their own voices, both to illustrate important points and to bring key experiences to life.

We report the findings of each of the responding groups separately and then, in a concluding section, bring together findings from across groups and offer recommendations for how the adoption field should move forward to make the Internet a safer, more useful and more beneficial arm of adoption practice.

Respondents to our survey made clear that adopted people, birth/first parents and adoptive parents make regular use of the Internet and social media for a variety of adoption-related purposes. Thus, they are like the majority of Americans for whom the Internet has become a part of daily life.

As demonstrated in Appendix I – describing the pervasive use of the Internet across all segments of American society – Americans have rapidly and thoroughly embraced the Internet and social media. In 1995, only 14 percent of adults in the U.S. used the Internet, but that grew to 50 percent by 2000, reached 75 percent in 2008, and stood at 85 percent as of spring 2013.[1] The breadth of Internet use crosses most demographic lines, with no statistically significant difference between

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[1] "Internet Adoption, 1995-2013," Pew Research Center, Pew Internet and American Life Project (hereafter: PIALP), http://pewinternet.org/Static-Pages/Trend-Data-(Adults)/Internet-Adoption.aspx, accessed October 30, 2013. The definitions of Internet use evolve slightly over time. For 1995, internet users include those who computers to access online bulletin boards and information services. For 2000, internet users include those accessing the World Wide Web, while the post-2005 definition also include those who send and receive emails. The 2011 report from the Economic and Statistics Administration and the National Telecommunications Administration in the U.S. Department of Commerce, *Exploring the Digital Nation: Computer and Internet Use at Home,* reported very similar statistics (http://www.ntia.doc.gov/report/2011/exploring-digital-nation-computer-and-internet-use-home, accessed October 30, 2013).

men and women (85%-84%) or between whites and African Americans (86%-85%). Researchers found no difference in Internet use among urban and suburban Americans (86% each), with rural use trailing slightly at 80 percent. Internet use surpassed 90 percent for Americans who had attended at least some college and for those whose household income was over $50,000/year. Its use is lower but still widespread among lower-income Americans (76% in households with incomes under $30,000/year) and those who had not finished high school (59%).[2]

Internet use is virtually universal among Americans age 18-29 (98%) and only drops significantly for those over 65 (56%).[3] Similarly, 95 percent of teens (ages 12-17) access the Internet, with no statistically significant difference between boys and girls (97%-93%) or older and younger teens (96% for ages 14-17, 93% for ages 12-13).[4] In short order, Internet use has become a core facet of life. If the adoption field is to stay current, it must understand and utilize these technologies to reach those interested in adoption, to educate them and to support their needs.

As readers consider the findings in this report, it is important to note that the results of our study are based on respondents who learned about it and chose to participate. Further, those who participated had access to the Internet and were able to use it to complete the survey. The sample may not be representative of all adopted persons, birth/first parents, adoptive parents or adoption professionals. Those who chose to participate may have had particular biases or views that drove their desire to participate. Thus, while the responses are many and varied, we cannot know the extent to which they represent the views of the overall population of each of these groups.

PART I

THE EXPERIENCE OF ADOPTED PERSONS

Sample of Adopted Individuals

A large number (392) of adopted adults participated in this survey of Internet and social media use as it relates to their adoptions. Respondents reported living in 39 of the 50 states and the District of Columbia. The state with the highest single total was California – 13 percent of all respondents. Almost 9 percent (8.7%) reported living outside the U.S. Overall, adopted persons who participated in this survey

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[2] "Trend Data (Adults): Whose Online: Internet User Demographics," PIALP, http://pewinternet.org/Static-Pages/Trend-Data-(Adults)/Whos-Online.aspx, accessed October 30, 2013. Data from this report covers adults (18 and older) and holds a +/-2.3% margin of error. The researchers found of Hispanic respondents used the Internet, but did not report data for Asian Americans, Native Americans, or Americans identifying as multiracial.

[3] "Trend Data (Adults): Whose Online: Internet User Demographics," PIALP, http://pewinternet.org/Static-Pages/Trend-Data-(Adults)/Whos-Online.aspx, accessed October 30, 2013.

[4] "Trend Data (Teens): Teen Internet User Demographics," PIALP, http://pewinternet.org/Static-Pages/Trend-Data-(Teens)/Whos-Online.aspx, accessed October 30, 2013. Data from this report have a +/- 4.5% margin of error.

were White, non-Hispanic, females in middle adulthood who were well educated, with above average household incomes.

Adoptee Demographics

Current Age (n=371)	
18-25	5%
26-35	13%
36-45	23%
46-55	30%
56+	29%
Gender (n=371)	
Female	82%
Male	18%
Race (n=371)	
White/Caucasian	77%
More than one race	7%
Asian/Asian American	5%
Black/African American	2%
Unknown	2%
Native American/Alaska Native	1%
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	>1%
Prefer not to answer	6%
Ethnicity (n=371)	
Non-Hispanic/Latino	98%
Hispanic/Latino	2%
Education (n=371)	
High school degree	15%
College degree	42%
Graduate or professional degree	41%
Annual Household Income (n=371)	
Less than $25,000	8%
$26,000 - $50,000	13%

$51,000 - $75,000	16%
$76,000 - $100,000	20%
$101,000 - $150,000	15%
Over $150,000	15%
Prefer not to answer	15%

Adopted Individuals' Use of the Internet

The majority of adopted adults (n=392) reported that they had used the Internet and social media for a variety of purposes related to adoption, with "finding information important to you as an adopted person" used most frequently and reported as the most helpful.

	% who used	% found "very helpful"
Locating information about topics important to you as an adopted person	88%	50%
Finding information about laws related to obtaining your original birth certificate	76%	38%
Online support to/from other adopted people	75%	40%
Connecting with other adopted people	72%	45%
Adoption advocacy	70%	39%
Online education/training about adoption issues	66%	20%
Sharing one's thoughts/experiences about adoption through blog or webpage	59%	30%
Online advice/support from professionals	53%	15%

Thirty-eight adoptees reported other uses of the Internet. Most of these related to search (addressed in a later survey question), as well as specific advocacy efforts related to adoption reform and helping other adoptees learn about their rights.

Use of the Internet to Search

Most adoptees (74%) reported using the Internet or social media to search for members of their birth families. They used a variety of methods, with general Google searches being the most common. Respondents were unlikely to use the Internet to find confidential intermediaries or for-profit search services.
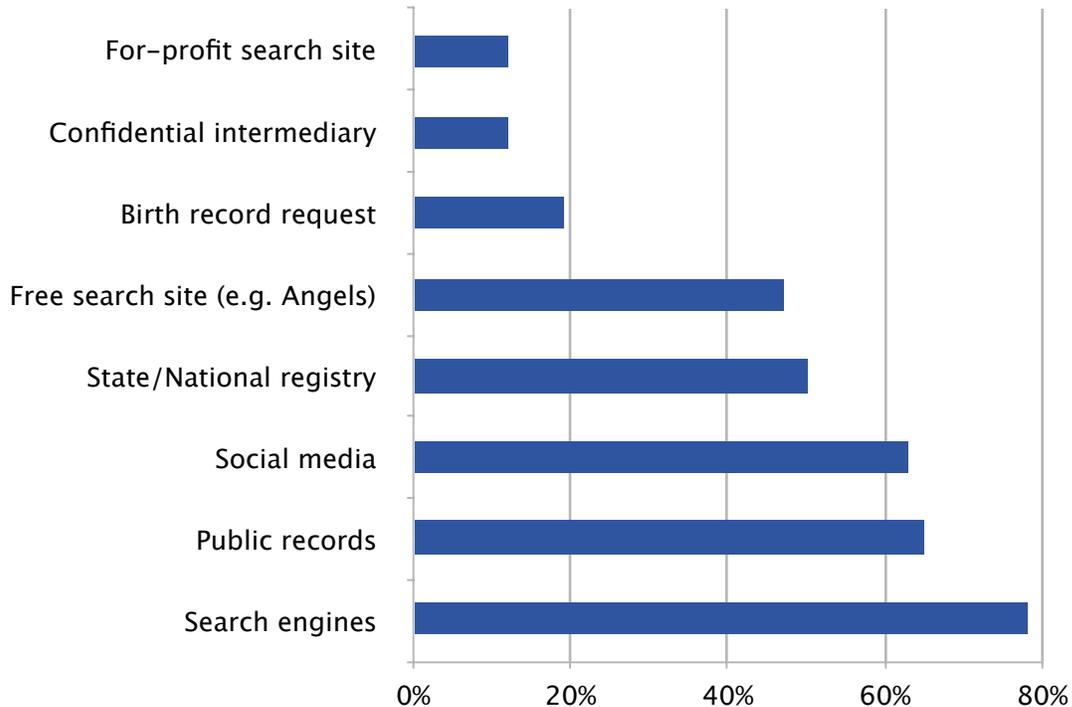
Those who searched were not always successful. Twenty-four percent of those who reported on the success of their online search (n = 233) were not able to find any members of their birth families. Sixty-three percent, however, either located birth family members (24%) or located and established contact (38%).

Adopted Individuals' Views of Challenges in Using the Internet to Search

Adopted adults were asked to identify their biggest challenges in using the Internet or social media to search, as well as the most helpful aspects of doing so. Of the 222 who answered this question, several said they had no challenges and provided evidence of the Internet's helpfulness or made comments not directly relevant to the question.

For those who did report challenges, the one most commonly cited was lack of birth parent names or other basic information (44%). Respondents reported frustration with the lack of access to their original birth certificates or the limitations resulting from private placements. Others said the search was complicated by the fact that even non-identifying information was sometimes difficult to obtain or was incorrect. Clearly this was not a challenge caused by the Internet, but a reason that the power of the Internet could not be brought to bear to find family members.

> *"We need our names! Most searching adoptees are blocked from the most important document – our original birth certificates".*

"The biggest challenge is sealed records. If records weren't sealed, I wouldn't have to waste so many hours searching for my family."

Respondents specified states where they had been unable to access information: Arizona, California, Missouri, New York, North Carolina, Rhode Island and Texas. One respondent noted the difficulty when a state only partially opened its records:

"The law in the state of my adoption, Virginia, does not support searching for those adopted prior to 1994. I was adopted in the late 1960s . . . It took many years to finally complete my search [which did not occur until this year]."

A separate but related concern was the lack of uniformity across state laws. A few also noted that even when they had basic information, the fact that many public records are not available online made search difficult. For those adopted internationally, issues relating to language, lack of Internet or social media access in less-developed countries and the lack of any clear system of search in other countries were mentioned.

Some adoptees (9%) also experienced frustration when birth parents' surnames were very common, or where birth mothers married or remarried and changed their surnames. Sometimes names were misspelled in documents they received, and a few respondents reported feeling they had been given false information. Sorting through a huge number of possible matches, an avalanche of possibilities, or using incorrect information could be *"overwhelming."*

A number of respondents (8%) noted that their adoptions or their searches had occurred before the Internet existed, or certainly before the use of social media was common, and before there was much information about adoption or search available online. Of note, many of these adopted people did eventually use the Internet to find or maintain a connection to birth families.

"When I began searching the Internet for my birth parents it was in 1999. The Internet was very new, but it is how I finally connected with them."

"When I first began my search, in the late 1990s, the Internet wasn't much of a factor for me … I think it would have been easier to find an intermediary if the Internet had been more available. Since then, I have conducted several searches on Facebook and Google to find my birth mother… but have not found her."

While the Internet led some adoptees to birth family members, there were often additional challenges after the initial success.

"I found my birth mother 25 years ago and she gave my sibling names, so I was able to find out some information about them, and did contact them. I will meet them for the first time this week. I still don't know my birth father's name, and have spent countless hours

searching relevant sites, but haven't found answers yet."

Another challenge was finding information that was no longer current, cited in about 5 percent of responses. Adoptees' searches were stymied by contact information that was no longer correct and email addresses or social media accounts that were no longer in use.

"Some information was outdated. It was more challenging searching for female birth family members because of changed names due to marriages. Also, sending messages through Facebook … I was never sure if they received it or not."

An unexpected challenge noted by some respondents (15%) was that their own fear or discomfort kept them from taking next steps after successfully finding birth relatives. This was not an aspect of the Internet or social media per se, but rather with moving from the virtual to the real. Several adoptees noted that they had the information they needed, but were not yet ready to move forward or were concerned about disrupting the lives of others they did not know, imposing what one respondent described as *"the issue of awkward surprise."*

"The biggest challenge is what to say, how to say [it], when to bring up 'the adoption.' "

"I wasn't sure what to do once I had the information, and it didn't seem 'real' to me because it was just names, addresses, etc."

Some said the challenge was not actually finding relatives, but being accepted by them. Birth families did not always want contact (although this was not commonly mentioned) and a few reported being rejected when they initiated contact.

Some respondents used this question about challenges in search to report that they had encountered none. They had straight-forwardly used the Internet to connect with birth family members from whom they had been separated.

"The Internet changed my life! I am happily reunited with most of my family, both on my mother's and my father's sides."

"None! I found them within hours!"

Adopted Individuals' View of the Internet's Benefits When Searching

More than half of respondents provided feedback about what they found most beneficial when using the Internet and social media to search. Several indicated the question did not apply to them. Ultimately, 187 responses were analyzed. Comments made clear that even those whose searches were not successful

nevertheless benefitted from the Internet's capacity to connect them with fellow adoptees and supportive groups.

The most commonly cited benefit, noted by 32 percent, related to ease, efficiency, immediacy and reach. Respondents found the Internet greatly speeded up their efforts, saving them hours, weeks and even years of looking. The availability of public records online made the process much easier for many, as did the ability to find resources that would help them in their searches and experts who could assist them. Many noted that the Internet is far-reaching and that they could go in several different directions almost simultaneously in their searches.

> *"It's right there at your fingertips any time of the day. You can easily ask for help from many online sources to help with your search."*

> *"When Googling a word or even a surname, Google brings up related articles. An example was when looking for a birth parent with a specific surname and Google brought up a group of Canadian soldiers with that ethnic background which included that surname, including the very identifying information I was looking for."*

The ease, speed and reach of the Internet allowed adopted people to take action on their own behalves, at their own pace. As one respondent put it:

> "[The Internet's benefit was] *the self-empowerment I felt being able to collect my own information and build off of using my own skill set, rather that feeling helpless when assigned to a retired social worker with no knowledge of Facebook or of how to refine a search."*

Many noted that these sites and search engines were crucial to their ability to search and that, without the Internet or social media, it was unlikely that their searches would have been successful.

Another important benefit, cited by 12 percent of respondents, was online community. For those who searched successfully and for those who did not, the Internet provided a place to learn more and be supported in search, a place to ask questions and to explore why search matters. Among their comments:

> *"Participating in an online forum for adult adoptees helped validate and support me, and offer suggestions on how I might proceed."*

> *"Connecting with on-line groups of adoptees and birth parents from the state where I was born [was beneficial]. I learned immensely from this group, and having contact with people who had similar experiences to me was invaluable RE: coming to grips with my situation."*

> *"Finding other adoptees on social media like me ... Thanks to social media I met many people who added a little more to my search itself as well as opened me up to soul- searching within. [It] introduced me to publications on all aspects of adoption as well as the ability to attend adoption conferences. It was through all this that I felt validated among others who got me, got being an adoptee with no knowledge of who I was as a child, where I came from and without an OBC [original birth certificate] because my state prevented me from something I had a right to."*

An aspect raised by some respondents (6%) was the value of the Internet in putting some distance between themselves and their birth families. Of note, this was an even more common theme in a later question about the overall benefits of the Internet in adoption. Adoptees noted that they could search anonymously and at their own pace, which allowed them to learn about their relatives while maintaining their privacy, and let them move toward contact once they knew more about the people they were seeking. It gave both birth family members and adopted people some space to decide how they wanted to proceed.

> *"After more comfort was established, could make arrangements for phone calls and actual meetings. The Internet has created an invisible protection barrier between adoptees and biological family. This can be seen as negative, but it can create a safe space for both entities before wishing to establish more one to one contact."*

Respondents named several other benefits. These included the satisfaction of successfully searching, the value of seeing pictures of family members online, the help the Internet provided in vetting searchers, and the general information about search that could help them get started in the process or know what might be ahead. One respondent noted the value of "*learning proper search and reunion techniques [and] being aware of the feelings of others"* in the triad. Also noted were the benefits of finding DNA sites online and getting DNA testing as part of the search process. Internet use often complemented other search processes.

Adopted Individuals' Use of the Internet to Maintain Connections

The majority of adopted people who responded to the survey used the Internet or social media to maintain a connection with members of their birth families. This was the case for 61 percent of the 384 adoptees who answered this question.

Email was the most commonly used method by which adoptees kept in touch with birth family members online (92%), with about equal percentages using it weekly, monthly or a few times a year. Seventy-five percent used Facebook or other social media to maintain contact. Those who did so were likely to use it daily (33.6%) or weekly (24.6%). Skype or other video applications were used by 27 percent, usually a few times a year. Some used personal websites or blogs for this purpose (11%) and a few (3%) used mediated confidential online sites. Other methods noted by respondents were Kako, Twitter, Facetime, texting and Instagram.

