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Analysing narratives of food, family and resources in mothers' blogs

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Introduction

This paper will explore how women bloggers narrate practices of everyday family life and mothering, within the current UK context of limited economic and time resources. It will focus on how women narrate and perform mothering and paid work within the blogs. We are particularly concerned with what the analysis of digital narratives offer in relation to other modalities of narrative; how blogs tell stories; how blogs concatenate established and newer narrative modalities; and how such blog narratives operate as resources and as forms of work in themselves.

The work is based on a small scale methodological study of mothers' food blogs (October 2012 – January 2014), funded by the ESRC's National Centre for Research Methods as part of the research programme, Narratives of Varied Everyday Lives and Linked Approaches (NOVELLA), which was led by Professor Ann Phoenix and based at the Thomas Coram Research Unit, UCL IOE, in collaboration with the Centre for Narrative Research at UEL (ESRC Grant Number ES/1025936/1. The study involved multi-modal and narrative analyses of blogs written by two UK mothers (see also DOMINGO et al., 2014). The paper describes the research team's narrative work with these blogs.

We chose to consider blogs rather than any other digital platforms, because blogs are widely prevalent forms of knowledge and identity construction, largely personally narrated, concerned with everyday lives, and with wide socioeconomic, cross-gender, and intergenerational reach. Blogs are, indeed, a new form of life document (PLUMMER, 2001), autobiographically narrating, often chronologically, rather like diaries, selves that are predominantly of an 'everyday,' non-exceptional kind (HOOKWAY, 2008). Indeed one of the blogs we refer to here is entitled 'The Diary of a Frugal Family'. Further, there is a large contemporary presence of blogs by and about mothers (MORRISON, 2011; FRIEDMAN, 2013; WHITEHEAD, 2014), and such blogs are read and in some cases supported by politicians, policymakers, and media and other commercial organisations. Like other blogs,

mothers' blogs are now a financialised form of online engagement, thus providing a good perspective on digital engagements as women's work. Moreover, many mothers' blogs concentrate strongly on food, current resource scarcity, or both. The impact of the blog <http://www.agirlcalledjack> is an example of the popular and policy effects such blogs can have. Although other digital media provide some of the same possibilities of both expressing and shaping popular, everyday responses, blogs, with their usually explicit authoring and dating, and their trusted individuality (JOHNSON and KAYE, 2009), operate as emblematic examples of personal 'recipes' for everyday life.

Blogs also exhibit interesting juxtapositions of new and older narrative modalities. Despite their digital context, many blogs have a relatively traditional emphasis on extensive written text as well as or instead of images, and on writing styles fairly close to those of older print writing, less close to text, message and forum-style writing. These resonances with older narrative forms, set against the features of digital narratives with which they also operate, such as new text and image forms; the spatial bringing together of text, still and moving image, and sound narratives and the co-construction of narratives via comments and replies, links, banners, and icons, also give blogs an interesting historical liminality in relation to genres. For their older and newer features invoke not just obvious precedents like recipe books, letters, written diaries, and family albums, but also the bricolage of nineteenth century commonplace books, scrap-books, the advice genres of 1940s austerity, twentieth-century how-to guides to self-improvement, the contemporary lifestyle magazine; and many forms of auto/biographical expression such as memoirs, autobiographies and biographies, and self-portraiture. There are also some widely transmediated genres appearing within blogs, for instance comedy and tragedy around some family events, and epiphany, usually within a kind of family 'romance' (HERMAN, 2013; HYVARIEN, 2014; SQUIRE, 2013). For us, these multiplicities of form and cultural convergences, intensified the possibility that narratives of mothering and food under resource constraints might find new lines of articulation within blogs.

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Why focus our blog research on mothering in contemporary western contexts of resource shortages? Pervasive cultural narratives of mothering in UK and US from second half of the

20th century onwards have emphasised the unstintingness of motherlove and mothers' work, while recent research, memoirs and novels about day to day mothering are about practices of rationing and juggling (THOMSON et al, 2011 ; CUSK, 2001; PEARSON, 2002; WARNER, 2006). These narratives have articulated tensions between paid work and the work involved in raising children, particularly, but not exclusively, among middle-class Western women. They emphasise working mothers' guilt both about time spent with children and about time taken from work (O'CONNELL and BRANNEN, 2014) and other workers' resentment of mothers' perceived easy lives (KNAPTON, 2014).

