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Published in:
Feminist Theory

DOI:
10.1177/14647001211059517

Publication date:
2023

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

Citation for published version (APA):
Andreassen, R. (2023). From the families we choose to the families we find online: media technology and queer family making. *Feminist Theory*, *24*(1), 12-29. https://doi.org/10.1177/14647001211059517

This article should be reffered to as: Andreassen, R. (2022). From the families we choose to the families we find online: media technology and queer family making. Feminist Theory. https://doi.org/10.1177/14647001211059517

From the families we choose to the families we find online: Media technology and queer family making

By Rikke Andreassen

Forthcoming article 2021; accepted to be published by *Feminist Theory* in a special issues about 'Queering Genealogies'

Abstract

Since the mid-2000s, a number of Western countries have witnessed an increase in the number of children born into 'alternative' or 'queer' families. Parallel with this queer baby boom, online media technologies have become intertwined with most people's intimate lives. While these two phenomena have appeared simultaneously, their integration has seldom been explored. In an attempt to fill this gap, the present article explores the ways in which contemporary queer reproduction is interwoven with online media practices. Importantly, the article does not understand online media as a technology that simply *facilitates* queer kinship; rather, it argues that online *media technology is a reproductive technology* in its own right in contemporary queer reproduction.

Drawing on empirical examples of media practices of kinning, such as online shopping for donor sperm and locating 'donor siblings' via online fora such as Facebook, the article analyses the merging and intersection of online media and queer kinship. These analyses serve as a foundation for an exploration of contemporary kinship and the development of a new theoretical framework for contemporary queer reproduction. Empirically, the examples are from single women's (i.e. solo mothers) and lesbian couples' family making.

Using Weston's work on 'chosen families' (1991) as a backdrop for discussion, the article describes families of choice in light of new online kinship connections. In particular, the article focuses on online-initiated connections between donor siblings and how such connections can re-inscribe biology as important to queer kinship. Furthermore, it closely examines how media technology guides queer reproduction in particular directions and how technology causes *becoming* as a family.

Keywords: LGBTQ+ families, reproduction, media technology, Facebook, donor families.

Introduction – The Scandinavian queer baby boom

Since the mid-2000s, a number of Western countries have witnessed an increase in the number of children born into 'alternative' or 'queer' families. In particular, this trend has been notable in Scandinavian countries, due to the welfare states' provision of free access to fertility treatment. In Denmark, lesbian couples and single women gained access to fertility treatment in 2006; in Sweden, lesbian couples gained access in 2005 and single women were granted access in 2016; and in Norway, lesbian couples gained access in 2009 (single women still do not have access). This relatively generous legal access to medically assisted reproduction (MAR) – accompanied by a fully subsidised treatment cost – has caused a queer baby boom in Scandinavia. Importantly, this boom in

alternative families has been very inclusive across social classes, ages and geographical regions, enabling a wide and diverse spectrum of women (and other people with uteruses) to become mothers (and parents).

Parallel with the queer baby boom, online media technologies have become intertwined with most people's intimate lives (Andreassen et al., 2018). Scandinavia has one of the world's highest Internet penetrations (i.e. 98 per cent for Denmark and Norway and 96 per cent for Sweden; Internet Word Stats, 2019), and online media are fully integrated into queer families' paths to conception and parenthood. While these two phenomena have appeared simultaneously, their integration has seldom been explored. In an attempt to fill this gap, in the present article, I explore the ways in which contemporary queer reproduction is interwoven with online media practices. Importantly, I do not see online media as a technology that simply *facilitates* queer kinship; rather, I argue that online *media technology is a reproductive technology* in its own right in contemporary queer reproduction. Drawing on empirical examples of media practices of kinning, such as online shopping for donor sperm and locating 'donor siblings' via online fora such as Facebook, I explore the merging and intersection of online media and queer kinship.

The combination of free access to assisted reproduction and a general integration of LGBTQ+ families into the legal and cultural framework has made Scandinavia a leading global region for LGBTQ+ reproduction and family making. For this reason, it represents a unique and ideal case study for examining and theorising contemporary queer reproduction. Scandinavian queer reproduction may be the harbinger of emerging international trends in queer reproduction; therefore, it serves as a useful context for observing macro patterns in contemporary queer kinship and queer family making.