Adoptee Use of Internet to Maintain Connections
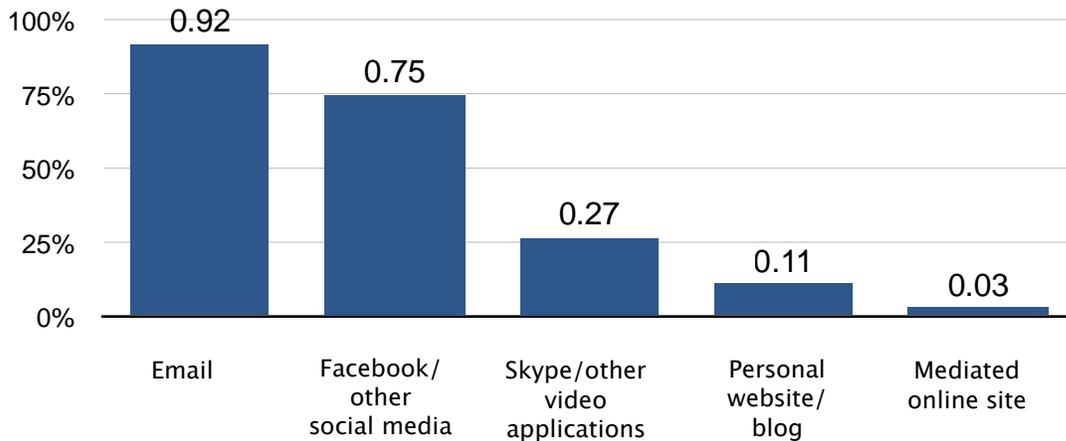
When using the Internet or social media to maintain connections (220 adoptees responding), by far the most common means was to share pictures or updates (93%). Other common uses were arranging times to visit (49%), getting answers to questions (46%) and communicating about medical or mental health information (40%). Adoptees also rated the importance of the Internet or social media in their relationships with birth family members. The significant majority rated it very important (68.6%) or somewhat important (20.9%).

Many who responded to this question emphasized that they used social media with birth family members in the same way as they used it with other relationships – i.e. that they weren't focused on adoption issues in their communication, but simply wanted to share and maintain relationships.

> *"[We use it for] social and cultural references, catching up on each other's lives, check-ins about life events (like weddings), etc. Facebook is a good medium for reunited birth families in that we can connect and be in contact without over-formalizing each and every interaction."*

> *"I have full, open and happy relationships with many members of my birthfamilies, so I use these media to conduct full-fledged adult relationships, just like I do with any member of my immediate and extended families, whether adoptive or birth."*

Others used this question to emphasize the importance of connection, even if family members do not necessarily see one another face to face.

> *"To know that even if we are not in a physical reunion in our daily life that we know each other's names, what we look like and where we live. Life is better knowing that they are there – not like before where we both did not know and it was a heart wrenching mystery."*

In addition to the types of contact they have with birth families, adoptees also were asked to note the benefits of having such contact online. Many comments echoed those reported in a previous question related to search; 192 responded and, of these, 185 directly answered the question. The most common comments, as was the case with search, related to the ease, speed and currency of the Internet. Adoptees spoke of the value of having "real time" contact, of being able to communicate over vast distances and of being able to have simultaneous relationships with a variety of family members.

> *"We've lost so much time already. We live very far apart, and the social media helps bridge that gap."*

Several comments noted multiple benefits:

> *"Gradually getting to know various members through observed online interactions, less formal (and therefore less emotionally risky) interactions, the ability to keep in touch despite being geographically separated, the ability to have both birth family and adoptive family be witness to each other's interactions with me and seeing how they all interact."*

As was the case in the section on search, and in the quote above, some respondents noted that the Internet allows for what one called "*connection and distance at the same time.*" Several commented on the particular advantage of being able, over the internet, to develop a relationship that can be complicated (echoing comments about the benefits of online search, but providing more explanation in this section). They used terms such as "*it feels less intrusive*" or "*it allows for a gradual process of getting to one another,*" or said that emails can be thought-out and less emotional. Others discussed how they began their interactions online and then moved to having in-person contact as the relationship grew. Some said Internet relationships also protect birth/first parents from having to "go public" about their relationships with the children they placed for adoption.

> *"I can get to know them confidentially – they don't have to disclose to anyone who I am or that I exist, and they feel safe to establish barriers until they are ready to break them."*

> *"As mentioned [in previous comment sections] it provides a venue to get to know each other without having to meet in person or carry on a conversation over the phone with people who are virtual strangers."*

> *"I have full contact with my birth family, but it also gives me the space I need to think and process information."*

> *"On an emotional level, it felt much safer being able to sort through my feelings while having complete control of the information the Internet yielded to me. As one of the fortunate ones, I've been able to maintain contact in as much or as little direct contact as I'd like, whereas without*

sites like Facebook I would have only been able to visit or speak on the phone, forms of very direct contact that are potentially too much, too fast for many. Being able to control this has helped ease many fears for me."

Adoptees also were asked to cite their concerns about online contact or relationships; only a small number (52) provided a response. The most common concern was related to privacy, noted by 19 respondents. Respondents raised concerns such as that the Internet allows people to "watch" you without your knowledge and that something posted or emailed to one person will be available to others without your knowledge, or that aspects of your life that you would like to keep confidential can be found out by birth family members.

Some noted the increased complexity that can come from online relationships across families. As one respondent noted, use of social media can lead to the *"ability to have birth family and adoptive family be witness to each others' interactions with me (adoptee/birthchild) and seeing how any and all interact, potential jealousy, information overload (emotionally or mentally) on either side…"*

As the later section on birth parent responses found, both groups were concerned about the possibility of rejection – either that they had not followed through with online search by contacting those they found or that they had engaged in these relationships but felt they were more tenuous than "real" relationships – and, therefore, that they might be rejected or cut off.

> *"The risks for me come from the potential of them blocking me, ignoring me, not answering me at some point. That [would] hurt terribly, especially after I worked so hard to find them in the first place."*

Others specifically made the point that these relationships were no different and that the same risks exist that anyone would face in any familial relationship and must be negotiated like any other. Overall, though, respondents reported many fewer concerns than they did benefits of online contact.

Adopted Individuals' Online Relationship `Rules' and Unwanted Contact

A question about the conditions of adopted adults' online relationships – i.e. the extent to which rules have been established – drew 220 responses. The majority (73%) had not discussed rules or expectations about contact. Fourteen percent had done so jointly and 6 percent had had birth family members set rules that they asked the adoptee to abide by. Only 2 percent of adoptees had established rules on their own that they asked birth family members to abide by.

Unexpected or unwanted contact was uncommon. Eighty-seven percent of the 366 adoptees responding had not had unexpected contact online or in other ways. For those who had, the most common response (by 19) was that they either happily or cautiously responded. As one noted, *"unexpected is not necessarily unwanted."* A few began a relationship only to have to pull back as the birth relative "pushed too

hard" for intimacy. Adoptees sometimes chose to ignore the contact or to block access. Some tried to set clear limits. Overall, however, they welcomed contact and reported few problems managing their online connections with birth family.

Adopted Individuals `Watching from a Distance'

The survey noted that the Internet provides the means to learn about others without their knowledge. Although some said they felt somewhat uncomfortable doing so, 55 percent of the 364 adoptees who answered this question did learn about or "watch" members of their birth families. Most commonly, they visited Facebook pages or reviewed online public records about such relatives. Some had been denied contact by birth parents or had birth family members who stopped responding to contact, so chose to follow their activities "from afar" online. Others wanted to know more about family but didn't want to intrude on their lives. Some reported that they simply want to know if birth relatives were still living. Again, the theme of wanting information, but keeping some distance, emerged.

> *"Facebook has been a great way to peek in on families' lives without having to bother them or have a lot of communication."*

Some watched from a distance as they decided whether to go further. For example, one adoptee said that learning about birth family members via social media allowed for assessing how receptive they might be to contact. Another tried to assess *"whether or not they might care about me or be worthy of my trust."*

> *"[I peruse] current activity, criminal records, status of significant relationships. All in an attempt to manage my own expectations for engagement and to craft my outreach such that it will be non-threatening and most productive."*

A few said they engaged in watching from afar because the option of more direct contact was not open to them, that is, birth relatives did not respond to contact.

Adopted Individuals' Overall Perceptions of Benefits and Risks

Two general, open-ended questions were asked about the Internet. The first was: *There is growing concern in the adoption community that the Internet and social media promotes unethical or overly-commercialized practice in adoption. When using the Internet or other social media, what have you seen or experienced, if anything, that you felt was unethical or overly commercial?*

The majority of adopted persons indicated that they have not seen unethical or overly commercial adoption practices online. The remaining 25 percent noted a variety of concerns.

> ➢ **Commodification** – Respondents spoke of the immorality of marketing to

promote adoption or to promote particular adoptive parents, and the danger that the Internet contributes to the selling of children. Forty percent of adoptees responding to this question cited such concerns, including the over-zealous or omnipresent promotion of adoption. Respondents criticized pop-up ads promoting adoption sites whenever a user Googles "adoption" and the pushing of adoption *"as if children were livestock."*

➢ **Exploitation of expectant parents –** Another aspect of commodification related to the coercion of pregnant women. They noted that Internet sites often promote placement over support for women in crisis.

> *"I COMPLETELY AGREE!! [that the Internet is overly-commercialized]. When I did start to look into my adoption experience (and I am also a Birth Mother, so have that experience too), I was mortified to see advertising for birth mothers, continued misinformation and people 'coaching' people interested in adopting how to 'mislead' a potential birth mother into giving up her child."*

> *"Ads from adoption [sites] that say 'Are you thinking about surrendering your baby, we can help?' on Adoption.com which is NOT promoting/helping the biological parent stay with their child but promoting ADOPTION and separation, which is not ethical. We need to do more promoting of keeping families together..."*

In a long response, one adoptee identified several concerns about how the Internet may co-opt pregnant women and contribute to the commodification of children:

- *That the father (if he is mentioned) is irrelevant, and they have ways to deal with him if he is not on board.*

- *Posting of 'situations' [available children] with price tags based on race.*

- *Offering the chance of scholarships - but only if [pregnant women] place.*

- *Offering to relocate mothers to other 'adoption friendly' states with fancy apartments and all-expense paid tour and shopping spree. On the flip side they let prospective PAPs [prospective adoptive parents] know they get the mothers to waive her revocation period so when she signs the papers it is irrevocable.*

- *The CPCs [crisis pregnancy centers] who if you trace*

the copyright logo appear to be linked in some way to or sponsored by adoption agencies without any upfront disclosure to women going to their site for unbiased help…One adoption [site] even goes so far as to say 'even if you are sure you want to parent we want to talk to you'...and do you really think they are going to help them finding parenting resources?

➢ **Adoptive parents advertising for a child** – In addition to overall concerns about commodification, adoptees reported concern about prospective adoptive parents who promote themselves via the Internet or social media. Respondents cited language that made the prospective parents and the life they would offer seem flawless, or that juxtaposed the many opportunities adopting parents could provide in a way that seemed to diminish the value of pregnant women of lesser means parenting their babies.

➢ **Potential for increasing fraud** – Adoptees indicated concern about fraud related to the search process, in particular that the Internet allowed unscrupulous people to market themselves as searchers.

The remaining comments made by more than a few respondents included the issue of "re-homing," a practice seen as unethical and dangerous, but made more possible through the Internet; prospective parents using websites for fundraising to adopt; that the Internet and social media permit the anonymous "trashing" of others with opposing views (sites that glorify adoption and ones that portray all adoption as negative were noted), and that the posting of pictures of children awaiting adoption is unethical.

Participants were asked another open-ended question that aimed at assessing the value of the Internet: *The Internet has led to new opportunities for people to learn about adoption, for families to be established, and for parties to better maintain connections. When using the Internet or social media, what have you seen or experienced that demonstrates the benefits of the Internet for the field of adoption?*

One hundred and fifty-three adoptees responded, with specific comments that fell into one of the following themes.

➢ **The Internet's value in creating community** – Adoptees noted that the Internet and social media allow triad members to support one another, gain information and obtain access to resources. A related aspect was **advocacy** – the Internet and social media allow like-minded adoptees to both gain knowledge about and to organize around issues such as restoring their right to access their original birth certificates.

➢ **The Internet's ability to enhance search and connection** – The Internet has reduced barriers to the search process and added more options for looking for birth family members. In regard to secrecy and the era of closed

adoption, once adoptee noted that the Internet "*blows this whole thing open.*" Some noted that the Internet marked the end of closed adoption and that, ultimately, all those who want to find one another will be able to do so, and that this was a very good thing.

> *"The internet is demolishing the old, BAD, STUPID, AWFUL, TERRIBLE idea of closed adoption."*

➢ **The Internet allows for *"connection with distance."*** – As they did earlier in the survey, adoptees again spoke to the comfort the Internet provides by allowing them to set parameters in ways that feel protective.

> *"The element of control was especially important to me. Being able to dictate how much information I was ready for and when definitely helped to ease many of the fears one experiences in searching for their family."*

➢ **Empowerment of adoptees and reduction of stigma in adoption** – Finding information about the circumstances of their births was important and empowering, and the Internet greatly facilitated this process. Adoptees also reported feeling that the Internet promotes messages to reduce stigma, normalizes their experience, and reduces the "*secrets and hiding*" that has surrounded so much about adoption.

> *"I think the free flowing opportunity to share ideas and thoughts between all members of the adoption story is positive. People, if they choose, are able to get a clearer picture of the real experience of adoption. Also, there is greater opportunity for adopted persons and birth parents to reconnect, without having to 'work the system' to do so. This gives us more power and control over our own stories."*

Additional benefits noted by adopted persons included that the Internet was of great value in connecting people separated by distance, and that the speed and ease of this technology enabled both search and ongoing contact.

Summary of Findings

Adoptee respondents found much to praise, and also much to be concerned about, as they considered the impact of the Internet on adoption and their lives. They valued the sense of community it made possible, and used this community to test out their feelings about search and other issues, to learn from the experiences of others and to work with others to organize for change. They also used the Internet to learn – to educate themselves about laws and policies.

The Internet was particularly valuable to them in finding and connecting with their families of origin. Adoptees spoke to the ease of using the Internet, its convenience and speed. Some had been able to locate family members astonishingly quickly.

Many noted that the Internet had enabled them to have important, meaningful and rich relationships with their families of origin. But many could not use the power of the Internet because they were blocked by sealed birth certificates or other records. Others were stymied by misinformation, common surnames or outdated information. A few noted that when they found relatives on social media, privacy settings kept them from learning more or having access. So while the Internet enabled search, it did not guarantee that search would be successful.

Respondents also valued the way the Internet allowed them to be close but distant – connecting with birth family members but keeping them a bit at arm's length. Sometimes this was temporary; that is, the Internet provided a buffer as they learned about birth family members without their knowledge or slowly moved forward with the relationship. One noted that e-mails and posts can be ignored or responded to more slowly than phone calls or visits can be. Several moved from this "arm's length" relationship as time went on, having gained some sense from earlier Internet-only contact that a fuller relationship would benefit them.

A number of respondents were adopted or began their searches long before the advent of the Internet or social media. Yet many noted that they had used the Internet for many purposes – search, affiliation, information – despite becoming adults before anyone was on Facebook.

Adoptees also raised concerns. They noted that the Internet could be a source of misinformation, that adoption was overly-promoted and that the complexities of adoption were glossed over by sophisticated marketing. Some raised concerns about potential coercion of expectant mothers by sites that promised opportunities in exchange for placing a child. Overall, however, the adopted adults who participated in this survey found the Internet to offer more benefits than risks.

PART II

BIRTH/FIRST PARENTS AND THE INTERNET

Both expectant parents considering adoption and birth/first parents who complete an adoption plan are increasingly involved with the internet. (While many parents who have relinquished children prefer to be referred to as first parents, the term birth parents will often be used in this report, as it is the most commonly used term in the adoption field). Some birth mothers (and sometimes fathers) parented their children for a time before placement; some lost the privilege to parent due to abuse or neglect; some made the choice to place their infants for adoption; and others were stripped of the opportunity to parent by personal or social pressures. This array of circumstances is demonstrated in the data from this portion of the survey. The parents who responded present a unique historical perspective of adoption and how its practice has changed over the past 50 years. Consider those whose children were relinquished in the 1960s and 1970s compared to more recent years and their responses to this question: *What resources were used to gather information about adoption?*

Then

> *"In 1979 there was not information to gather, it was just a given by society at the time that I would give up my child for adoption as I was an unmarried teen."*

> *"I was sent away and my questions were answered in a way to persuade my decision. It is only now that I understand the psychology used against me."*

Now

> *"ParentFinder"* (a website of waiting adoptive parent profiles)

> *"Email lists for first mothers."*

> **"***I also learned about adoption from watching a show called true life on MTV."*

Sample of Birth/First Parents

Birth Parent Demographics

Birth parents	%
Current age (n=167)	
19-25 years	10%
26-30 years	13%
31-35 years	8%
36-40 years	13%
41 & older	56%
Race (n=163)	
White/Caucasian	93%
More than one race	5%
Asian/Asian American	Less than 1%
American Indian/Alaska Native	Less than 1%
Unknown	Less than 1%
Ethnicity (n=154)	
Non-Hispanic/Latino	96%
Hispanic/Latino	4%
Education (n=164)	
Less than high school	2%
High school degree	32%
College degree	42%
Graduate or prof. degree	24%

Income (n=144)	
Less than $25,000	22%
$26,000-$50,000	22%
$51,000-$75,000	23%
$76,000-$100,000	11%
$101,000-$150,000	14%
Over $150,000	8%

The sample in this group's survey consists of 245 respondents whose children were placed for adoption between 1958 and 2012. These parents were predominantly Caucasian (89%), more than half were over age 41, and the majority had a high school or college degree.

The vast majority of respondents appear to have relinquished infants into domestic adoptions; 88 percent reported that their child was placed within a week after being born. Only five birth parents reported their children were over 1 year old at placement, and those ages were 1 (three children), 3 (one child) and 6 (one child). The year the placement occurred varied among those who responded, with 43 percent within the last 10-12 years, 25 percent in the 1980s and '90s, and the remaining 32 percent in the 1950s, '60s '70s. The chart below provides a more detailed overview of the timing of the adoptions, demonstrating that many of the respondents had adoptions that occurred before the existence of the Internet. Thus, data are skewed toward placements that occurred in the days of closed adoption. As this was when the bulk of domestic infant adoption occurred in the U.S., it is not surprising that our birth parent sample represents this time period.

