

FROM PRIVATE PAGES TO PUBLIC FEEDS: SELF-NARRATION, CHILDHOOD, AND SOCIAL MEDIA

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Abstract

The diary once gave people a space to write without an audience. Blogs, Instagram, and reels have steadily taken that space away, and family vlogging has extended the loss to children too young to consent to it. This paper traces self-narration across four media, the diary, the blog, the Instagram post, and the reel, and then asks what happens when the narrated self is a child. Drawing on Lejeune's theory of diary writing, Goffman's account of self-presentation, Nelson's research on autobiographical memory, and recent Indian scholarship on Instagram and family vlogs, it argues that each platform restructures what selfhood can look like. Ruby Franke's "8 Passengers" channel and Shruti Arjun Anand's Delhi-based family YouTube business anchor the argument at opposite ends of one structure. The paper concludes that the platform's reward for continuous visibility sits in tension with a person's need for an unwatched private self, a tension Illinois has begun to address in law.

Keywords: self-narration, diary, Instagram, family vlogging, sharenting, Goffman

Introduction

People have used the diary for more than three centuries. They used it to record, question, and build their inner lives. Spiritual journals from the early modern period and confessional diaries from the nineteenth century offered something rare. They offered a space where a person could speak to herself, unwatched. That privilege has eroded steadily. Blogs arrived in the late 1990s and suddenly started to introduce an addressable reader. Instagram, launched in 2010, made that reader permanent and visual. Reels compress the self further into looping clips that a viewer scrolls past in under a second.

This paper follows that chain as one history of self-narration, and it then extends the chain to its youngest subjects. Family vlogging, sharenting, and child-led content creation have turned childhood, once narrated privately for relatives, into content made for strangers, optimised for engagement, and archived in ways no baby book ever managed (Berg et al., 2024; Tosuntaş & Griffiths, 2024). The central claim is that each platform shift does more than add an audience to an existing form of self-narration: it changes the conditions of audience, persistence, curation, and circulation under which the self is represented. When that representation involves a child, these changes raise a further question about the child's ability to participate in shaping her own public identity and future personal history.

Two real cases anchor the second half of the argument. Ruby Franke ran "8 Passengers," a Utah family channel with millions of followers, presenting years of disciplined, faith-based parenting before she was sentenced in February 2024 to up to 4–30 years in prison for child abuse

(CBS News, 2024), in a case where one prosecutor described the children's conditions as "concentration camp" conditions (TODAY, 2024). In India, Shruti Arjun Anand built a very different but structurally related business. After moving to the United States and starting a channel largely to combat loneliness, she returned to Delhi and, with her husband, turned family content, including videos of her young niece Anantya, into a company running half a dozen channels with roughly 1.5 million subscribers (Gulf News, 2018). Franke's case is extreme, while Anand is not accused of any wrongdoing. Read together, the cases illuminate two different manifestations of family-content culture: one in which domestic life becomes normalized as monetized media, and another in which the gap between public representation and children's lived experience became the subject of criminal proceedings.

The point is not that family vlogging causes abuse, since most family channels involve nothing like what happened in Franke's home. Reels were introduced in India in 2020, shortly after TikTok was banned, marking a rapid expansion of short-form video as a mode of everyday self-presentation.

The Diary and the Blog: Writing Before the Feed

Lejeune (2009) calls the diary paradoxical. It is written for an absent reader, sometimes the writer's future self and sometimes no one, yet it remains recognisably writing, shaped by narrative habit even without an audience. Virginia Woolf used her diary as a workshop where doubt and ambition could sit on the same page without agreeing with each other (Woolf, 1953). This is not a uniquely female habit, because the diary's structure, not the

diarist's identity, permits the contradiction. Entries accumulate instead of curating themselves. A diarist can hate someone on Tuesday and forgive them by Friday, and the page does not object. The blog kept the diary's dated, first-person structure but added a visible audience. Comment sections and hit counters made readers real in a way the diary's imagined reader never was, while early blogging also became a technology through which users constructed and negotiated an online identity (Siles). Price situates the confessional blog within a literary tradition instead of treating it as a spontaneous internet phenomenon. Her dissertation argues that bloggers who wrote about depression, addiction, and sexuality inherited a lineage from confessional poets such as Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, and Anne Sexton, whose books, including *Life Studies* and *Ariel*, had made confession legible to readers decades earlier. That continuity gave early bloggers a vocabulary they could adapt without inventing it. What the blog changed was consequence. A blogger who contradicted an earlier post risked confusion or backlash, which Woolf never had to worry about, because readers had begun to treat the blog as a character and not as a record.

Instagram, Reels, and the Curated Self

Instagram reverses the diary's order of operations: image first, text second, and often barely any text at all. This is a formal break, not a stylistic one. Where the diary and the blog built a self from accumulated sentences, Instagram builds one from chosen and edited images arranged in a grid. Goffman's (1959) distinction between front-stage performance and back-stage privacy applies directly. Hogan (2010) extends this distinction to social media by differentiating between performance and the curated exhibition of self through persistent digital artefacts. Marwick and Boyd (2011) further show how social media users negotiate imagined audiences and the collapse of multiple audiences within networked communication. Marwick (2013) links this to a wider culture in which social media users are encouraged to treat themselves as brands.

