**Opposing Narratives about Children's Digital Media Use:
A Critical Discourse Analysis of Online Public Advice Given to Parents
in Australia and Belgium**

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Opposing Narratives about Children's Digital Media Use: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Online Public Advice Given to parents in Belgium and Australia

What are the public discourses about parental guidance of children's digital media use in Australia and Belgium? The findings of a multi-method interpretive content analysis suggest that both risks and opportunities are made significant, (re-)claiming power for parents to decide what is realistic. Belgian critical-optimistic commentary suggests that it is normal to see a variety of parenting practices in society, encouraging parents to make informed decisions considering the child's developmental age and mutual trust. Australian public commentary features emotionally-laden, opposing views, whereby restriction seems the golden rule for guiding young children's engagement with digital media. Across the 30 months of the dataset, however, Australian pieces began to give voice to experts who embrace more relaxed rules. The study illuminates how public narratives are sites of political manoeuvring, revealing ideological stances relating to parental mediation and children's media use, sensitive to and reflective of situated meanings bound by space and time.

Keywords: children; digital media; parental mediation; discourse analysis; public advice; narratives

Introduction

Technological advances typically generate a range of public discourses and media representations including pessimistic techno-dystopian and optimistic techno-utopian constructions as well as critical-optimistic discourses that evaluate both benefits and risks (Barassi, 2016). These types of responses are now a well-established pattern, especially when related to children's technology use (Trueltzsch-Wijnen & Aliagas, 2017). This article investigates, analyses, and discusses publicly available advice given to parents about children's healthy online behaviour, and about parents' roles and responsibility in ensuring this outcome. The analysis compares public discourses from two regions, Australian and Belgium, with the understanding that the localised context

in which families with children use the internet, and the local frameworks through which public narratives are constructed, promoted and interpreted, differ across regions (Bulger, Burton, O'Neill, & Staksrud, 2017). The study contributes to existing research regarding publicly available parental advice by highlighting how public narratives are not universal, but rather sensitive to and reflective of situated, cultural meanings; the individual characteristics of the child (Nabi & Krcmar, 2016; Warren, 2016); various family configurations and characteristics (Domoff et al., 2017; Kammerl & Kramer, 2016; Mostmans, 2016); as well as being bound by space and time (Jensen, 2016). The findings indicate that even though Australian and Belgian public discourses revolve around similar tensions, they present different ideological framings of digital parenting and hence constitute different political effects.

Literature Review

Alongside the academic interest in the parental mediation of children's media use and their online risks and opportunities, there is significant public interest in and commentary around the role of parents in shaping children's future digital lives (Mavoa, Gibbs, & Carter, 2017). Public discourses around children's online activities and parents' roles tend to focus on two discourses: 'risk and responsabilisation' and 'benefits and opportunity' (Masceroni & Holloway, 2017). These construct good parenting practices as either protecting children from the dangers of the internet or providing enrichment for children's future educational and employment success, respectively.

The advent of home computers initially saw a wave of optimistic narratives emphasising the technical, economic, and social advantages being offered (Drotner, 1999), ultimately informing parents that their children would be left behind if the family did not have access to computers and broadband internet (Seiter, 2008). Subsequent to this, a more pessimistic 'risk and safety' paradigm became apparent, calling upon

parents to protect their children from online risk and harm. Legacy media increasingly used shocking and confronting news in an effort to hold onto and build their audience base. This content included stories about children at risk (Altheide, 2002) and the vigilance parents need to protect children from harm and risks (Bulger et al., 2017; Livingstone & Third, 2017). The public discourses tended to be fearful for and protective of children (Beck, 1992; Drotner, 1999; Giddens, 1990) and were likely to focus on content risks (e.g. pornography) and contact risks (e.g. paedophiles) (Bulger et al., 2017) and, in terms of video games, children's aggressive or addictive responses (Willett, 2015).

Children's rights discourses, stemming from the United Nations' (1989) Convention on the Rights of the Child, led to a reconsideration of the power balance within families (Chambers, 2012) and a more explicit consideration of children's rights in digital contexts. Within this discourse, children have a right to internet provision, participation and protection (Livingstone & Third, 2017; Third, Bellerose, Dawkins, Keltie, & Pihl, 2014) while participating in digital society in a relatively autonomous manner.