Year of Adoptive Placement (n=161)

8% 2% 17%
35%
13%
11%
14%

Legend:
- 1950's
- 1960's
- 1970's
- 1980's
- 1990's
- 2000's
- 2010's
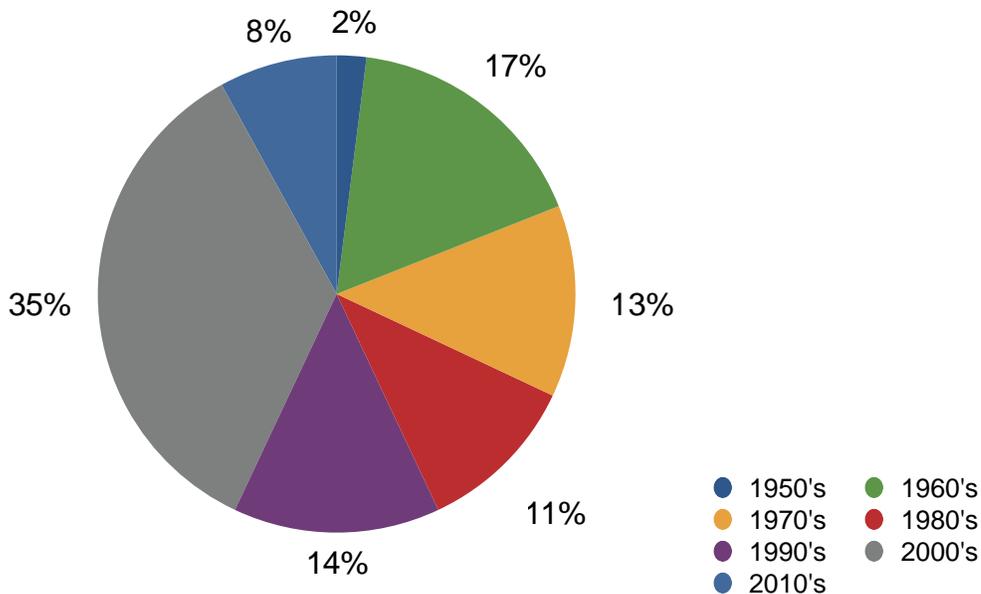
Birth Parents' Information Gathering

Adoptions from the 1950's to present. Birth parents considered the survey question, "*What resources did you use to gather information about adoption?*" in two different ways. For those whose children were placed more recently, the Internet may have been used to learn about adoption and their options, as well as to facilitate post-placement contact. However, the majority in this sample had children who were relinquished many years ago, prior to the existence of the Internet. The Internet may have only been used when they were ready to search or were looking to connect with other birth parents. Several respondents whose adoptions took place long ago commented that gathering information about adoption was never an option for them; there was no information available and they had no choice about the adoption.

> *"I gathered no information. The child-snatchers came to me."*

> *"In 1968, I thought it was my only option to place my baby for adoption."*

Participants were asked what kinds of resources they used when researching adoption, and all 245 responded. Birth parents identified a number of resources for gathering information. The most commonly cited was talking to friends, family or professionals in person (30%). These professionals may have included adoption agency staff, doctors, crisis pregnancy centers or clergy. Twenty-four percent gathered information by phone, 22 percent used the Internet, and 13 percent utilized books. A small number of birth parents (4%) noted that they did not have a choice in the adoption; therefore they did not gather any resources (at least at the time of placement). The very small remainder noted gathering information from personal experience, such as being adopted or having a family member involved in an adoption. While not stated directly, the intent of the question was to learn about information-gathering prior to placement. A number of respondents (6%), particularly those whose children were placed long ago, noted that resources were used for search and that the Internet was not available when the child was born.

Gathering information in the internet era – 2000 to present. In order to better understand the experience of birth parents once the Internet *was* available, analysis was conducted on a sub-sample of respondents whose adoptions took place since 2000. Seventy-three, or 29 percent who responded to this survey, had adoptions that took place since then; 55 percent of those reported using the Internet to learn about adoption. Gathering information by phone was also used by 52 percent, and talking to friends, family and professionals in person was used by 48 percent. A smaller number (12%) used books, and others commented that they gained information from their physicians.

Birth parents used the Internet to learn about a number of different aspects of adoption. Information about the general process was accessed most (46%),

followed by information about couples seeking to adopt (43%), openness and contact (38%) and researching adoption agencies (38%). Despite using the Internet to learn more about adoption, 47 percent reported that the Internet played no actual role in selecting an adoption service provider. The remainder (47%) said the Internet played a lot, some or a little bit of a role, and 6 percent did not choose a provider but, instead, connected directly with an adoptive family.

Birth Parent Selection of an Adoption Service Provider

This survey explored what type of service provider was chosen by more-recent birth parents when using the Internet to gather information, and also what drew them to a particular practitioner. More often than not, they said they worked with a licensed, non-profit adoption agency (which can mean many things, but no distinctions were offered). Other providers used were brokers or referral agencies and attorneys. A few respondents used more than one provider, and a few others were not sure what type of provider they used. It is very important for birth parents to understand the services they could and do receive; the Donaldson Adoption Institute's *Guide to Internet Use in Adoption*, to be published in 2014, will include guidance to expectant parents who are in need of quality services that have their best interests at heart.

After reporting the type of service provider they used, participants were asked to select the top three reasons for choosing that provider. Almost half of birth parents (49%) made their choice because "*The provider was kind and respectful to me when I contacted them.*" Forty percent chose their provider because *"a friend, family member or professional referred me to them."* The third most-selected reason (33%) was that *"The provider's philosophy on openness matched my own."*

Finally, in regard to using the Internet to gather information about adoption, first parents were asked how much of a role the Internet played in connecting with an adoptive family, choosing an adoptive family, and communicating with the adoptive family prior to placement. Overall, the Internet did not play a significant role in these activities. About one-third of respondents used the Internet or social media a little, some or a lot to connect to an adoptive family, while 24 percent used the Internet to help select a family. Pre-placement contact with both the adoption service provider and the prospective adoptive parents was not conducted using the Internet very often (although some email contact was reported) but, instead, communication took place face-to-face or by phone.

The data from the full and sub-group of more-recent birth parents showed that many birth parents gathered information and received services for adoption in person. More-recent placers reported greater use of the Internet, and it's expected that rates of Internet use will continue to rise. A growing concern with increased use of the Internet and social media is the rate of birth parents who are connecting with adoptive families directly, often bypassing the assistance of professionals for education and support. These concerns will be illustrated throughout this paper.

Birth Parent use of the Internet to Maintain Connections

While birth parents' Internet use to gather information and facilitate adoptive placements is limited in this sample, its use increases after adoption (often many years later). The survey broke this contact down to separately measure connections with the adoptive family and the child. This allowed for the span of adoption, since the children of some birth parents who responded are now adults. Other adoptees are still young, so contact may not be occurring due to the child's age. Distinctions between contact with the adoptive parents and the child were also made to better understand connections that may be formed or have already been formed between the birth parents and the children, possibly without the knowledge of the adoptive families. This is most concerning if the child is still a minor.

Almost half (47%) of birth parents who responded used the Internet to maintain a connection to the adoptive family, and 42 percent used it to maintain a connection with their children. Birth parents connect online with adoptive families and children mostly by Facebook and email. A few others noted that they communicate with their children via Instagram, and previously through MySpace. The graph below displays the type of contact birth parents have with adoptive families and with their children. Contact between birth parents and adoptive families is most often to share pictures and updates, followed by making arrangements to visit, communicating about family history, or having a child's questions answered.

Use of Internet & Social Media to Maintain Connections

Adoptive family (n=90)
Adopted person (n=75)
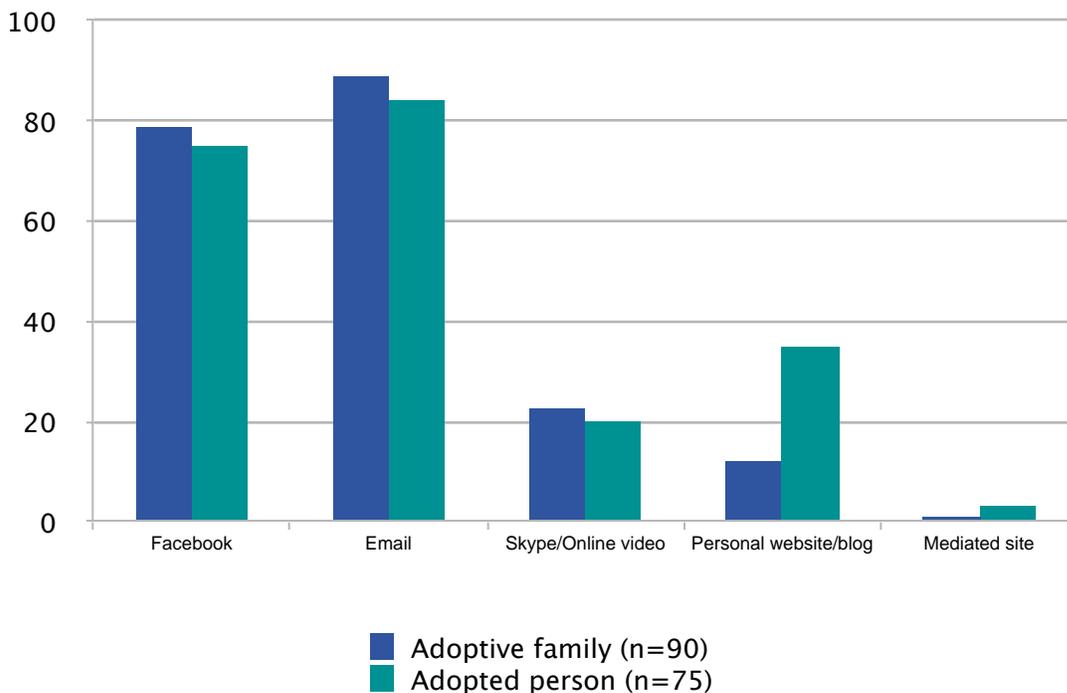
Respondents noted throughout the survey that communication with their children or their children's adoptive families has become a part of everyday life. Even in instances where the parties were not specifically "communicating," or contact by phone or in person was infrequent, social media such as Facebook, Instagram and blogs allowed the adults to stay current on what's happening in each other's lives.

> *"I am included in many moments of her life. Her family life, her first day of school, summer camp, etc. The best part is being able to see new pictures every week!"*

> *"Updated photos, daily stories, (are a) good avenue for watching the child grow without seeing him or her."*

> *"On a regular basis, I can know what my child and her family are doing, to see how she is developing, to share in her milestones, to see how she is thriving in the family I chose for her. It also allows me to be closer with her adoptive parents and their extended family."*

The Internet and social media also allow individuals to "connect" without any communication. For example, triad members may find each other online but never reach out. Depending on a Facebook user's privacy settings, strangers, old friends, coworkers and long-lost family members may be up to date on what is happening in each other's lives through newsfeeds or photographs that have been posted.

The survey asked the following: *"The Internet and social media has provided us with the opportunity to learn about others, often without their knowledge (such as viewing someone's Facebook page when he/she does not have strict privacy settings, following someone on Twitter, viewing a LinkedIn profile, reading a blog). Have you ever used the Internet or social media to learn or assess how your child or the adoptive family is doing?"*

While birth parents who responded may also have direct contact with the family in some manner, responses to this open-ended question were interesting, with 54 percent indicating they had used the Internet or social media for this purpose.

> *"I don't 'stalk' their Facebook pages but I do like to see pictures of her smiling. The most recent ones I have seen have been of her first day of 2nd grade and her first day of Karate. These are great things to know she is involved :)"*

> *"Tried to see pictures of my daughter online and see if she's healthy, happy, and okay."*
> *"I watch their posts and interactions; it has allowed me to gauge*

things. Especially on the sites their parents aren't on, but I am."

A small number of respondents (11%) also said they had been contacted by their children or the adoptive family when it was not planned or expected. Of the 23 who expanded on this experience, 42 percent reported a positive outcome, 32 percent a negative outcome, and 26 percent did not reply to the unexpected contact.

Birth parents, adoptive families and children also connect outside of the online community through face-to-face visits, text messages, phone calls and letters. Forty-nine percent of birth parents reported maintaining connections offline with adoptive families and 63 percent reported such contact with their children who were placed for adoption. The chart below compares the types of offline contact with adoptive families and children.

Use of Offline Communications to Maintain Connections

Legend:
- Adoptive family (n=84)
- Adopted person (n=115)
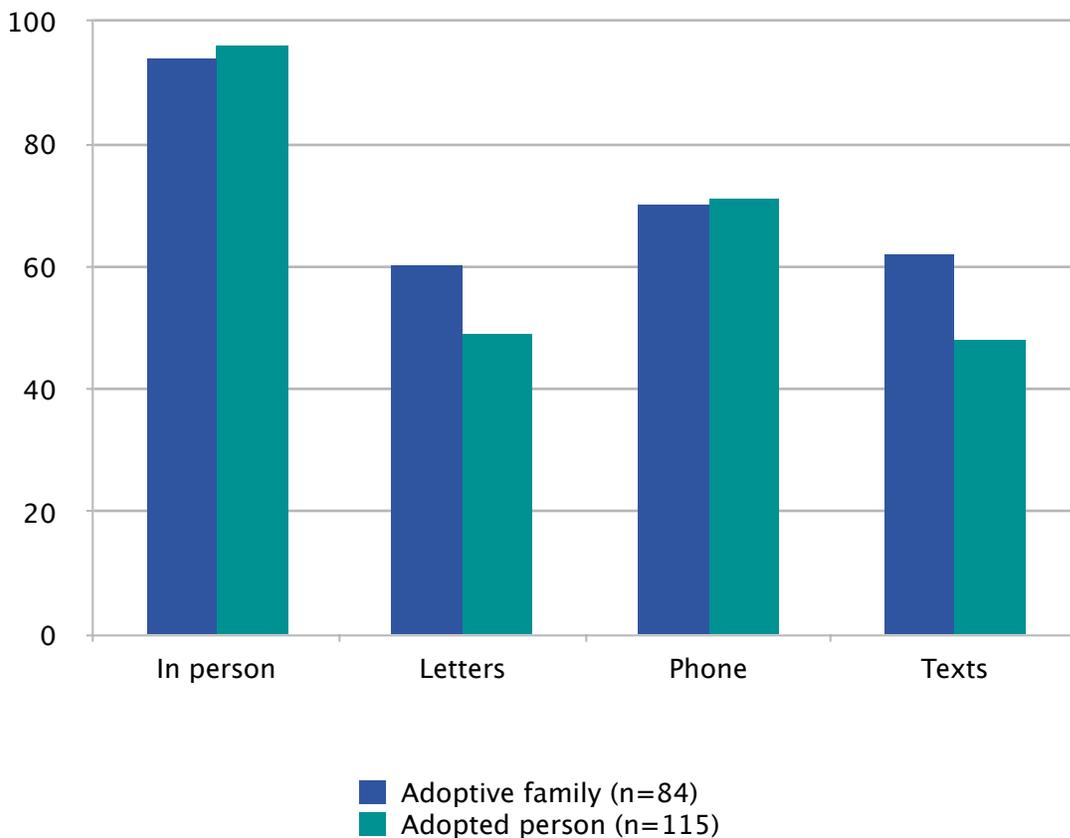
Given that establishing and maintaining connections is easier than it was in the past, it is important to acknowledge that this trend will likely continue. Reports on Internet and social media use show rapid growth in use (Pew Research Center, 2013). For their adoption journeys, children born into this mobile generation are more likely to include connections that were always present in some shape or form, and methods may change and become more innovative. In light of these trends, our survey explored what kind of expectations were put into place regarding contact, especially via the online community.

The data show that most birth parents (71%) who responded have direct contact with their children (who in many cases is this sample are now adults), which makes setting expectations for contact with the adoptive family less applicable. When the data were further analyzed for birth parents whose children were still minors, very little information was available regarding expectations for contact. Of the 15 birth parents who responded, some reported they had not discussed it with the adoptive family, while others said they negotiated the rules together with the adoptive family. A very small number reported that adoptive parents developed rules that they asked the birth parent to abide by. The remaining respondents either preferred not to answer or felt the question did not apply to their situation.

While the response rate was low to this question, a secondary goal to asking about expectations for contact was to encourage birth parents to think about it. For those adopted children who are still young, it is going to be critically important for birth and adoptive families to have these conversations. The guide that DAI is producing to follow up on this report will provide information, resources and support to assist parties to adoption in negotiating and navigating their connections with each other.

Benefits, Risks of Internet Use in Maintaining Post-Adoption Connections

As contact among the parties to adoption continues to grow and expand, both in manner and frequency, it is important to understand what they perceive as the benefits and risks. Birth parents were asked open-ended questions to gain an understanding of their feelings in these regards. Though most did not respond, of the 22 percent who did, the <u>benefits</u> fit into one of the following themes:

➢ **Ease/Immediacy of contact** (73%) – The greatest benefit is how easy and quickly birth parents can connect with adoptive families.
  "*It's an immediate daily connection to one another . . . makes it very easy to stay involved in activities and to know what's going on in each other's lives.*"

➢ **Non-stressful contact** (13%) – Birth and adoptive families can stay up to date on each other's lives without the pressure of more direct contact.
  "*We get to maintain a healthy involvement in each other's lives without stressful awkwardness.*"

  "*Easier, more laidback, more frequent. Getting a better, fuller, more nuanced and authentic sense of each other.*"

  "*I can keep up with her life without being "in" her family's way.*"

➢ **Distance** (7%) – The Internet allows for connections across long distances.
  "*We are both very busy and don't live close enough to see each other more*

than 3-4 times a year. FB helps us to stay abreast of what is happening in each other's lives."

➢ **Peace of mind** (7%) – Birth parents find comfort in knowing their children are alive and healthy.
"Just knowing he was alive...knowing I could communicate with him...knowing he's out there every day....just being normal."

"While we don't have an internet relationship - it is very comforting to see her on-line and know she is happy and well..."