Living with recession involves resource cuts which exacerbate these tensions. An important context for our research has been contemporary resource constraints, at a time when the aftermath of global financial crisis and recession and the risk of its repetition remain with us (WORLD ECONOMIC FORUM, 2014). Such economic, social and indeed narrative constraints affect families and children disproportionately, particularly at lower income levels. At the same time, economic, social and cultural lives, and the resource constraints pertaining to them, do not run in exact parallel. We focused on mothers' blogging as one route into understanding 'everyday' forms of living with current economic constraints. We addressed blog narratives about feeding families because contemporary economic and temporal resource constraints powerfully structure such narratives, both explicitly and implicitly, particularly for mothers. Mothers bear disproportionate responsibility for feeding families in times of hardship and plenty. What children eat is a highly moralised area, and is also a domain where social relations are enacted. (These aspects of our research are discussed elsewhere - ELLIOTT et al., forthcoming). Mothers' blogs about families and food must therefore negotiate 'motherhood' through normative stories of nutritional care; but they may also develop narrating practice that are non-normative, tangential or oppositional to the norms (JENSEN, 2013). For all mothers are - although to importantly different degrees - on the edges of 'mothering' practices (PHOENIX, 2010). Moreover, living with the recession and its aftermath, including 'austerity' discourses and practices, constitutes a new conjuncture. Within it, narratives around motherhood and food, such as blogs provide, may have some important things to say about both normative and oppositional contemporary mothering and feeding practices.

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We will proceed by describing our method, ethical approach and narrative-analytic frame. We will then discuss the ‘About Me’ sections of the blogs analysing, narratives of mothering and scarcity within them. We will go on to consider in what senses blogs might constitute work, and will finally draw conclusions about what is new and valuable about this narrative form in relation to our specific research concerns.

Research method

Sampling

We sampled ethnographically, initially selecting a corpus of around 30 UK blogs focussed on feeding children and families generally, to scope the field without ruling out possible blog categories in advance. We included in this sample examples of blogs by celebrity chefs, blogs related to managing on less money than previously, blogs that reflected diversity in class, age, ethnicity, and gender. Our sampling criteria developed iteratively as we became familiar with the community of blogs in which we were interested, and led to a second, smaller sample of 15 blogs which

- Were ‘middle ranking’ in terms of popularity – not authored by celebrities or media-known bloggers like the most heavy-traffic blogs, but still well-visited, not likely to be skewed by small shifts in visitor numbers; and well-established for more than four years, so that we could assume some continuity of the blogs and their audiences which would not be disrupted by the blog ending or being at its start or by small fluctuations in blogging frequency or type.
- Were written by UK mothers whose families included primary school age children (4-11 years) – ages at which we would expect to read frequent articulations of childcare practices in relation to food
- Were specifically related to feeding families, as well as general blogs about parenting which addressed food and feeding families
- Included both visually and textually led blogs.

For our final sample selection, we chose two blogs which differed in the way they position themselves in relation to resources, and in relation to their media they deploy: ‘The Diary of a Frugal Family’ <http://www.frugalfamily.co.uk/> and ‘Thinly Spread’

<http://thinlyspread.co.uk/>. Both blogs are by mothers with young children, although the Thinly Spread blogger also has older teenage children. Both blogs started in 2009 - both, as they explicitly comment, in relation to recession.

Analysis

The authors each analysed posts over two months from our two sampled blogs, analysing six months of posts for each blog in total. This period – September 2012 to February 2013 - included posts on everyday and special occasion cooking, posts within which food was not the main topic, and posts where it was the foregrounded concern.

In conducting a thematic content analysis, as well as a thematic and positional narrative analysis (BRAUN and CLARKE, 2006; PHOENIX, 2013; RIESSMAN, 2008; SQUIRE, 2013), we noted the amounts of verbal and visual materials, as well as links, sponsorship, and response patterns, as well as verbal and visual themes and narratives. We addressed personal, social and cultural themes and thematic narratives. Here, we drew on, but were not limited by, themes which had appeared within the sampling processes outlined above, around family and mothering, food and health, and economic and time resources. Our analytic notes also addressed genres, and media characteristics of blogs. A concern that emerged from this analysis, and that was carried into the finer-grained analyses of posts, was the ways in which the blog posts narrated work, including blog work, and also performed that work, in relation to constrained economic, temporal and emotional resources.

We later conducted a more in depth narrative analysis of six specific blog pages and posts. This analysis addressed the ‘About Me’ pages of the blogs, and two emblematic pairs of posts, one, on Christmas, focused around family, and another, on Pancake Day, focused around food. This analysis also enabled us to track how narratives established in the ‘about’ section of blogs, might be replayed or departed from in other blog posts.

Our narrative address enabled us to explore how narratives built over posts; the inter-connections, consistencies, inconsistencies and transgressions within and between posts; how the blogs express temporality, for instance by marking the progression of the posts over time, marking seasonality, and referring to life course markers; how the blogs ‘move’ spatially and causally as well as temporally; and intertextualities which both draw on and generate cross-media ‘story worlds’ (HERMAN, 2013). Finally, ‘identity’ is a major thematic organiser of

contemporary western personal narratives generally, (RIESSMAN, 2008). This emphasis was clearest in the blogs' 'About Me' sections, but it was also played out across posts and in the interaction of visual and text based media.