Over the past 15 years, optimistic and pessimistic discourses have run in tandem in the public sphere, with varying degrees of credibility and authority. Existing research, however, lacks a contemporary, situated benchmark. This paper seeks to address this gap in research and present theoretical advancement going beyond a straight-forward categorisation of today's discourses on a pessimistic-optimistic continuum. Instead, this study offers an in-depth understanding of the underlying building blocks of public discourses, acknowledging their cultural and temporal specificity (i.e. what these discourses *are*), as well as their constitutive ideological and political potentialities (i.e. what these discourses *do*).

The Present Study

The study's key research question is: "What are the dominant public discourses about (parental guidance of) children's digital media use in Australia and in Belgium?" In accounting for the situatedness of the construction, and the multi-layered interpretation of public narratives, seven further sub questions are interrogated, reflecting Gee's (2011) "seven building tasks of language". These sub questions are summarised in Table 3, below, and deal with Significance, Practices (or Activities), Identities, Relationships, Politics (distribution of social goods), Connections, and Sign Systems and Knowledge.

The rationale for analysing data from more than one country is to reveal patterns that might otherwise escape a single country perspective (Esser & Vliegenthart, 2017). Two-country comparisons can shed light on similarities and differences and heighten understanding of each country's discursive environment. Comparison, even between two countries, allows for the testing of theories across diverse settings and for the evaluation of the scope and significance of certain phenomena (Esser & Vliegenthart, 2017, p. 2).

The rationale to focussing on Australia and Belgium builds on arguments of similarity, alongside theory-informed hypothesized differences. Capturing data in two different geographical regions, Oceania and Europe, both countries score similarly in the International Digital Economy and Society Index (I-DESI): they belong to the high-performing cluster but are not in the top four countries (Foley, Sutton, Wiseman, Green, & Moore, 2018). Even though both countries share a similar digital economy and western mindset, different histories can be expected to result in cross-cultural variability in ideas about children's development (Harkness et al., 2007; Livingstone & Third, 2017), yielding distinctly separate narratives. Through analysis of these discourses as sites of meaning-making (Mavoa et al., 2017) and political manoeuvring (Gee, 2011),

the spectrum of ideological framings for parental mediation of children's digital media use is acknowledged and made visible.

Belgium is expected to circulate public narratives that tend to be even-handed while engaged with critical-optimistic discourses. This hypothesis is based on previous research showing that Belgian parents often alternate between active and restrictive mediation (Mascheroni & Ólafsson, 2014; Mostmans, 2016; Symons, Ponnet, Walrave, & Heirman, 2017; Zaman, Nouwen, Vanattenhoven, Ferrer, & Looy, 2016). Flanders, the Flemish speaking part of Belgium, established a Knowledge Centre for Media Literacy in 2012, known locally by the name Mediawijs. This Centre marked a shift in media literacy policy from a protectionist to an emancipatory and empowerment approach (Van Audenhove, Mariën, & Vanwynsberghe, 2018), which is likely to have shaped public narratives to be identified across the 30 months of the dataset (1 January 2015 - 30 June 2017).

In contrast, it is hypothesized that the public discourses in Australia will likely be pessimistic or critical in nature. Australia has a long tradition of employing a child protection perspective (e.g., in response to addressing child abuse and neglect) which continues to have impacts. Examples include the Australian policy recommendations on the use of filtering software, partly to protect children from undesirable content (ACMA, 2008); Australian evidence showing that Facebook comments strongly revolve around children's problematic 'screen time' (Mavoa et al., 2017); and guidelines by the Australian Department of Health and Ageing that are oriented towards harm-reduction (Mavoa, 2018). Given the increasing salience of a child's rights approach in research and commentary, however, it is expected that a techno-dystopian approach will be increasingly contrasted with an emerging digital empowerment framework which promotes screen technology use in early childhood classrooms and encourages families

to use these technologies for children's educational benefit (Lonne & Gillespie, 2014; Mavoa et al., 2017). Accordingly, traces of this variety of discourses and potential changes may be increasingly apparent across the 30 months of the dataset.