Respondents also articulated their concerns about connecting online. While most (59%) said they did not see any risks, the remainder noted the following:

➢ **Fear of hurt feelings or rejection** (26%) – Respondents worried that a comment or miscommunication would be misunderstood, including hurting the adoptive family because the birth parent is in communication with the adopted child. They were also concerned about broken connections.

"Not understanding my life and why I placed when I was younger (I'm stable now, etc.)."

"Sometimes they (the adopted child) know more than you want or realize. For instance, I have a daughter who I kept and is only 2 years younger than my birth son. We write back and forth about being each other's favorite people and at times forget that my birth son could be reading this. I worry about his feelings."

"I see what I am missing out on."

"She will block me."

➢ **Fear that image is construed as inappropriate** (11%) – Birth parents want to be a good influence and sometimes feel they need to be careful about what is posted about them or by them online.
"Managing my friends' and my personal posts to ensure I only promote respectable content that is non-offensive and meets my and her parents expectations of a positive model (me)."

➢ **Safety** (4%) – Some birth parents worry about the consequences of connecting, especially without proper support.
"If children are unsupervised and parents are not aware children are seeking information or misinformation to gain connectedness with birth family, it can disrupt the family dynamic. Children and adolescents seeking to reunite need to be closely monitored."

Birth Parent Views of the Internet and Social Media's Role in Searching

The birth/first parents in this survey represent a variety of perspectives on the search process. Some have experienced open adoptions from the start, thus search has not been a necessary part of their journey. For others, their adoptions were so closed that finding their child was not possible. Contact in adoptions has been initiated by birth parents, adoptive families and children as each situation is unique. In this sample, an equal number of birth parents reported searching and not searching (33%). The remaining third reported that searching did not apply, most likely due to situations where contact already existed or where they had no information at all about their children.

The 33 percent of birth parents who have searched were asked what types of resources they utilized to do so; most reported using more than one. The following are the resources they listed, in order from most-used to least: search engines such as Google, state or national adoption registries such as the International Soundex Reunion Registry, Facebook, public records, adoption search sites such as Adoption Angels, online birth record requests, for-profit search services, confidential intermediaries, and their placement agencies. When asked about the outcome of their search efforts, 20 percent reported being unsuccessful in finding any information about their children, while the rest reported finding at least some information, locating their children, and/or establishing contact.

Birth Parents on the Internet's Risks, Benefits for Adoption Practice

All participants in this study were asked: *"There is growing concern in the adoption community that the Internet and social media promotes unethical or overly-commercialized practice in adoption. When using the Internet or other social media, what have you seen or experienced, if anything, that you felt was unethical or overly commercial?"*

Birth/first parents shared many different concerns, most of which fell into specific themes. By far the biggest concern created by the use of the Internet and social media in adoption was advertising and commercialization. The concerns about advertising were related to enticements by service providers to expectant parents, as well as ads placed by prospective adoptive parents who were waiting to be matched with an expectant parent. Birth parents also expressed concern that agencies were not forthcoming enough about the emotional scars that adoption can cause. Some described service providers as talking about adoption as a "win-win" or a "loving act" without discussing the long-term support that may be needed. Concern was also expressed that some agencies focus too much on assisting adoptive parents in receiving placements, rather than on supporting expectant parents who could have successfully parented their children.

In addition, concern was expressed about *"unscrupulous adoption broker sites"* that "troll" the Internet for pregnant women, or prospective adoptive parents who misrepresent themselves online, acting as if they are birth parents or people willing to help. The more recently publicized issue of "re-homing" was also mentioned by

some birth parents in the survey, expressing concern about *"trading them (children) like merchandise."* Finally, a few respondents reported concern that the Internet and social media have impacted the beauty of adoption and how it is an alternative to women in crisis by commercializing it. Below is a summary of the primary themes illustrated by the birth parent sample, in their own words.

➢**Advertising to and exploitation of pregnant women**

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

"Anyone approaching an expectant mother with potential adoptive parents before she has had honest to goodness counseling about resources or father's rights is just wrong and it happens in every corner of the internet."

➢**Adoptive parents advertising for a child**

"Ads on Facebook from PAPs (prospective adoptive parents) are extremely distasteful. I don't want to spend the rest of my life being confronted by ads that boil down to 'Want to give us your baby? Because boy howdy, do we want to take your baby!' Gross."

➢**Making adoption look easier than it is**

"The incessant agency advertising, prospective adopter blogs, fundraisers, we-want-your-baby websites, craigslist ads, promotion of how great being a first mother is (i.e., blessings in a basket, birthmom buds). I find these coercive and offensive, and these practices should be frowned upon and curbed."

"The information provided by adoption 'professionals' is misleading, untruthful, and not real. It is the facade that adoption is a 'win-win', but there is never any reality or truths shared with society who has not been touched by adoption. There is no disclosure of all the damage separating an infant from his/her mother does psychologically, emotionally, mentally and in some cases physically to both the mother and child. Rarely are the long term affects ever disclosed to parents considering separating from their child 'in their best interests'. This is not a true depiction of what adoption is.....adoption is LOSS before anything at all. This is the message that is never addressed, and was NEVER brought up when I lost my son."

➢**"Trolling" for expectant parents**

"I have seen trolls and hackers pretend to be birth moms and join online birth mom support groups then emotionally abuse birth moms online for their choice. I have stood up for the birth moms."

> *"Prospective adoptive parents and agencies hover around sites geared to allow expectant parents explore adoption."*

➢ **Re-homing**

> *"Services to 're-home' unwanted infants or older adoptees. Possible placement with sex abusers, unwittingly. Buying babies, horrible development from anonymous internet."*
> *"The underground network that AP's (adoptive parents) use to dump their adopted kids when adoption fails."*

➢ **Creating a negative view of adoption**

> *"I have noticed that there sometimes can be a negative spin on adoption rather than showcase the beauty of it. I also find that there is not a lot of information that comes from a birth parent or information geared towards birth parents - adoption related stories/articles are about the child and the adoptive parents, more often than not."*

Despite the varied number of concerns expressed by birth parents, it should be noted that 39 percent indicated that they had not seen anything unethical. Some stated other concerns that did not fall into one of the primary themes, such as, *"I think that putting up pictures of children who need a family, well intentioned, but kind of dreadful"* and *"I only worry that adoption is becoming 'trendy' and that some will seek to adopt or place a child for adoption for personal attention and not have the children's best interests at heart."*

Birth Parent Feelings about Overall Benefits of the Internet in Adoption

There's no doubt that the Internet and social media have created tremendous opportunities for all parties to gain information, receive support and create or maintain connections. The survey asked birth parents to describe their experiences of the benefits that these opportunities have brought them. Similar to the feedback provided in regard to maintaining connections, several themes emerged. The ease of being able to connect through the Internet and social media was by far, the most-reported. The birth parents who spoke of the ease of connecting also cited the benefit of greater openness as it relates to adoption in general, not just in their personal experiences. The Internet and social media are thought of as tools allowing for greater access and more varied methods of communicating.

> *"I feel much more involved in his life. We live on opposite sides of the United States and we keep a very open adoption plan. Online communication is easy and fast, and keeps us close. I feel it is a much needed supplement in between the holiday/birthday calls we share."*

> *"Openness in adoption is a wonderful thing, it benefits all members of the adoption triad, not only, though most importantly, the adoptee. I think social media and the internet allow for an easing into openness*

> *where otherwise fear and insecurity may have kept possibilities much more closed."*

In addition to the ease of contact, some view contact through the Internet and social media as a way to deepen bonds with their children and adoptive families.

> *"I can share a picture that lets my birth daughter know I am thinking of her and I can see what she is up to as it happens. I also use social media to connect to others and share ideas or feelings."*
> *"I have many benefits of this. I have connected with my son's forever family through social media and we keep updated with each other's lives and really have a great bond because of this."*

Finally, birth/first parents reported that the Internet and social media had provided them with the opportunity to gain support from others in ways that were not available to them in the past.

> *"It has been VERY useful in searches and reunions - the internet and social media have allowed people in adoption to connect much faster and easier without having to jump through all of the legal hoops of the closed records system. It also offers a plethora of support opportunities that those who have no access to a face to face in person support network can utilize."*

> *"Contacting members of my TRIAD support group is done via email and certainly easier than sending mail notices or calling every member (huge number of people keep in touch with this TRIAD support group) There are benefits such as articles, news, etc. that can be shared with the support group, too."*

Summary of Birth Parent Findings

The purpose of this study was to begin to understand the impact of the Internet and social media on adoption. From the birth parent perspective, the Internet has had a profound impact, especially post-adoption. While this sample (primarily of birth parents whose children are now adults) did not report significant Internet use to gather information about adoption prior to placement or to facilitate placement, the growing use of online communication and mobile devices is likely to create greater use for these purposes. Study participants reported using the Internet most after adoption – to search for their adult children, as well as to maintain connections with adoptive families with young children who have open adoption arrangements. Birth parents are also using the Internet and social media for support, which has allowed them to feel less isolated and alone. The Internet has provided an outlet to gather information about adoption years after placement, and to advocate for the rights of birth parents and adopted persons.

While the survey's focus was to understand how the Internet and social media impact adoption, a few findings also emerged that illustrate the greater impact of adoption on one's life and the emotional journey faced by many birth parents. This survey represents two ends of the spectrum of adoption: from birth parents who felt forced into "giving up" their children with no option for future contact, to women and

men who have experienced a greater sense of control in their decisions, which often includes ongoing contact with their children and their adoptive families.

This study intentionally asked a number of open-ended questions, so that respondents had the opportunity to share their individual experiences. The responses to these questions were coded into categories that helped to better describe the thoughts and opinions of birth parents. The pain of losing a child is still present, and it seems that those who felt they did not have control have had the most difficulty in adjusting throughout their lives. Respondents who had more open arrangements talked about their experiences, overall, in a more positive way. One noted that the benefit of connecting online with the adoptive family has allowed for *"Integrating our lives as well as enriching the openness of the adoption. I'm not a secret, they are not a secret."* Another shared,

> *"Openness in adoption is a wonderful thing, it benefits all members of the adoption triad, not only, though most importantly, the adoptee. I think social media and the internet allow for an easing into openness where otherwise fear and insecurity may have kept possibilities much more closed."*

The Internet appears to have had a positive impact for birth parents who are able to connect, reconnect or maintain existing connections with their children. The ease of staying in touch or seeing how their children are doing without being intrusive offers peace of mind. The risks, such as sharing too much information, appear to be outweighed by the positives. This feeling is summarized well by one birth parent: *"The only real concern or issue I have had with this sort of contact is that it sometimes makes me feel her absence in a profound way, and from time to time brings out feelings of jealousy. Overall, however, the benefits far, far, outweigh the negative aspects."* Connecting with each other, whether in person, by mail, or within the online community, should take place with thought, not haste. All participants need to consider the impact of their communication not only on themselves, but also on members of the other person's social network.

Respondents reported using the Internet after placement to locate general information about adoption, connect with other birth parents, and share thoughts through a blog or website. Wide use of the Internet for specific resources, such as through agencies, was not reported. A few commented that online resources provided by agencies were not very helpful; instead, birth parents have turned to blogs or blogging for support. Birth parents must use caution when consulting some websites for information, as there is some question about the accuracy of the information, but having an outlet such as blog that shares one's adoption experience appears to have provided a benefit for emotional well-being.

> *"I pretty much live online now doing adoption 24/7. I have blogged since 2005. Our face to face reunion in 2007 was basically live blogged and shared with hundreds. My adoption networks are vast."*

The social movement that has taken place in adoption has been for less

secrecy and more openness. When women were sent away to have their babies, they were often pressured to keep their pregnancies secret and were left feeling isolated and alone. The opening of adoptions and increase in contact between birth and adoptive families has helped relieve some of the isolation felt by many birth/first parents. The Internet and social media also provide an outlet for birth parents and greater opportunity to feel they are not alone, offering a growing number of ways to connect with others and to gather the information.

> *"Knowing there are other Birth/First Parents out there who are going through the same thing you are, is a GREAT knowledge. Being able to contact them, ask them questions, receive sympathy from, etc. has helped me through difficult times - especially Mother's Day and her Birthday."*

PART III
THE EXPERIENCE OF ADOPTIVE PARENTS

Adoptive parents make up the largest number of respondents to our survey. At the time the data were analyzed, 1216 adoptive parents had responded. They came from across the nation and beyond. Adoptive parents who reported their place of residence lived in every state except Mississippi[5], while just over 3 percent reported living outside the U.S.

Respondents were overwhelmingly white (91%) and non-Hispanic (92%). Adoptive mothers were far more likely to respond than fathers (89% vs. 11%). Respondents were highly educated, with 52 percent having an advanced degree and another 37 percent having completed college. Respondents were generally affluent, with 53 percent who reported family incomes of over $100,000, while just 8 percent had annual incomes below $50,000 annually.

Most parents were in middle adulthood. The largest age category was 36-45 (35%). Most families (80%) were composed of two opposite-sex parents with one or more adopted children. Most (68%) had adopted one child.

Perhaps because demographic information came at the very end of a very long survey, about 23% of respondents did not complete this part of the survey. Thus, the description above refers to the 931 respondents who provided these data.

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[5] New York had the highest number of respondents, followed by California, Massachusetts, Illinois, New Jersey and Maryland.

Adoptive Parent Demographics

Age (n=931)	
18-25	0%
26-35	12%
36-45	35%
46-55	33%
55+	19%
Gender (n=931)	
Female	89%
Male	11%
Household Type (n=931)	
Two parent/opposite sex	80%
Single parent	15%
Two parent/same sex	5%
Number of Adopted Children (n=931)	
1	68%
2	28%
3	3%
4 or more	>1%
Race (n= 931)	
White/Caucasian	90%
Black/African American	2%
More than one race	2%
Asian/Asian American	1%
Other	>1%
Ethnicity (n=931)	
Hispanic/Latino	8%
Non-Hispanic/Latino	92%
Education (n=931)	
High school completion	11%
College completion	37%
Graduate/professional degree	52%
Annual Household Income (n=931)	
$25,000 or less	1%
$26,000 - $50,000	7%
$51,000- $75,000	14%
$76,000 - $100,000	20%
$101,000 - $175,000	5%
$176,000 - $200,000	5%

Over $200,000	13%
Prefer not to answer	14%

Adoptive parents reported on the adoptions of 1545 children. The most common type of adoption reported was international, but domestic and foster adoptions were also represented. Most children were infants or young children at the time of placement. Perhaps because many children were adopted internationally and most children from the major sending country of China have been females, 55% of the children reported on were female.

Adopted Child Demographics

Adoption Type (n=1545)	
International	47%
Domestic Infant	36%
Foster care	16%
Current Age (n=1545)	
< 1	3%
1-5	28%
6-10	28%
11-15	19%
16-20	12%
21-25	4%
>25	6%
Age at Adoptive Placement (n=1531)	
<1	58%
1-5	30%
6-10	8%
11-15	4%
16+	<1%
Gender (n=1554)	
Female	55%
Male	45%

Race (n=1528)	
White/Caucasian	38%
Asian/Asian American	30%
Black/African American	16%
More than one race	12%
Native American/Alaska Native	1%
Ethnicity (n=1538)	
Non-Hispanic/Latino	87%
Hispanic/Latino	13%

Given that 90% of adoptive parent respondents were White, compared to 38% of adopted children, it is clear that most of the adoptions reported on in this part of the survey were of children adopted into families where at least one parent was of a different race. Trans-ethnic placement also occurred. Eight percent of adoptive parents were Hispanic, compared to 13 percent of children.

Adoptive Parent Information Gathering Prior to Adoption

Respondents used a combination of methods to learn about adoption as they began the process (n=1216). The first area examined was their use of the Internet to explore adoption generally; it was commonly used (75%), on a par with talking to professionals (75%) and more often than seeking information by phone (66%), talking to family and friends (66%) or through books or other print media (57%).

Ten percent of respondents reported additional information about their original steps toward adoption. The most common responses among these "other" responses were exploring adoption through conferences, seminars and workshops, or support or information groups for people considering adoption. Some were foster parents or otherwise connected to an agency serving foster children. Others reported that their adoption work had occurred prior to the Internet's existence.

Respondents also were asked how large a role the Internet or social media played in their exploration of adoption. Given that many respondents either adopted well before the Internet was available or adopted children whom they had fostered, it is not surprising that 20% of respondents reported that the Internet played no role in their early information-gathering. However, 40% said the Internet played a large role, and an additional 26% reported it played some role in this regard.
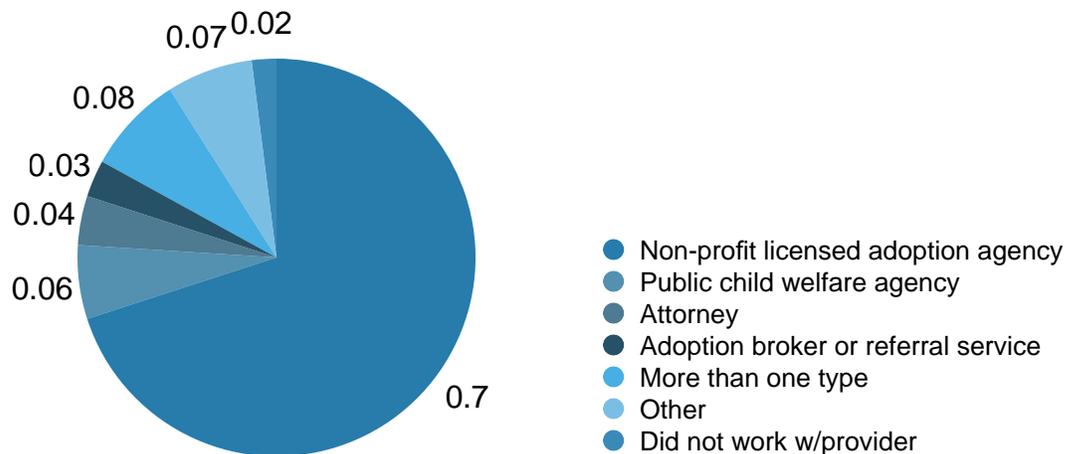
Those who reported that they used the Internet (n=934) did so for a variety of purposes. The most frequent was to learn about adoption providers. Common additional reasons were to learn about waiting times, fees, the types of children who were available or needed homes, laws related to adoption, available post-adoption support, and information on openness in adoption.