Knox (2022) offers a text-based parallel. Analysing common trends in Instapoetry, an extremely visual and short-form genre, she shows how polished micro-poems are posted for the sake of popularity, part of a wider habit of doing things for Instagram itself. If verse is being shaped to circulate well in the feed, then the pressure toward compact, legible disclosure is not confined to video; social media posting can also function as a form of personal digital storytelling (Rubio-Hurtado et al., 2022). The reel also has a theatricality that the earlier

forms lacked. The diary was written, the blog was written and read, and the photograph was staged and viewed, but the reel is performed, addressed to the camera as if in conversation while remaining fully editable behind the scenes.

Childhood Narrated by Others

Adults have always authored much of the story of a child's early years. Parents decide which infancy stories are repeated at dinner, photo albums record moments the child never chose to have recorded, and baby books ask for milestones filled in by someone else's hand. Family vlogging dissolves that boundedness. A video of a child's tantrum or medical appointment, posted to a public channel, no longer circulates among people who know her. It is searchable indefinitely, clippable by strangers, and liable to resurface in contexts nobody anticipated. Boundedness did not merely weaken here. It failed entirely, in plain view of an audience that mostly did not know what it was watching.

Muralidharan and Alam (2023) analysed videos by four popular Indian family vloggers and found that the appeal of these channels lies in presenting everyday occurrences as significant. They also found that the performativity of parenting in family vlogs reinforces heteronormative gender roles instead of challenging them, even though it gives creators some agency, and that this performativity is often driven by the demands of the audience and the market. Anand's business fits the pattern closely. What began, by her own account, as a way to make friends in an unfamiliar country became a company built on continuous domestic content, cooking, hairstyling, and home remedies, with her niece as one element of a monetised family brand (Kaushik, 2018). Research on Indian kidfluencers likewise shows how children can become part of commercially organised influencer content managed by adults (Sarwatay, 2025). Abidin (2017) describes this dynamic through "calibrated amateurism," in which carefully constructed displays of ordinary family life appear spontaneous and authentic to followers. Yet the cases should not be treated as equivalent: the relevant question is how platform economies can transform ordinary family life into content and how adult control over production can shape a child's public identity.

The Child Who Cannot Yet Choose

Goffman's distinction is helpful in understanding what platform childhood threatens: the situation in which individuals are not expected to retain the same act before an audience. The question emerges whether the ability to sustain visibility might interfere with opportunities for experimentation in the creation of an identity in another. Recent scholarship has come to regard social media as a

crucial site by which teenage identities are formed; studies on younger children indicate that such behaviours as sharenting can contribute to them acquiring a digital identity (Avci et al., 2025; Berg et al., 2024). Therefore, a youngster who is frequently recorded may experience confusion between acted visibility and daily experience.

Nelson's research on autobiographical memory is helpful in this context because it places the emergence of autobiographical story and memory in the context of children's growing sense of personal experience (Nelson, 1989). When a camera is present for a considerable amount of a child's waking hours, experiences that might otherwise be included in the child's later reconstructed personal history have an additional audience. However, Nelson's study is not sufficient to answer the question of whether children's growing feeling of privacy or self-narration is impacted by the requirement to perform in front of the camera on a frequent basis.

Consent worsens the issue. According to studies on sharenting, parents have to manage how much their children's lives become a part of their digital identities, and teenagers may feel conflicted about how these representations impact how they present themselves (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017; Ouvrein & Verswijvel, 2019). When a child is videotaped for a family channel, she is unable to actively engage in decisions for the long-term public distribution of the material until she is aware of the consequences. The typical autobiographical sequence is complicated by this.

The Law Begins to Catch Up

The issue has also moved beyond theoretical debate into legal questions about the labour and compensation associated with children's participation in monetized online content. In 2023, Illinois enacted an amendment to its Child Labor Law addressing minors who appear in qualifying monetized online content; the relevant provisions took effect on July 1, 2024 (Illinois General Assembly, 2023). The statute applies when a minor under sixteen appears in at least 30% of qualifying monetized content over a thirty-day period and the content meets the statute's compensation or viewership threshold; in such circumstances, the required share of earnings must be placed into a trust for the child.

What makes the law significant is not the money but what it concedes: a child in family content is doing something closer to labour than to being photographed, and the profit from her ordinary life belongs at least partly to her. The law would not have prevented the abuse in Franke's home, which was a separate and more severe failure, but it names

in statute the economic relationship described throughout: a child's daily life as an income-generating asset, managed entirely by someone else.

Conclusion

When we put these two formats side by side, what is changed when going from private writing to public posting is a lot more than a loss of privacy. It alters the nature of how an individual is able to represent themselves, the pace of the experience, the process of writing the diary, and the ability for a person to construct their life in a record through their participation within that life. With the digital, there is no delay, just a transformation of how the individual is able to reflect themselves and their lives onto a public register. Although the individual's privacy is compromised, they also relinquish a little bit of autonomy over their story, but in return they can also find reach, recognition, community, and an ability to edit the story that they themselves tell.

However, this issue is far more complex when looking at children, who can literally become a part of a public record and have no say in what is posted about them. Family vlogging and kidfluencing consequently bring into play not only privacy and consent, but labour, ownership and children's influence over the creation of the selves they will have to live with in the future. The problem here is not that every family channel is damaging but rather that digital platforms are also opening children's everyday lives up for consumption as public and commercial entertainment.

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