We examined how bloggers positioned themselves within and across their narratives (PHOENIX, 2013) in relation to motherhood, family, food, austerity, blog audiences and sponsors, and blogging itself. We expected that there would be a number of genres expressed across even single posts, that we would be able to see genres changing within and across posts, and that genres would appear in hybridised forms. Our starting point was that genres are never as fixed as they might appear, and they always undermine themselves in interesting ways. These underminings of what seem at first to be the dominant blog narratives, are some of their most interesting moments for our analysis.

To analyse the visual within the blogs, we consider positioning as well as explicit content, and the conditions of making and displaying the image, factors which relate closely to categories of syntax, semantics and pragmatics. We also drew on BARTHES' (1978) approaches to analysing visual narratives, particularly photographic images, as well as the work of MULVEY (2006) on movement of the gaze across images. We thus treated visual materials as narrative in broad continuity with how we treated written materials (SQUIRE et al. 2014).

Ethics

The Association of Internet Researchers' Recommendations on Ethical Decision-Making and Internet Research (AOIR), (2012), note that 'currently no official guidance or answers regarding internet research ethics have been adopted at any national or international level' and advocates a practice and case based approach. It is argued that internet research is a heterogeneous and dynamic field and the almost endless range of specific situations this gives rise to 'defy attempts to universalise experience or define in advance what might constitute harmful research practice.'

Although the blogs are in the public domain, AOIR argues that since individual and cultural definitions and expectations of privacy are ambiguous and changing, it is impossible to rule definitively on whether blogs are private or public documents and again advocates a case by case approach. Further, they suggest that what is significant is not necessarily whether a

space is private or public but the appropriate flow of information and the contexts in which it appears. We have therefore developed strategies to work sensitively with authors' material.

We analysed the authors' public online identities, which are related to, but not synonymous with off-line identities (MILLER, 2013), as described in the 'about me' sections of their blogs. Our focus is on how the authors perform narratives relating to motherhood, food and resources in the terms that they set out themselves and how these relate to wider cultural narratives of mothering. We developed accounts which are grounded in material the authors have written rather than evaluative or speculative about 'off-line' lives. We are concerned with the blogs as texts, rather than with the bloggers.

We have chosen blogs that are well-established, have a media presence and generate benefits in kind or income. This indicates that the authors are operating in public contexts and managing their on-line identity, so that they are unlikely to be 'vulnerable' web-subjects.

Although the web authors were not study participants, and we did not require consent to analyse this work, we wrote to the authors of the blogs to inform and set out the terms of analysis and to describe the archiving process, to which they were asked to and did agree. Mindful of the potential ethical risks of including in our analysis people beyond the scope of our study, we have discussed the comments which posts elicit in general terms, as this is an important part of analysing cultural narratives about mothering and food which emerge from the blogs we do not identify or quote particular commentators. We have selected posts for analysis which describe families in general terms and avoid discussion of authors' children.

The research team arranged for the British Library to archive the blogs in the 'Society and Culture' section of their online resources. The bloggers consented to this archiving. It meant that the blogs were stabilised for analysis, something that otherwise might be compromised by the availability of online storage as well as by authorial decisions about changing blog form and/or content (<http://www.webarchive.org.uk>.)

We proceed now to consider what narratives about families, food and resource constraint emerge from the About Me section of the blogs, and how these narratives are performed within the blog platform. We have restricted consideration to these two pages in order to

focus attention on methodological issues around working with blogs as narratives, although we will at times refer to findings from our broader analyses.

Analysing ‘About Me’ blog narratives

The ‘About Me’ pages are useful for methodological analysis, since they are the introductions to the blogs, the primary articulation of the personal story that a blog narrates.

In this section, we concentrate on ‘The Diary of a Frugal Family’ and the ‘Thinly Spread’ ‘About Me’ pages to explore how narratives play out in both older and new ways within blogs, and how we can approach the analysis of them. We start by looking at the relations between text and image narratives in blogs, move on to examine ‘everyday life’ narratives generally, continue by addressing narratives of resource scarcity, and end by examining the narratives of work told in and by the blogs.

Text and image narratives

Image and strapline of ‘Diary of a Frugal Family’