The present article builds upon my previous research on mediated queer kinship (Andreassen, 2016, 2017a, 2017b, 2018), expanding it via new empirical examples and analytical insights. These examples and insights serve as source material for a rethinking of contemporary queer reproduction and the development of a new theoretical framework to better understand this phenomenon.

The article is introduced with a description of Weston's concept of 'chosen family' (1991), which serves as a backdrop for the article's analysis and discussion. This is followed by a brief description of the empirical material and the methodological approaches used to collect the material, as well as a short description of the theoretical frameworks that informed the analyses. Then comes three thematic analyses. The first analysis focuses on online-initiated connections between donor siblings and how such connections re-inscribe biology as fundamentally important to kinship. The second analysis investigates the ways in which single women (i.e. solo mothers) might be more willing than lesbian couples to engage in extended kinship relations with donor siblings. I argue that this might be interpreted as an illustration of solo mothers acting 'queer' when engaging in family creations. Finally, the third analysis closely examines how media technology guides queer reproduction in particular directions and how technology causes *becoming* as a family. The article ends with a summary of the theoretical framework that was developed through the article.

Weston and families of choice

Kate Weston's concept of 'chosen families' (1991) has long been central in understandings of queer family making. Weston describes how, for many LGBTQ+ families in the 1980s and 1990s, chosen families often constituted closer ties than families of origin (i.e. kinship relations formed through blood, genes and biology). Building on Weston's insights, I will discuss the concept of choice and understandings of biology and genes in light of new online kinship connections. Although Weston's research to underpin her chosen families concept was conducted nearly three decades ago, her ideas have been – and continue to be – influential for the self-understanding and community formation of many LGBTQ+ families. Furthermore, Weston's book, *Families We Choose*, is a very rich empirical source with many qualitative interviews, nuances and perspectives. By using Weston's work as a backdrop for a discussion about contemporary families of choice, it is possible to see how the concept of choice is still prevailing among queer families while ideas of biology might be mobilised in new (and queering) ways. While Weston describes how her informants often downplayed biology when discussing the family formation of their chosen families, I will demonstrate in this article that the vast number of families who locate donor siblings online have re-inscribed biology as important for new queer kinship and family making. Many of these families also *choose* a family, i.e. choose to form an extended family with a large number of donor siblings.

Weston documents how many gays and lesbians choose their kinship relations; that is, they form families with (chosen) individuals, such as friends, lovers and ex-lovers. Weston uses the terms 'gay', 'lesbian' and 'lover' because these were the terms used by her informants; today, the terms 'LGBTQ+' and 'partner' would most likely been used. I reproduce Weston's terms here in order to stay close to her original text. Chosen families often constitute stronger support networks (both emotionally and materially) than families of blood relatives. Importantly, Weston sees a chosen family as a *transformed* kinship network rather than a substitute genetic family (1991: 106). To her – as well as to her interviewees – the chosen family holds the potential of utopia, as it can create new traditions, challenge the hegemonic norm of the nuclear family and challenge the idea that biology is the (only) site of procreation (Weston, 1991: 110 f.). Central to Weston's chosen family – which is the most radical concept discussed in her book – is her dismissal of biology's role in defining kinship: 'Families we choose are defined through contrast with biological or blood family, making biology a key feature of the opposing term that conditions the meanings of gay kinship' (Weston 1991: 211). Importantly, Weston associates biology with heterosexuality, as '[a gay family] displaces biology onto a particular type of family identified with heterosexuality' (Weston, 1991: 210).

Empirical material, methodological approaches and theoretical frameworks

Empirically, my interest is in investigating processes of entanglement between media and social life; more particularly, I am interested in exploring what happens when parenting, family formation and kinship making become interwoven with online media. Kember and Zylinska (2015) describe how mediation (i.e. our situation of living with and through media technologies) has become a fundamental condition of contemporary social life and relations. They point to the relationship

between media and social life as a co-constitution, whereby media technologies shape social life and social life, in return, influences media practices and media development. In this respect, I view online media and kinship making as mutually constitutive: online media (e.g. Facebook) offer new ways of connecting and creating kinship and, in turn, these new connections and kinships shape the use of online media. In other words, I do not view online media as merely a platform through which relations can be communicated, but as technology that, in itself, creates relations. As Kember and Zylinska phrase it: '[Mediation is] an intrinsic condition of being-in and becoming-with the technological world' (2015: xviii); similarly, mediation contributes to contemporary 'becoming' as a family, and mediating 'causes' kinship.

