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## Plenary - Untangling the Web: The Internet's Transformative Impact on Adoption

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adoptioninstitute

# Untangling the Web:

## The Internet's Transformative Impact on Adoption

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Rudd Conference – April 12, 2013

# Adoption Institute Mission

The Donaldson Adoption Institute's mission is to provide leadership that improves laws, policies, and practices – through sound research, education and advocacy – in order to better the lives of everyone touched by adoption.

## Our Principles and Values

- Every child needs and deserves a permanent family.
- Adoption is a natural, beneficial way to form a family.
- Everyone's needs in the Extended Family of Adoption must be respected.
- Openness and honesty are critical; deception and coercion are undermining.
- Practices must adhere to high ethical standards and be free from profiteering.

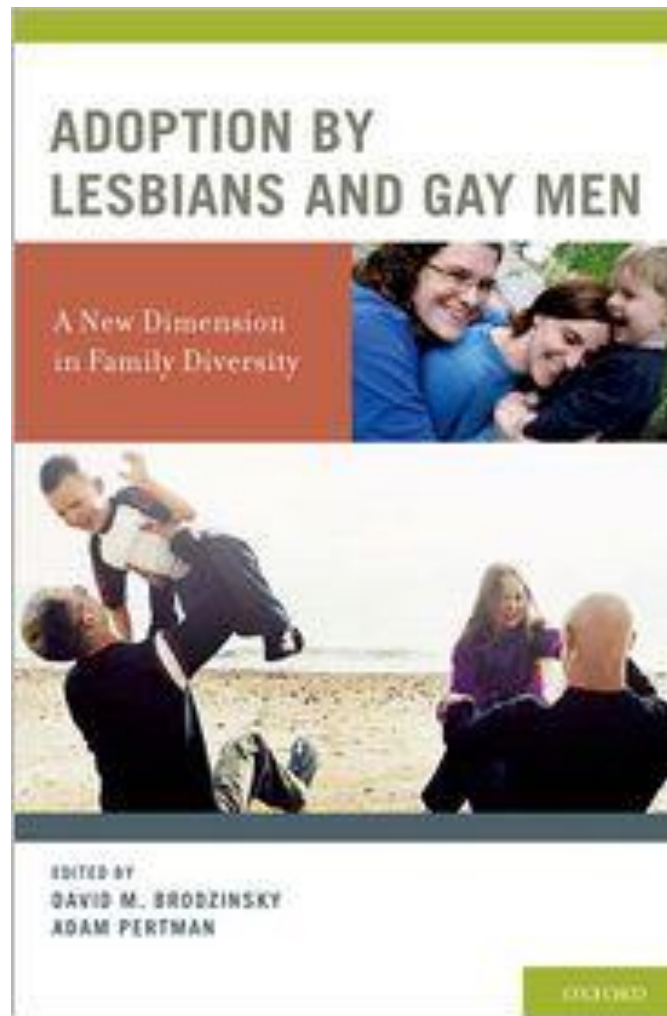
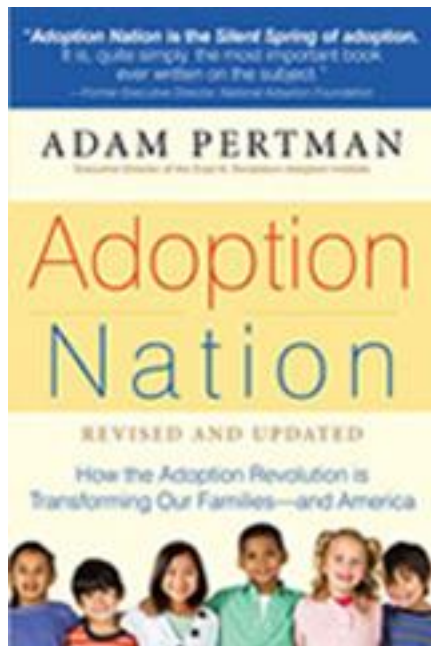
# A Sampling of Our Projects, Initiatives

- Untangling the Web: The Internet's Transformative Impact on Adoption
- Adoption Openness: From Secrecy & Stigma to Knowledge & Connections
- Never Too Old: Permanency and Connections for Older Youth in Care
- Keeping the Promise: The Critical Need for Post-Adoption Services
- For the Records I and II: Restoring a Legal Right to Adopted Adults
- Expanding Resources for Children I, II and III: Gay/Lesbian Adoption
- Beyond Culture Camp: Promoting Healthy Identity in Adoption
- Safeguarding the Rights and Well-Being of First/Birth Parents
- Old Lessons for a New World: Adoption's Lessons for ART
- Adoptive Parent Prep: Meeting Children's Mental Health Needs
- Improving Policy & Practice in Transracial Adoptions from Care
- Adoption in the Schools: A Lot to Learn
- Adoption in the News and Entertainment Media