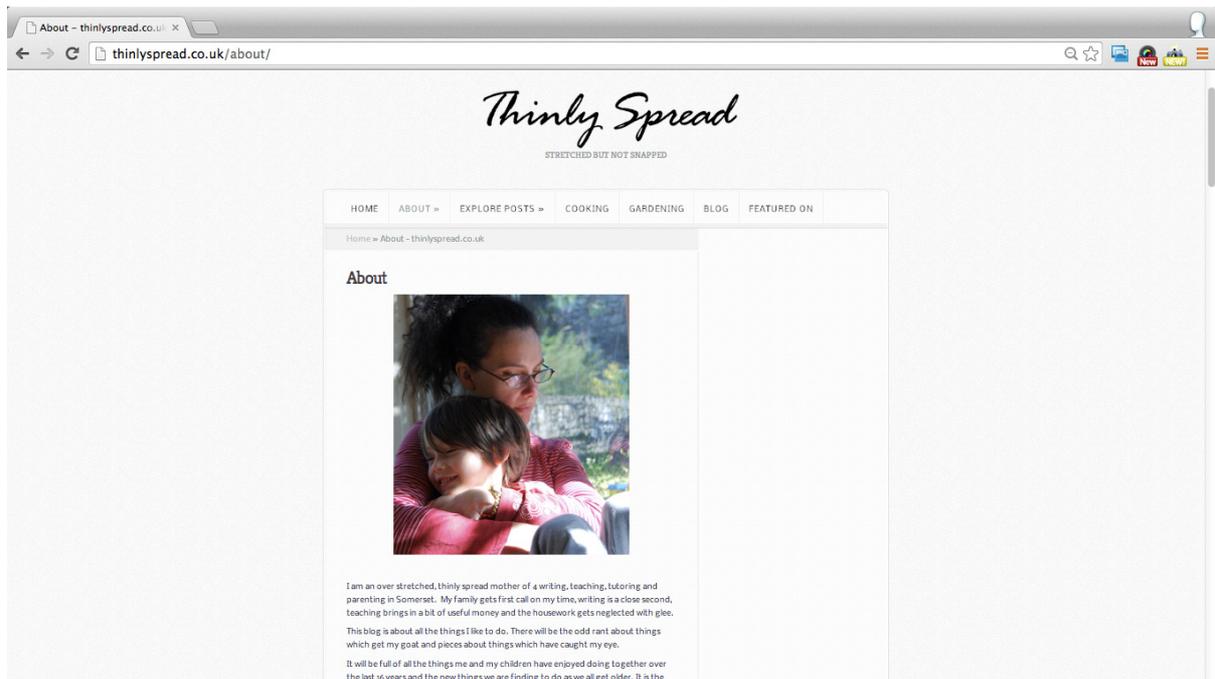
The screenshot shows a web browser window displaying the 'About me and my blog' page for 'The Diary of a Frugal Family'. The page has a green background and a navigation menu at the top with links for HOME, ABOUT ME AND MY BLOG, MY FAVOURITE RECIPES, FRUGAL CHRISTMAS, FEATURED POSTS, and FREE BUDGET PLANNER. Below the navigation is a search bar and a '50 WAYS TO SAVE MONEY' link. The main content area features a large banner with the title 'The Diary of a Frugal Family' and the subtitle 'Surviving the credit crunch... Follow our journey to living a more frugal lifestyle', accompanied by an image of a cupcake. Below the banner is a section titled 'About me and my blog' with a photo of a family and a dog. The text in this section reads: 'Hi, My name's Cass and I write The Diary of a Frugal Family which is my blog about my family. Lots of people ask me why I write this blog and I always say the same thing - I write because I want to make sure that we don't forget a single one of the memories that we make as a family. It's really important to me as both my mam and my brother died of Cancer a few years ago which really brought it home to me that we should make the most of every moment that we have together. All I have of them now are my memories and a some photographs and I'm determined that if anything every happens to me, my children will have as many memories and photos as possible to remember me by. My plan is to get the blog made into a book for the children when they are older so they remember all the happy times we had while they were growing up (by make into a book, I don't mean I have aspirations of being a real life writer, I just mean I'll print it out, punch holes in it and stick it in a pretty folder). The second reason is kind of linked to the first. In the spirit of making the most of every moment, I was very aware that working full time meant that I wasn't spending as much quality time as I wanted with my children. We couldn't afford for me to drop to part time so we had to drastically change our spending habits.'

Surrounding the main text are several promotional widgets: a '70% OFF Home Décor' offer from Joss & Main, a 'Meal Planning made easy' widget, a 'CHECK OUT OUR TRAVEL AND DAYS OUT POSTS' link, an advertisement for a Xerox printer, and a 'FOLLOW ME' section with social media icons for RSS, Twitter, Facebook, and Pinterest. There is also a 'NetworkedBlogs' section with a grid of user avatars and a 'Follow this Blog' button.