For the present study, I analysed a Scandinavian Facebook group that connects families – largely mothers with donor conceived children – with each other. The Facebook group also serves as a support and knowledge sharing group for families with donor conceived children and donor conceived individuals. I have been a member of the group since 2013, and my analysis of the group was based on my years of participation and observation (Emerson et al., 2001). Analytically, I approached the written posts, photos and emojis as 'text', drawing on the framework of qualitative content analysis. Furthermore, I interviewed 13 women most of them active in this group; some of these women had donor conceived children and others were in the process of trying to conceive using donor sperm. All 13 interviewees identified as women; two-thirds were creating a family as a lesbian/queer couple, while one-third were solo mothers (the majority of the solo mothers were heterosexual, while one identified as lesbian). I use the term 'solo mother' rather than 'single mother' here, in an attempt to distance families headed by single women from the negative connotations associated with singlehood. In this study, I limit my focus to families with donor-conceived children. Critical kinship scholars (e.g. Deomanpo, 2016; Ikemoto, 2010) warn against the use of the rather neutral term 'donor', as such terminology masks the commercial and capitalist aspects of gamete transaction in assisted reproduction. While acknowledging this important point, I do still use the term 'donor', as all of my interviewees – as well as members of the Facebook group – used this term, and I want to reproduce their own framings as accurately as possible. Accordingly, I also use their terms 'donor family' and 'donor sibling'.

All interviews were qualitative interviews spanning several hours; most were conducted in the interviewee's home. Informed by the concern of feminist researchers with the relationship between interviewer and interviewee (e.g. Hesse-Biber, 2006), I aimed at fostering an interview environment based on genuine and reciprocal dialogue by sharing my own personal experiences of queer motherhood during the interview (see also Broom et al., 2009; Maynard 1994). As a result, the interviews took the form of a dialogue rather than a traditional interview. I believe that this dialogic sharing of personal stories, as well as our shared position as 'mothers in a queer or alternative family', created a bond of trust between myself and the interviewees, which resulted in them divulging detailed narratives about their experiences as a mother of a donor conceived child.

In order to protect the anonymity of interviewees, I refer to them here using fictional names. In order to make interviewees non-recognisable, I have chosen to re-write their utterances a little and

change a few geographical locations. In relation to this point, Markham (2012) underscores the ethical challenges of online research as compared to offline research. In contrast to interview material, which can be anonymised, online remarks (such as those posted to a Facebook group) cannot simply be anonymised. While words uttered offline can be cited and presented anonymously, words uttered online cannot be cited because the citation would enable a direct link to the source and, thus, the individual uttering the citation (Markham, 2012: 335). Accordingly, in order to protect online participants, researchers must not only anonymise names, dates and sometimes websites/apps, but also render the citation, itself, anonymous. Thus, to protect the members of the Facebook group, I refer to the group as the 'Facebook group' instead of citing its real name. I also render all names of individuals, their children and their sperm donors anonymous, and I provide no dates for any quote. Furthermore, I have rewritten and rephrased statements and utterances, in order to make them non-traceable; in this process, I have tried to stay as close to the original utterance as possible.

While much scholarship on LGBTQ+ families has focused on the wellbeing of such families and their offspring (e.g. Bos et al., 2016; Bos et al., 2017; Malmquist and Zetterqvist Nelson, 2014; Nordqvist, 2012; van Rijn-van Gelderen et al., 2015), in this article, I instead align with critical queer kinship (e.g. Dahl, 2014, 2017; Eng, 2010) and its tradition of using queer kinship as a lens through which to analyse and understand larger societal patterns. Theoretically, the article is inspired by Dahl (2014), who focuses on 'failure' rather than wellbeing in queer families, and uses the concept of failure to investigate norms of queer kinship and same-sex relations. Relatedly, in her analysis of 'happiness', Ahmed (2010) analyses the persons whose lives and life choices easily follow a normative path towards happiness, and those whose lives and choices divert from this road. She points to how particular institutions, such as family and marriage, become 'happy objects' and how people become oriented towards these objects in order to 'be happy'. As she phrases it: 'happiness becomes very quickly the promotion of certain ways of living' (Ahmed, 2010: 11). As I will show in the following analyses, donor families – and queer families, in general – can be interpreted as families that are constantly in risk of 'failing', and thus families who must 'balance' the 'happiness narrative'. On the one hand, families with donor conceived children follow a traditional 'narrative of happiness' by creating a family; on the other hand, their family is always at risk of 'failing' because its alignment with the traditional family form is not stable. Establishing contact with donor siblings is a potentially risky business: siblings can be seen as 'happy objects' and establishing contact with them can therefore strengthen one's position within a 'happy family'; however, if too many siblings emerge online (if, for instance, one discovers 100 siblings), then the family deviates from the 'happiness narrative' and instead 'fails' as a family. The present article explores this ambiguity and 'risk of failing' as a queer family.