Method

Sample

The purposive sampling strategy focused on collecting publicly available online materials of Australian and Belgian (viz. Flemish) contributions posted between 1 January 2015 and 30 June 2017. Table 1 gives an overview of the inclusion and exclusion criteria that informed the sampling strategy of materials in Australia and Belgium. The selected time period was of interest because of two events that may have increased the quantum of materials relating to digital media, children, and parental guidance. First, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) revised its recommendations regarding young children's screen-time on 21 October 2016, and this may have impacted the public debate (Mavoa, 2018). Compared to their 2011 policy statement, the 2016 guidelines are more nuanced with respect to content and context. Although the recommendation for families with young children is still in favour of limiting screen time, it is acknowledged that video chatting (e.g. with family) and consuming educational, high-quality content can be valuable under certain conditions including parental co-use and guidance (Council on Communications and Media, 2011, 2016). Second, in Flanders, the Flemish Knowledge Centre for Media Literacy (Mediawijs) launched MediaNest, an online platform with advice for parents, caregivers, and educators on 20 September 2016. MediaNest's mission statement focuses on communicating positive messages without denying risks, which is likely to have shaped public commentary in the Flemish region.

Table 1

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

<u>Inclusion criteria</u>	<u>Exclusion criteria</u>
Publications produced in electronic format (e.g., reports, fact sheets, websites, policy documents, blog posts, piece of commentary, podcasts).	Unavailable online. Academic reports and publications (e.g., journal papers, conference proceedings). Websites and web pages of commercial tech companies. Sources from outlier organisations not known to the researchers or not trusted (e.g., obscure organisations).
Published by a (i) government, (ii) NGO, (iii) newspaper, (iv) non-parenting magazine, (v) non-tech journalists' blog, (vi) tech journalists' blog, (vii) parenting website or forum, (viii) mummy bloggers' website, (ix) parenting magazine, or (x) radio show/ podcast, within Australia/Belgium.	Published outside of Australia. Unavailable in English. Published outside of Belgium. Unavailable in Dutch or Flemish.
Most current version, source published between 1 January 2015 and 30 June 2017.	
Text, images, titles, lists and other content that form an integral part of the main message as intended by the creator.	Not including advertisements, not including (social media) posts or comments that people who are not the author of the item have created.
Implicitly or explicitly intended for an audience that includes parents with young children; Reporting on tips for media education of young children within the age category of approximately 0-8.	Intended for an audience that does not include parents. Reporting on media education of teens or adolescents.
Includes information, tips, tricks, guidelines, or dos and don'ts about parents' media education of their children or describes and comments on parenting practices as an example of what can be considered as (not) good.	Guidelines or tips for schools, unless they are directly related to parents' media education, to inform them about digital parenting.

Search Strategy

The data items were accessed via online databases with search settings based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria and the search words as specified in Table 2. The

Australian dataset used a combination of three databases, including i) a Google Custom Search (Settings: Region: Australia, Sorting: By relevance, All results, Anytime, Tab: All, First page results only), ii) an advanced search in the online Edith Cowan University Library database (Settings: Advanced Search, Keyword Search, Limits: Year 2015-2017, Language: All Languages, Audience: Any Audience, Content: Any Content, Libraries WorldWide), and iii) a keyword search via the online Factiva Database (Factiva accessed through Edith Cowan University online Library. Settings: Keyword Search, Data range: 1 January 2015-30 June 2017, All Sources, All Authors, All companies, All Subjects, All Industries, Region: Australia). The Belgian dataset was developed with a Google Custom Search (Settings: Language: Dutch, Region: Belgium, Time period: 1 January 2015 – 30 June 2017, Sorting: By relevance, All results, Tab: All, First 10 relevant results).

Table 2

Search keywords (translated from Dutch for Belgian dataset)

<u>List of keywords related to “Who? (people)”</u>	<u>List of keywords related to “What? (technologies)”</u>	<u>List of keywords related to “Where? (places)”</u>	<u>List of keywords related to “What? (actions)”</u>
Babies; Baby; Toddlers; Children; Child; Pre-Schoolers; Pre-Primary; Pre-School; Playgroup; Young Children; 0 to 8; Parents; Carers; Grandparents; Teachers; Educators; Kindergarten; Kindy	Smartphones; Tablet; iPad; Digital Media; Internet; Websites; Apps; Games; Technology; Touchscreen; Toys; Connected Toys; YouTube; Computer; Phone; Laptop; Digital, screen(s)	Home; Kindergarten; School; Preschool	Parenting; Guiding; Gaming; Playing; Connecting; Protecting; Creating; Sharing

Screening Strategy

Results were considered in the order presented in the result pages and screened by title, URL, date, text snippet, and other inclusion and exclusion criteria as specified in Table 1. Duplicates were manually excluded. Relevant data items were labelled and archived (full text), and the URL and label were entered into an Excel spreadsheet as the metadata for coding. There was no intention to capture a complete list of all possible data items, nor to try out all possible combinations of search terms. Instead, the search strategy was purposefully aimed at capturing a limited but highly relevant dataset similar to qualitative data gathering, where researchers continue capturing data items until patterns are identified and data saturation occurs. Recurring dominant patterns and clear indications of saturation were identified in the final Belgian dataset with 62 entries, and in the final Australian dataset with 87 items (see also, Data Analysis).

