

Becoming a Home-Educator in a Networked World: Towards the Democratisation of Education Alternatives?

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Abstract

The internet is assumed to play a special role for Elective Home Education (EHE) in the UK and has anecdotally fuelled an increase in its prevalence. Yet little is known about the how the internet features in experiences of discovering EHE. This study reports on the ways in which a predominantly middle-class and highly educated faction have appropriated the internet to develop networks and communities to support the informational, social and emotional needs of new families. The research formed part of a mixed-method doctoral study that included: an online survey of 242 home-educators; 52 individual and group interviews with 85 parents, children and young people and a week-long participant observation with families. In the absence of any “official” discourse for them, initiating contact with existing home-educators online socialised prospective families into a normalised “Do It Yourself” education culture. However, access was a complex achievement that predicated the demonstration of allegiances and commitment. The modalities of power mirrored online left some families on the periphery indefinitely, while others used the internet to cultivate self-selecting communities elsewhere. The conclusions paint a paradoxical picture for the illusive promise of the democratisation of education.

Keywords

Home education, home schooling, EHE, internet, network, community

Introduction

The process of interacting online and the new connections and organisation built between groups (known as “online networks”) presents an important and prominent socialising agent of the digital age (Brown & Duguid, 2000; Liang et al., 2012). The proliferation of social media platforms such as: Twitter, Facebook, Blogs, Skype, Instagram and Whatsapp, for example, offer rich internal structures allowing users to personalise different types and intensity of interactions (Grabowicz et al., 2012).

The multi-modal spaces of communication facilitated online have afforded groups of many sizes and disparate localities with the tools to build and sustain a combination of strong, weak and mixed-social ties. In triggering the formation of “a distinct group of willing and interested people” online networks can function as a social linkage tool for community development (White, 2004, p. 292).

In other fields, the internet has enabled dispersed individuals with shared interests to establish networks of practice, to deliberate decisions and to support each other in a way that has not previously been possible (Brown & Duguid, 2001). Such developments have shifted our understanding of what constitutes a learning community (Selwyn, 2016). Moreover, some argue that mutual reasoning and the co-creation of knowledge online has the potential to foster a form of deliberative democracy (see Russman & Klinger, 2015).

The connections and possibilities afforded through the proliferation of the internet might compliment broader trends towards Do It Yourself (DIY) education (Lees, 2011). The taken for granted assumption is that some alternative education communities are both transforming and being transformed by the seemingly limitless tools of the digital age.

The role of internet and implications for the Elective Home Education (EHE) community in the UK are unexplored. It is estimated that around 80,000-100,000 families currently home-educate in England, Scotland and Wales- less than 1% of the total school aged population (Smith & Nelson, 2015). In 2017, the BBC contacted councils in England, Wales and Scotland; of the 177 authorities who provided data, 48,000 children were being home-educated in 2016-17. This figure represents an apparent increase of 40% from 34,000 in 2014-15 (BBC, 2018). Others have also alluded to increased numbers (see: Fortune-Wood, 2005a; Hopwood et al., 2007; Myers & Bhopal, 2018; Webb, 2010). In the absence of representative numerical data, it is difficult to fully validate these claims. To add to this complexity, Lee’s and Nicholson’s (2017) imply more of a sporadic picture with EHE numbers being in flux. Set against the backdrop of increased numbers, are the anecdotal internet conversation trails which imply online networks are being used as a tool for community development:

Home-educators around the UK have organised themselves into local groups, providing mutual support, sharing information and resources, and often meeting regularly for social and educational activities (Educationotherwise.net, 2019).

Join a group...It's a great idea for novice home educators, as you'll be able to pick the brains of people who've been doing it for a while. They can tell you where to go for resources and learning experiences in your

area, share materials, provide group learning opportunities...
(TheShoolRun.com, 2019).

Numerous website posts, blogs and forum comments littered across the internet seem to suggest that access to social support online is readily available to home-educators at the click of a button. Joining an email list or forum might serve as a gateway to meet EHE families offline. These developments have unique and unexplored implications for EHE, yet no UK study has systematically researched this topic. To answer overdue calls for work in this area, this study considers some of the ways in which EHE parents have used the internet to develop networks and communities and how participation in this landscape featured in their experiences of discovery.

Literature Review

EHE in the UK is more visible in the public sphere than it once was (Rothermel, 2015), and a small but promising body of literature has emerged on the topic in recent years. This review collates empirical work on the rise of the internet, community and network development in the UK context. Selected studies from the USA, Australia and Norway are included to extend discussion in places where there are substantial gaps.

EHE in the UK

It is broadly assumed that the EHE population is not confined to a specific family type of occupational class, professional background or ethnic group (Hopwood et al., 2007; Rothermel, 2002; Nelson, 2013). In the largest survey conducted, Rothermel (2002) found that home-educating families come from all walks of life. Yet this diversity was limited. Rothermel's survey (2002) of 419 home-educating parents in the UK found that 49% of mothers and 67% of fathers had attended university. Only a small number (26%) had not received any post-compulsory education. The professional groups were lecturers and teachers, with at least one trained teacher in each family (40%); process, plant and machine operatives, as well as elementary occupations (10%) while health professionals (including doctors and nurses) made up a small proportion (4%) of the population sampled (p.221). While this study is now dated, it is one of the largest national studies of its kind. Fortune-Wood's (2005a) study broadly echoed the trends that Rothermel (2002) observed. However, Fortune-Wood (2005a) was keen to assert that home-educators are not a stereotypical middle-class elite because their household income and family size meant that they were financially poorer than average. There are exceptions to the trends in education levels previously reported by Rothermel (2002) and Fortune-Wood (2005a). For example, as part of her qualitative study with 34 experienced

home-educators in England, Safran (2008) found that fewer than half of parents had obtained a first degree.