Surviving the credit crunch... Follow our journey to living a more frugal lifestyle

The blog's strapline explicitly references living through scarcity of economic resources (the 'credit crunch'). A key strategy for 'surviving' the credit crunch is to economise on food costs and this blog describes family food practices, in particular, mothers' majority but often-unregarded shapings of them (KAN et al., 2011). Food's instantiation of resource constraints is particularly strongly articulated within mothering discourses and practices, whose legitimacy is and has historically been bound up with feeding children (DE BRUN et al., 2012; LUPTON, 1996): mothers bear responsibility for feeding families in times of hardship and plenty. The strapline emphasises too that this is a blog about the family's trajectory, 'our journey', not just that of the blogger, the mother. The photograph also tells this story. The whole family is included, even the dog, all wrapped up together at the sofa, looking outwards towards the audience. Perhaps we look first at the blogger and her daughter, on the left, or at the father, whose face is the only one fully shown; but fairly soon we probably track across all the family characters, arrayed at more or less the same level. As with any photograph, but particularly one with a 'snapshot' aesthetic, as here, the image seems snipped out of the stream of everyday living. It has an immediate implicit past and future that narrativise it. In this case, we can very easily imagine the moment before everyone settled into place, and the moment after the shutter clicks, when they disperse. The photograph is relatively small, at the top of the page; like a 'snapshot' or a kind of Labovian abstract of the narrative that follows (LABOV, 1972; PATTERSON, 2013). On this page the visual image is, then, a narrative, albeit of more condensed kind than the verbal narrative. It instantiates and particularises that verbal narrative.

Image and strapline of 'Thinly Spread'



Stretched but not snapped

I am an over stretched, thinly spread mother of 4 writing, teaching, tutoring and parenting in Somerset. My family gets first call on my time, writing is a close second, teaching brings in a bit of useful money and the housework gets neglected with glee. ('Thinly Spread' 'About Me').

'Thinly spread' speaks to the multi-tasking, time poor narrative of contemporary mothering. There are several demands on the bloggers' attention to balance – she knows where they each 'fit'. The family takes up most of her time but is not what it is 'all about', as with the Frugal Family blogger.

Although this introductory, situating verbal narrative is about juggling and prioritising, the blog is not hectic. There is a sense of calmness and composedness in the photograph, which therefore tells a slightly different story from the written words- unlike the closely cohering visual and verbal narratives on the 'Diary of a Frugal Family' 'About me' page. We see the blogger with her youngest child on a window seat, between the family home and the outside world. She has both arms round him; he is looking into the room, happy; she is looking downwards in a different direction; she seems absorbed in her thoughts. Neither figure is looking at the camera or engaging with the reader or viewer as the characters in the Frugal Family image are. There is, moreover, a significant, if vague, background of foliage, perhaps a garden. As with the verbal story, we see that there could be stories other than the family

story here, and that the story speaks less directly to us; it is not addressed to a singular or plural ‘you’. Moreover, the image emphasises, with the co-present green haven of the background, the blogger’s imbrication in a ‘nature’ story that is presented slightly differently, as ‘escape’, in the text.

The image on the ‘Thinly Spread’ page is large, with a depth and saturation of colour that clearly distinguishes it from the grey-on-white of the text section, whereas the black-on-white text of ‘Diary of a Frugal Family’ works in concert with the colouring of its smaller image. In ‘Thinly Spread’, the ‘About Me’ story is therefore more image-centred. When looking at that image, we probably start from the woman who takes most of the picture space, move to the child and then shift to the background natural environment, possibly before even looking at the ‘backgrounded’ text. The image is sized, coloured and composed to tell a story, rather than to illustrate one. This difference shows how stories online can be visually driven and not necessarily print-derived. That is, even if blog stories move, as in English writing, from left to right and top to bottom on a web page – which they will not always do – they may be independently narratively shaped by their visual elements, within which stories may move differently. Blog narratives can, too, move around in relation to the size of different elements – we move quickly to the text on the ‘Diary of a Frugal Family’ ‘About Me’ page – or their disposition – we dwell on the central ‘Thinly Spread’ ‘About Me’ image. Such possibilities have implications for how we understand narratives as playing out across still images (BARTHES, 1978; ESIN and SQUIRE, 2013; MULVEY, 2006) and also for how we read narratives online, given that they may travel between images and texts; and between links and ads.

Narratives of everyday family life

We turn now to the visual and verbal stories of family that play out within the ‘About Me’ pages, and to the blog form’s affordances and limitations for such stories.

Lots of people ask me why I write this blog and I always say the same thing – I write because I want to make sure that we don’t forget a single one of the memories that we make as a family. It’s really important to me as both my mam and my brother died of Cancer a few years ago which really brought it home to me that we should make the most of every moment that we have together. All I have of them now are my

memories and a some photographs and I'm determined that if anything every happens to me, my children will have as many memories and photos as possible to remember me by. (Diary of a Frugal Family, 'About Me')

The 'Diary of a Frugal Family' blogger states that the main reason for writing the blog is to memorialise everyday family life; this is part of the work of the blog and of being a mother (ROSE, 2010). Memories and family ties cannot be taken for granted, but need to be worked at. Blogging is an important way of materialising elements of family life that might otherwise slip away unnoticed. Indeed, this blogger imagines binding the blog posts into the material form of a scrapbook, suggesting that the blog is too ephemeral for this purpose:

My plan is to get the blog made into a book for the children when they are older so they remember all the happy times we had while they were growing up (by make into a book, I don't mean I have aspirations of being a real life writer, I just mean I'll print it out, punch holes in it and stick it in a pretty folder). ('Diary of a Frugal Family', 'About Me')

The motivation to blog is narrated as coming from the premature loss of her mother and brother. Thus for this blogger, the family story encompasses the extended family – not just, as in the sofa picture, the present 'extended' family, with pet, but-also, the historically extended family, extending into the future, and including those who have passed away. Elsewhere, the blogger mentions her mother and grandmother in posts, for example about traditional family occasions like Christmas and Mothers' Day and about the meals she cooks.