# And Working on These New Ones . . .

- The Lynn Franklin Fund will support: Safeguarding Birthparents II, Unintended Consequences II, For the Records III . . . and More
- Hague Assessment and Best Practices for International Adoption
- Three Nations' Best Practices on Placing Children from Foster Care
- Report on the Need for Adoption-Competent Therapists
- Keeping the Promise II: National Initiative on Post-Adoption
- Curriculum on Open Adoption for Parents and Professionals
- Curriculum for Continuum of Family Education and Supports
- Promoting Positive Identity for Adoptees: Curriculum for Summer Camp, Adoption Clubhouse, a Book . . . and More
- Adoption in Schools II: Educating Educators, Creating Curricula
- Media Matters: Impact of Journalists, Entertainment Industry
- Conferences, Legislation, Advocacy, Trainings ... and More

# A Few Books by Our Authors

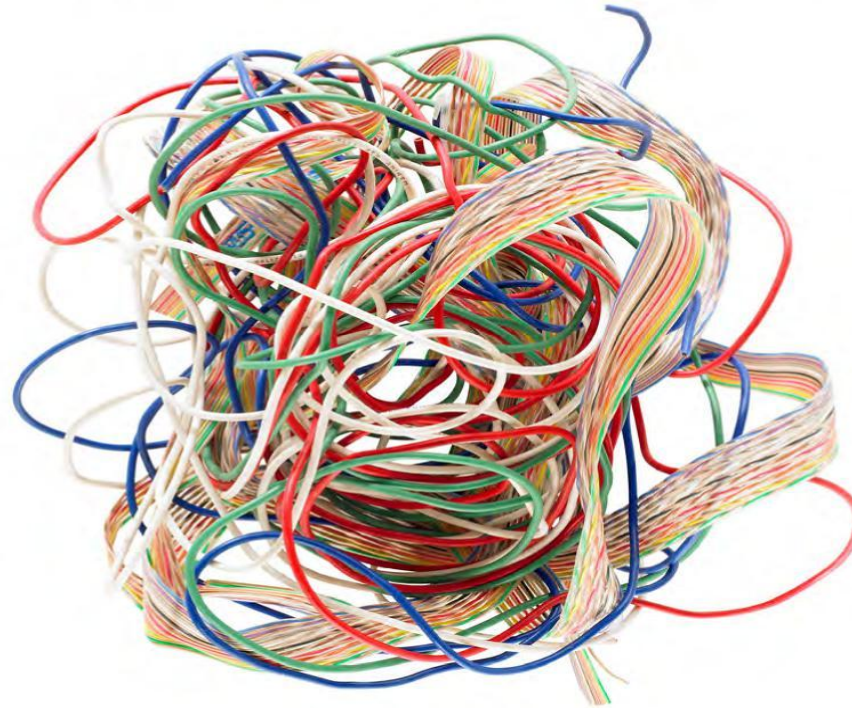


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# UNTANGLING THE WEB

THE INTERNET'S TRANSFORMATIVE IMPACT ON ADOPTION



POLICY & PRACTICE PERSPECTIVE

December 2012

Jeanne A. Howard, Ph.D.

EVAN B. DONALDSON

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# Caveats and Context

- The internet's greatest impact to date is on infant adoption, where the most money is at stake.
- A lot of good, thoughtful, ethical practice occurring.
- Dubious/unethical/illegal activities have always gone on, but now the opportunities are far greater.
- Search "birth mothers," 135 million hits; "child adoption," 91 million; "foster adoption," 10 million.
- Our goals: generate a national discussion on impact, regulation and protections – and instigate change.



# For Now, More Questions than Answers

- Adoption Practice: What's the impact on ethical professionals when internet providers promise babies quickly and incentives to pregnant women?
- Search and Reunion: What should professionals tell clients? What should parents tell their kids? What guidance, support, resources does everyone need?
- Law and Policy: How do we address possibly unsafe or traumatizing contacts for children? Do legal obstacles to acquiring information make sense?
- More and More: How do we best utilize all the new opportunities, resources, research and supports?

# So . . . How Profound Is the Internet's Impact?



"This is a secret family recipe. Speaking of family secrets, you were adopted."

# A Lay of the Land: Principal Findings in Year One

- There's a growing “commodification” of adoption and a shift away from the perspective that its primary purpose is to find families for children; it's especially the case in infant adoption.
- Finding birth relatives is becoming increasingly easy and commonplace, with significant institutional and personal implications.
  - Likely end of the era of “closed” adoption.
  - Growth in relationships between families.