It is possible that home-educating families from ethnic minority groups have not been adequately represented in UK EHE studies. Based on her review of empirical studies, D'Arcy (2014) argued that Traveller families were often disregarded because they were not perceived as legitimate home-educators. Drawing on their qualitative study of 33 home-educating families in England (including white middle class families, Gypsy and Travellers, Black families, Christian and Muslim families), Myers and Bhopal (2018) have argued that the presence of ethnicity and social class inequalities have shaped the experiences of home-educating families in marked ways. Muslim home-educators were unfairly perceived by policymakers as a riskier and somewhat illegitimate part of an otherwise implied safe white middle-class majority. Myer's and Bhopal (2018) usefully surface some of the ways in which the intersection of ethnicity, race, class and religion have shaped the experiences of different EHE families in unequal ways.

Much attention has been paid to grouping families' interest in EHE based on philosophical, ideological, and/or religious beliefs (Rothermel, 2003). There are a host of multi-faceted motivations leading to initial EHE interest and subsequent discovery. Reasons include: dissatisfaction with the school environment, philosophical beliefs, children's educational needs and school places (Rothermel, 2002). Although educational approaches and styles are diverse and vary from family to family, some scholars suggest that a larger proportion of UK families do not primarily home-educate due to their religious beliefs and instead adopt autonomous and child-led approaches to their practice (Thomas, 2008; Thomas & Pattison, 2013). More recently, there has been a suggested increase in the number of families who home-educate primarily due to their dissatisfaction with state provision, and a lack of support for special educational needs (Davies, 2015). This emergent faction of families is typically "pushed" into EHE as a last resort rather than as a desirable first choice (see: Morton, 2010; Parsons & Lewis, 2010).

The application of fixed typologies is limited when considering that parental motivations, education philosophies, styles, methods and approaches evolve across the number of years spent home-educating (Safran, 2010; Rothermel, 2011). Additionally, families adopting EHE for short and/or fixed periods or in combination with part-time school attendance, only further complicates efforts to represent a comprehensive picture of what is clearly (no fixed data on numbers withstanding) a transient and geographically dispersed population (Hopwood et al., 2007; Fortune-Wood; 2005b; Smith & Nelson, 2015).

The little that is known about the intrafamilial differences such as family composition or parental partnerships paints a varied picture (Rothermel, 2002; Fortune-Wood, 2005a; Hopwood et al., 2007). While there may be exceptions,

small-scales qualitative studies have found mothers typically assume primary responsibility for EHE (Kunzman & Gaither, 2013; Morton, 2011).

Clearly a multitude of characteristics are likely to shape the needs of the EHE population in heterogeneous ways. What follows is a review of how some EHE families have engaged in community development to cater for these needs.

Community Development

The existence of offline parent-initiated support groups has been broadly acknowledged in several UK studies (Eddis, 2015; Kraftl, 2014; Lees, 2011; 2014; Morton, 2010; Nelson, 2013; Thomas, 2008). The most significant contributions in the area of community development research come from Safran (2008) and Steven's (2001) work. Based on her doctoral research exploring neighbourhood EHE groups among "long term" home-educators in the UK and US, Safran (2008; 2009) applied Wenger's (1998) original Communities of Practice framework (CoP) to conceptualise the learning processes and structures within an EHE group who met regularly offline. Importantly, through participating in this form of social group, members acquired a shared sense of belonging and identity. Safran (2008) argued that:

The neighbourhood home-education group is an unusual community of practice...it is not an institution such as an office, hospital or school with generally well-known structures. In the neighbourhood home-education group, there is no defined structure, no formal obligations, no agreed way to do things and their joint enterprise may not even be made explicit (Safran 2008, p. 3).

Interestingly, Safran (2010) suggested that even when home-educators choose not to engage face to face with neighbourhood EHE groups, their process of reading newsletters, visiting websites and browsing email lists could engage them in a collective social learning process that makes those individuals legitimate peripheral participants of the wider EHE culture (Safran 2010, p. 1). She alludes the internet co-existing with neighbourhood groups and the possible creation of more loosely associated constellations of home-education practice (Wenger, 1998).

Recent community and network developments might have implications for the identity work and sense of belonging among new parents in their EHE discovery. In her research with home-schooling mothers in the US, Lois (2012) found that what united different families was a shared emotional struggle linked to overcoming criticism from outsiders and presenting a discourse of good mothering. Lois (2012) noted online discussions with experienced home-educators and meeting families face-to-face helped new parents to manage this ongoing negotiation.

Significantly, the perceived absence or loss of community following a sudden break from school, was one of the primary reasons why the parents sampled in Beck's (2010) Norwegian study did *not* home-educate in 2006. In their attempt to reconstruct everyday modern life, Beck (2010) argues that a new socially motivated group aims to recruit participants from all classes (p.79).

The seemingly more critical implications of community and network development have been explored in US research (See Neuman & Guterman, 2017). Based on a decade of researching parents in the US, Stevens (2001) reveals that home-schooling "[i]s not a random collection of individuals but an elaborate social movement with its celebrities, networks, and characteristic lifeways" (p. 10). Steven's found local home-schooling communities were sometimes hostile to home-educators with different or opposing philosophical and ideological approaches to their practice. This conflict centred on supposedly "authentic" versus "fake" home-educators. Others have questioned whether the self-selection formation of tightly bonded communities signal the erosion of social cohesion by reproducing highly individualised parallel societies (Aruini & Davies, 2005; Lubinski, 2000; Medlin, 2013).

Internet Use in EHE

The proliferation of internet technologies is cited as having some sort of connection to the rise in EHE (see, English, 2016; Lees, 2011; Kunzman & Gaither, 2013). For example, in her doctoral work, Lees (2011) writes:

[T]here is no doubt that internet usage and the discovery of EHE have a relationship. This relationship is considered as a combination of a lack of active EHE-appropriate (i.e., not disappointing in its legal, philosophical or educational accuracy) information provision by Government and a new social trend towards people "doing it for themselves" (p. 69).