Types of Information Accessed:	Percent
Adoption Service Providers	87%
Waiting times	72%
Fees	69%
Types of children needing homes	69%
Law (revocation, birth father rights, time to finalization)	56%
Post-adoption services	43%
Openness in adoption	41%
Prospective adoptive parents paying for expectant parents expenses	18%
Legally binding post-adoption contact	13%

Adoptive Parent Selection of a Service Provider

While most respondents made considerable use of the Internet to learn about adoption generally, fewer used it to select a provider to help them adopt. Forty percent said they did not use it at all, 23 percent used it "some" and 20 percent used it "a lot." Participants were asked to describe the type of agency, group or individual they decided to use once their initial research was completed. By far the most common was a non-profit licensed agency. For those who indicated they used an "other" source, they were most often providers that specialized in international adoptions, or they had arranged an adoption on their own.

Type of Services Providers Used

Legend:
- Non-profit licensed adoption agency
- Public child welfare agency
- Attorney
- Adoption broker or referral service
- More than one type
- Other
- Did not work w/provider

Adoptive parents were also asked to select the top three reasons they chose the provider they did. Most used information from their immediate circle, relying on advice from those known to them.

Reasons for Choosing Adoption Provider

Referral from family, friend or professional	44%
The provider was responsive to my questions and concerns	35%
The provider offered supportive service before, during and after the adoption	34%
The provider was kind and respectful to me	33%
Location of provider	27%
Cost	19%
Provider philosophy on openness matched adoptive parents'	17%
Worked with provider in past	7%
Best website	3%
Most ads, most outreach online	2%
Other reasons (e.g. general reputation, foster to adopt situation)	28%

Adoptive parents were asked to list any other reasons for their choice of provider and many did so – often citing several reasons. For example:

> *"Great reviews from other adoptive parents, long standing history of success, ethical MD who ran the overseas operation, and not a huge backlog of waiting families."*

The most-common category of comments related to the provider's reputation. Parents often noted that the provider was recommended by someone they respected or had been positively commented upon by other parents. Some respondents specifically identified their basis for this classification, including that they had read reviews on Facebook forums, adoption.com or other sites.

> *"The provider was one of three that were recommended and did not have anything negative on the three Ethiopian Yahoo! Message boards I'm on. We had initially planned to go with someone else, but after reading about unethical practices and suspected trafficking of children, they were eliminated pretty quickly. The adoption agency we went with has been very ethical and upfront with everything we have encountered."*

> *"The provider had a good reputation and a long-standing commitment*

> *to children's services in all the countries in which they work; the provider was conservative in its advertising and didn't make unrealistic promises; the provider was more than an adoption agency – they do work within the countries they serve… and are children's advocates."*

Not all attempts to locate reliable providers were successful. As one noted: "*Based on our research (which later turned out to be wrong), the agency appeared to be ethical and culturally competent.*" Another said: "*Saw a child on an international listing and his case was with this agency. (Pretty much the worst way to find your agency).*"

The second most-common "other" category for selecting a provider was that the child was in foster care, and thus there was not a choice of agency, but rather the agency was dictated by the child's status.

Values described the third-largest category, with many responses tied to the provider's religious focus (primarily Christian). However, a few specifically said they chose a broker or agency because it was <u>not</u> religious (or Christian). Several who adopted internationally noted that the provider's commitment to serving children and families in the country of origin fit with their own values. Others reported their choice was influenced by the provider's commitment to pregnant women considering adoption.

Other aspects of providers' work also appealed to the values or beliefs of parents. Illustrative comments include:

> *"This agency matched our beliefs and we knew we could trust them after meeting with them. We had had a meeting with another agency first, but left the meeting feeling very discouraged and not agreeing with the things they were saying and doing."*

> *"The provider had a strong reputation locally and an ethical philosophy regarding their role in the adoption process - to assist women experiencing an unwanted pregnancy regardless of their ultimate decision to parent or choose adoption."*

> "*Orphanage (supported by provider) was providing child welfare services to older, non-adoptable children in their care with our fees.*"

Values were also noted in terms of agency openness to serving non-traditional families or prospective adoptive parents whose situations meant other providers would not readily serve them – such as people who were older, or single wishing to adopt internationally, or gay and lesbian adults.

Several respondents noted that their selection of provider was tied to the type of child they wanted to adopt, or that the agency worked in the country from which they hoped to adopt. For example, one parent wanted to adopt "a healthy deaf

child," and went with the agency that had such a child available. Others said they selected providers who allowed them to pick the gender of the child they adopted.

Adoptive Parent Use of the Internet in Finding a Child

While many parents used the Internet or social media to learn about adoption and to examine providers, it was much less common for them to use the Internet to find a child or be matched for one. Eighty- five percent of respondents reported the Internet had no role in their being matched with expectant parents or a child. Just 6 percent said that the Internet was used "a lot" in the matching process.

Adoptive parents were asked what methods they used to assist them in being matched. The most common was a traditional hard-copy profile or "Dear Birth Parent" letter to introduce them to expectant mothers and their partners – noted by 35%. The most common online method was creating such a profile or letter to be placed on the provider's website, reported by 16 percent. Few created a personal website or blog (7%), created online profiles on general sites like Parentfinder or adoption.com (6%), or placed ads on Facebook or other social media sites (4%).

When asked what other online methods they used to achieve a match, most said this did not apply to them; they adopted internationally, from foster care or before the time that the Internet or social media were in wide use. Among those who did use online methods, a few noted other strategies, including posting on Craigslist, establishing a toll-free phone number, using Google AdWords to promote their profile, participating in Yahoo! chat groups, sending electronic letters to the agency to email to expectant parents, making and posting videos, or finding their children on the Heart Gallery (a site for older, waiting children) at www.heartgallerykids.org. One parent noted the effectiveness of using social media:

> *"Created an open adoption page on Facebook to extend our profile materials and leverage our personal networks. Wrote frequently about our adoption process on a personal Tumblr blog, which is ultimately where our birth family found and initiated contact with us without first contacting an agency."*

Adoptive Parents' Pre-placement Contact with Birth Families

In an attempt to determine the extent to which the Internet and social media (as opposed to other methods of connecting) were used <u>before</u> the adoption, adoptive parents were asked about the nature of pre-placement contact. For most respondents, such contact using the Internet or social media was uncommon, most likely due to the large number of international adopters in this sample. The exception was email, used often by 44 percent. Telephone calls were the most-common type of contact (over 90%), followed by face-to-face meetings.

Nature of Pre-Placement Contact

	A Lot	Some	A Little	None	Prefer not to Answer
Telephone Calls	43%	39%	9%	8%	1.3%
Face to face meeting	37%	28%	13%	20%	1.3%
Emails	44%	23%	10%	22%	1.6%
Social media	1%	3%	6%	87%	1.7%
Skype/other video	0%	1%	2%	95%	1.6%

Adoptive Parent Search and Reunion

Most adoptive parent respondents had not used the Internet to search for their children's birth family members. Of the 962 who responded to this question, only 37 percent reported they had used the Internet to help with search. The most commonly used method was Facebook or other social media sites, the case for 76 percent of those who had used the Internet. Sixty-nine percent used Google or other search engines to try and locate birth family members, and 37 percent used online public records. Few (under 7%) reported using non-profit or for-profit searchers or confidential intermediaries or state or national registries.

Most parents who used the Internet to search did so without their children's involvement (90%), while 6 percent worked with their children on the search. Respondents who used the Internet to search were most likely to find general information about their children's birth families (35%), but were slightly less likely to locate members of the birth families (34%). Just 18% reported that they found specific family members and only 10% successfully established contact.

Adoptive Parent Use of Internet for Post-Adoption Affiliation and Support

A common use of the Internet and social media was for information, advice and support. Of the 962 parents responding this question, the most common use was for online groups for affiliation and connection. Adoptive parents often created and participated in online communities – sometimes linked to their children's country of origin or special needs. Interestingly, adoptive parents by far reported more online help from other adoptive parents as very useful (80%) compared to online advice or support from professionals (19%).

	% of Respondents Using	%found "very helpful"
Locating information about topics important to you as an adoptive parent	89%	52%
Online education/training about adoption issues	77%	33%
Online advice or support from adoption professionals	65%	19%
Online advice or support from other adoptive parents	43%	80%
Sharing your thoughts and experiences about adoption through a blog or webpage	50%	21%
Finding information online about particular issues or aspects related to your child (e.g. information about child's original culture and language, information about specific behavior or emotional challenges, etc.)	79%	43%

Respondents reported a variety of other uses of the Internet to inform or guide them as parents and to maintain important connections. Many described multiple ways they use the Internet and social media – from online support, to arranging outings with other families, to keeping in touch with staff from their child's orphanage or maintaining contact with previous foster parents, to finding information on and support for specific issues they face such as Reactive Attachment Disorder or Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, to simply being "in the company" of fellow adoptive parents. Many described the Internet as a valuable way to keep their children connected with their culture or country of origin, or to learn more – from language to hair care – that helps them be better parents. Participants' comments illustrate the range of ways the Internet can be used post-adoption:

"[We use the Internet] as a member of communities whose focus is just to share milestones, like first day of kindergarten, new hairstyles that work for our children's ethnicities and country of origin, etc... Also, as a member of communities that meet up for playdates, girl scout troops, etc...specifically for our children's ethnicity and country of origin."

"I founded a nonprofit organization for transracially adoptive families using Meetup. Eventually, we broadened our scope to include the use of Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter to share information on educational events and relevant articles regarding all aspects of and voices on

adoption. We are currently building a website, with a blog component, to support our nonprofit and have plans to use Pinterest, Tumblr, and possibly other social media resources. The demand for a community such as the one we have built is more significant than I anticipated. Additionally, I have received inquiries from other online resources regarding adoption and race - requests to speak, provide a presentation, be interviewed, or to collaborate on a mutually beneficial project. It's pretty amazing."

Adoptive Parent and Adopted Child Contact with Birth Family Members

The Internet has dramatically increased the capacity for the parties to adoption to find and connect with one another. Further, it has enabled those with open adoptions to maintain contact more easily. Adoptive parents were asked about their use, as well as their children's use, of the Internet in having contact with birth family members (n=996). Thirty-two percent of adoptive parents reported that they used the Internet for such contact, as did 11 percent of their children. Given that almost half of children (46%) were age 12 or older at the time of the survey, this was somewhat surprising. However, the large number of international adoptees (for whom contact may be less likely) may partially explain this.

Twenty-five percent of parents reported that contact with birth family members was through the parents' site or account, and 50% reported their daughter or son had unmediated contact through her or his own account. Fourteen percent of parents had access to their children's accounts, thus were able to monitor contact. When the Internet was used for contact, social media and email were the most common types of online communication.

Adoptive Parent & Adopted Child's Contact with Birth Family Members

53
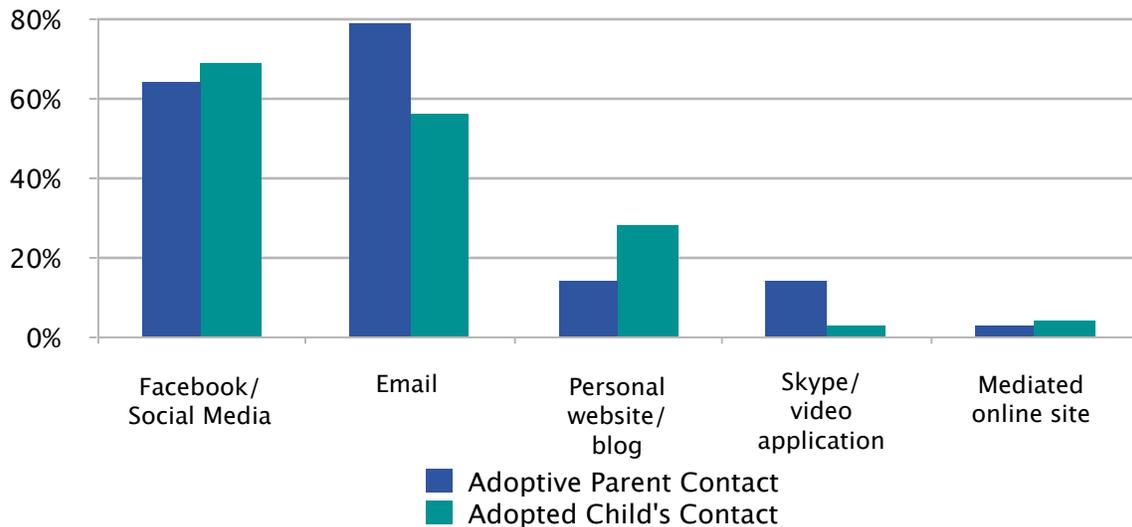
The most common uses of the Internet between adoptive parents and birth family members were to provide pictures and updates, and to arrange times to meet.

Share pictures/updates	84%
Arrange visits	41%
Communicate health/mental health information	22%
Get information to answer child's questions	17%
Prefer not to answer	3%

Several parents reported on additional uses, including trying to find birth parents when they cease contact. Some noted the advantage of being able to show children pictures and information about birth family on Facebook, even when contact was intermittent.

> *"My son's birthmother moves and changes contact information frequently. The only constant seems to be Facebook so we are "friends". She is not proactive in letting us know about changes in her life (moves, recent divorce) and frequently does not reply to our outreach so Facebook is one of the few ways we have to know what is going on in her life."*

Others said they use the Internet to check in with birth family members about their lives and families as a means of generally keeping in touch. Social media are also used to develop or maintain contact with birth siblings and extended family members. A few noted that they check social media sites to see if their children and birth parents are having contact they did not know about.

Forty-one percent of those who reported they used the Internet and social media found these methods were "very important" in their relationships with birth family members, and another 28% found them somewhat important. Just 15% reported that the Internet and social media were not important in maintaining contact.

Adoptive Parent Online Relationship `Rules' and Unwanted Contact

Few respondents (n=103) reported on the arrangements they had made when their children had online contact with birth relatives. Most of these few respondents (51%) had not discussed rules or expectations about such contact. Twenty-five percent had negotiated rules and another 12% had established rules that they asked birth family members to abide by.

The vast majority (94%) reported that their children had not had contact (either online or otherwise) from birth family members that adoptive parents did not want or expect. In the 41 cases where such contact did occur, most (54%) allowed it to continue and some welcomed it. Most revealed some reservations – reporting that they were "friendly but cautious" or double-checked to make sure the people contacting them were really who they purported to be. They often discussed the issue with children who were old enough, advising that they be careful. Others

arranged for contact to be mediated. One parent, who adopted a child who had experienced maltreatment, described a journey toward accepting the birth mother and establishing a relationship that illustrates what can result via communication:

> *"At first we were frightened. It was only a year into our adoption and we had [Protective Services] version of events of how the kids came to be wards, hers was different. And she was angry about all of this. She told us she knew where we lived, had our phone number, and it was entirely unsettling. Our kids know their mom deals with addiction and mental health issues, and the kids were neglected growing up…But what became clear is that she loved her kids, she wanted to do what was best for them, she was incredibly supportive that they had a two mom family…and that part of her re-connecting was processing her grief and loss…Once we got to know her better, and over time as she's realized we are not a barrier, our relationship has gotten much better."*

Adoptive and birth families also had contact beyond the Internet. Thirty-seven percent of adoptive parents reported other contact. The most common type was visits (reported by 72% of those responding to this question), which most typically occurred a few times a year, followed by letters, phone calls and texting.

Almost one-third of the few parents who had unwanted contact (31%) took action to end it. Responses ranged from discussing previously agreed-upon rules with birth family members and requesting that they respect them, to deleting contacts and changing privacy settings, all the way to threatening or engaging in legal action. Some parents said that they simply did not respond to contact and that it did not continue.

Another use of the Internet is to learn about or follow the activities of others. Respondents were asked whether they followed members of their children's birth families on the Internet without their knowledge. Over a third (34%) of adoptive parents reported they had done so.

Adoptive Parents' Views on Risks of the Internet in Adoption

Respondents were asked two open-ended questions about the Internet to learn about their perceptions of its problematic aspects, as well as its benefits. The first of these two questions was: *There is growing concern in the adoption community that the Internet and social media promotes unethical or overly-commercialized practice in adoption. When using the Internet or other social media, what have you seen or experienced, if anything, that you felt was unethical or overly commercial?*

Six hundred and seventy-nine parents answered this question; 49 percent of them identified concerns. By far the most common category was the commercialization of adoption made possible or intensified by the Internet and social media.

Commercialization. Respondents expressed discomfort with the way prospective parents are marketed, the "slick" and intrusive advertising in adoption, and the growth of adoption as a profit-making enterprise rather than a service to provide families for children. They said it sometimes seems as if parents or children are commodities, "like a toaster or a car." This not only raises serious ethical and legal

issues, but can also lead to higher costs – putting adoption out of reach for some families.

> *"It appears adoption is a booming industry. I am saddened that it appears to be a money-making business. There are many couples that cannot afford the outrageous fees that are now being required by these agencies."*

> *"All the marketing around adoption made me feel like I purchased a product."*

Several parents said that the accepted use of the Internet by providers and prospective adoptive parents has led to parents having to "sell themselves," and that "ads" promoting specific couples seeking to adopt both contributed to the commodification of adoption and resulted in processed, unrealistic presentations.