Finding siblings online and cultivating kinship online

When conceiving via donor sperm in Scandinavia, one does not know the identity of the donor.[1] However, each donor is assigned a donor number or name and, most often, recipients of the sperm are informed of this number/name (alternatively, they may request it from their fertility clinic). Through this donor number/name, parents of donor conceived children can connect with other

parents who have conceived via the same sperm donor. Over the previous decade, a large number of parents have connected in this way. The majority of Scandinavian parents of donor conceived children connect through Facebook. In fact, a number of Facebook groups have been created with the aim of both connecting different kinds of alternative families and creating a community of alternative families (including families of donor conceived children). Most of the groups that connect donor families are administrated and run by donor conceived persons or mothers of donor conceived children. The Scandinavian-based Facebook groups are very different from other donor registries, such as the US-based Donor Sibling Registry, which also aims at connecting offspring from the same sperm or egg donor. While the Facebook groups connect members for free, the Donor Sibling Registry charges for its services (US $99/year).[2] Furthermore, many of the Facebook groups (including the group analysed in this article) can be characterised as 'bottom-up' online communities run by volunteers, whereas the Donor Sibling Registry is a top-down professional organisation. This difference between the models has one important consequence: unlike the Donor Sibling Registry, the analysed Scandinavian Facebook group connects persons across social classes, as everyone can afford to join. This difference might also be thought to mirror the larger Scandinavian context, reflecting the Nordic welfare states' provision of free services.

In the Facebook group, connections between donor siblings occur on various levels. Typically, a connection is established by a group member 'advertising' for children born from a particular donor. An illustrative example is provided by a mother of donor conceived children, who asks: 'Is there anyone else who has children by donor Svend? I have two children by Svend' (Stine, Facebook). The member also posts a photo of her children. Other members answer: 'I also have a child from Svend' (Sabine, Facebook); and 'Your children look cute – and look just like my children' (Katrine, Facebook). In this Facebook thread, a number of mothers who conceived via the same donor reveal themselves, and many of them post photos of their children. After an initial connection is established, the mothers typically create their own, closed, Facebook group, where they continue their dialogue and share photographs of their children; later, they might meet in person. Following Weston (1991), these new connections can be seen as transformed kinship or extended families that potentially can challenge traditional family making.

While mothers of donor conceived children report various reasons for seeking and establishing contact with their child's donor siblings – including curiosity (Hertz and Mattes, 2011) or to provide their child with a better understanding of her/his identity (Freeman et al., 2009) – a primary reason for their search is to provide their child with more family (Andreassen, 2018). Karen, a solo mother with a young son, explains that she began looking for her son's donor siblings in order to create a larger family for him. As a solo mother who was not planning to have more than one child, she wanted to provide her son with siblings and secure his kinship. She explains:

> Family is very important to me, and I want to provide my son with a large family. […]. We are in contact with three other families, who have children by the same donor. I found them through the Facebook group. We are very close – both the mothers and the children. The children have a very special connection with each other.

> […] They look like each other, and are very similar. We call them siblings. I feel very happy to have this special extended family in our life. (Karen, interview)

To Karen, establishing contact with other families and creating an extended family of donor siblings was a *choice*. While many families with donor conceived children choose not to establish contact with donor siblings and often do not consider offspring from the same sperm donor 'siblings' (Andreassen, 2017a), Karen actively chose and cultivated her extended family. She (and her son) met with the other families, with whom they enjoyed family gatherings and holidays. The families lived far apart, so they could not meet often; but they kept in contact via Facebook and (especially) Messenger, where they posted photos of their everyday lives.