The text indicates that this blog will be a positive account of family life, narrating 'happy times'. However, as foreshadowed in the frank revelation about her bereavements, the blogger does post about difficult experiences: for example, her upset about another mother telling her children off, and around the dilemmas of selecting secondary schools. The rhetorical power and credibility of the blogs as personal narratives rests strongly on such disclosures, which start within the 'About Me' narratives (WHITEHEAD, 2014). There is no such thing as 'pure' disclosure: disclosures always have subjects who make them, objects to whom they are disclosed, and reasons for the action (SQUIRE, 2013). In this case, disclosures work within the narratives both to maintain personal, particular, often

idiosyncratic aspects of the blogs, guaranteeing the narrators' authorship, and to establish common ground with audiences.

Relatedly, there is a small editorial slip on the 'About Me' page 'a some photographs', which contributes, alongside the simple family snap, to a lo-fi, scrap-book aesthetic and a sense of unedited authenticity. Such elements belie the work involved in creating the blog (DOMINGO et al, 2014) – to which we will return later - and draws the reader into an informal relation with the blog story. Even the blog itself is positioned, in its future-story, as a book for the family, of a kind anyone could make. The blogger's future is not presented as about to change her or separate her from her readers by turning her into a 'real life writer'.

'Diary of a Frugal Family' thus tells stories on the 'About Me' page that affirm norms of family life but that do not suggest that difficult aspects of it can all be redeemed. The cut-and-paste informality of the blog allows for such transgressiveness, at the same time as it opens up identificatory possibilities for the reader.

The Thinly Spread blogger's 'About me' story of everyday family life differs in both content and style. It features a long section about the garden shown in the image:

“We spend a lot of time outside growing stuff and the garden has been my escape since they were tinies. I feel I am still being a good Mum while I'm planting seeds and pulling weeds accompanied by various small children digging holes, making fairy houses, climbing trees and holding tea parties.”

The garden is the blogger's 'escape' but the story does not specify what is being escaped from, perhaps relying on a shared audience understanding of family and work pressures for mothers with small children. At the same time, this implicitness, shown also in the blogger's indirect look within the accompanying image, foreshadows how, in this blog, there is some disclosure about family life, but posts revealing conflict or trouble are rare. Powerful cultural ideas about what 'good mothers' do are, in 'Thinly Spread', cited and played with. The domestic labour of maintaining a home, for example, can be 'neglected with glee'. Such ideas are also consistently repositioned in a more environmentalist and self-determined frame, as here: 'I am still being a good Mum while I'm planting seeds and pulling weeds'.

The ongoing transgression enacted in this ‘About Me’ page, and the blog’s other posts, too, is less around the ‘happy families’ narrative that ‘Diary of a Frugal Family’ both reiterates and problematizes, more around the normative story of women being able to ‘have it all’. ‘Thinly Spread’ troubles that story both by direct opposition, and by reframing what ‘it’ is. The gardening story speaks to the familiar tension articulated in the literature on mothers, between being absorbed in an activity one loves, and being there for one’s family. This tension is much less pronounced in ‘Diary of a Frugal Family’, which tends to emphasize all-inclusive family fun rather than differentiating between adults’ and children’s activities, although here too there are occasional tensions between ‘me-time’ and family time . On the ‘Thinly Spread’ ‘About Me’ page, the tension between self and family is resolved in the activity of gardening, a ‘good’ pursuit children can take part in too, relatively independently. At this moment in the account, the blogger is ‘accompanied by children’ rather than subsumed by motherhood.

‘Thinly Spread’’s gardening story also draws on a narrative of mothering as in tune with and defending the natural world, foreshadowing the ecological concerns of the blog. The environment is one of the thinly spread resources referenced in the blog’s title. The narrative of mothering as ‘doing ecology’, and the co-present, contradictory narrative of ‘escaping’ motherhood in nature, are brought together not only in the image and in the gardening story, but also in the story of the blog itself, which figures children as fledglings. The About Me section states that the blog will tell ‘the story of all those little letting-gos as my lovely husband and I encourage our birds to spread their wings and fly’.

This metaphorisation recalls in some ways the ‘Diary of a Frugal Family’ blogger’s awareness on her ‘About Me’ page of how fleeting family life can be. However, there, the story of children growing up moves towards excitement and potential. On ‘Diary of a Frugal Family’’s ‘About Me’ page, the narrative of family loss is associated more with past bereavement than future change.