> *"Many profiles appear to be professionally written and almost "plastic" in a "sales" attempt to find a BMom. Every profile has the same photos of the Dad golfing, the Mom gardening, etc. It can feel a little forced or contrived."*

 A few parents noted their particular dismay when ads or sites presented fees connected to types of children, sometimes with lower ones associated with children of color. One noted:

> "[I am concerned about] *Ads posted with prices, higher prices for selected races, lower prices for special needs...if the money paid is truly for services provided by adoption agencies/lawyers/etc.- the fees would be the same across the board."*

Privacy. Adoptive parents expressed uneasiness about the Internet's impact on privacy. They were concerned that the privacy of adopted or waiting children was violated when parents posted pictures (including before the child had even been placed with them), or blogged about or otherwise made public aspects of their children's lives. Some objected to agencies photolisting waiting children or presenting aspects of their histories that contain personal information.

> *"I am uncomfortable about people blogging about their child's life, adoption, etc. I think adoptees have enough emotional issues (grief/ loss) to work through without having it blogged about without their consent."*

> *"I think adoptive parents tell too much,…publicly about their adoptions. The stories are also the children's. To have intimate detail told before they grow up gives them no choice about who knows what."*

Another set of comments described unease about "Dear Birth Mother" postings or other presentations on web sites by those hoping to adopt – including information that prospective adoptive parents choose or feel compelled to share about private aspects of their lives, and that such sharing can leave them open to being taken advantage of. Some Internet sites also can allow outsiders (including those seeking business) to monitor and gain access to vulnerable pregnant women and hopeful pre-adoptive parents.

Some respondents also noted that when their information is available on the Internet, it's possible for birth family members to have contact with minor children beyond what the adoptive parents would prefer or feel is best.

Fraud/misrepresentation. A number of comments focused on the impact of the Internet in perpetrating fraud or, at the least, presenting incorrect or deliberately misleading information to a large audience. Parents said they had been defrauded or came close to being so, or reported fraud experienced by other parents.

"We have been scammed, we have been manipulated and we feel the Internet has had a profoundly negative effect on adoption."

"The 'professional' we met our daughter's birthmother through online ended up stealing money that was supposed to go to birthmother for her expenses as required by law."

Most of the adoptive parents did not experience fraud per se but, rather, described unethical practices that were misleading or unethical. These included hidden fees and false advertising – including presenting children who were not really available.

"Too many promises…And a thorough lack of pertinent information about services and fees that are hidden and not exposed until a family is well on their way with [a provider]. Little to no information provided by attorneys until a large fee is paid in person."

"Misinformation regarding wait times and hardships with international adoption, which would lead one to think that the process is easier and faster than it really is."

"Guarantees of 'quick placement' (or placement at all), advertisements of wait times, exclusive focus on websites or ads on the adoptive family and 'getting a child,' rather than on child welfare and the birth family."

"Adoption agencies inappropriately place pictures of waiting children on FB pages frequented by adoptive parents. They are essentially using a bait and switch approach, as those children pictured are not necessarily available for adoption by the time a family might decide to adopt. Also, this practice smacks of advertising children."

"I also see ads for Adoption Facilitators who make claims of matching birth parents with adoptive parents. They do indeed do this, but they do not inform clients that the thousands of dollars they spend are only for the "match" and the family ends up having to pay thousands more dollars to an adoption agency to provide post-placement supervision services and finalization services in order for the adoption to be finalized. There should be laws against this . . . perhaps that is why

many states do not permit adoption facilitators to 'practice' in their states. However, there are no laws preventing them from advertising in any state as far as I am aware."

Concerns about impact on birth parents. Several parents specifically noted the potentially coercive effect of online solicitation on expectant parents, such as online facilitators that do not provide sufficient support to pregnant women to make an informed decision or provide services to them after adoption. Adoptive parents were sometimes appalled at the frequent ads they saw, encouraging women to place their children while offering rent, cell phones, shopping sprees and the like.

"[My concern is] Agencies that promise EMs [expectant mothers] the world, lavish gifts, accommodations, etc. bordering on bribery to get them into "the program." … And sometimes people in a confusing and vulnerable can be easily swayed. The Internet allows more and more of these places to pop-up and be easily viewed. I feel it can be overwhelming and confusing to EMs."

"There are TONS of agency ads everywhere telling expectant moms how they can get expenses paid, how great adoption is, etc. that make me think of baby buying because paying expenses for the mom is so prominently featured. I fear it coerces potential birth moms to seek an adoption plan for money."

"My concern with that is that the birthmoms are not getting the services they need to make an informed choice. I would never want to be in an adoption where the birthmom later felt coerced and or did not have services to help her."

A related concern was that the information provided to expectant mothers could be geared to convince them that they were incapable of raising their children or that they could never measure up to the smiling and financially comfortable couples seeking to adopt.

"[I am concerned about] Things that overly encourage young pregnant women to place their child for adoption and try to convince them it is in their child's best interest – without any regard to the particular woman's situation. Some young women make excellent mothers. It's like [Internet sites] are trying to produce more goods for the adoptive parent market. If a mom and dad cannot be parents to the child, then adoption is a wonderful option, but to fish for babies is sickening."

Some noted that adoption providers "troll" websites and chat rooms for pregnant women. Examples included ads soliciting pregnant women on support message boards for birth mothers. Birth parents in this study noted similar concerns, indicating that sometimes offers for help turned into nothing more than pressure to place their children.

Other concerns. A large number of concerns did not fit into clear categories, but generally expressed concern about the Internet's negative impact on adoption. For

example: *"the idea of arranging adoptions without an agency for vetting is disturbing to me*" or *"[on the Internet] it's difficult to know what is or isn't legitimate"*.

Some spoke to their complicated feelings about the Internet – that it both contributed to and complicated adoption.

> *"I have mixed feelings – on one hand the use of 'advertising' to try to find children a family seems inappropriate. However, if it finds the child a loving family then as long as it is well-monitored I can see its role. The use of blogs and websites is usually a sensitive and positive medium for adopted families, parents and children to meet, chat and share, however recently I have seen some rather nasty and narrow-minded discussions that could cause upset and possible damage…"*

Adoptive Parents' Views on Benefits of the Internet in Adoption

The question about the benefits of the Internet read: *The Internet has led to new opportunities to learn about adoption, for families to be established, and for parties to better maintain connections. When using the Internet or other social media, what have you seen or experienced that demonstrates the benefits of the Internet?*

While many adoptive parents cited concerns, even more emphasized the positive aspects of the Internet and social media to them and to adoption generally. Parents answering this question (n=671) saw it as a powerful tool for making adoptions more likely and preparing them for the process. In particular, they cited the Internet's value in providing information, support, affiliation and contact with birth family members after adoption.

Adoptive parents were asked a second open-ended question aimed at identifying the benefits of the Internet and social media on adoption: *The Internet has led to new opportunities for people to learn about adoption, for families to be established, and for parties to better maintain connections. When using the Internet or other social media, what have you seen or experienced that demonstrates the benefits of the Internet to the field of adoption?*

Fifty-one percent of parents responded that they had no concerns about the Internet. A few responded with affirmations of the Internet's value, such as making adoption a much more public issue, providing helpful connections from adoptive parent to adoptive parent, and generally "finding it very helpful." A few parents specifically spoke to the benefits of the Internet in countering unethical practices:

> *"I feel that it is the opposite - the Internet gives people a platform to speak out against unethical practices and actually reach others who could otherwise fall prey to them. In fact, I think there is far more discussion of adoptive ethics online than off."*

Information. By far the most common benefit cited related to information, especially the way the Internet allows for incredible reach – that the world of knowledge and experience is available any time "at one's fingertips". Adoptive parents felt armed by such information, so they could assess services by reviewing both content and reading the opinions of others. They could explore adoption resources early in their process, and they could gather information to assist them in

parenting, in supporting adoption generally and even in advocacy.

> *"Specifically, the Internet and social media allows for people who are interested to read about and learn more about adoption options at their leisure without having to make a commitment of time or seriousness. I think allowing people to do that informal research likely leads to more people following up and eventually adopting."*

> *"As [an adoptive parents and] an adoption professional myself I am able to find out about leading edge research/other information and to share my own insights."*

> *The ability to explore the various ways to adopt, the rules for each situation, the cost, the wait, etc., makes it so much easier than having to call agency after agency after agency. You can clearly make a more informed choice.*

Several parents also noted the importance of gaining information about the experiences, beliefs and feelings of other members of the adoption community. The blogs of adult adoptees, who "provided perspectives beyond that of adoption as a simple, happy ending" were noted.

> *"Net [The Internet] has provided an eye-opening opportunity to understand the point of view of adoptees. Traditionally, adoption was presented as a win-win-win situation where everyone, birth parent, child and adoptive parent wins. Often the birth parent and adopted child's point of view is even ignored in the celebration of the adoptive parents getting what they want -- a child. The reading I have done through the net (yahoo groups, support group listserv, blogs, etc.) has helped me see more clearly that there is a lot of pain and loss as a result of adoption. Adoption is not just about me (the adoptive parent) and my success. I look for opportunities all the time using the internet to learn more about the point of view of the children and the birth parents."*

A subset of parents identified the value of the Internet in providing them with specialized information and support that was often difficult to find otherwise. Parents identified the value of sites that educated them about specific emotional or behavioral issues, and the support found on such sites from other parents grappling, for example, with attachment difficulties, children's reaction to trauma or children with physical challenges. They also spoke to the support they found there.

> *"I would never have been able to become a parent capable of raising my severely traumatized child without the support of my on-line parent listserv."*

Community. Respondents repeatedly spoke to the power of connecting with peers who shared their interests or concerns, who could offer support and advice, or could share their experiences. One noted, *"We feel as if we are part of a new trans-national community. Love it!"* Parents talked about the importance of chat rooms and blogs, which provide a chance to communicate with others who understand their situations.

> *"As an adoptive parent, online communities of fellow adoptive parents have been extremely important to me. Reading blogs written by all parts of the triad has also been extremely important an eye-opening…*

> *The Internet has allowed me to feel more a part of a larger adoption community than I think would otherwise have been possible in my day-to-day life."*

> *"When I did my first 2 adoptions, I was isolated. After the internet came, we could build connections with families all over the world. This was crucial as we moved through all the ages and stages with our children."*

Contact. The Internet enables ease of connection between birth family members and adoptive families. Parents spoke of the benefit of social media sites to quickly and regularly share updates and pictures.

> *"My daughter was able to connect with her birth family on her own at age 14 through Facebook. It was a big shock to her birth family at the time, but since then, they have an ongoing face-to-face and internet/ phone/texting relationship."*

> *"Facebook allows me to stay connected to both of my children's birth families on a regular basis through private messaging and seeing each other's posts and photos regularly."*

> *"I have seen that it can be an incredible benefit in helping to maintain open international adoptions. I know a significant number of adoptive families who have frequent contact with their [internationally adopted] children's first families through email, FB, etc. The number is continuously growing."*

Several parents noted that the Internet affords ease of contact with others important to their children, including former foster parents and orphanage staff.

> *"The ability to maintain contact with our child's foster family and to follow one another's lives in a way that feels organic and natural as a connected set of families rather than the forced and artificial means of sending letters through our agency."*

A few parents felt the Internet and social media actually made relationships closer. The speed of information-sharing and the ability to share day-to-day activities, led to fuller integration of the two families.

> *"The community of support and concern that is created through blogs and online forums is a huge benefit. My daughter's birth mother and I both blog, and have co-written posts together. It has definitely strengthened our relationship to write together in a public forum where we can tell our individual stories and, collectively, the story of our daughter and the family we chose to create to love and care for her."*

Other adoptive parents noted that the Internet enables them to be connected to birth families, but with separation or distance that feels protective – or that contact could encourage or protect birth family members.

> *"I probably would not have kept in contact with my children's birth*

mother due to her mental illness but with the internet I'm able to and it is less threatening since I have the option to 'turn it off.'"

"It makes it really easy to connect with our daughter's birthmom because she is shy. So, sending emails has become a great way to stay connected without the pressure of talking on the phone."

Education. Some parents specifically noted the education readily available through the Internet – that they could take courses, research issues and increase their knowledge as parents, while others noted education that helped them to assess which service providers were "above board."

"The internet provides an opportunity to lift the veil on the processes, practices and complexities of adoption. There are some websites - usually professional services (ASPs) which are very informative."

"When we were deciding on a country and then on an agency, I was able to learn from people who were much farther down the road than I. We quickly eliminated Guatemala because of ethical issues, thanks to what I learned in online forums. No agency working with Guatemala told us about these issues, of course. And I was able to eliminate an agency we were considering because of red flags other parents raised. A little research turned up serious concerns, and sure enough, the woman who ran the agency was in jail a year or two later! I had met her in person and really liked her. I thought she seemed passionate as well as ethical. It was only Internet research and AP forums that clued me in."

Matching. The Internet also led to opportunities for families to be formed. Matching occurred as a direct result of the Internet for several parents. Some also mentioned the potential of the Internet to promote matches**.** In particular, they noted the value of photolisting waiting children and the importance of the Internet in finding families for older children or others who had not readily found homes.

"You can locate a birthmother in a shorter amount of time than using an agency. We did our own advertising at no cost on Craigslist and were contacted by no less than 30 viable birthmothers."

"Beautiful profiles of children and youth available through the foster care system… make them more appealing than the theory of adopting an older child.

Reduction of the stigma of adoption. The Internet can also serve as a method of reducing stigma associated with adoption and promoting it as a positive way for families to be formed. Not only can the Internet improve general understanding about adoption, it also can serve to reduce negativity relating to birth parents.

"Increased awareness regarding the need for adoption and putting a face to the actual need. It is harder for potential families to turn away when they virtually meet children that are waiting."

> *"Seeing that hopefully some stereotypes are slowly changing. My son's birthmother is a perfectly wonderful person to have in his life."*

Further, the Internet can challenge the tradition of secrecy that has undermined many who might have benefitted from connections.

> *"I think it will push the trend toward openness, which is good for kids, because people will realize that nothing stays secret anymore."*

Search. Adoptive parents noted that efforts to search for their children's birth family members are also enabled by the Internet. The Internet has allowed for speedier and more varied methods of searching.

Adoptive Parents Summary of Findings

Like the adoptees and birth parents who responded to this survey, adoptive parents used the Internet and social media often and for many purposes. They identified many actual and potential problems, but were more likely to stress its many benefits. By far the most important of these was the power of online communities. Adoptive parents were able to connect with one another, share aspects of their lives and offer support, information and advice. Many reported on the value of connection to other parents of families *like them* – whether those are families who adopted from foster care; whose children have special challenges; who adopt from a particular country or orphanage; or who are coping with children's questions, concerns about search or a host of other issues.

The Internet was also regarded as very valuable because of its broad reach, the extent of information it makes available and the ease with which it can be obtained. This was true across the adoption process, from gathering information about adoption or assessing providers, to sharing their profiles, to learning about issues and preparing for adoption. They also continued to educate themselves and receive training after adoption. The Internet provided them with information in ways and to a degree that were never possible before.

The Internet and social media were valued by adoptive parents for their utility in locating birth family members and, in particular, for maintaining contact easily. Like adoptees, they sometimes noted the value of the "connection with distance" that the Internet provides – making contact less intimate or intrusive.

Adoptive parents were aware of the risks of the Internet – commercialization and the impact of money and advertising on adoption, threats to privacy, exploitation, fraud and the potential for coercion of birth mothers. Several noted the importance of all parties "proceeding with caution," recognizing that the reach of the Internet is immense, and that it can be hard to evaluate what is accurate or who is trustworthy. As with the other triad members participating in the study, however, the

benefits of the Internet and social media far outweighed its limitations.

PART IV

ADOPTION PROFESSIONALS AND THE INTERNET

Child welfare professionals working in adoption have dealt with significant shifts in practices and the ways they provide services to children and families for decades. Perhaps the biggest change in the past generation has been the "opening" of adoption, from shared information and contact between birth and adoptive families, to more states allowing access to original birth certificates. Adoption workers have had to learn to chart new territory and support their clients in navigating their adoption journeys. Professionals are now facing another reconfiguration of how they provide services as the use of the Internet and online resources grow.

In many cases, rather than getting together in person to talk about adoption, professionals meet with pregnant women and prospective adoptive parents in cyberspace – through websites, online trainings, emails, blogs, forums, Facebook pages and Twitter feeds. Adoption service providers (ASPs) are discovering that they must participate in and understand the online community in order to maintain their place in the field and to provide the best possible support to their clients.

Professionals in both public and private settings were encouraged to participate in DAI's study. Of the 186 who took part, the majority (66%) reported working in a private child welfare agency, while 12 percent worked in a public agency. The remainder reported working in a clinical setting (10%) in positions such as counselors, group facilitators and independent contractors who conduct home studies, in legal settings (3%), or in advocacy (2%). While the job responsibilities in these areas vary, preparing adoptive parents and facilitating placements, along with counseling expectant parents and finding adoptive homes for children in foster care, were most common in both public and private settings.

The professionals who responded to our survey tended to be seasoned workers, with 42 percent employed by their agencies for more than 10 years. Twenty-two percent had been employed for 6-10 years and 35 percent for 0-5 years. Sixty-six percent of those who responded had been employed in the field of child welfare for more than 10 years. Ninety-two percent were female, and 85 percent were Caucasian. Workers varied in age, with the majority (54%) between 46 and 55, 40 percent between 26 and 45, and the remaining 5 percent under 25 years of age.

Professionals' Views of the Internet and Social Media in their Work

The Internet and social media are fairly new to the social service landscape. Many adoptive parents reported that Facebook did not exist at the time of their adoptions, and that the Internet was rarely used beyond searching for an agency or resource. Child welfare professionals reported similarly, adding that times are changing quickly. Most social workers and adoption professionals were trained in how to interact with people face to face; to counsel, guide and educate. Now they are faced with learning to use the Internet to assist adopted persons in locating their

birth relatives or helping adoptive families find a therapist who can help them with a child's challenges. Agencies and professionals are also finding that they need to participate in Internet and social media use in order to access their clients.

