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Frustration in Ferguson

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Charles M. Blow

The response to the killing of the unarmed teenager Michael Brown — whom his family called the “gentle giant” — by the Ferguson, Mo., police officer Darren Wilson — who was described by his police chief as “a gentle, quiet man” and “a gentleman” — has been anything but genteel.

There have been passionate but peaceful protests to be sure, but there has also been some violence and looting. Police forces in the town responded with an outlandish military-like presence more befitting Baghdad than suburban Missouri.

There were armored vehicles, flash grenades and a seemingly endless supply of tear gas — much of it Pentagon trickle-down. There were even officers perched atop vehicles, in camouflage and body armor, pointing weapons in the direction of peaceful protesters.

Let me be clear here: Pointing a gun at an innocent person is an act of violence and provocation.

Americans were aghast at the images, and condemnation was swift and bipartisan. The governor put the state’s Highway Patrol in charge of security. Tensions seemed to subside, for a day.

But then on Friday, when releasing the name of the officer who did the shooting, the police chief also released details and images of a robbery purporting to show Brown stealing cigars from a local convenience store and pushing a store employee in the process.

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The implication seemed to be that Wilson was looking for the person who committed the convenience store crime when he encountered Brown. But, later in the day, the chief said Wilson didn't know Brown was a robbery suspect when they encountered each other.

Something seemed off. The police chief's decision to release the details of the robbery and the images — without releasing an image of Wilson — struck many as perfidious. In a strongly worded statement, Brown's family and attorneys accused the chief of attempting to assassinate the character of the dead teen.

Some also deemed it an attempt at distraction from the central issue: An officer shot an unarmed teenager who witnesses claim had raised his hands in surrender when at least some of the shots were fired, which the family and its attorneys called "a brutal assassination of his person in broad daylight."

The Justice Department is even investigating whether Brown's civil rights were violated. This would include the excessive use of force. As the department makes clear, this "does not require that any racial, religious, or other discriminatory motive existed."

It's impossible to truly know the chief's motives for his decision to release the robbery information at the same time as the officer's name, but the effect was clear: That night, a fragile peace was shattered. There was more looting, although peaceful protesters struggled heroically to block the violent ones.

On Saturday, the governor issued a midnight curfew for the town. A small band of protesters defied it and some were arrested.

The community is struggling to find its way back to normalcy, but it would behoove us to dig a bit deeper into the underlying frustrations that cause a place like Ferguson to erupt in the first place and explore the untenable nature of our normal.

Yes, there are the disturbingly repetitive and eerily similar circumstances of many cases of unarmed black people being killed by police officers. This reinforces black people's beliefs — supportable by

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actual data — that blacks are treated less fairly by the police.

But I submit that this is bigger than that. The frustration we see in Ferguson is about not only the present act of perceived injustice but also the calcifying system of inequity — economic, educational, judicial — drawn largely along racial lines.

In 1951, Langston Hughes began his poem “Harlem” with a question: “What happens to a dream deferred?” Today, I must ask: What happens when one desists from dreaming, when the very exercise feels futile?

The discussion about issues in the black community too often revolves around a false choice: systemic racial bias *or* poor personal choices. In fact, these factors are interwoven like the fingers of clasped hands. People make choices within the context of their circumstances and those circumstances are affected — sometimes severely — by bias.

These biases do material damage as well as help breed a sense of disenfranchisement and despair, which in turn can have a depressive effect on aspiration and motivation. This all feeds back on itself.

If we want to truly address the root of the unrest in Ferguson, we have to ask ourselves how we can break this cycle.

Otherwise, Hughes’s last words of “Harlem,” referring to the dream deferred, will continue to be prophetic: “does it explode?”

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Is Ferguson anomalous?

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2014/08/15/is-ferguson-anomalous/>

Last weekend in Ferguson, Missouri, an unarmed black teenager was shot and killed by a white police officer. Over the course of the week, protesters — mostly African Americans from this majority-black community — were threatened and tear-gassed by the local police, most of whom are white. Throughout the nation, there was a widespread sense of outrage at such bold-faced racial injustice.

Were the events in Ferguson anomalous? Were they a departure from the shared values of “equality” and “reverence for the dignity of every single man, woman, and child” that President Obama, in his statement Thursday afternoon, claimed Americans share?

Or were they evidence that racist beliefs and attitudes have not changed as dramatically as many think: that, rather than equality and the dignity of all, many racially privileged Americans continue to endorse inequality and racial hierarchy?