She mentioned the word "internet" 50 times in her thesis so vital a role it showed itself to have in EHE discovery in 2009 to 2010, when collecting her empirical data. However, specifically focusing on internet matters in EHE discovery and community building is an area given some of the least tightly focused research attention by EHE scholarship so far. This is partly to do with the fact that year on year the internet becomes more and more important to daily life. Yet in a rising internet-technological age its pertinence to understanding EHE better is clear and urgent. Where authors have identified the internet as playing a democratising role, for example in making EHE "easier" to discover or practice, few have systematically researched how this occurs.

Notably, Andrade (2008) sought to explore the relationship and purpose between the diffusion of computer-mediated technologies and the reported growth

of home-schooling in the US. Based on 27 interviews with families and focus groups, Andrade's (2008) findings highlighted that computer and communication technologies helped parents lower informal, interpersonal, instructional and psychological barriers of "entry" during the process of deliberation leading to the decision to home-educate. Once parents were committed to home-schooling, the internet helped them to create, access and sustain CoPs (Lave &Wegner, 1991). This empowered families to "energize latent or percolating ideologies of choice, individualism and parental sovereignty" (Andrade, 2008, p. 4).

Internet use has also been explored in relation to parents who see themselves as so called "unschoolers." In her master's research, Bertozzi (2006) suggests an unschooling movement in the US has grown alongside the evolution of grassroots media technologies. Her findings implied internet use played a simultaneously supportive, reinforcing and contradictory role among subcultural identities in participatory unschooling practices.

Conversely, Apple (2011, 2015) postulates the internet, TV and radio are being used by a "powerful group of educational activists—conservative Christian Evangelical home-schoolers" (p. 113)—to grow and support themselves through a variety of ideologically motivated social agendas. Apple (2011) argues that these technologies provide individuals with a way of personalising information to only select specialised knowledge by choosing "what they want to know or what they find personally interesting" (Apple 2011, p. 9). It follows that customising lives in this way undermines the strength of local communities, many of which are allegedly woefully weak (Apple 2011, p. 9).

Webb's (2010) observations resonate with Apple's (2011) assertion that network development is serving to create social divisions among families rather than serving to bridge them. In the aftermath of *The Badman Review of Elective Home-Education in England* (2009), online platforms were used by a politicised minority of home-educators to air personal agendas and to socially exclude outsiders (Webb, 2010 p. 39). Apparently, home-educators used two major websites (Education Otherwise and Home-education UK) alongside an emailing list to coordinate a campaign against the recommendations made by Graham Badman (2009). Webb (2010) remarks:

The more militant autonomous educators are well organised and give the impression of being more numerous than they are. A core of activists patrols the internet looking for debates about home-education taking place online. Should a newspaper or magazine run a piece on home-education, and it is possible to post comments online, the comments section will at once be flooded with pro-home-education posts...Anybody who is critical will be challenged (Webb 2010, p. 39).

Webb (2010) argued that a small minority of home-educators who viewed themselves as the “shock troops” of home-education—activists fighting for all home-educators—waged a “vicious” campaign against Graham Badman over the internet. Webb also implied that the wider home-educating community has yet to organise themselves and “to create bridges across incommensurability” (Lees, 2011, pp.191-192 in Webb 2010, p.39), a result of mistrust that has now led to their “misfortune” (p.39). Webb’s (2010) views reflect his opinion as opposed to analysis grounded in a systematic empirical piece of research of which he has done none.

Summarily, McAvoy (2015) claims that new technologies have already impacted on EHE communities in a significant and irreversible way. The EHE community are now “legitimate contributors to a process that is enjoying refreshingly democratic renaissance” (McAvoy, 2015; p. 82). The assumption that access equates to democratisation lacks nuance and an appreciation for the possibility of modalities of power and control that can be reconfigured online (Selwyn, 2017). Additionally, the EHE movement does not constitute one “community”. The social characteristics and familial dispositions seem to point towards a heterogeneous collection of families with unique interests and needs, albeit with a profile that may veer more towards the educated than the uneducated.

Evidently, the ways in which different social groups have used the internet to cultivate communities and online networks to support their EHE practice requires further exploration. Participation in what might be a broad constellation (Safran, 2008) or “landscape” (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015) could have implications for the extent to which a wider range of families are discovering EHE as a viable educational alternative. This includes social justice concerns. Lees highlighted in 2011 (p. 69) that

There are issues with even this “freedom” to discover EHE, which are to do with cultural capital. The charity...describes how many people calling their helpline not only do not have good internet access but more importantly have never received educational input suitable to be able to do the most basic of internet functions such as using a common browser:

Sophia: “We have a lot of people making inquiries who don’t have access to the internet... don’t know how to Google...”[...]

Discovery of EHE then becomes a privilege, not a right or an opportunity, because of issues connected to social, economic and cultural capital.

To answer calls for further work in this area, this study sheds detailed light on the role of the internet, online networks and communities in the discovery of EHE

among novice and experienced parents in England, Scotland and Wales. The central question that guided the inquiry was: “*how have families used the internet to develop communities and networks and in what ways do these groups feature in the discovery of EHE?*” The following section outlines the mixed methods approach and data collection tools used to pursue this inquiry.

Methodology and Methods

To collate different units of analysis (the individual, family, and communities), a qualitatively driven (Mason, 2006) mixed methods approach was used in this research. This encompassed a broad spectrum of integrating qualitative and quantitative data collection tools, perspectives and research paradigms (Mason, 2006). The design, sequence and application of tools emerged from a pragmatic, strategic and self-reflexive thought process. The approach used therefore resembled that of a *bricolage* (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). Thus, whilst aware of the paradigmatic tensions and substantive issues of using a mixed methodology, the approach taken favoured pragmatism over purity (Bazeley, 2004).

