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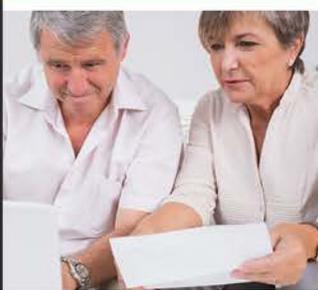
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UNTANGLING THE WEB II

A RESEARCH-BASED ROADMAP FOR REFORM

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



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Lisa and Bernard Selz.

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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.