Neither view is entirely right. Racial beliefs and attitudes *have* shifted markedly since the mid-20th century. In the words of Lawrence Bobo and his colleagues, “A Jim Crow era commitment to segregation, explicit white privilege, revulsion against mixed marriages, and the categorical belief that blacks [are] inherently inferior to whites collapsed. Broad support for equal treatment, integration, and a large measure of toleration supplanted these views.”

But racial hierarchy and racial injustice have not therefore ended. As I argue in my recent book, “How Americans Make Race,” challenging racial injustice requires more than simply changing racially privileged people’s beliefs and attitudes. It requires changing the institutions and the physical spaces that help keep racial injustice alive, even when attitudes shift.

Consider the division of a metropolitan area like St. Louis into politically autonomous municipalities like Ferguson, Mo. A small city of about 21,000, Ferguson is one of nearly 400 general-purpose governments in the St. Louis metropolitan area, which, as Peter Dreier, John Mollenkopf and Todd Swanstrom have shown, is one of the most politically fragmented of America’s metropolitan regions.

Local government law in the U.S. permits and encourages such fragmentation. It enables the division of metropolitan areas, not just into multiple municipalities, but into municipal systems that effectively sort the rich from the poor and offer each a very different set of resources and opportunities. Because of our long history of racial inequality, this economic sorting translates into racial sorting.

Compare Ferguson, where per capita income is less than \$21,000 to Ladue, another St. Louis suburb, where per capita income is almost \$88,000. Ferguson’s poverty rate is

about 22 percent, while Ladue's is 2 percent. Ferguson is about two-thirds African American and one-third white, while Ladue is 94 percent white and just 1 percent African American.

How does such sorting occur? The state of Missouri, like most American states, grants local municipalities the authority to determine zoning laws, to collect taxes and to spend the tax revenue they collect on public services that they make available to residents only. Ladue, like many prosperous suburbs, uses this zoning power to limit high-density development. It restricts large portions of its land area to single-family houses. It requires that those houses be built on large, and therefore expensive lots. As a consequence, the price of admission to Ladue is quite high. And, of course, admission to Ladue is what buys admission to its nationally recognized public schools.

In the early 20th century, St. Louis was one of only a handful of American cities to pass a racial zoning ordinance. No African American, that law ordained, could move to a city block that was 75 or more than 75 percent white.

In St. Louis County today, municipalities like Ladue achieve a very similar result through low-density zoning: a practice entirely consistent with liberal racial attitudes like "support for equal treatment, integration, and a large measure of toleration."

Ferguson is anything but anomalous. It's an all-too-familiar manifestation of how racial injustice lives on, even after significant shifts in white racial attitudes.

To be sure, the events in Ferguson this week show that old-fashioned racism has not been eradicated. But the everyday events in Ferguson, in Ladue, and in the hundreds of other municipalities that make up the St. Louis metropolitan area, show that racial injustice does not depend on such old-fashioned racism. Changing racial injustice requires changing more than beliefs and attitudes. It requires changing institutions, like the institutions of metropolitan governance that perpetuate racial segregation and racial inequality.

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Give Your Children a Chance at Privacy



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It seems reasonable enough. On the last day of your daughter's soccer camp, you snap a few photos of her with the ball. During the game, you record video. After her victory, you take some more pictures of your sweaty mess, because you're a proud parent.

By recording and publishing our children's every dental visit, afternoon recital or poopie diaper, we are removing any possibility of their future privacy.

The problem is what happens next, that moment you decide to upload those photos and videos from your cellphone to Instagram, YouTube, Twitter and Facebook. Once you post and tag your child, she becomes subject to an array of databases over which you have little control.

I'm a parent, and I understand the desire to share happy memories, in real time, with family and friends. I'm also a digital media futurist, which means that I know that the social networks we use aren't closed circuits, and that our digital identities are increasingly – and inextricably – linked to our faces. Facial recognition technology is now engineered into more than you may think: our search engines, our photo editing apps, even our connected TV sets. In the next five years, our faces will start to replace passwords. They'll also be used by law enforcement, government officials and companies to quickly learn who we are both online and in the real world.

This generation, the Millennials, is the most surveilled generation in our history. By recording and publishing our children's every dental visit, afternoon recital or poopie diaper, we are removing any possibility of their future privacy. Once you tag photos and videos with your child's name, you've contributed a significant amount of actionable information to somebody else's structured database. Machine learning algorithms can then analyze your photos, and over time recognize your children, even as they age. Right now, I can easily learn where someone lives, where they work, where they went to high school, who their close friends are – using only a photo to start. Children whose parents willingly contributed photos and videos online will increasingly be easier to search, parse and identify.