Access and Recruitment

By most criteria, home-educators are defined as a “hard-to-reach” research population (see, Marpsat & Razafindratsima, 2010). Home-educating families account for less than 0.25% of the overall school aged UK population. They do not share a common access point and are, by all accounts, geographically dispersed. Additionally, there is no large-scale national data set. This makes it difficult to construct a comprehensive sampling frame. To create matters as even more complex, researchers such as Nelson (2013) and Morton (2011) have documented the difficulties in accessing a population who have traditionally faced negativity and hostility. Given that home-educators are a heterogenous and hard to reach group, an online survey was used to generate the sample (see Fig 1.). With permission, a link was circulated by the online moderators of 29 Yahoo! and Facebook groups on my behalf.

Data Collection Techniques

The quantitative and qualitative techniques used to gather the data consisted of: i) an online survey, ii) semi-structured interviews with adults and families, and iii) focus groups with home-educated children and young people (Fig. 1).

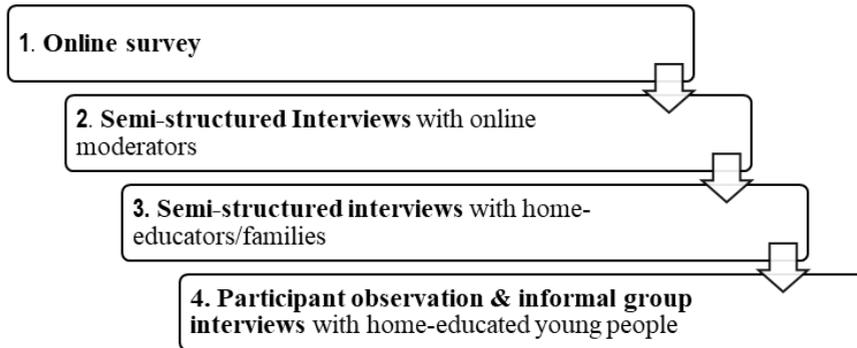


Figure 1: Primary data collection phases

The primary data collection for this research took place over a three-month period between May and July 2013.

The use of online surveys in social research presents several theoretical and practical challenges and limitations. The “scoping” online survey used was created using Qualtrics and was open to any parent/carer who currently home-educated in the UK. It consisted of 55 open and closed questions on a range of different topics including: parental qualification levels, occupational social class, reasons for EHE, children’s previous & current forms of educational provision, memberships of organisations and groups for EHE and family technology use.

Semi-structured interviews with parents, families and home-educated children and young people were integral to phase 2, 3 and 4 of the project. A total of 52 semi-structured interviews were conducted on a 1-1, family and group basis across a range of different contexts, locations and mediums. While there are several methodological limitations associated with conducting interviews across the mediums of telephone and skype, in this study, several participants who otherwise would have been excluded (due to geography and/or physical impairments) were offered the opportunity to participate via telephone or skype. However, the majority of interviews took place face-to-face, in participants’ homes and community spaces (village halls, a camping festival).

The fourth phase of data collection encompassed participant observation at a large summer camping festival for home-educating families in South England. This involved living with home-educating families and participating in a range of activities including talks and arts and crafts activities.

Sample Groups

The groups sampled in this study included the moderators of online Yahoo! and Facebook groups, home-educating parents and families, and home-educated children and young people. The online groups sampled included national, regional and local networks intended to support an array of different families and forms of EHE. Table I provides a break-down of the data collection phases and sample groups.

	Group	Method	Sample
Phase 1	Home-educators in England, Wales & Scotland	Online survey	242 responses
Phase 2	Online moderators	Semi-structured interviews	12 semi-structured interviews
Phase 3	Home-educators/families & children	Semi-structured interviews	32 semi-structured interviews
Phase 4	Home-educated young people	Participant observation & group interviews	8 informal group interviews

Table 1: Sample group overview

It emerged that 12 of the online moderators (OMs) interviewed were trusted and established members of their respective communities. 10 of the 12 online moderators interviewed had been home-educating for six+ years and all were female. Most of home-educating parents interviewed were female and collectively, had been home-educating for variable number of years (ranging from six months to 15 years). The home-educated children and young people who participated were of varied ages (ranging from 10-22yrs old), most were male. Identifiable data, including individual and group names have been replaced with pseudonyms. For the purpose of paper, two pseudonyms presented in the original doctoral study have been secondarily replaced to protect the identities of researchers with shared names working in the field of home-education.

Conceptual Toolkit

The quantitative and qualitative data generated in this study was analysed using thematic techniques. The process of coding and indexing focused on single cases before collating re-occurring topics, patterns and ideas (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). This was a process that begun inductively before assuming more deductive techniques. Towards the later stages of analysis, several theoretical concepts served to guide the interpretation. These included aspects of Communities of Practice

(CoPs) Theory (Wenger, 1998), forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1986) and Bernsteinian (1975; 2000) ideas. In this way, I did not assume theory would be my guide, rather I selected a collection of inter-related concepts and ideas to extend the analysis of emergent themes within the data.

Most pertinent to the analysis of communities, networks, meaning and belonging in this study, was Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner's (2015) metaphor of a "landscape of practice" (LoP). The LoP metaphor recognises that more tightly knit CoPs exist alongside looser networks of practices (NoPs). This metaphor captures that individuals might be members of multiple communities and networks and that, overtime, some of these groups have varying degrees of influence. Other important concepts used included: Ball's (2002) typology of "push" and "pull factors"; "concerted cultivation" (Lareau, 2003; Vincent & Maxwell, 2016) and "bridging" and "bonding" capital (Putnam, 2000).

Findings Part A: Towards a Landscape of Practice

The parents surveyed in this study cited multiple affiliations to a diffuse range of formal and informal organisations, including a variety of online, offline and mixed group types. In response to the question "*Are you a member of any national, regional and/or local community support groups for home-education?*" (n=237), 178 (75%), said "yes," while 59 (25%) said "no." A further 168 survey respondents cited 240 different formal and informal organisations—including a variety of national, regional and local groups. Within these accounts, some respondents explicitly cited Yahoo! and Facebook groups, while others mentioned parent-led groups who primarily interacted offline.