Data Analysis

The data analysis was iterative in nature and comprised two main phases. These were a provisional directed content analysis that integrates the principles of Hsieh and Shannon (2005) and Saldaña (2013, p. 144), and an in-depth critical discourse analysis according to the constructionist lens of Gee (2011). The overall analytic approach could be characterised as an interpretive content analysis (Ahuvia, 2001) whereby the data were considered in all their modalities (including written and spoken text, formatting, structure, narrative, and photographs), and as a whole (i.e., accounting for the relationships between the parts), in order to examine latent content and meaning, as constructed through a range of discourses operating within society. As appropriate for reflexive qualitative data analysis, researchers adhered to trustworthiness as the key quality criterion, pursued through prolonged and collaborative thoughtful engagement

with the analytic process, and through traceable, substantiated and clearly documented research (Ahuvia, 2001; Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 594; Nowell et al., 2017).

In the first provisional coding phase, the Belgian and Australian dataset were analysed separately but with a joint predetermined coding scheme. Existing theory on digital media and children, and parental mediation, was used to construct the coding scheme. The coding scheme was developed in consultation with international scholars of the EU Horizon 2020 COST ACTION IS1410 network. The coding scheme specifies (i) the source of the advice or commentary given (e.g., online newspaper, parenting website); (ii) the general background to the advice or commentary given (in terms of risks and benefits); (iii) the parental action advised (e.g., restrictions, conversation with child, co-use, role-modelling, supervision); (iv) the assumptions about children/childhood (e.g., stereotyped as victims, autonomous agents); and, (v) the tonal qualities of the advice piece (e.g., patronising, accusatory, supportive). Data were codified together with the URL (if available), a meaningful quote, publication date, the headline or heading of the advice piece, and country code.

The first author led the provisional coding of the Belgian dataset in consultation with the fifth author. The first and fifth author are native speakers of Dutch (Flemish) and both live in the Flemish part of Belgium. All other authors live in Australia, of which the second and fourth authors are native speakers of Australian English and the third author of British English. The fourth author led the provisional coding of the Australian dataset in close consultation with the first and second authors. Data that were difficult to code were intensively discussed among all authors, and further analysis was carried out to determine if these difficult data could represent a new subcategory. This approach avoided overemphasising established theory or previous assumptions and allowed acknowledgement of situated meanings. The first and fourth authors

independently coded 20 pieces, then worked cooperatively to compare outcomes and discuss the findings in order to develop a more nuanced understanding (Ahuvia, 2001, p. 145; Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 594). An updated coding scheme was developed that was more refined and discriminating with respect to the various risks and benefits being reported, the parental guidance advised, and the tonal qualities of the item.

In the second phase of data coding, the Australian and Belgian datasets were re-analysed in depth, critiqued, and compared, in line with Gee's (2011) guidelines on critical discourse analysis, hereby adhering to a constructionist paradigm (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Table 3 specifies the questions that guided the discourse analysis. There was a focus on the significance, practices, identities, relationships, politics, connections, sign systems, and knowledge (Gee, 2011, pp. 17–18) explicitly and implicitly communicated through textual, visual and auditory modes of the materials. The first iteration consisted of open coding of the individual entries and resulted in a reduction of the data and an initial list of codes across and within Gee's (2011) seven building tasks of language. A second iteration compared initial lists of codes across the datasets and further refined these, using an axial coding approach (Saldaña, 2013, p. 222) to detect subcategories, properties and dimensions within a continuum or range.

This second phase of data analysis was once again a collaborative effort and aimed to improve the quality of the connotative coding (Ahuvia, 2001). The first author took the lead in the discourse analysis of both datasets and discussed the findings with all co-authors. Additionally, four domain experts were consulted, of whom two were Australian (i.e. the third author, and one external Australian research expert), and two were Flemish (i.e., two senior representatives of Mediawijs). None of these domain experts were involved in the previous research activities. This phase resulted in a consolidation of the Australian dataset, a refinement of the Belgian dataset with new,

more targeted searches in order to achieve data saturation, and a contextualisation of the Belgian results from a practitioners' perspective. Preliminary findings from the Belgian dataset were presented at the DigiLitEY meeting in September 2017 in Bologna, Italy. Australian findings were presented at the ICA Preconference on Trust, Control, and Privacy in May 2018 in Prague, Czech Republic.