Such online contact is central for creating family bonds between extended donor families. Another solo mother, Tina, who was in regular contact with a number of families, explained how she used online media to cultivate an extended family:

> We live in different countries. Most families are in Denmark, but there are also some families in Sweden and Norway and other countries, so we communicate via Facebook. […] Last Christmas, I took a picture of Iris [her child] in front of the Christmas tree and posted it in the [Facebook] group, and then the others took pictures of their children and their Christmas celebrations [and shared them in the group]. It is nice to follow each other's lives. […] Many pictures are just normal pictures of Iris playing in the house or in the garden. With the phone or the iPad, it is very easy. I just take a picture, and upload it. It takes 1 minute. (Tina, interview)

Extended donor families may actively employ media technologies to create their family and strengthen the bonds between them. Wang and Lim (2018) describe how transnational families (in which family members live in different countries) use online media to maintain a sense of closeness and belonging (see also Madianou and Miller, 2012). Similarly, donor families develop a sense of belonging through their online interactions. In this process, media technology and its affordances is central (Ellison and boyd, 2013). For the interviewed members of extended donor families, the particular affordance of sharing photographs was central to creating family connections. boyd (2010) sees media affordances as architectural structures that shape participation. The ease – with respect to both technology and time – of taking a photo with one's smart phone and sharing it with a group using the same smart phone is a central building block in the creation of extended donor families. Photos may capture everyday life as well as holidays; accordingly, by sharing photos, families can follow large and small developments in other family members' daily lives and routines. During the interview, Tina showed me photos of her child and her child's donor siblings, repeatedly underscoring their resemblance (both physically and mentally). In this way, the photograph came to underscore and testify to the biological connections between the children. Many of the interviewed mothers who engaged with an extended donor family had limited education, and writing was not necessarily part of their daily repertoire or something they felt particularly at home with; however, these same mothers felt that taking pictures with their smart phones was an integrated and familiar

activity. Photo sharing is also free of cost and inclusive to all members of the extended family; this is not the case with physical meetings across borders. As a result, online photo sharing is prioritised in the creation of family bonds.

New chosen families and fragility in same-sex families

Donor families (such as Karen's family, described above) that engage with large extended donor families re-inscribe biology as a fundamental aspect of kinship. To Karen, the biological connection is the foundation for the family bond. Similar to Stine, who was searching for children conceived by her child's donor, Svend, Karen went online to search for *genetic* relatives to her son. The importance of biology is underscored in Karen's utterance (above), as well as in the Facebook thread about 'Svend', which emphasises the physical (biological) resemblance between the children.

While Weston downplayed biology in her families of choice, extended donor families are now re-inscribing biology as central for kinship relations and cultivating biological similarity in their family making. For these new families, biology and shared genes seems more important than physical proximity, as the families are created via online media across geographical distances and even national borders. One might interpret these new extended families as a re-interpretation of Weston's chosen families. In the time of Weston's account of kinship, biology – and thus family making through shared genes – was strictly connected to heterosexuality and the heterosexual nuclear family. Differently – with todays' ART and media technology – contemporary chosen families can be formed via biological connections. Both types of families emphasise family making outside traditional frameworks, driven by choice.

Many interviewees who engaged with extended donor families spoke about their friends with donor conceived children who chose not to contact donor siblings. Similarly, continuous debate on the 'wall' of the Facebook group testifies to the large number of mothers who do not want any contact with donor siblings. Research suggests that, relative to lesbian mothers, solo mothers establish contact with donor siblings to a greater extent (Andreassen, 2018; Freeman et al., 2009). The emphasis on biology that accompanies contact with donor siblings might partly explain this difference. Lesbian relationships often have the goal of equality, and equality is more often experienced in lesbian relationships compared to heterosexual relationships (Bos and van Balen, 2010; Bos et al., 2007; Dahl, 2017; Pelka, 2009). In lesbian relationships, one way of maintaining equality is to downplay biology – that is, to downplay the potential difference in motherhood between the 'birth mother' and the 'social mother' in a couple (Dahl, 2017; Pelka, 2009). Research on donor conception has revealed ongoing ambiguity and tension related to the kinship status of the donor and donor siblings (Nordqvist and Smart, 2014). One interviewee, who was the social mother of two children, explained:

> I am not interested in having contact with donor siblings. […] Before we had the children, I was worried about if I would be as equal a mother as my wife [who gave birth to the children]. We talked about my fears and chose an anonymous sperm donor

> in order to make sure we were the only two parents. I just want to be a normal family with two parents and two children. […] I am a legal parent to my children. […] We live as any other family: We go to work, we take the children to school. Yet, people keep asking who is the 'real' mom. When we discovered that our children have donor siblings, I felt my old fear returning […]. With donor siblings, biology became important again. (Anette, interview)