Facebook and Yahoo! information pages were used to communicate varying joining criteria to new and existing members. Examples of similar kinds of information pages to those that featured in this study are provided below:

[Group name omitted]...provides free and subsidised events, resources and support to home educating families. The group has become a national group open to all home educators in the UK, having started in *[location omitted]* initially. (Facebook group)

There are many Home Education groups out there, many dedicated to various strands of Home Education and belief systems in the UK, but not a single one for Pagan Home Educators in the UK. I thought it would be nice to have a space where we can share related links of interest as well as offer support and advice for those raising their kiddies in a Pagan household whilst home educating, without them being lost in the vastness of other, larger groups. (Facebook group)

The expression of joining criteria and rules based on characteristics such as: ideology, ethnicity, religious belief, ages of children, educational approaches and school experiences online, meant that some of the offline groups represented in this sample were more “closed” to prospective families than others:

Some groups insist that you cannot join unless you are committed to home-education as a lifestyle choice...you not allowed to join if you are waiting for a school place...(Sharon, OM¹)

Through the process of searching for and applying to join, these signs and symbols serve as boundary markers to explicitly separate legitimate from illegitimate participants of the group (Wenger 1998). However, the exact criteria required to become a legitimate member of a community varied from group to group. As Sharon explained:

Some insist that you have to be personally vouched for by other members of the same group. Some insist that you live in the same locale or follow the same ethos/ faith/ spiritual leanings/ type of home-education... (Sharon, OM)

Due to the high levels of commitment associated with participating in a local co-operative group co-run by Sam², their Yahoo! group’s information page specified that any parents were required to attend at least three meetings with group offline before being able to access their Yahoo! domain. She explained that this protocol was put in place to ensure the continued success of the group:

If they want to join the group new people have to agree to the guidelines of the group, which are...I mean, there’s quite a lot...But it’s mostly common sense to be honest. It’s things like, parents are responsible for their own children, we like people to contribute in some way to the group because it is a co-operative group...Our Yahoo! group is very much for

¹ The abbreviation OM is used to refer to online moderators

² Sam is a home-educating mother of three children. She had been home educating for eight years at the time of our interview. She ran a green ‘co-operative’ neighbourhood group for home-education families in her local area, explained she wanted her children (who are currently home-educated) to be able to build relationships with other families, and to provide them with the opportunity to engage in ‘interesting’ outdoor education activities with other families on a regular basis.

organising get-togethers...for some people, that is not their cup of tea...(Sam, OM)

Furthermore, Georgina a home-educating mother of two children, set up a small Facebook group to support six local EHE families engaged in a study-style history group. She explained why the group was invitation only:

Partly it was to keep numbers down. I felt that if the group was too big, then all of the children don't get enough time and then they get bored. We have got nine children and that is just about okay in two hours. Each child can get through their session and pay attention to everyone else's. More children than that [and] it wouldn't work...(Georgina, OM)

Arguably, these examples highlight how some groups used criteria to ensure engagement and commitment. Thus, in communicating the parameters, online moderators could ensure that the enterprise of their group was maintained. If some groups did not set explicit criteria, this would be significantly harder to achieve. As Georgina illustrated:

...[W]ithin the home-education world, a lot of people have a terrible habit of seeing something is coming up saying that they will go to it and then never turning up...So, by making it invite only, I have control who's in it and if I felt anybody wasn't pulling their weight I could chuck them out. (Georgina, OM)

Power and Surveillance

Experienced home-educators often assumed the role of maintaining boundaries between different networks and communities in the landscape. Their role as moderators hinged on previously gaining the acceptance and trust of the EHE families that the group intended to support:

I had set up a home-education group in real life and people knew me and trusted me....Home-education works on trust very much, because people knew who I was, I got invitations to moderate....(Elaine, OM)

In addition to being primarily responsible for approving requests to join the group, Yahoo! and Facebook also empowered online moderators primarily with the responsibilities of regulating the flow and content of the kinds of information exchanged between members of the online space. Sam highlighted:

They can message whatever they want. I mean, obviously, we're keeping an eye on it. So, if it's offensive anything we could take it down, but I mean they wouldn't tend to be....(Sam, OM)

Some online domains in the landscape were more tightly moderated than others. As Elaine and Lorraine illustrate:

You just sort of look at the messages before they go out. The group that I set up is very tightly moderated, nothing gets through without my say-so. But some of the other groups are quite lax and it is just a matter of overseeing...just making sure that nothing is kicking off and people aren't killing each other. (Elaine, OM)

My role is only really, calming any arguments....The unspoken guideline agreed between moderators is that it's not a forum for arguments and it isn't a forum for lots of personal type of emails, you know like "meet you at the park Suzie" sort of thing, because it just gets in the way of other things. (Lorraine, OM)

Interestingly, with the appropriation of the internet, some of the communities and networks in this study are perhaps not as self-organising and mutually negotiated as the neighbourhood group identified in Safran's (2008) earlier work.

Characteristics of EHE Parents Online

The home-educating parents surveyed and later interviewed possessed very high levels of cultural capital. This was echoed in their educational attainment and previous and current occupational social class. The previous and/or current employment groups of my survey respondents illustrated that Managerial (17.4) and Professional occupational (12.7) formed the largest categories. Collectively, this group constituted a very highly-educated faction of the general population (n=238). Of the 238 respondents, 93% had achieved 5 GCSE/O Level passes (grades A-C) or higher, a figure nearly three times higher than the 27% of the general population, while 36% had obtained a Higher BA/BSc education degree or equivalent, and a further 29% had obtained masters and/or doctoral degrees. Just 1% of respondents reported having obtained no qualifications, significantly lower than 22.7% of the population of England and Wales recorded in the 2011 Census.

Most of the home-educators surveyed identified as white British. All except for two families interviewed constituted two parent cohabiting households—with mothers typically assuming primary responsibility for their child's/children's EHE. The group of home-educators sampled in this research mostly likely constituted a middle-class faction (Ball, 2002).