Table 3

Coding scheme (based on Gee, 2011, pp.17-18)

Seven Building Tasks of Language	Questions that led the discourse analysis
Significance	Does it emphasise (a specific) risk(s), or opportunity/ies of children's media use, a challenge of parenting etc.?
Practices (Activities)	Which practices are communicated (i.e., socially recognised, institutionally or culturally supported endeavours, usually sequencing or combining actions, e.g., how children's media use or parental mediation activities are interwoven in everyday life activities)?
Identities	Who is giving the advice and how does this person present him/herself? How does the speaker use language to enact this identity? How does the sender talk about the parent, the child, what role or identity is attributed to them?
Relationships	Does the speaker communicate from a hierarchical distance or as one of the listeners/readers; how does the speaker refer to the groups, people, institutions included in the piece?
Politics (distribution of social goods)	What is implicitly or explicitly communicated as 'adequate' media education, 'normal' parenting, 'acceptable' media use for the child?
Connections	Does the speaker connect children's media use to parental mediation practices and/or to certain benefits and risks, and if so, what kind of connections are suggested (e.g., causal relationships)?
Sign Systems and Knowledge	How is a certain sign system being used to justify the message, to build the speaker's identity, to seek authority and credibility (e.g., emotional words versus an expert referring to academic evidence)?

Results

In what follows, initial consideration is given to the discourses revolving around

conflicting identities and relationships; then the focus moves to narratives of media education concerns and practices.

Conflicting Identities and Relationships

The analysis of public online advice offered to Australian parents revealed a typology of four conflicting identities echoing an ‘us versus them’ narrative. These public commentaries were written from a parents’ perspective, advocating that discussion and debate should more closely reflect the lived reality of family life rather than reiterating ideal rules imposed by experts, celebrities, news media, or other parents who e.g. “aren’t realistic” and “make us feel guilty” (see also Table 4). In the dataset, these discourses were particularly salient on large commercial (blogger) websites aimed at parents as readers. See for instance the data extract of an online magazine (Carlton, 2015) with the subtitle “When are these so-called experts going to give parents some credit for knowing what’s best for their own kids?”, which reads as follows:

Child experts think we’re the children, flailing helplessly until we can be guided by their wise counsel. They’re wrong. We love our kids and we’re doing our best - which is largely about following our own instincts and common sense. Hey experts. Back off. We got this.

A significant theme of the Australian communicative messages was one of parents feeling guilty and having to defend their position against others, regardless of whether the advocated perspective encouraged parents to be more relaxed, or more concerned, with respect to their children’s media use. Australian commentary often used emotional language to express how authors feel about, and/or to justify, their child’s use of technology. Dominant words included “blame” (and variations, e.g. “the blame game”), “guilt” (“guilty”), “judge” (“accused”, “call me a judger”), and “worry” (“frightened”, “tragedy”). Australian newspapers also recognised how parents might feel burdened by

others' expectations. See for instance the online piece starting with the following sentence: "TODDLERS plus tablets equals parents who feel guilty about their parenting ... but perhaps that shouldn't be the case" (McLauchlan, 2016).

Table 4

Conflicting identities and relationships in Australian online public commentary

Communication about whom?	Quotes exemplifying a discourse of <i>us versus them</i> relationships
Experts	"Psychologists and experts slam us with warnings about the dangers of too much screen time" (Anderson, 2015).
Celebrities	"But we are not all millionaire movie stars, with flexible hours and unlimited dollars for nannies to entertain kids while we work" (Sugden, 2015).
Media	"scare tactics" (Orlando, 2015).
Other Parents	"Are you horrified? (You must be a first time mum...you'll get me someday). [...] Tablets ARE real life. Let's ditch the guilt mums, with a few realistic limitations I encourage you too to embrace this [...]" (Anderson, 2015).