## Principal Findings (cont.)

- A growing number of minors have contact and/or relationships with birth relatives, often without guidance, preparation or parents' knowledge.
- A rising number of sites that improve the prospects of adoption for “waiting” children, notably including those with special needs.
- More and more places to get information, education, networking, services and resources.
- Additional benefits such as greater opportunities for affiliation, support and information-sharing.

# The Good (Benefits)

- Internet is immediate, efficient and private
- In foster realm, better recruitment and placement
- Resources, research, support more available than ever: Rudd, Adoption Institute, ALP, Gateway, etc.
- Expectant/first/birth parents: affiliation, options info, cautions, connections to others like them
- Pre-adoptive/adoptive parents: guidance, specific knowledge (ex., LGBT), post-adopt services
- Adopted persons: exploration on adoption/selves, affiliation, search and reunion, advocacy

# The Bad and the Ugly (Risks)

- Internet is immediate, efficient and not-so-private.
- Commerce/profits over child (and adult) welfare, including aggressive and extensive marketing.
- Sometimes-singular focus on doing it quickly rather than thoughtfully, ethically and well.
- Exorbitant fees, babies who don't exist or go to the highest bidder, inability to identify red flags.
- Lack of options counseling/guidance for expectant mothers; instead, recruitment and inducements.
- Who will keep the records for the future?

# A Prism for Assessment: Accepted Ethical/Best Practices

- Preparation, counseling and representation of prospective parents and expectant mothers/fathers
- Education, resources about openness/relationships
- Transparency regarding payments and services
- Non-coercive (including financial) procedures
- Access to post-adoption resources for all parties
- Supervision and boundaries for children's safety when adopted from foster care

# What is Happening with Infant Adoption on the Internet?

“Complete your domestic adoption, on average, within 3-12 months.”  
“We connect with states where birth parents cannot revoke consent.”

- \* Learn more about the safe alternative to abortion... adoption.
- \* Financial assistance is available. \* FREE housing is available.





# Advertising and Recruitment

- Agency A: “Most couples were selected in less than FOUR months [as a result of] marketing & extensive Nationwide Internet advertising specifically targeting suitable Birthparents knowing the Internet is the most widely used medium of this demographic. ... We spend millions yearly advertising to pregnant women using aggressive grassroots marketing and outreach programs.”
- Agency B “aggressively reaches out to more Birthmothers. Unlike many state-regulated agencies B is not confined by state-mandated budget restrictions. B spends over \$1m in advertising for Birthmothers annually. As a result of these extensive advertising and outreach efforts, most matches are made in less than 9 months. With a track record like that, it is no wonder hundreds of families turn to B each year to realize their dreams.”

# Nondirective Options?

- Site X offers help to pregnant women in crisis, explaining that they have a range of options, then (accompanying photos of affluent, happy couples in their lovely homes) asks questions including:
  - \* Can I provide financially for my child?
  - \* Will my child have a father figure in his life?
  - \* Will I have time to properly care for a child?
- Another section of the site offers “Facts and Myths” about abortion, adoption and parenting.
  - \* Fact on abortion: “Over 70% of women have negative feelings.”
  - \* Fact on parenting: “You cannot rely on family members to help.”

# Search and Reunion: How Hard is it To Find Someone?

**OmniTrace** *The People Search Experts*  
Find Your Birth Parents  
or Adopted Child Today!



**Find Your Birth Family**

- Birth Parents
- Birth Siblings
- Adoptee

**Free Quote**  
by top search professionals

Search

- Search Type -

**Find My Family**  
Reuniting Adoptees  
With Birth Family Members

[www.FindMyFamily.org](http://www.FindMyFamily.org)

**KINSOLVING**  
*investigations*

### Specializing in Adoption Searches

Kinsolving Investigations is a "No Find-No Fee Agency" owned and operated by a reunited Birthmother and Private Investigator. We will provide you with the current name and address of the person you are seeking. All of our searches are guaranteed. Licensed-Bonded-Insured private investigators and member of the Better Business Bureau. Kinsolving continues to be the PREMIER search company. Please visit our website today at [www.kinsolving.com](http://www.kinsolving.com) to obtain a free quote.

### Testimonial

I'm so glad for having made the contact. I think this will be one of the most amazing experiences of my life - and hers, too. Even though sometimes it has been painful to relive the past, it has also been very healing for her ... and that has been the ultimate reward!

Many, many thanks.  
TBS/MN

### Kinsolving Investigations

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Join us on Facebook - just search  
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# Story after Story Like These

“I read a story in Time in which Mr. Pertman talked about the phenomenon of [search] through social media. Last night, my 12-year-old daughter’s birth family contacted her through Facebook. We are devastated. She wants very much to meet them. ... What advice and literature can you provide us to deal with this? It is living hell.”