When asked to rate the importance of factors influencing their family’s decision to home-educate, the most important reasons in the 235 survey responses found social context and a child’s individual experiences of school were the most important themes in the decision to home-educate. These findings imply that although 17% of the survey respondents identified religion as important to their lives, religious belief was not an important factor alone in the decision to home-educate. Rather, perspectives positioned school risking the social development of the child as the most crucial consideration This resonates with Myer’s and Bhopal’s (2018) and English’s (2016) work.

Asked to think about what they valued most for their children when they grow up, respondents rated the prospect of good health, independence and fulfilling employment significantly higher than having a lot of money or having good educational qualifications (see Table II):

Goals	The no. of respondents who ranked this achievement in their top three
1. Good Health	198
2. Being independent	148
3. Having a fulfilling job	125
4. Having a good marriage or partnership	104
5. Having good friends	102
6. Good educational qualifications	19
7. Having children	14
8. Owning their own home	2
9. Having a lot of money	1

Table II: Goals for home-education- survey responses

Furthermore, the desire to cultivate happy, confident and independent learners who possessed a love for learning, critical thinking and an ethical sense of self was prevalent across the 150 qualitative survey responses. Amidst these desires, EHE has enabled participants to achieve this through the various freedoms it offers for

childhood learning. Across the 168 qualitative survey responses to question 54: “*What do you want home-education to achieve?*”, “*freedom*” was cited 66 times.

Collectively, the parents in this study aimed to reach the same destination but they had very different experiences, ideas and starting points in this journey. Just under half of the families who had opted to home-educate from the outset held positive beliefs that gradually pulled them towards EHE and away from the prospect of their child/children attending school (Ball, 2002). On the other hand, the remaining families who resorted to EHE following their child’s school attendance held negative experiences and fears that pushed them towards EHE and away from school (Ball, 2001). For these families, their online status was of special importance and the remaining part of the findings explores this link in greater depth.

Findings Part B: EHE Discovery in a Landscape of Practice

This part of the paper provides an account of the ways in which participation in a landscape of practice featured uniquely in their EHE discovery for “first choice” and “last resort” families (Morton, 2010).

Committing Earlier: Why Bother with School?

Some of the parents interviewed in this research had discovered EHE in the mid to late 1990s. During this time, Yahoo! and Facebook had not yet fully taken off. As discussed earlier, several parents had almost by chance met and established social ties with families. Recalling 1997, Nadine, who had been home-educating for 15 years, described the process of following “trails” on the internet:

[W]hen I was pregnant with my first child, I was researching natural childbirth options and as soon as you start looking at natural childbirth you come across a few nutters who home-educate and I was thinking, “Well, I’m all for natural childbirth, but home-education, that’s just a bridge too far”....You know, “Well, very impressive, but I’m not sure I’d ever do that”...and then by the end of the first trimester I had decided “yes, I’m going to do this.” It was entirely driven by following trails on the internet...this was in the days before emailing lists... (Nadine, home-educator).

Nadine’s comments support the observations previously made by Andrade (2008) who alluded to a positive correlation between the availability of the internet and the prevalence of EHE (as did Lees, 2011). Given what little is known about the existing home-educating population in Britain, it is difficult to fully capture the nature of this multi-faceted relationship. In 2013, when this research was carried out, the perceived importance of online groups had since changed:

Becoming a Home-Educator in a Networked World

Quite a number of parents now enquire whilst their child is very small; under four years, and we have had a couple of families who have come to events from when their child was small enough to be in a sling, as this is a lifestyle choice for them....(Sharon, OM)

Sam, the online moderator of a local green “co-operative” style group for families living in the East of England, is an example of parent described by Sharon:

...[I] bumped into one of the original members when my daughter was only three and I took a name and number, because I was sort of interested in what they were doing and then I joined the email list very soon afterwards...and then I just got very involved in it really....(Sam, OM)

Seemingly early networking with local home-educating communities offline had enabled and further cemented family decisions of “not needing to give school a try”:

[M]ore people are giving it a go. Whereas, 10 years ago they might have thought, but I wouldn't know anyone and I would be all alone, now you get people who are joining these forums when their children are two or three years old, saying “well I'm thinking about it.” So, I think those forums are actually helping to increase the numbers who are home-educating...It counteracts the lack of positive images in the media....(Georgina, OM)

Moreover, after researching EHE online, and having found the page for her local Yahoo! group, Christie decided to set up her group for local home-educators in her area when her son was four years old.

[O]ur area is a big geographical area and no one had started a group, so by the time my eldest reached four, I just thought “right I'm going to start my own”...I am very excited about home-educating....(Christie, OM)

Overall, the accounts showed that these parents were positioned as what Wenger (1998) might define as *inbound members* of EHE communities when their children were very young. Based on these findings it could be inferred that through identifying groups online and subsequently participating in activities offline, some families were subsequently committed to the prospect of EHE much earlier on than was previously possible.

We Are Not Alone: A DIY Education is Normal

The participation in the landscape featured in a unique way for parents who discovered EHE as a “last resort.” For these parents, their first social encounter with existing home-educators was online. This subsequently led to meeting families offline:

The first thing I did when researching home-education, was to go on Mumsnet...and then I went on to Education Otherwise...from there I got to my local Yahoo! group... they were quite a friendly bunch. I got lots of information from them, and I just started attending the different groups that way... It is an online community, but then you get to meet everybody in the group scenario [offline] as well... (Heather, home-educator).