Preparation and Training of Professionals on Use of the Internet

The Institute was interested in learning how much training professionals had received about the Internet and social media, and the relationship of that training to their work. Only 34 percent of respondents reported that their agencies provide training on these technologies in adoption practice. Of those, private agency professionals received this type of training slightly more often than did public child welfare workers.

Of those who received training, only 17 percent rated is as comprehensive. Nearly half (49%) rated it as sufficient, and 27 percent as insufficient. Given that the number of workers who received any training was small, and that less than one in five of those reported their training was comprehensive, it is clear that much needs to be done to remedy this reality. Recommendations for training of adoption professionals will be provided in the Donaldson Adoption Institute's *Guide to Internet Use in Adoption.*

Professionals' Use of the Internet

The Institute sought to examine how professionals are using the Internet and social media in their work with children and families. Overall, 71 percent of respondents reported that the use of the Internet in preparing prospective adoptive parents is very or somewhat important.

Workers "frequently used" the Internet to perform a number of their duties when preparing children and families for adoption, including locating resources to improve their own knowledge about an issue, providing information to prospective adoptive parents, and providing training to people who are in the process of adopting. Workers were less likely to use the Internet to provide information to expectant and birth parents regarding termination or surrender of parental rights.

More than half of professionals indicated that they facilitated placements of children into foster and/or adoptive homes. However, the Internet and social media were only used about one-third of the time to feature a child on an agency, state or national website, or to search for relatives who could be adoption resources. Forty-four percent said they used the Internet to review online profiles of waiting parents, while 53 percent used it to generally describe the need for adoptive families for waiting children. It is noteworthy that slightly over one-third believed the activities listed in our survey regarding facilitation of placements did not apply them. Reports of these types of activities may vary by the type of adoption that workers typically facilitate, and this information was not collected as a part of the study.

Professionals were most likely to use the Internet when providing support to children and families after adoption. Those in adoption practice reported that they "frequently used" the Internet to locate resources and information to improve their own knowledge and skills (46%), to assist families in finding resources such as

support groups and counseling (42%), and to help adoptive families meet the ongoing needs of children, such as medical or educational issues (36%).

While professionals reported using the Internet to support families after adoption, it was least likely to be used to provide post-adoption services or support to birth parents, or to assist in searches. This finding is of concern given that many birth parents are typically younger and tend to use mobile devices to communicate within their networks. While it is possible that they receive post-adoption support in person, it is critical to recognize that they need such support, whether from their social networks or from professionals (Brodzinsky & Smith, in press). Not utilizing the Internet or social networking to provide support and information may be a missed opportunity for professionals to continue to help their clients. If birth parents tend to fall out of contact after adoption, professionals should encourage greater use of the online community to support them. This assistance and education should include procedures for helping birth parents to navigate and manage ongoing contact with adoptive families.

Professionals' Views about Post-adoption Contact

Use of the Internet and social media appears to be most prevalent following adoption. This finding is consistent across all of the Institute's surveys. The ease of communication is considered a great benefit, as is the flexibility of communication. Professionals noted that using online forums as a means of communication adds another option for all parties to stay connected. It also provides a less-direct method of contact, which may be more comfortable for some.

> *"Many young birth families have social media as their preferred form of communication; therefore we are communicating with them the way they want to be communicated."*

As with any form of communication, there are always advantages and disadvantages. In some cases, workers noted that the positives include ease of staying in contact, especially across long distances, as well as providing the opportunity to connect more frequently. They also said that contact can be maintained while preserving some level of confidentiality, and that the Internet allows for mediated contact to take place without using professionals, if deemed appropriate. Some workers cautioned that expectations for contact should be a part of the communication to avoid hurt feelings or unexpected contacts.

Professionals credited the Internet for its ability to mediate some of the emotions that often accompany post-adoption contact. One worker said, *"[The Internet] provides an intermediary space for people to connect [that is] less emotionally fraught than face to face meetings or phone calls."* Advantages to adopted children noted by professionals included that having online contact from the beginning allows it to feel "normal" for kids, and allows children who are placed when they are older to "*maintain contact with family and friends from their past, just as non-adopted people can.*" Online contact can be advantageous for birth and adoptive families too, as it eliminates the mystery of how the other is doing.

Professionals also noted negatives to contact. Of particular concern was privacy after adoption. When triad members connect online, it often means not only that they are agreeing to share and view details about each other's lives, they are also opening up their lives to others. According to the Pew Research Center's American Life Project (Pew Research Center, 2013), the average Facebook user has 229 friends. That means when a birth parent shares a photo of her child, it could impact the privacy of the adoptive family since it could be viewed by hundreds or thousands of others (friends of friends, etc. depending on privacy settings). In the

reverse situation, if a birth parent is struggling financially, emotionally or legally, people connected to the adoptive family may be able to see sensitive information.

> *"Depending how contact is facilitated over the internet, there is no guarantee who else has access to that information. Once something is posted online, it is out there, and somewhere it can be found again. For adopted kids, this may be difficult down the road if they come across conversations, or their friends come across conversations about them."*

The greatest risk in this era of post-adoption contact is likely to adopted children. The details around their placements and life circumstances of their birth families (both at the time of placement and beyond) are all parts of their personal stories. A child may not be of age to understand these circumstances, or to communicate what he or she is comfortable with sharing. It's up to the adoptive parents to respect the details of their child's story, keeping in mind that once something is posted online, it is virtually impossible to take back. The definition of privacy is changing significantly with each new technological advance.

As adoptees get older and have access to the Internet, the possibility for contact with birth parents, if not previously established, becomes greater. Professionals who responded to our survey expressed strong concern about adopted children searching for their birth families without their parents' knowledge. Of those who responded, 63 percent indicated that adoptive families had reported unexpected or unmonitored contact with the birth relatives. In contrast, only 21 percent reported that birth parents had informed them of such contact. Workers said this type of contact has been increasing for at least the past five years. The outcomes of these unexpected encounters are mixed, and it appears adopted children tend to reach out to members of their birth families as much, if not more, than birth parents reach out to their children. The greatest risk in these situations is when communication takes place between children who had been in foster care because of abuse and neglect and their birth parents.

"I have worked with three children who have all located a birth parent soon after termination of parental rights and whose parents attempted to get them to run away back to the birth families."

Guidelines and training need to be provided to all foster and adoptive parents so that they are prepared for when, not if, this kind of contact may occur. The training must help such parents to support their children through the emotions associated with the severing of legal ties to birth parents. It also requires assisting adoptive parents to acknowledge their own fears and anxieties about contact between their children and birth families so that they can have open conversations about managing connections. Guidance is also needed to assess the level of contact that is in a child's best interest and to navigate a plan for contact so that adopted children can maintain connections openly and not secretly.

International Adoption and Post-adoption Contact

The connections forged between children and their birth families are not limited to domestic adoption. Although the respondents to our survey tend to work primarily in domestic agencies, those facilitating international adoptions also reported stories of communication online and through social media. One professional noted a few instances of adopted children connecting with their Ethiopian birth families, while

another described a case where a Korean adoptee located a birth brother who did not know he had a sibling who was placed for adoption.

Homeland tours and online searches are becoming more common for internationally adopted children and, in countries such as Ethiopia where birth and adoptive families are meeting each other prior to or at the time of placement, the opportunity for ongoing contact is especially present (Pinderhuges, Matthews, Deoudes, & Pertman, 2013).

Professionals' Views of the Negative Impact of the Internet on Clients

In the past, birth parent counselors spent time talking in person with expectant parents about their options, assisting them in locating needed resources, and supporting them as they made the most emotional and wrenching decision of their lives. For many individuals today, this counseling takes place online or via text, limiting the opportunity to establish relationships. Adoption professionals identified a number of concerns that impact their clients:

➢ The commercialization of adoption and the potential for pregnant women to be manipulated by online ads promising cell phones, apartments and payment of other expenses.

"I have seen a LOT of advertisements for birth parents that promise things that we would never offer. We don't want even the slightest hint of any pressure or obligation with a birth parent, but they are enticed by these ads."

➢ The lack of direct support for birth and adoptive families as they connect and as placement occurs.

"I believe that the lack of direct (person to person) support is the greatest risk. If there can be an adoption competent "go to" support for any adoption circle/triad member to discuss and process thoughts and feelings during and between contacts - I believe this is best."

➢ The vast amounts of information available about adoption, positive and negative, accurate and inaccurate, can overwhelm adoptive parents and put them at risk of sharing too much about themselves or their children. Distinguishing between good and bad providers can also be difficult.

➢ The ease and often instant response to online inquiries that adopted persons will move forward with making contact with birth family members before they are emotionally ready.

"Birth family connections can be great or disastrous especially if there are mental health issues on either/both sides. Connections are being made [between birth family members and children] before a child is emotionally developed enough to manage age appropriately… connections are being made without parental knowledge or consent."

> ➤ That many licensed, full-service adoption agencies cannot keep up with large for-profit facilitators and brokers with million-dollar marketing budgets. *"We are a traditional agency. We do not have the money or man power to design a new website . . . yet we feel like the adoption world is passing us by. I fear that if we wait too much longer to 'catch up' we will be out of the game all together."*

Professionals' Views of the Positive Impact of the Internet on Clients

Despite their worries related to the growing use of the Internet and social media, professionals also noted many positives, especially the ease with which the parties to adoption are able to connect.

> *"The ability to communicate immediately and over distance is great. The ability for adoption circle members to connect via internet allows for greater 'checks and balances' in the greater world of adoption practice."*

> *"I think it helps establish a positive relationship so that a child is able to communicate with birth relatives, and have it be 'normal.'"*

> *"Benefits include access that may otherwise not occur, opportunity for triad members to reflect before responding which cannot be done well face to face."*

In instances where adoptions were once completely closed, birth family members and the children they placed for adoption are reconnecting with the assistance of online resources. These may include social media forums such as Facebook, but also genealogical sites such as Ancestry.com and websites that offer services to conduct DNA testing. Many of the adopted persons who completed the survey reported using these types of resources when connecting with birth relatives.

For more recent adoptees, connections via the Internet may be built into the plan for contact between the birth parents and adoptive family prior to or at the time of placement. These openness agreements (plans for contact between birth and adoptive families post-adoption, which are legally binding in some states) include sharing of phone numbers for texting or calls, visitation, exchange of letters and pictures through the mail, or contact through online sources such as email, utilizing a mediation site such as Child Connect (a method of communicating without exchanging identifying information), being friends on each other's Facebook pages, following a family blog and/or visiting with the use of Skype.

> *"I think it can be another good tool in openness provided that both the birth family and adoptive family respect each other's privacy and boundaries."*

For foster children in need of permanent families, the Internet has reduced geographic barriers and allowed for greater opportunity for networking, especially for those labeled as "harder to place." While workers feel cautious about sharing

too much information, better training and more agency-wide policies are needed about the use of the Internet in identifying safe and loving homes for children.

> *"With the advent of the internet, children waiting to be adopted became real people with names and personalities. In adoption it is a goldmine for the children and families wanting to adopt. It has reduced geographic barriers."*

While professionals are concerned about the accuracy of some information on the Internet for supporting children and families, the benefits of having access to information are undeniable. The Internet and social media have allowed for birth parents, once shrouded in secrecy during the pregnancy, to be more empowered and to connect with each other. Organizations such as Concerned United Birth parents and Bastard Nation have been formed to support the rights and opinions of birth parents and adopted persons. And there are numerous information groups, blogs and websites that offer support to adoptive parents.

> *"It (the Internet) creates a broader network for families to reach out to other families for support when struggling. One of the largest benefits for families is to know they are not alone in their struggles or successes, and often time's it is difficult for families to find people to share their stories and experiences with and gain that extra support."*

Professionals' Views on the Impact of the Internet on Ethical Practice

In addition to listing benefits, all respondents were asked to comment on problems or unethical practices that are occurring. This open-ended question read: *There is growing concern in the adoption community that the Internet and social media promotes unethical or overly-commercialized practice in adoption. When using the Internet or other social media, what have you seen or experienced, if anything, that you felt was unethical or overly commercial?*

Respondents described a number of areas where they perceived unethical practices. Many of these themes were reiterated among all groups surveyed in this study. Of the 115 professionals who provided responses to this question, 73 percent indicated that they have seen unethical practices on the Internet, while 27 percent said they had not seen any. The responses by those who identified unethical practices fell into one or more of the following categories:

- ➢ **Advertising to pregnant women** (enticing them with living expenses, nice places to stay and ease of placing their children for adoption)

- ➢ **Privacy** (too much sharing of children's information online in both domestic and international placements)

- ➢ **Agency ethics** (misleading licensure and location, advertising services that are not actually provided, promising babies to families)

- ➢ **Re-homing** (children being placed in new families without any agency

oversight, underground adoptions)

> **Birth parent scams** (women using prospective adoptive parents for living expenses without any intent of placing a child for adoption)

> **Misinformation about children** (not providing all of the background about a child to prospective families)

> **Other** (lack of professional control and placements with adoptive families who physically or emotionally harm children).

Professionals' Summary of Findings

Professionals in this survey reported a number of job responsibilities aimed at assisting children in finding their permanent families. Use of the Internet in performing those duties was reported, specifically in preparing children for adoption, finding adoptive resources, and supporting families post-adoption. Respondents cited a number of concerns, including the exploitation of women – for instance, the Internet recruitment of expectant parents can lead to adoptions without proper counseling on choices, support resources for parenting or proper counseling throughout the process. Instead, for-profit brokers and facilitators can lure expectant parents with material goods, while making adoption sound easy.

Professionals were also concerned about adopted children and their privacy. Social media and the Internet offer wonderful ways for people to connect, but this sometimes occurs without consideration of what information should be shared about the children. In international adoption, for example, some countries have policies around the sharing of pictures or certain information. In any adoption, parents should be mindful that the adoption story belongs to the child and the family, and once information is shared, it cannot be taken back.

In these quickly changing times, child welfare workers need resources and support for themselves. Few professionals reported receiving any training on using the Internet in their work. Awareness needs to be raised about the importance of this type of training, and programs should be developed so that workers are informed and, in turn, can better serve their clients now and into the future.

PART V

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This landmark survey of adoptees, birth parents, adoptive parents and child welfare professionals working in adoption provides a baseline for understanding the impact of the Internet and social media on adoption. Data from more than 2,000 respondents make clear that these modern technologies are a major and growing part of society's means of communicating, and there's no exception when it comes to adoption. Even those involved in adoption long before the Internet existed make use of online resources in a variety of ways. These include education about adoption issues, learning from and forming communities with others around adoption, and establishing, maintaining or strengthening connections among the

involved parties. Adoption professionals also make use of online resources in helping clients during all stages of the adoption process and beyond.

This study provides valuable insights into all of the participants to adoption, whose experiences are vast and longstanding. The adoption journey for some birth parents in this study began more than 60 years ago and continues today. The Internet and social media have provided opportunities for birth parents, adoptive families and adopted persons that many believed would never be possible in regard to learning about adoption, establishing and maintaining connections, and accessing support and resources.

There is great concern, however, that some expectant parents are being exploited before adoption and are being enticed by online ads, email contact and pressure from for-profit adoption service providers to place their babies instead of receiving support on how to parent or getting counseling to ensure that adoption is truly what they want for their children. Adoptive parents can also be taken advantage of, be scammed out of thousands of dollars (or far more), and children may potentially be placed for adoption when they could have been successfully raised within their families of origin. The consequences of not providing sufficient services can be detrimental for everyone concerned.

While concerns were expressed about the impact of the Internet and social media on adoption, survey respondents overwhelmingly noted that the greatest benefit is the ability for adoption triad members to establish and maintain contact. Use of social media, especially Facebook, has allowed all parties to adoption to feel more a part of each other's everyday lives, without the sometimes emotional consequences that can result from in-person contact, or as a supplement to an already existing connection. An adopted person noted:

> *"I think it [the Internet and social media] creates a less stressful and more informal means for relationships to develop naturally following reunions. Before the internet it was just much more difficult as there was little that could be done but direct contact and hard to develop the little connections that build familial links."*

Summary of Findings from this Study of over 2,000 Respondents:

Use of the Internet and Social Media

- The Internet and social media are widely used, especially after adoption. All groups recognized their incredible reach, ease of use and efficiency.

- The data strongly support that the benefits of the Internet outweigh the risks and challenges, and that both are important parts of how adoptees, birth parents and adoptive parents live their lives related to adoption.

- The Internet provides affiliation and community in ways that sustain and support those who are grappling with issues related to adoption or are seeking connections with others in similar situations.

- First parents reported using the Internet most after adoption – to search for their adult children, to maintain connections with adoptive families and for support from other first parents.

- Adoptive parents often use the Internet to learn about adoption as they begin the process, including learning about agencies and facilitators that might aid them. They are less likely to use it to locate expectant parents.

- Adopted people use the Internet to search for birth family members. They find it to be a powerful and invaluable tool in enabling them to locate, learn about and connect with members of their birth families.

- Professionals use the Internet in many areas of their work, but few receive training about how to best serve their clients in light of the fast-changing times and methods of communicating.

- The Internet poses risks and challenges for all users. Common concerns include commercialization, risk of fraud, commodification of adoption, and potential for manipulation and heightened risk for violations of privacy. A particular concern was the potential for coercion or exploitation of expectant parents and/or prospective adoptive parents by for-profit online entities.

Establishing & Maintaining Connections

- Whether or not an adoption had been open or closed, the Internet and social media enable connections. Without them, even open relationships could be harder to maintain due to people's mobility and changes in life circumstances. The "constant" of a social media connection or access to email facilitates ongoing contact. The most common uses were to maintain connection between birth families and adoptees and/or adoptive parents.

- The Internet allows birth parents to feel more connected and involved in their children's lives. Access to frequently posted information, pictures and updates – typically through Facebook – helped birth parents feel more integrated and part of the lives of their children and their children's families.

- Unwanted or unexpected via the Internet contact was rare. Although some respondents expressed concern about the potential of such contact, few experienced it. Generally, all parties were cautious about imposing themselves on others.