Thus both blogs point to how the time a family has together is scarce, can pass one by without conscious effort to ‘make the most of every moment’ (‘Diary of a Frugal Family’) or notice the ‘all those little letting gos’ involved in raising children (‘Thinly Spread’), and yet cannot in the end be captured. Stories of everyday family life exceed snapshot and composed images alike, and also exceed verbal attention, management and memory. This boundary-blurring works insidiously yet consistently and transgressively across the blog narratives.

We now move onto explore how day-to-day family time is narrated in the blogs and how these stories link to stories of economic resources and work.

Blogs narratives of and as temporal and economic resource constraints

The second reason (for the family's efforts to live more frugally) is kind of linked to the first. In the spirit of making the most of every moment, I was very aware that working full time meant that I wasn't spending as much quality time as I wanted with my children. ('Diary of a Frugal Family', 'About Me').

This verbal story-beginning on the 'About Me' page of 'Diary of a Frugal Family' speaks to the common concern with work-life balance prominent in UK parenting and mothering narratives, particularly when the blog started in 2009. The notion of 'quality time' relates to this tension, and as in the paragraph about the blogger's mother and brother, is underpinned by the idea of there not being enough time, that it is a limited and expensive resource. This blogger's commitment to 'frugality' is laid out carefully. Frugality is a 'second' reason for writing the blog, and is positioned as secondary and supportive of the narrative's primary drive towards enabling family time.

As you've probably guessed, my blog is a bit of a mish mash of family fun, money saving tips and foodie ideas with lots of cupcakes and smiley faces thrown in too

('Diary of a Frugal Family' 'About Me')

Food practices in 'Diary of a Frugal Family' are about saving the family money, which can be traded for time but also fun. Later in the 'About Me' page, the blogger distances herself from associations between frugality and deprivation:

I'm not hardcore frugal! I'm not comfortable with having a cold house to save money or taking moneysaving to the extreme. ('Diary of a Frugal Family', 'About Me').

Frugality may involve not just saving fuel, money, food, and other resources, but also saving time. It may and even involve 'laziness', especially in times of family exhaustion or illness - through for instance visits to McDonalds and the use of ready-prepared food - within stories where what is being saved for, and saved, is family time. Frugality is not a word invoked

frequently in current UK political or policy discourse, though it has more traction in US contexts and may speak to international audiences. In the UK, it evokes wartime and postwar modes of living more than current austerity, and this historicity fits with this blog's concerns with its family's twentieth-century past. When frugality is called upon now, its historical antecedents are generally presented as salient counters to the 'credit crunch'. It is narrated, as in the blog, as a means of cutting waste, being responsible, and taking care. It is thus decoupled to some extent from cost-benefit resource calculations: through it, the husbanding of resources can appear as an end in itself. On 'Diary of a Frugal Family's 'About Me page', however, this 'frugality' narrative is reframed, to centre on family comfort and enjoyment as resources, rather than on goods and money, the resources of 'hardcore' frugality. Again, this is a transgressive narrative move, particularly in contexts where the minute monitoring of economic resources within everyday lives is presented as the overwhelming priority within policy discourse. However, the casualness of the blog's style allows these moves to appear almost accidentally; their transgressiveness slips into view almost incidentally.

Resource constraints operate very differently on the 'Thinly Spread' 'About Me' page, which focuses almost entirely on temporal resource limits:

"I will be posting some of our favourite veggie family recipes, most of which can be cooked in 30 minutes or less with a toddler sitting on the work surface, an older child moaning about a grumbling stomach another one asking for homework help and yet another needing to be picked up from an after school club." ('Thinly Spread', 'About Me')

The 'Thinly Spread' blogger's narrative of family resources resonates with the familiar, 'over-stretched', 'busy' genre of family story. It operates through the figure of a mother juggling competing tasks, with family mealtime as a point in the day where demands typically intensify. Phrases about disparate activities, separated by comma after comma, and then abandoning commas entirely, generate a long and complex sentence. The story is stylized and recognizable. 'Veggie' food, rather than 'vegetarian', fits with the informal, busy kitchen scene the blogger paints and makes the cookery seem more accessible. This blogger's explicit commitment to financial thrift shows up fairly little in food posts, although vegetarianism might connote it at times. She occasionally references recession and the need to economise, though her specific food posts are not often about money saving. However, the

posts' stories of managing, protecting and enjoying family time, of living 'simply' at home or in local countryside, are implicitly and sometimes explicitly positioned against higher-expenditure activities – for instance, buying Halloween foods which are both commercialised and expensive. These stories also focus again and again on claiming time, in a way that exceeds the temporal resource tensions operating between mothering and personal identity. As in the 'Diary of a Frugal Family' blog, then, 'Thinly Spread's 'About Me' page transgresses resource-constraint narratives, in this case by taking the blogger's own time out of zero-sum balance sheets and stories of 'balance', and simply 'escaping' to it.