*“I had been looking for my mother and siblings, if I had them, for years ... Finally, with Facebook, I found them and they have added immeasurable joy to my life. My adoptive family is still my `real’ family but now I have more.”*

# A Tiny Glimpse at the New World

I am looking for my birth parents, I was born in Akron Ohio on or around 4-14-1965 and adopted by two loving parents in Toledo Ohio. .... *I am searching for my niece and nephew. My nephew was born May 4, 1993 and my niece was born June 21, 1994. Their names were ...* I am searching for my adopted brother, born 1/11/1960 at the Florence Crittenton home in Sioux city Iowa [and] adopted out at birth in Woodbury County/Sioux City Iowa ... *I'm looking for my biological grandparents. My Mother, Angela was born December 30 1969. She says she was told she was adopted from Warren County N.C. She says she thinks her first name was "Gwendolyn" ...*

A woman with brown hair and bangs is holding a white sign. She is looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

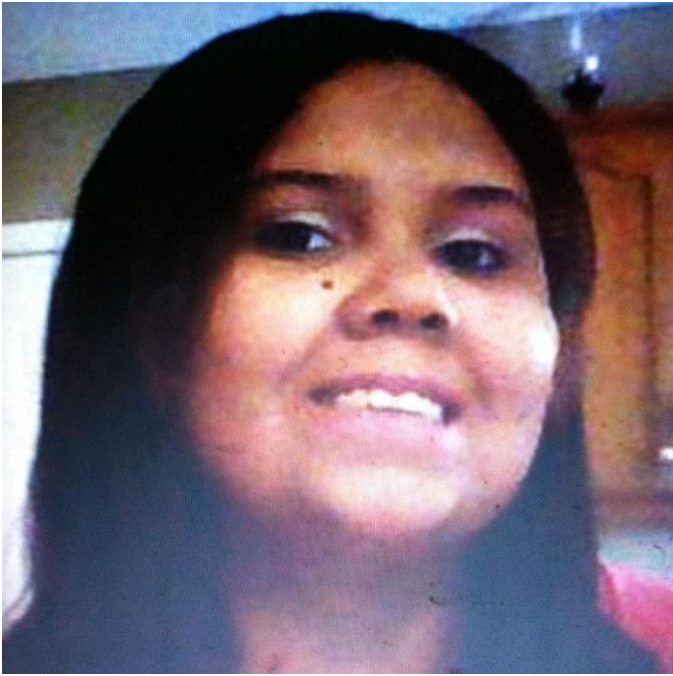
I AM Looking for  
my DAUGHTER

BORN Shirleen Ann

MARCH 30, 1966

ST MARY'S HOSPITAL

SYRACUSE NY



my name is latoya i was placed in fostercare in missouri birth place is greene county i think springfield i have a brother named joe and james and cecil we were all placed in fostercare and adopted i dont know my mother or fathers names but heard that i have a sister named tamika I was born jan 11th 1984

# In a Nutshell, What's Happening Out There . . .

- There are more reunions and more relationships, giving people what they've wanted and needed for too long. But some searchers are children without counseling, supervision or, sometimes, even parental knowledge.
- There are more resources, more opportunities for permanency for children with special needs and older youth. But there also are practices that are dubious at best, untrained practitioners, antiquated laws, etc.
- Some children's safety – emotional, psychological and perhaps physical – may be put at risk.
- **What else?**



# How Big a Deal is Internet's Impact?

- Traditional adoption practice is probably at risk.
- Era of secrecy/closure is probably near its end.
- Extended Family of Adoption is coming fast.

## What Do We Need?

- Research for knowledge, tools, best practices.
- Info and training for professionals and parents.
- Updated laws, policies, practices.

# Practice Recommendations

- Key organizations, experts should convene to devise best practice and identify needed guidance/materials.
- Education, training programs by and for professionals should be developed, then provided to all clients.
- Professional curricula, training should be revised to reflect reality many/most adoptions will be “open” to some extent, then give clients commensurate info.
- Practitioners should get training, devise materials that enable them to better assist growing number of triad members coming to them for search/reunion help.

# Policy and Law Recommendations

- State and federal policymakers should commission research, hold hearings and implement legal/policy changes to minimize risks and offer protections.
- Policy and law-enforcement officials should monitor internet activity and take action against exploitation, fraud and other illegal and unethical practices.
- Social media and internet companies should conduct and enable research and implement appropriate policies and practices on issues raised in this report.
- Laws that impede or prevent parties to adoption from gaining important information should be repealed.

# Conclusion

The list of positive, negative and complicated changes occurring in the world of adoption as a result of the Internet goes on and on, with many already in place and others still evolving. The common denominator among them is that they are not best practices derived from lessons learned from research and experience; rather, overwhelmingly, they are transformations that are happening simply because new technology enables them to happen.

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