The above citation expresses Anette's underlying fear – which is common in lesbian family making – of not being recognised as a full mother or 'as much a mother' as her partner. The choice to not contact her child's donor siblings might therefore relate to an attempt to maintain equality between herself and her partner and to secure the non-biological parent's kinship. Rather than extending or expanding kinship networks through biology (with donor siblings), parents may become invested in protecting the current kinship network (of the lesbian family) by downplaying biology. In an argument about motherhood (not related to donor siblings), Dahl argues that biological relatedness may be experienced as a threat to the ideal of equality between lesbian parents (2017: 10). This threat might be accentuated in relation to donor siblings, who not only underscore biology but also highlight the use of a third party (i.e. a sperm donor) in the child's conception.

Anette's utterance about being a normal family with two parents, two children, work and school can easily be interpreted as an illustration of homonormativity (Duggan, 2003) and a criticism of lesbians for upholding the nuclear family as an ideal. However, it might also be seen as a testimony to the continued fragility experienced by same-sex parents. Even in LGBTQ+ liberal Scandinavia, same-sex families continue to experience discrimination (Dahl Spidsberg, 2007; Ewers Haahr, 2017; Frisch et al., 2019; Malmquist, 2015a, 2015b; Malmquist and Zetterqvist Nelson, 2014; Rozental and Malmquist, 2015). However, rather than interpreting the labour invested in creating a 'nuclear' lesbian family (and protecting that family by excluding donor siblings) as a sign of assimilation to homonormativity, we might also understand it as a survival strategy in a time that is (still) characterised by homo- and transphobia.

Rather than open up the long existing discussion about whether LGBTQ+ families can be viewed as submissive or assimilating (e.g. Mamo, 2007: 94 ff.; Weston, 1991: 197 ff.), my intent is to use the question of biology – and especially the mobilisation or downplaying of biology through online media – to nuance understandings of contemporary kinship formations. To Weston, the chosen family is non-biological and fluid; for this reason, it may challenge and transform the heterosexual nuclear family (Weston, 1991: 195 ff.). Weston closely associates institutions such as heterosexuality, marriage and nuclear family formation with 'biological kinship'. However, this alignment seems different in modern donor families, within which institutions of marriage and the nuclear family also can be associated with lesbian parenting and biological kinship can be aligned with the extended families of solo mothers. This marks a fundamental difference in the understanding of biology. For contemporary families with donor conceived children, *biology appears to have lost its former close ties to the nuclear family*.

Solo mothers queering kinship

While queer kinship most often has been associated with LGBTQ+ family making, one can argue that solo mothers with extended families are queer – if we understand 'queer' as subversive (Butler, 1999) and apply Weston's 'fluidity' as a sign of potential transformation and subversion – as solo mothers fundamentally challenge and de-naturalise the nuclear family as a core symbol of kinship (Schneider, 1968). Furthermore, extended donor families can be considered queer because they constitute large families with only mothers, and no men. Many of the mothers in these families are heterosexual solo mothers, some are lesbian or queer solo mothers and others are female same-sex couples; but there are no cis men or traditional fathers.[3] While the initial pivot of the extended families is the (male) donor, and, as such, one can argue that the extended families are structured via male/patriarchal lineages, I wish to highlight the absence of actual men from these families. It is a common characteristics of the extended families I have encountered (in interviews and on Facebook), that they consist of only mothers and children. This can be understood as a challenge to – or transformation of – the patriarchal family system. Dahl (2014) criticises lesbian same-sex families for extending, rather than dismantling, the traditional nuclear family model, and asks if 'queer kinship [has] failed to be queer?' (Dahl, 2014: 161). However, extended donor families lead us to rethink whether it is indeed biology that drives heteronormative kinship making, or whether this driving factor is instead *coupledom*.