One of the advantages of a Yahoo! group or a Facebook group is that you can lurk. You can join and not actually post anything, but you can see the kind of traffic that is happening...You get to thinking, “oh, hang on a moment these are just normal people discussing normal things”... and then you think, “well, they are meeting up in a park near me, I will just go and lurk to see how scary they look”...and then you go and realise people are not talking about how they force their children to sit in a dark room all day doing chemistry sums or something....(Georgina, OM)

Participation in “readymade” networks, dedicated to EHE, afforded parents on the periphery of EHE and between school, the ability to identify educational and social activities taking place regularly in their locality. The effect of this, eased parental anxiety concerning and the perceived loss of community. Moreover, through peripheral participation in both online and offline domains of practice, some parents learnt that home-educators were normal. Central to this learning process was the realisation of commonalities, between not just a few families but many families. As Phoebe illustrated:

I suppose from a parent’s point of view, we want to make sure that she had the education that she would have got if she was in school...She broached the subject when she was still in school, so I used that time, without her knowing, to look at the online forums. I spoke to our local coordinators and then visited local groups. It started with a simple Google search, and I found our local home-education page. I filled in joining details...The local home-educator called me and spoke about all of the different things she did, her experiences, and she suggested some more online forums that I joined... they were great. There was also Facebook pages for all of those as well....(Phoebe, home-educator)

For Phoebe, her participation in multiple groups of likeminded parents served to valid her experiences. She gained a sense of belonging that helped her to reframe her discover of EHE initially introduced by her daughter:

I needed a lot of support, not just from one person, but from many. So, having those forums was a really useful way of putting down on paper everything that I needed to say and the answers I needed to get without having to face anybody...it was helpful to know that people had gone through the same thing...So my initial reaction went from one of horror to “oh well I might be able to this”.... (Phoebe, home-educator)

At the point of “family crisis” because of the break down in communication with her son’s headmaster, Grace highlighted the importance of her local Yahoo! group:

[T]hat was the lifeline for me that there were other people out there. And I remember seeing that number thinking “Gosh this 269 other families out there doing home-education”... because you don’t see them, why would I see them because... I was at work. (Grace, home-educator)

Here the feature of the online networks and communities served to make EHE families visible to parents like Grace, who otherwise might not have established communication with many of these families before this. Connected to the alienation and anxieties experienced by these parents, Kirsten explained that making the decision to home-educate required *aligning* oneself to an unusual practice. To commit to such an idea requires a lot of support and emotion work on the part of parents:

Home-education has and probably always will be a minority choice...because it goes against the norm of school. Anything that is a minority choice requires an awful lot of support around it....(Kirsten, home-educator)

Several home-educators described how feeling part of a wider culture was crucial in cases where they felt that they could not discuss the possibility of EHE with family or friends for fear of negative judgment. For these parents, the process of lurking and sharing stories with others online helped to them to negotiate the boundaries of school and a DIY education. For example, Jenny described how her participation in a national Yahoo! group for parents managing their child’s special educational needs helped her to gain a sense of belonging:

[M]ainstream schools do not work for children with autism... unfortunately...our experiences are not isolated at all. Hundreds and hundreds of families have been through the same, and I discovered some of these families through the online networks. In particular, [*group name*]...the majority of people on there have children with autism, and if they wrote their stories, they would look so much like ours all over the internet. I found that in actually connecting with them...you start to realise well actually you know, I'm not wrong...and that actually this is a situation that many people are going through, and you know that home-education is one way to say "no, I am taking control of this and I am stopping doing this" and you have the support of those people. (Jenny, home-educator)

Through her participation, Jenny re-negotiated meaning in the stories of other like-minded families. This, in turn, afforded her with the ability to alter her position, whereby EHE was re-framed as an empowering choice. The knowledgeability acquired online was powerful for parents on the periphery of EHE practice, despite assuming an identity of non-participation. Elsa described that:

It was the community of the local group, even though we haven't done much with them, just knowing that it was out there...it made me realise that if we did take this path we won't be alone and we could be as involved in the groups as we want, you dip in and dip out as we wished....(Elsa, home-educator)

Moreover, Elaine highlighted that the immediacy of support offered by multiple home-educators is something that, before the expansion of online networks, was a lengthy process:

I think, if you were waiting for support in the real physical world, you could be waiting for quite some time...the minute you post not only will you get just one person to support you, you will get a whole lot of people too....(Elaine, OM)

Kirsten, a deaf home-educator, illustrated how joining a Yahoo! group for home-educators in her area correlated with a newly-acquired confidence and empowerment—an experience that facilitated her decision to deregister her son from school:

I mean, it took away the fear, it's what gave us the strength to go for it... one week later we took our son out of school, after five and half months at school....(Kirsten, home-educator)

The knowledge that Grace acquired through participating in a Yahoo! group helped her to take the leap towards EHE while on holiday with her family. As soon as the plane had landed, Grace explained, she telephoned the head teacher at her children's school. Recalling the emotion work and significance of the support she received from one experienced home-educator online she recalled:

In the beginning, what you'll find if you speak to any home-educating family, is that leap that you take...it is like jumping on to the other side of a cliff...for me, it was just that one voice saying "you are not on your own we are here, just close your eyes and jump...it's not that far down and when you jump, we will be here to catch you". [H]onestly, I remember reading that going "I can do this!" I still have that email saved in my inbox...I don't know how much she saved our lives that day.... (Grace, home-educator).

These findings show that the feature of online networks and communities among this collection of parents served to strengthen the perception of EHE as a valid and positive alternative to school. This was embedded in a learning processes whereby parents gained a sense of belonging to other members of networks and communities in home-education through internet use.

Leaving School

For parents who had reached the decision to home-educate as a last resort, this typically involved deregistering their child from state-maintained school. While for some parents, a letter issued to their children's head teacher was a relatively smooth and straightforward process, for others, apparently, this was not the case. The difficulties experienced by some parents during the process of deregistration was compounded by the loss of specialist support for the additional learning needs of their children. In these situations, online networks were used to circulate deregistration letters and to receive advice from veteran home-educators. In discussing this form of online support, Jenny remarked:

What these groups can do, for example, is help somebody if they are going through that difficult time. We would say "right, you need to write an educational philosophy". So, we would all share our philosophies online so that people could see what each other had written....(Jenny, home-educator)

Online exchanges between new and veteran home-educators sometimes extended to offline support through, for instance, attending meetings with the LA personal:

In the online group, we also have another mother, she was a special needs teacher...So she has recently volunteered to answer any queries in relation to Special Educational Needs in this case...so she actually attended this meeting that the mother had with the LA about her daughter to give her support. Because again she can give very knowledgeable inputs which can be very helpful for parents, about the law and special needs this case. So, we have a few amateur experts around who offer their advice when needed... (Alexa, OM).