Sharing that kind of content may have an additional unintended consequence. Because Millennials are used to being recorded, they are more likely to post an incriminating photo of themselves online. Since photos can be searched, the GenX and Baby Boomer managers are now using data scraped from social networks to make hiring decisions. It's not that these managers object to a drunk night at school necessarily, but that the photo was captured and published for the public to see. The problem is that GenX and Baby Boomers do not always decontextualize the data they're using to inform their decisions, even though they caused the shift in how our attitude toward privacy has evolved as technology has become more ubiquitous.

For parents who want to remain connected to their friends and family, there are plenty of alternatives that won't compromise your child's privacy now, or in the future.

Even Viral Stars Must Be O.K. With Sharing



Penn Holderness is a managing partner and creative director at Greenroom Communications.

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Last December, we turned our silly family tradition (wearing matching Christmas pajamas) into a video newsletter of sorts. The video, featuring myself, my wife and two children, got almost 13 million YouTube hits in one week.

Our kids love our videos and the positive feedback they get from their friends, and even people on the street. But they also have absolute veto power.

Before our "#XMAS JAMMIES" video — we made other videos together (we run a video production and digital marketing company). Our children love the process — they love performing, improvising and even the production side (my daughter is learning some basic photography and editing). And they also love the positive feedback they get from their friends, and even people on the street. But, most important, they also have absolute veto power.

Last month, during the World Cup, we made a video about my son and his experience on the youth soccer team. I showed it to him, and he said he didn't like it and didn't want people to see it. I think he wished he looked a little more skilled (he was running around aimlessly, because, you know, he is 4!). We deleted the project and never spoke of it again.

We've been asked if we feel this publicity hurts our children's chances for future jobs. What if they wanted to be president? Would you vote for someone who had danced in their pajamas as a child? Well, yes, I would.

As far as concerns about putting my children "out there" too much, I have much greater concerns about what is available online than posting videos showing my children. In a few clicks you can find out where anyone lives, how much they paid for their homes, their political affiliation and much more. If you chose to participate in the digital world — there is no real privacy.

I'd rather show people my super cute kids than tell them how much my house is worth, wouldn't you?

Join [Room for Debate on Facebook](#) and follow updates [ontwitter.com/roomfordebate](#).

Be Mindful of Sharing, Because Toddlers Grow Up



Stephen Balkam is the founder and chief executive at the Family Online Safety Institute.

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Of course, parents are going to share photos and videos of their kids. The question is with whom. Facebook, Google+ and many other social media sites now have inline privacy settings so that those adorable bathtub pictures go to Grandma and not to the whole world.

We should be more thoughtful about how our 2-year-old will feel as a 12- or 22-year-old when she sees what we've posted when she was a nonconsenting toddler.

As parents, we need to find a middle way between sharing everything with everyone, all the time and an overly cautious clamping down of images of our kids. We should be more thoughtful about how our 2-year-old will feel as a 12- or 22-year-old when she sees what we posted when she was a nonconsenting toddler. And as kids get older, you may want to ask for permission before you share potentially embarrassing photos and videos with friends and family.

There's an emerging photo etiquette around the tagging and taking of photos of other people's kids. Increasingly, I hear parents ask other parents if it's O.K. to post pictures from a birthday party or gathering of kids that are not all their own. Or of parents asking others to take down personally identifiable information – name, age, where they live – that appear on Facebook and the like.

The research is telling us not to fear unknown strangers or predators so much as to consider a child's online reputation and future privacy concerns. So go ahead and share Tommy's first walk, or Susie in her new swim suit, with close friends and family. But when in doubt, particularly about other people's kids, it's best not to share.

Learn to Avoid the Traps of 'Sharenting'



James P. Steyer is the founder and chief executive of Common Sense Media, a national nonprofit dedicated to improving media and technology choices for kids and families.

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To share or not to share? For many parents that is a question not often considered before they hop online. But sharing content of your children should be done with an understanding of the potential unintended consequences for parents and kids alike.

It's important that we remember our digital sharing could have wide-ranging and unforeseen consequences now and in years to come.

Everyone's a publisher now. According to the [Pew Research Center](#), 74 percent of adults who go online use social networking sites. As parents, it's important to remember that we're the keepers of our children's personal privacy until they're old enough to take it on. And, although we may be interested in sharing details of our own lives, we shouldn't presume our children want their personal stories publicly shared now or searchable in the future.