In the Belgian dataset, opposing relationships manifested themselves in a piecemeal way. General opinions or stereotypes were interrogated in the discourse, with readers called upon to "dispel the myths". The broad spectrum of parental voices was particularly salient in the dataset of Belgian parents' blogposts. Table 5 illustrates how the 'us versus them' discourses constructed a range of different parental identities. Early adopters were positioned at one end of the spectrum, emphasising the positive aspects of digital media and offering content advice and technical tips (e.g., for the selection of connected toys, or the use of parental controls). Those who commented on innovative media or games tended to often be fathers. Mummy bloggers were likely to present themselves as relaxed parents who support children's autonomy in, for example, children determining their own screen time. At the opposite end of the Belgian spectrum were the parent bloggers who explicitly introduced and identified themselves as

‘concerned’, using an accusatory tone to critique more laissez-faire parenting practices. Parents positioned between these extremes tended to offer more nuanced commentary that embraced digital opportunities but did not proactively promote the use of digital media by young children. These latter voices typically referred to the experiences of everyday challenges they encountered in finding a healthy balance between digital and non-digital activities.

Table 5

Typology of Belgian parent bloggers

Identity Belgian parent blogger	Significance and Politics	Quotes
The Relaxed Early Adopter	Benefits (innovative) digital media; granting autonomy	“Well, I can tell you that we think differently. We do not restrict our children” (Lambrecht, 2017). “Stop demonising games [...] don’t push the big red panic button. But look at the situation with a magnifying glass” (De Smet, 2017).
The Balancing Trial and Error Parent	Acknowledging important digital skills; trial and error, balancing young children’s digital media use with other activities	“The use of small and large screens is here at home a big issue, we all try to find a balance between our screen time. [...]. Just as we have to do everything in moderation, tablet use has to be a healthy mix of wonderfully old things and integrating new things” (Gielkens, 2015).
The Hesitant Concerned Parent	Avoiding the use of digital media in children aged 2 and younger; not actively pushing digital media use in young children	“I often see the tablets popping up [...]. As if it were a medicine we are giving it to the children to make it easier for ourselves as parents” (Gielkens, 2016).

Situational demands shaped these discourses and revealed differences between messages that dealt with ideal situations and the more realistic practices of everyday family life. Age differentiation also plays a role with, for instance, Gielkens (2015)

advocating for media restrictions in children younger than two but calling for a healthy media diet when it comes to toddlers (Gielkens, 2016). The Belgian dataset not only suggested that parents can take up several perspectives and identities depending on the situational context, but also that parents can differ from one another in their digital parenting approach. This perspective was, for instance, communicated through online tests that would help parents to identify and support their dominant mediation style within a broader set of digital media parenting practices. Image 1 shows an online test published by a Flemish newspaper in collaboration with Mediawijs to “Discover which type of media parent you are”. Such messages are designed to be supportive, rather than patronising or accusatory. They embrace diversity in parenting approaches and empower parents to make informed judgments.

Image 1

In summary, many narratives in both datasets reflected tensions around the expertise of the authorities providing advice and the emotions linked to parents ignoring or following this guidance. In contrast, the datasets also included narratives that

indicated parents were reclaiming power in this area. The language describing these tensions is emotionally-laden in the Australian dataset, positioning parents as in conflict with the views of traditional authorities. The Belgian dataset reported a broad variety of parental identities, with less emotion, urging the debunking of myths and stereotypes and encouraging parents to make informed, personalised decisions.

Media Education Concerns, Practices and Politics

Both datasets reveal critical-optimistic voices, typically sourced from academic research. The strategy was similar in each case: giving voice to local researchers who were cited or interviewed, commenting upon studies located in the own country, or in the UK or the US.

Australian journalists, media companies, and (interviewed/cited) researchers tended to use phrases such as “embrace technology”, and “balance”, especially in the time period after the revision of screen time rules from the AAP (i.e., 21/10/2016 and later). Many Australian media experts commented upon and welcomed these revised, more balanced guidelines. In addition, a number of the interviewed/cited authorities were openly critical of the Australian government for not reflecting the AAP revisions and providing balanced advice for parents.

The Belgian dataset also included many positive messages, often with practical tips to help parents engage their child in productive digital experiences while preventing online harm. For instance, Image 2 shows the first page of an online informational brochure with hands-on tips and tricks, encouraging parents to guide their child in playing video games. The guide explicitly addresses risks, but without an alarmist tone.