So far, we have looked at how these two blogs 'About Me' pages narrate resource constraints. But blogs themselves require, mobilise and produce resources. How do these blogs draw on and work as resources in themselves? The blog narratives, even within the relatively static 'About Me' pages, offer some ways to analysis this internal resource economy.

Both blogs require considerable, effortful work to maintain. Posts must contain clear, informational, emotional, amusing and/or attractive and highly individualised verbal and visual content; gaps in posting must be explained; blog comments must be invited and responded to; links and reporting on samples are necessary parts of having sponsors; other bloggers must be read and interacted with; blog awards must be followed and supported. Both blogs do all these things. The 'About Me' pages themselves, even though they are generally the most constant blog pages, have been changed and technically upgraded since our initial analyses. In the six months of posts we analysed, both bloggers wrote regular posts, although there was a pronounced difference in frequency. The 'Diary of a Frugal Family' blogger posted 78 times during September-October 2012, never missing more than one day, on several occasions with multiple posts each day; through these posts, we can truly 'follow' the family on their journey, almost every step of the way. The 'Thinly Spread' blogger posted 25 times within this time period, with some longer gaps; but the posts tended to be longer.

An important material difference between the blogs lies in their storying of their own relations to the bloggers' other paid, non-blogging work, which is for both of them a key means of gaining resources. The 'Thinly Spread' blogger's her professional life is narrated as more connected to the blog activities of writing and photography than are those of the 'Diary

of a Frugal Family' blogger. Blogging and other paid work may thus generate resources synergistically:

“I am also a freelance copywriter and photographer and an unpublished (as yet) fiction writer so I will be sticking some of my writing on here too as well as some tips and ideas which have come out of the fiction writers' workshops which I run.”
(‘Thinly Spread’, ‘About Me’).

The ‘About Me’ section of the ‘Diary of a Frugal Family’ blog indicates that the blogger has work where she can choose the number of working hours. However, the blog does not tell us what she does.

At the same time, the narrative within both blogs work themselves to build resources, as well as drawing on existing stores of resources. As a form of internet work, blogs take resources in order to be made. Yet the blog is also itself a resource, for the bloggers as well as their readers. It is a product, a production, and a means of production, all at the same time. One notable recent aspect of such blogs' functioning within resource economies is their monetisation. Across the posts, both blogs include voucher offers, goods testing, sponsorship, links, and invitations to events, as well as addressing specific requirements of blog content and form. The blog posts are in addition, articulated, as we have seen, through stories of time poverty, economic constraint, and exhaustion. The ‘Diary of a Frugal Family’ blogger also positions the blog in relation to a set of other enterprises such as Facebook pages and garage sales, with which the blogger's family as well as she herself is involved. The ‘Thinly Spread’ blog, too, relates to other internet work by the blogger; the work involved is less remarked on within the blog, but other social media links are present throughout in both blogs, including on the ‘About Me’ pages.

The resource requirements and productions of the blog narratives recall a range of other kinds of often female-identified, informal-economy, part-time, casual work: that of online gamers who work for clients; of competitioners and coupon-clippers; of home sales and pyramid selling; of home-based work, especially piece-work, in the manufacturing, craft, and knowledge-economy sectors (TAYLOR; 2015; SIMONTON, 2002). These two blogs' frequent references to when they can and cannot blog, and their explicit positioning of blogging in relation to other demands on their resources, strengthen these analogies.

Conclusions

Blogs as narratives

Our analyses have paid attention to the blogs' narrative hybridity, with many narratives coexisting on the same 'About Me' pages. Across the modalities at play in the blogs, the multiplicity of stories in operation generates contradictions as well as parallels. The overlapping yet also relatively autonomous stories of images and verbal texts on the 'About Me' pages display this duality especially strongly. We have also seen how the blog narratives reproduce, resist and transgress the boundaries of hegemonic narratives of motherhood, family and nutrition, in relation to resource constraints. Their transgressiveness is stylistic, as well as content-reliant. The webpages' hypertextual radiations to other blogs, advertisers, and sponsors, suspend us within more untold stories of blogs as labour resources. Indeed, this analysis has started to give us a fine-grained picture of blogs as work for women, particularly in straitened times, in ways that may relate interestingly to other feminised kinds of work, many of which are often poorly and ambiguously monetized.

These psychosocial and socioeconomic workings of blog are achieved by extensive cross-media hybridities, transmediation and 'convergence culture', as is often the case with internet signification; but such characterisations can be over-homogenising (JENKINS, 2008; RYAN, 2004). We have tried to pay attention here to the specificities of blog narratives, to elucidate the particular features and functionings of these new yet historically embedded forms of personal story.

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