Support, Affiliation and the Lifelong Emotional Consequences of Adoption

- Birth parents, even those who are connected to their children or their children's adoptive parents via the Internet, still felt pain. This was evident most commonly among those whose children were adopted long ago. The Internet provides a place to express such pain and receive support and guidance from fellow birth parents.

- Birth parents worried about how their online image (such as on Facebook)

is perceived by their child and want to present as positive role models.

- Some adoptees reported feeling overwhelmed or daunted by search. While the Internet introduced the possibility of finding birth relatives, some adopted persons did not act on searching or contacting birth family members due to fear, discomfort or a lack of emotional readiness.

- Adoptive parents reported gaining support online, with the majority of that support from other adoptive families rather than from professionals.

- The Internet provides affiliation and community in ways that sustain and support those who are seeking connection with others in similar situations or who may be grappling with issues related to adoption.

- An unanticipated benefit, cited by birth parents, adoptive parents and some adoptees, was that the Internet provides a comfortable middle ground of "connection with distance." This space allowed all parties to learn about one another and develop relationships online that at times felt more comfortable than more-direct contact like phone calls or visits.

Limitations of the Study

This study, to the best of our knowledge, is the first of its kind. While we heard from over 2,000 respondents, they are not necessarily representative of the range of birth parents, adoptive parents and adopted persons in our country. For example, the largest category of adoptive parents adopted internationally, but the significant majority of adoptions in the U.S. are of children from foster children. The birth parents who responded are more likely to represent domestic infant placements that have taken place over a span of 60 years. More than half of the adopted people in the sample were middle-aged adults, and younger adult adoptees were underrepresented.

There are similar issues of representativeness among the other groups in the study. Adoptive parent respondents were more likely to be female, Caucasian, well-educated and have higher incomes than adoptive parents generally. This fact highlights one of the limitations of the Internet itself – it has broad reach, but it does not reach all groups equally.

We heard from far more adoptive parents than any other group. While we were pleased to include the responses of hundreds of adopted adults and birth parents as well, we hope that future studies will include even more representation from these cohorts. The Institute is particularly interested in gathering data from public child welfare workers, as they were less represented in the sample but are responsible for facilitating a large number of adoptions in the U.S.

Another limitation is one inherent in many studies where no sample is selected per se, but rather the sample results from broad and general outreach. This is often an

issue in studies of adoption because no data sets exist of adopted persons, birth parents or adoptive parents from which to sample. Further, those who participated in our study had to have at least a basic comfort with using a computer and with the Internet to go to the survey site [Survey Monkey] and to take the survey online. Thus, it is likely that selection-bias occurred, as those who were uncomfortable with or unfamiliar with the Internet were less likely to participate. In part, this problem was lessened by the nature of the study. We did not intend to determine what percentage of each of the respondent groups did in fact use the Internet, but rather how the Internet was used by those who did so.

Recommendations

This study provides thought-provoking findings that can inform ongoing efforts to render the Internet less risky and more beneficial to those involved with adoption. The information in our surveys, including the hundreds of comments made by respondents, suggests many ways in which the adoption field – and the parties to adoption themselves – should move forward to assure that the Internet and social media serve ethical practice rather than undermine it. Toward that end, the Donaldson Adoption Institute recommends:

1. State and federal policymakers, legislators and law enforcement authorities, in coordination with major Internet companies such as Facebook, Google and Microsoft, should work with ethical adoption experts and organizations to create best-practice standards relating to adoption on the Internet; delineate illegal, problematic and unethical behaviors; establish regimens for monitoring adoption-related marketing and other activity; and create regulations and laws, including punishments, with the aim of providing protections for children, adults and their families.

   The fields of adoption, foster care and child welfare also need to coalesce around the critical issues raised by DAI's research. Further, Attorneys General nationwide should follow the lead of states like Illinois to end the provision of services by unlicensed providers and curb advertising and outreach by out-of-state brokers or those who engage in unethical practices. To that end, DAI is conducting a survey of Attorneys General to determine the extent of complaints they receive and the actions they are taking in response to Internet-based abuses.

2. Leaders in the field of adoption (including foster care) should collaborate on the creation of an awareness/education campaign about the impact of the Internet and social media – and, perhaps most important, should develop and disseminate best-practice standards, training materials, ongoing educational programs and other relevant resources so that social workers and other professionals can guide everyone concerned

about the safe, effective use of these transformative tools.

Almost two-thirds of child welfare professionals responding to our survey had not received any such training and, given the lack of research, it is probably safe to assume that the existing training varies in quality and usefulness. Professionals should receive education and resources that enable them to – among other things – assess the quality of sites and services offered online, teach others to protect their safety and privacy, and effectively provide information in areas such as support services, ethical practices, and search and reunion.

As one respondent commented:

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

We agree. As part of our ongoing work to inform the field, DAI will publish a *Guide to Internet Use in Adoption* in early 2014 to advise all parties about how to better use this technology while reducing its risks. The guide is being developed by a team that includes experts on adoption practice, research, Internet use and legal issues. The Institute earlier this year issued a publication with preliminary cautions, "*Proceed with caution: Asking the right questions about adoption and the Internet.*"

3. Adoption professionals – as a matter of routine – must educate expectant, prospective, adoptive and birth/first parents that most, if not all, adoptions may one day be open, no matter how they begin. As part of the process, professionals should provide everyone concerned with information and resources about openness in adoption, how to shape and navigate relationships and other related subjects.

The likely end of the era of closed adoption is one of the most profound changes brought about by the Internet. Social media sites, personal blogs and many other online mechanisms exist that expedite searches, reunions and connections – with significant positive, negative and unexpected consequences. For instance, as we noted in our previous paper: "Untangling the Web I," minors already can – and sometimes do – locate and connect with biological relatives, and they are sometimes contacted by birth family members without their parents' knowledge. Adoptive parents

need to be informed about this possibility and be equipped to talk with their children about this subject and to manage their need and desire to know.

4. Given concerns about fraud, commercialization and manipulation, systems must be devised – in coordination with law-enforcement authorities, Internet providers and ethical adoption organizations – to provide better information about the differences among the various types of web-based adoption services; in particular, it is vital to explain the differences between charitable, tax-exempt, licensed, not-for-profit agencies and online brokers/ facilitators who are not bound by ethical professional requirements or, often, by sufficiently protective laws or regulations. Indeed, brokers sometimes claim to be "non-profit" even when they do not have the required governmental [501 (c) 3] status.

Adoption is big business, and online brokers boast that they spend "millions of dollars" advertising to expectant mothers or "marketing" to prospective adoptive parents. Adoptees, adoptive parents and birth/first parents in our study reported incidents of "trolling" by businesses on sites where pregnant women look for support or information. Such dubious and unethical practices must be brought to the attention of users and law-enforcement authorities, and must be stopped wherever feasible. At the very least, the field must work to educate expectant parents and prospective adoptive parents about the importance of working with ethical service providers.

Conclusion

For a host of reasons, it is clearly important for many if not most people with adoption connections – personal or professional – to understand the sometimes-invisible role that the Internet already plays in their lives. And, as trends continue toward more-extensive and more-advanced online and mobile communication, greater knowledge and better resources will become increasingly vital. The Donaldson Adoption Institute has provided a few publications to help fill the void of evidence-based information on the Internet's impact on adoption, and will continue to do so with its *Guide to Internet Use in Adoption* in a few months and "Untangling the Web III" in late 2014. For the sake of the millions of children, adults and families for whom adoption is a reality of everyday life, it is our hope that these publications will become a foundation on which law enforcement authorities, policymakers, legislators, Internet companies and adoption professionals will build.

Future Directions

Future work in the area of the Internet and social media in adoption will allow for tracking changes in practice and informing policy so that advocacy for better, more-ethical practice can be pursued. The Institute will continue to collect data in this study in the coming months, in particular with the hope of increasing the sample of child welfare professionals and birth parents, but also to encourage adoptive

parents in all types of adoption and adoptees of all ages to share their knowledge and experience.

As trends continue toward more online and mobile communication, it is critical for the parties to adoption and those professionals who work with them to understand how to best provide appropriate information and support. The Donaldson Adoption Institute's *Guide to Internet Use in Adoption,* to be published in 2014, will provide valuable information and resources to chart this territory. The guide aims to assist in the following ways:

➢ Educate expectant parents on the types of adoption service providers available and what to look for in a legitimate agency that will support them in whatever parenting decision they make.

➢ Educate prospective adoptive parents on vetting service providers, including describing the differences between licensed agencies, non-profits vs. for-profits, facilitators, brokers, referral services and attorneys.

➢ Provide tips for all parties to adoption in navigating the search process, as well as managing contact at all stages of the adoption journey.

➢ Provide professionals with guidance for educating clients about the impact and use of the Internet and social media in adoption.

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APPENDIX I
OVERVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY INTERNET AND SOCIAL MEDIA USE

Ian Lekus

Our findings detailing how the Internet and social media have fundamentally transformed adoption must be understood against the backdrop of the arrival of the information age. Over the past few decades, information technology and computer networking have, literally and figuratively, rewired modern society. The changes in how Americans communicate, connect and carry out their daily lives are nothing short of revolutionary, and they are here to stay. The most dramatic changes might yet lie ahead, but we can already identify a shift underway to ever-more mobile technologies. Like the dawn of the automotive age in the early 20th Century, the emergence of smartphones and social networking have provided teens in particular with new freedoms – and parents and other responsible adults with new concerns, especially in regard to privacy.

Over the past two decades, Americans have rapidly and thoroughly embraced the Internet and social media. In 1995, only 14 percent of American adults used the Internet, but that figure grew to 50 percent by 2000, reached 75 percent in 2008, and stands at 85 percent as of spring 2013.[1] The breadth of Internet use crosses most demographic lines, with no statistically significant difference between men and women (85%-84%) or between whites and African Americans (86%-85%). Researchers found no difference in Internet use among urban and suburban Americans (86% each), with rural use trailing slightly at 80 percent. Internet use surpassed 90 percent for Americans who had attended at least some college and for those whose household income was over $50,000/year. Internet use is lower but still widespread among lower income Americans (76% of those with household incomes under $30,000/year) and those who had not finished high school (59%).[2]

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[1] "Internet Adoption, 1995-2013," Pew Research Center, Pew Internet and American Life Project (hereafter: PIALP), http://pewinternet.org/Static-Pages/Trend-Data-(Adults)/Internet-Adoption.aspx, accessed October 30, 2013. The definitions of Internet use evolve slightly over time. For 1995, internet users include those who computers to access online bulletin boards and information services. For 2000, internet users include those accessing the World Wide Web, while the post-2005 definition also include those who send and receive emails. The 2011 report from the Economic and Statistics Administration and the National Telecommunications Administration in the U.S. Department of Commerce, *Exploring the Digital Nation: Computer and Internet Use at Home,* reported very similar statistics (http://www.ntia.doc.gov/report/2011/exploring-digital-nation-computer-and-internet-use-home, accessed October 30, 2013).

[2] "Trend Data (Adults): Whose Online: Internet User Demographics," PIALP, http://pewinternet.org/Static-Pages/Trend-Data-(Adults)/Whos-Online.aspx, accessed October 30, 2013. Data from this report covers adults (18 and older) and holds a +/-2.3% margin of error. The researchers found of Hispanic respondents used the Internet, but did not report data for Asian Americans, Native Americans, or Americans identifying as multiracial.

Internet use is virtually universal among Americans age 18-29 (98%) and only drops significantly for those over 65 (56%).[3] Similarly, 95 percent of American teens (ages 12-17) access the Internet, with no statistically significant difference between boys and girls (97%-93%) or older and younger teens (96% for ages 14-17, 93% for ages 12-13). Researchers found small but measurable differences of Internet use across race (98% of white teens, 92% of African American teens, 88% of Hispanic teens) and across income (99% whose parents' household income surpassed $50,000/year, 89% for those in households bringing in under $30,000/year).[4] In short order, Internet use has become a core facet of American life. While parents, adoptees and adoption professionals should certainly pay attention to the statistically significant differences in Internet use across income and other lines, the fact remains that Internet usage, especially among teens and young adults, is approaching universal levels.

What is striking is how quickly both the means of accessing the Internet and the use of social media are evolving. The unmistakable trend over the past few years, among both adults and teens, is towards mobile technology. As of early 2013, 91 percent of American adults owned cell phones, with 56 percent possessing smartphones that provide comprehensive access to the Internet.[5] Patterns of teen ownership parallel those of adults. Devices such smartphones can provide teens with immediate access to the Internet, whether at home, school, or out and about, whether or not adult supervision is present.

Beyond any doubt, the Internet, and increasingly mobile technologies, are reshaping how we initiate, sustain and resume relationships of all kinds – from neighbors down the block to long-ago classmates relocated across the country, from familial and romantic relationships to professional and civic association, and countless more ways we connect. These connections take place through myriad forms, including but not limited to Facebook, Google+, Yahoo Groups, Blogspot, Twitter, Pinterest, FaceTime, and Instagram.

Patterns of social media usage among teens draw regular attention from the media, and parents and professionals concerned about adopted teens may wish to keep up-to-date with those trends. Data collected over the past few years offer a more detailed picture of how teens use the Internet. The vast majority of teens (80% as of 2011) used social networking sites such as Facebook. Other significant

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[3] "Trend Data (Adults): Whose Online: Internet User Demographics," PIALP, http://pewinternet.org/Static-Pages/Trend-Data-(Adults)/Whos-Online.aspx, accessed October 30, 2013.

[4] "Trend Data (Teens): Teen Internet User Demographics," PIALP, http://pewinternet.org/Static-Pages/Trend-Data-(Teens)/Whos-Online.aspx, accessed October 30, 2013. Data from this report have a +/- 4.5% margin of error.

[5] "Trend Data (Adults): Device Ownership," PIALP, http://pewinternet.org/Trend-Data-(Adults)/Device-Ownership.aspx, accessed October 30, 2013.

ways that teens regularly use social media include text and video chatting and creating and sharing photos and video.[6] Facebook remains, by far, the dominant social media platform used by teens, with 94 percent of teen social media users maintaining profile on the site as of 2012. Pew Center investigators did report in 2013 that teens "have waning enthusiasm for Facebook, disliking the increasing adult presence, people sharing excessively, and stressful "drama," but they keep using it because participation is an important part of overall teenage socializing."[7]

This discontent suggests there is room for new platforms to gain popularity among teens (it is noteworthy that Vine and Snapchat, whose emergence is driven by teens and young adults, emerged too recently to be fully included in the Pew Center research conducted in the summer of 2012). Nonetheless, with Twitter (at 26%) and Instagram (at 11%) the next most popular platforms after Facebook, it remains clear that the latter remains the social network of record for the moment.[8]

For parents and adoption professionals concerned about the erosion of privacy in the information age, it may come as a surprise how actively teen social media users curate their connections and manage their privacy settings as they build their online social networks. Recent research shows how teens build online social networks that parallel their in-person lives. While most are Facebook friends with people they know, a third of teens are friends with people they have never met in person.[9] Pew Center researchers found many teens only accept Facebook friend requests from people they know, although the threshold of what it means to "know" someone varied, including, for some, other students in their grade level at school.[10]

For today's teens, life without the Internet, social networking and mobile digital technologies is as unimaginable as life without television or cars would be for their grandparents. They are as Internet commentator and educator Marc Prensky notes "digital natives," for whom the distinction between online and offline relationships is blurring, to the extent that such a distinction holds any value. In turn, their parents and other professionals with responsibility for their welfare are digital immigrants, learning the rules of a new society on the fly. In our forthcoming guide, we will discuss best practices to help parents and adoption professionals adapt to this shifting landscape. For the moment, it is useful to understand how near-universal these technologies have become in such a short time, to keep consistently informed as new social networking apps emerge, and to keep in mind that teens are active and engaged participants in maintaining their privacy in the digital era.

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[6] "Trend Data (Teens): Online Activities: What Teens Do Online," PIALP, http://pewinternet.org/Trend-Data-(Teens)/Online-Activites-Total.aspx, accessed October 30, 2013.

[7] "Teens, Social Media, and Privacy," Pew Research Center, http://www.pewinternet.org/~/media//Files/Reports/2013/PIP_TeensSocialMediaandPrivacy.pdf, May 21, 2013, p. 2, accessed October 26, 2013.

[8] *Ibid.,* p. 23.

[9] "Teens, Social Media, and Privacy," Pew Research Center, http://www.pewinternet.org/~/media//Files/Reports/2013/PIP_TeensSocialMediaandPrivacy.pdf, p. 6, accessed October 26, 2013.

[10] *Ibid.,* pp. 40-41.

Given that adoption occurs not only domestically but across national boundaries, it is well worth keeping in mind both the global scope of the information age and the long-term patterns of international adoption to the United States. Since 1971, U.S. citizens have adopted more than 400,000 children from other countries,[11] including 8,668 children in FY2012.[12] China has ranked as the largest provider of children for overseas adoption by American parents in recent years, with significant numbers of children also coming from elsewhere in Asia (especially South Korea, Taiwan, and India), the nations of the former Soviet Union, Latin America, and increasingly Africa (especially Ethiopia and Nigeria). As such, parents, adoptees, and adoption professionals are advised to keep informed about social media networks that reach far beyond the borders of the United States.

The ubiquitous use of the Internet and social media found by the Pew Research Center and others is echoed by those who responded to DAI's survey.

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[11] "International Adoption Facts," Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, c. 2002, http://www.adoptioninstitute.org/FactOverview/international.html; "Historical International Adoption Statistics, United States and World," William Robert Johnston, last updated May 20, 2012, http://www.johnstonsarchive.net/policy/adoptionstatsintl.html.

[12] "FY 2012 Annual Report on Intercountry Adoption," U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Consular Affairs, Office of Children's Issues, January 2013. http://adoption.state.gov/content/pdf/fy2012_annual_report.pdf