Image 2

The Belgian pieces introduced a diverse set of parental mediation strategies as ‘normal’. Parental modelling, shared family rules, balancing digital and non-digital activities, co-use, talking, monitoring, pre-reviewing content, and restrictions were all presented as everyday acceptable parental strategies. Items concerning ‘screen time’ separated the advice offered into age categories and developmental stages. Only a minority of the Belgian pieces advised strict restrictions, but those that did echoed the traditional AAP stance, to avoid screen time for children under the age of two. Other Belgian pieces that supported some restrictions offered advice in the form of a suggestion: that families might consider setting time rules, possibly as part of a family meeting (see e.g., Image 3). Many Belgian pieces mentioned the importance of investing in positive family relationships. In addition to encouraging shared rule making, other tips promoted co-use (“explore things together”) and advised parents to “show interest”. Discussion with children around their media use was an opportunity for “creating mutual trust and showing respect” or, in the words of the Belgian Data Protection Authority (BDPA) (2019), “Healthy parental control is giving your children the benefit of the doubt, thinking of learning as trial and error, avoiding secretly spying

on children but consulting with them instead.” Acknowledging children’s rights to protection, however, in addition to their rights to provision and participation in digital domains, the BDPA also noted that, “In some cases, the interests of your teenager may outweigh the protection of his or her privacy.” Finally, the Belgian public sphere contains the nuanced message that exceptions are fine, that rules are exemplars that are not fixed, and that there is no perfect approach since parenting styles may often need to be combined.

Although the findings indicate that communicative messages in Australia emphasise both risks and opportunities, the discourses still put significant emphasis on risks and the potential for negative effects. Australian pieces were often accompanied with emotionally laden, negative images (e.g. of tantrums, see Image 4), or written by authorities who “quietly yearn for a return to those times when social media didn’t exist”, referring to “how it was done BED (Before Electronic Devices)” (Dor, 2015).

Image 4

The tone of such pieces is sometimes accusatory in nature, with Australian materials often reporting on people or things that are to ‘blame’ for a range of social/health issues:

- Technology: “more time using tablets blamed for increase in children’s eye problems” (Field, 2015).
- Popular beliefs: “We hear so much that technology is bad, bad, bad. [...]

Contrary to popular fears [...] [research findings] conclude that iPads and other tablets are not the mind-numbing, eye-ruining sources they are accused of being” (Stiles, 2015).

- Media: “these scare tactics often succeed because they cause a sense of guilt among adults” (Orlando, 2015).
- Parents: “The other obvious target of blame [...] are the parents themselves, and their seeming lack of ability to control [...]” (Orlando, 2015).
- Experts: “Dear ‘experts’, stop telling me I’m ruining my baby’s future”, “[they] need to role-play life with a toddler before they make such disturbing findings unsettling all of us parents for whom screen time isn’t just a way of life but a necessity” (Anderson, 2016).

Reflecting these tensions are discussions online about what can be considered as ‘good’ and ‘appropriate’ media education, with various Australian authorities presenting opposing opinions. Across the dataset, this tended to result in strong ‘us versus them’ messages (see Table 6).

Table 6

Conflicting advice about what different Australian authorities consider to be ‘good’ media education

Authority whose rules are supported	Authority whose rules are critiqued	Quotes exemplifying a discourse of <i>us versus them</i> opinions with respect to the politics of good parental guidance
Researchers	Medical bodies	“[Researchers] say these guidelines may be unrealistic in this technological age” (nbn, 2015).
Researchers	Australian Government	“[Professor University of London] now recommends that all babies be given tablets from birth. [...] Try telling that to the Australian government” (Hartley, 2015).
AAP	Australian Government	“Let’s hope Australia and other countries with overly strict limits will follow suit” (Loughran, 2015).

In summary, the narratives in both datasets deal with risks and opportunities, but express separate ideological messages. In the Australian dataset, messages often use emotional language and give considerable weight to risk and safety concerns. The

Belgian messages tend to differentiate their critical-optimistic advice according to the child's age and the parents' digital mediation profile, accepting as 'normal' the fact that parents differ in their approach, while embracing diversity in parenting styles as reflective of different family values, dynamics and situational demands.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study reported on a directed content analysis of dominant online, publicly available advice provided to parents and caregivers about children's internet use, along with a critical discourse analysis that synthesised how the advice offered constructs the qualities for being 'a good parent' in socially significant ways. The first analytical strategy focused on the content of the narratives, demonstrating that they are likely to communicate inconsistent messages to parents, which may result in confusion about what constitutes positive, effective parenting around digital practices (Mavoa et al., 2017). The second analytical strategy deconstructed the messages, offering an account of what these narratives do, and what their constitutive effects may be (Graham, 2011). These communications signify what is considered normal (Asare-Donkoh, 2017, p. 421; Jensen, 2016) and illuminate the social and cultural dilemmas (Drotner, 1999, p. 597) inherent in digital parenting in Australia and Belgium.