It's called "[oversharenting](#)" for a reason. If you do choose to share images of your kids online, consider the history and reputation you're creating for them. How will they feel about their digital footprints in five years? How will these footprints affect the way other people see them? Consider using a social network's settings to create small, closed groups that include a limited number of people with whom you share more private moments. Even then, be vigilant about content. There's a difference between broadcasting a moment of pride – the first piano recital or the winning goal – and posting something sensitive or potentially embarrassing.

As we deliberate over what and where to share those precious photos and videos of our children, it's important that we remember our choices could have wide-ranging and unforeseen consequences now and in years to come.

Still Coming to Terms With Our Digital Selves



Erika Elmuts is the founder of ConsciousParents.org.

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Today, thanks to technology, there are countless “witnesses” to our lives, some we know well, some we don’t. But let’s face it, it feels good to get people “liking” or commenting on our posts or our child’s latest accomplishment. What could possibly be wrong with that?

Ask the woman who adopted her two children in a sealed adoption, only to have the birth father find her Facebook page (which she thought was protected by her privacy settings, but they were set incorrectly), save the pictures and post them up on his Facebook page announcing his paternity.

Ask the 13-year-old girl who had a boy in school see her picture on a site advertising child pornography, as a result of her mother’s choice to innocently post a picture of her daughter on her blog four years earlier. She’s now in therapy dealing with the fallout.

Ask the divorced mom whose ex-husband’s new girlfriend posts pictures of her daughter on Facebook, and has a friend who is a convicted sex offender. Despite the mother’s countless attempts demanding they be removed, Facebook does nothing.

Why does our need to share in social media overshadow our children’s right to privacy? The known risks are bad enough, yet as a society we still have no real grasp on the long-term repercussions of these actions.

We don’t know what we don’t know. Even if you think you know, I doubt you can keep up. Think you have your privacy settings set the way you want? Think again. Facebook will update some site code, and now you are unknowingly sharing something you thought was private, with an entirely new audience.

As an adult with fully developed cognitive functions (which children do not have), even I don’t quite know what the long-term consequences may be from posting something of mine online. If I’m not even sure myself, I don’t feel comfortable making that choice on my child’s behalf either. And how do I know when she’s older that she’s not going to be one of those millions of people who chooses NOT to engage in social media?

They do exist, you know.

While some may argue otherwise, as my child’s parent, it is not up to me to make the decision on her behalf. Until she is an adult, I won’t make it for her.

I don’t believe there is a solid answer, or solution, to this cultural challenge. We may never get to the point where we think, “O.K., now we know how all this works, what the risks are and aren’t, so we can make the appropriate choice.” Dare I say, that day will never come, so instead of trying to catch up, perhaps we should step back and draw a line.

A Visit to the Dentist, a World of Fun



David E. DeVore is an entrepreneur, social media consultant and business owner. To more than 125 million people around the world, he is the father, or unseen voice, in the "David After Dentist" YouTube video.

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After our video went viral, we didn't know what to think. Our main concern was what people were saying about David. Were they making fun of him? Once we realized they loved his reactions, we were at peace with the attention. I did get some criticism, but we knew we had the vantage point no one else had. We knew the truth. We knew the full story and we were confident in who we were as a family. I quickly realized the most vocal critics were just trying to get attention themselves and weren't truly concerned about David.

Our experience as a viral family has been overwhelmingly positive. We have been able to experience things that we wouldn't have been able to do without the video. David has participated in a panel at M.I.T., traveled nationally and internationally, and has been on several TV shows because of it.

We didn't intend for this to happen, it just did. I had never posted anything on YouTube. Our intention was to share the video with family and friends and we thought the privacy setting wouldn't allow us to. We opted for the public setting, and the rest is viral history.

In some ways David is unaware of how big a deal the video is. He is almost 14 now and is somewhat shy in general. He has enjoyed all the experiences we have had with the video but there is so much more to him. He is into sports, school, church – the video is just part of a life he is living to the fullest. Going forward, it will be more up to him to tell people about it. I suspect it will be people finding out on their own and asking him about it. I can't imagine him walking up to anyone and telling them who he is!

As more videos spread rapidly, parents must be sensitive to their kids' personality. Each child is different. One may be mortified while another one may love the experience. But sharing stories about our families is something that has always been part of the human experience. As technology changes, so has the way we share. Each parent needs to step in and decide what's right for their child. The most alarmist voices out there forget that the likelihood of something bad happening to your kids because of a photo you posted online is about the same probability as getting struck by lightning.

We can agree on one fundamental thing: our children are precious and anything associated with them should be done with their best interest in mind. There is no greater priority.