Interestingly, some online moderators explained that without a landscape of communities and online networks in EHE, many parents, but particularly those whose children encounter problems at school, would have had trouble in negotiating the emotion work (Wenger 1998) needed to align themselves to a vision of an education without school:

I think many people would end up not home-educating if the online groups didn't exist. The nervous people who put out a few requests, who are so relieved when they get responses and they find that there are a few home-educators near them with children the same age...or see that they could fill their week really easily with different activities...I think it is make or for break them. It is the reason they are able to home-educate... (Lorraine, OM)

Elaine goes on to explain the positive outcomes of this intervention:

Existing home-educators provide a safety net for new families... Parents who come to home-education as the last resort, at the end of their tether...if it wasn't for the fact that home-education exists and there is a community already in place...I would be as bold to say that lives have been saved...(Elaine, OM)

EHE Has Changed: It is Easier to Find Your Tribe

Across the 238 qualitative survey responses there was a common perception that because of network and community development, the internet had democratised the prospect of an education without school to a greater range of “mainstream” families. Becky echoed this point in her interview:

So, 15, 10 or even just five years ago, most home-educators were mostly libertarian anti-government, wanting to do it their own way...What we call philosophical home-educators. Now home-education has become more mainstream...I think the bigger the internet gets, the more likely you are to be able to find your tribe....(Becky, OM)

Additionally, Sharon explained how through network development, the internet has made home-education more visible:

If you go back five years, 10 years, it was a much more hidden community. But I think more people are willing to explore that avenue and think about it than perhaps they were previously....(Sharon, OM)

In turn, Kim remarked that access to new technologies would contribute to what she perceived as the continued rise of home-education:

[M]any more children are and parents are unhappy with school and they're finding out through online groups and social media that there is an alternative which the schools don't advertise, and the government doesn't advertise...without a lot of online sites and stuff, people possibly wouldn't find all that out....(Kim, OM)

Conversely, using the internet to identify this existence of a community and/or network did not always predicate becoming a legitimate and trusted member of said groups. As Becky explained:

...I think being put in the outgroup, so to speak, is not always helpful, actually it can put people off home-education...I'm on other forums for other things... and every so often you get, "I looked at home-education and I went on this email list and then people were so against schools that I left again"...So, there will be extreme outliers of the group, so they will actually back right off and not home-educate and choose to keep their children in school which is fine, and then there will be others who will just leave them to find their own tribe somewhere else....(Becky, OM)

Discussion: The Paradox of Access

This study has found that a highly educated, white British middle-class collection of new and experienced EHE parents have used the internet to cultivate networks and communities in what is a varied landscape of practice (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). While Safran's (2009) earlier work on the neighbourhood group was useful for developing our understanding of CoPs in EHE, the findings of this study

question the extent to which some of these communities are self-organised and free of explicit rules and modalities of power.

Furthermore, because some collections of home-educating parents use both online and offline spaces to communicate with each other, the extent to which these groups are bounded to geographic neighbourhoods is only one piece of a complex picture. The challenge of “group think” and the “echo-chamber” are not new ideas. Nor is the idea that communities shape and are simultaneously shaped by the online domains that they inhabit (Selwyn, 2016). For EHE, the question of privatisation and exclusive parallel societies is not new (see Aurini & Davies, 2015). However, this case points towards a reconfigured set of pre-existing challenges for the democratic foundations of the modern EHE “project”. On the one hand, the internet has clearly helped groups of families to organise and co-ordinate themselves in way that might not have been previously possible. Sharing a common world view, experiences and or other familial characteristics is likely to increase bonding capital (Putnam, 2000) among members. Loyalty and mutual respect amongst a plurality of loosely associated groups is vital for the “co-operative intercourse” (Dewey, 2004) of communities. Yet, the ability to challenge and change discourse in an equitable way, is central to the healthy function of learning communities (Wenger, 1998). Jointly, re-negotiating the rules and regulations is central to the continued innovativeness and novelty of shared-practice (Wenger, 1998).

Crucially, with the internet, some of the new and existing groups in the landscape of EHE practice, might have unintentionally organised themselves in ways that directly undermine the kind of “free” and “open” education that EHE parents seek to provide for their children.

Evidently, becoming a home-educator in a networked world necessitates a combination of cultural competencies, economic and social capital (Bourdieu, 1988). Access to this new landscape of online networks and communities is not simply achieved at the click of a button.

Discovery and subsequent entry may have undoubtedly been made easier for some EHE parents, but for others, discovery via these networks and communities continues to be as out of reach as it may have been in the past. The exclusivity of some parts of the landscape is paradoxical when considering the UK EHE movement as a whole is potentially a heterogenous and transient population.

To this end, I second McAvoy’s (2015) calls for further research on the possible digital divide in EHE. The use of online groups to access this research population means that the sample obtained reflects home-educators who were members of, and frequently participated in said groups. Undoubtedly, there are some home-educating families who choose to live “off-the-grid” (see D’Arcy, 2014; Fensham-Smith, 2014). Capturing their perspectives on internet usage, networks and communities and EHE discovery would undoubtedly serve to enhance our understanding of the topic.

Concluding Remarks

This study has served to extend what little that was known about the internet in the discovery of EHE. In so doing, the findings have surfaced paradoxical tensions that could accompany future EHE community and network transformations. For EHE, the wider implications of this study suggest that the internet plays a mixed role in simultaneously bridging and bonding various groups. Suggestions that the internet has directly fuelled a rise in EHE while also perpetuating social disintegration are overly simplistic. This relationship is nuanced and not directly causal. Crucially, The possible existence of a digital divide in EHE warrants further attention. For EHE advocates, the conclusions drawn might make for difficult reading. The future challenge facing the EHE movement is in finding further ways to bridge these social divisions. In isolation, the internet is not a tool that fully achieves this.

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