The findings from the publicly available advice for Australian parents demonstrate a continuing, emotionally laden and contested debate around children and digital media, anchoring a dominant narrative of parental protection. Without drawing any causal relationship, separate evidence indicates that Australian parents echo this risk and safety outlook (Rhodes, 2015). Third and colleagues (2014, p. 40) found that children in many parts of the world have inherited a popular discourse around media use "characterized primarily by fear – if not moral panic". The implication for children is that this popular discourse "potentially inhibits their capacity to imagine and articulate the opportunities digital media affords them" (Third et al., 2014, p. 40). Macenaite

(2017, p. 765) argues that “by favouring protection over empowerment of children”, parents and policy-makers risk “limiting children in their online opportunities”.

Nevertheless, there are indications that many researchers, journalists, and bloggers are moving away from a focus on risk and safety messages, encouraging a more realistic range of perspectives. Across the 30 months of the dataset, Australian online pieces increasingly paid greater attention to the benefits of children’s digital interactions, giving voice to local experts who embrace more relaxed rules, suggesting that the Australian public sphere may eventually embrace a more critical-optimistic paradigm.

The content of the Belgian dataset focused on parents’ responsibilities for making informed decisions based on predominantly critical-optimistic messages about children’s digital media use. The discourse in this public sphere acknowledges the parents’ role in facilitating online opportunities (as opposed to a sole focus on risk prevention), and the role of the child as an active agent (rather than merely vulnerable, and in need of protection). Belgian narratives indicate respect for a variety of digital parenting practices. Together with the child-differentiators included in the online tips for Belgian parents, this approach moves the debate beyond the ‘average’ child (Macenaite, 2017; Wyness, 2012) or ‘average’ parent, and acknowledges the situational factors, instead (Warren, 2016).

From a macro-perspective, Belgium and Australia share a similar digital media landscape and western mindset. At first sight, their public commentary may seem similar in making both online risks and opportunities significant and (re-)claiming power for parents to decide upon what is realistic guidance. However, the in-depth, critical analysis of the underlying discourses revealed how the public commentary in the separate countries constitutes and reflects different ideologies. The Belgian commentary considers it normal to embrace a variety of what is considered to be ‘good’ parenting

practices in society. These narratives indicate that being a good parent means seeking a personalised approach based on mutual trust that reflects the developmental age of the child and that accounts for situational demands. Rules are flexible, exceptions are fine and no 'ideal' approach is offered. In contrast, given the risk and safety concerns evident in the Australian commentary, restrictive advice remains dominant. Such discourses construct digital parenting as an emotive, polarising topic. Even so, the Australian data indicates movement over time with an increasing number of voices calling for a more balanced and realistic perspective towards digital parenting.

Although this paper offers an analysis of Australian and Belgian public discourse, it does not aim to achieve full comparability. Indeed, adopting geographical restrictions for the online search may have been a limitation. Results suggest that tips for parents move beyond national boundaries, with both the Australian and Belgian public spheres including strong commentary around the AAP rules. It was not possible to institute identical search strategies since the ones used reflect language-specific, university-provided, geographically-tailored third-party 'black boxed' search engines and research resources. Even so, insofar as possible, narrative analysis has been disentangled from cultural effects (Raghavan, Harkness, & Super, 2010, p. 617), although each influences the other. While it is to be expected that Australia and Belgium might differ, as well as sharing similarities, the inclusion of two case studies helps reveal latent constructs that might have been missed if the focus had been on discourses from one country alone. Different coders from different countries speaking different languages may have contributed sensitivity, and increased the possible transferability and generalisability of results (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017, p. 3). Documentation and textual examples are offered to assist those who may seek to transfer these findings to their own sites of meaning-making. Future research could

usefully continue this line of inquiry with a new dataset that comprises narratives published online from July 2017 onwards, or with a contrasting dataset comprised of other data sources. For example, the dataset might include narratives contained in school-based communications, or from child development experts attuned to differences in the skills and competencies of particular groups of children. Instead of a focus on the public sphere, data might be collected from more private communication channels and discussions on social media. Finally, future reception studies might complement the content analysis offered here by exploring parents' real-life understandings and constructions of relevant messages (Ahuvia, 2001).

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