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photo: Anthony Lee /OJO Images/Getty

Parents, Facebook, and Google

My mom's secret life.

by Melissa T. Shultz | July 21, 2010

I Googled my mother. I was certain I knew everything there was to know about her — or at least everything a daughter wants to know.

7	47
comments	tweets
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She watches the detective show *Bones* twice a day, hates board games and bland food, loves coral lipstick, Hollywood tell-all books and George Clooney. She's prone to offering unsolicited opinions, has no qualms about telling a brain surgeon how the ganglia really work, and goes to the movies with her sidekick, Marilyn. I know this stuff because we talk by phone, every week. That, and my sister fills me in.

It wasn't always this way. As a teenager, we spoke very little. I figured she could never understand what it was like to be a kid. Now, a parent myself, the mirror has flipped. At least my generation has tools to help bridge the gap — tools like Google and social networks — at our fingertips.

When I joined Facebook, I took every security measure possible. It was months before I added a photo, then several additional weeks before I sent friend requests. One day, I found myself looking up everyone I've ever known, including my mother. To my surprise, I discovered she has a Facebook page, and with a fabulous photo that makes her look coy, playful!

How could this be? My mother is not playful; she is my mother. She makes chicken soup and tells me how to get stains out of tablecloths.

Who took that photo? Who are these people writing on her wall? I wanted to know, but I didn't ask. Instead, I went with the flow and Googled her.

And up came her name.

Seems my mother has finally found an outlet for her commentary. She reviews books online, where her preference for fiction surprises me, especially those with dark, tawdry themes. Pity the authors she doesn't care for; the word "annoying" comes up more than once in her reviews, some of which are picked up by other sites and reverberate

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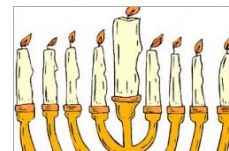
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33 people shared this.

Facebook social plugin

across the Internet.

But books are only the beginning. She belongs to several "meet-up groups." What are these? And why does a 76-year-old woman know and I don't? On one of the sites, she answers the profile question: Which of these words best describes you? Talker. Listener. Icebreaker. She replies ALL. Then she goes on to note that in her opinion, people are defined by their experiences. Some of which, I find on another site (which I have also never heard of) lead me to THE BOMB:

My mother is registered on an online dating network.

Her code name — is that what you call it? — let's just say, think *Gone With the Wind*. Why did she pick *that*? I want to know, but I dare not ask — after all, I am spying. Instead I go further undercover and register to read more. And there she is, in living color, my mother, looking for "a date, a friend, an activity partner," noting that she raised a family (finally, something I do know), has had several "vocations" and now watches her grandchildren with "great amusement." What does that even mean?

When I get to the part about how she likes "witty dialogue with dinner," I find myself wishing it wasn't noon, so I could swish back a glass of wine. Now I'm certain I've been talking to someone else's mother, not mine, for all these years.



I can't help but wonder how the Internet will someday affect my relationship with my own kids. Will we share more? Hide less?



The woman who thought my father hung the moon is saying, "Bring it on. I'm ready."

Why didn't she tell me?

There's more. She both coordinates classes for seniors and takes classes for seniors — on everything from psychology to art history — enters writing competitions, and answers trivia questions. Online. With the computer my brother gave her.

"Have you Googled Mom?" I asked him soon after.

"Why would I Google Mom?" he answers — a man whose name, when Googled, fills up dozens of pages, and who lives only minutes from our mother.

Thousands of miles from his home, using my computer, I show him. He laughs till he can't speak.

The thing is: Where do I go from here? Just because I can, is it right to keep tabs on my mother? Really, the whole concept behind "parental controls" on the Internet needs to be rethought. Who are the controls for? The parent or the kid with the nosy parent? What about the parent with a nosy kid? Can you blame anyone for looking? And if you don't, and miss something big, how awful would you feel later?

Would she have gotten out and about and met new people and stayed connected to peers simply using the outdated tools of the telephone and snail mail, I'd say no way. And from everything I've read, the older you get, the more important it is to have communities, friendships and hobbies. As I approach my 50th birthday, I can't help but wonder how the Internet will someday affect my relationship with my own kids. Will we talk to one another differently? Share more? Hide less? Will they like the new me or prefer the me they thought they knew? The one who says, "Pick up your clothes, dinner's ready, and everything will be alright," or the one who has friends from an online meet-up group?

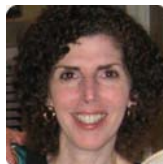
But mostly I wonder if the Internet can take credit for people like my mother creating new versions of themselves, or if that new version has been there all along, and I just never thought to ask.

When she comes to visit this weekend, I will — face to face. I just hope she'll send me a "friend request" when she gets back home.

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- [Absentee Grandparents](#)
- [Dangerous Web Sites Parents Should Know About](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Melissa T. Shultz lives in Dallas with her husband and two sons, ages 15 and 17. She is a literary agent and a freelance writer and teaches creative nonfiction at the Writer's Garrett.

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Melissa T Shultz Jul 22, 11:59 AM

Hi Melalev, Your comment about hoping our kids remember us as people not just moms one day struck a chord. I remember that aha moment when I was a teen - when my folks became real to me and I began to notice things I had never noticed before.

1 likes I like this



Melalev Jul 22, 11:07 AM

Great piece! My mom and I have a rather "rocky" relationship but I do know she has a life, and I'm glad that she does (so she leaves ME alone for the most part, LOL). I think it's wonderful you have a new appreciation for your mom and you have a sense of humor -- and wonder -- about what you found out. :) I hope OUR kids know us as PEOPLE rather than just moms too one day!

2 likes I like this



Rosana Jul 22, 9:55 AM

Hehehe, very funny piece. Gotta go to Google my mom :)

3 likes I like this



Rufus Griscom Jul 21, 11:05 PM

wildly charming piece, thank you.

1 likes I like this



Melissa T Shultz Jul 21, 4:27 PM

Hi there, loved your comments and your story and thanks for writing! As a little girl, my grandmother Ida loved to take me window shopping and out to lunch when I visited. The only stipulation was I needed to say I was her daughter. She wore knee high boots and had red hair and a gorgeous figure. I thought she was really hip. I think about her sometimes and wonder what fun she might have had with a Facebook page! Best, Melissa T. Shultz

5 likes I like this



Anonka Jul 21, 4:00 PM

Wow, what a scary prospect! Our parents? Having lives? Of their own? Online??? Thanks for the article. It made me laugh. I *can* laugh since my own mom does not do Facebook (yet). It also reminded me of what my 35-year old friend's 70-year old mom told him during the heyday of online chatting (pre-Facebook)"If we happen to meet online, remember, you are 25, I am 50!"

4 likes I like this



John Darrouzet Jul 21, 9:31 AM

Marvelous! Will send many of us right off to Googling our parents and siblings and long lost friends. The surprise of it all. The joy and laughter, palpable. Please write more as your discoveries unfold. You have tapped the Divine Comedy, Ms. Dante.

4 likes I like this



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