If it is coupledom, rather than biology, that is upholding traditional family patterns and thus framing the nuclear family as ideal, then there are two interlinked consequences for contemporary kinship making: first, *coupledom trumps heterosexuality*; and second, *single parents* (including heterosexual single parents) might be *more marginalised* than lesbian couples. This second factor might explain the hostility that is levelled against many single women who choose to parent on their own. In spring 2019, the Danish media reported a harsh debate centred on Joy Mogensen, a female mayor from the Social Democrat party, who was pregnant with donor sperm and planned to become a solo mother. Mogensen's fellow party member, Simon Simonsen, led an attack from his Facebook account and various media outlets. He said: 'Children MUST have a right to know who their father is […]. More and more women become solo parents and it is a tragedy of Shakespearean dimensions, when there, at the same time, are ca. 500,000 great and wonderful men who are [involuntary] childless' (Simonsen, 2019). Simonsen's criticism of solo motherhood was picked up and repeated by various media actors. Criticism of Mogensen was clearly motivated by her *choice* to parent on her own (i.e. her choice to become a parent without the involvement of a man and outside a nuclear family context). Research on solo motherhood (Ravn, 2017: 160) shows that this family arrangement receives much more acceptance when it is framed as a second option and not a deliberate first choice; that is, when women become solo parents only because they cannot find a husband and not because they simply wish to create a family on their own (without a man). Queer kinship scholarship points to the close connection between reproduction and full citizenship (Eng, 2010; Riggs and Due, 2013). However, different kinds of reproduction are acknowledged differently; Riggs and Due (2013) argue that the more family making (and thus reproduction) resembles the ideal of heterosexual reproduction, the more respect the parents receive. Applied to Scandinavian queer kinship, this might explain why some same-sex lesbian parents struggle to

maintain their family as a nuclear family. While donor siblings might function for solo mothers as what Ahmed (2010) terms 'happy objects', and thus become pre-defined to generate and secure happiness because they 'confirm' the family, they may also cause same-sex families to 'fail' as nuclear families. While same-sex families of two parents and children might align with heterosexual nuclear families, Anette's interview testifies to the fragility and instability of this alignment. Similarly, research on same-sex motherhood documents ongoing discrimination (e.g. Malmquist and Zetterqvist Nelson, 2014), which can be seen as ongoing risk of 'diverting' from family norms or 'failing' as a family. It is not my intention to draw general conclusions about same-sex couple-led families versus solo mother-led families here; rather, I wish to underscore how biology is mobilised differently between these families, and how such mobilisation might relate to different attempts to be recognised as a family (rather than a 'failure', as such).

Media technology as a reproductive technology

While media technology facilitates connections between donor siblings, it also organises the development of their relationships and cultivates their bonds of belonging. In this way, media technology causes *becoming* as families and kinship. Feminist post-humanists (e.g. Barad, 2010; Haraway, 1991) argue that we come into existence not simply *via* technology, but *entangled* with technology. This idea was taken up by Kembers and Zylinska (2015), who describe the relationship with media technology as 'our entanglement with nonhuman entities [that] continues to intensity with the ever more corporeal, ever more intimate dispersal of media and technologies into our biological and social lives' (Kembers and Zylinska, 2015: xv). In other words, our existence is characterised by a 'being-in' and 'becoming-with' the technology (Kembers and Zylinska, 2015: xviii). Applying these perspectives to contemporary queer kinship, we might argue that the entanglement between media technologies and mothers of donor conceived children causes the 'becoming' of queer families and the 'emergence' of extended donor families.

While many studies on reproduction and kinship have focused on assisted reproduction technologies (ARTs) such as in vitro fertilisation (IVF), embryo transfer and gestational surrogacy (e.g. Franklin, 2008, 2013; Kroløkke, 2011; Kroløkke et al., 2016), media technology has been less explored, despite being equally vital in contemporary queer kinship. Medically, ARTs are considered highly technological fertility treatments, defined by the *in vitro* (out of the body) handling of oocytes, sperm and embryos; differently, most of the mothers I interviewed conceived via the less technological treatment of intrauterine insemination (IUI) (in the body). Their reason for doing so was that they were fertile and had no difficulty conceiving. To them, ART was not important for their family making; rather, online media proved vital.

First, many located and bought donor sperm online, in line with the modern trend in queer reproduction (Mamo, 2010: 178; Moore and Grady, 2014: 189). This practice significantly differs from previous queer reproduction, wherein access to sperm could be a demanding affair: most often, lesbians could only receive sperm from friends or acquaintances (often gay men) and they had to carry out home inseminations and negotiate parental roles with the sperm donor(s). Additionally, in many countries, access to sperm via private fertility clinics is only available to

women with significant financial means. In contemporary Scandinavia, intended mothers can select sperm from a smart phone or tablet, and the practice of doing so mirrors the familiar shopping routines of the Web 2.0. In this process, 'designing' one's future kin is deeply entangled with media technology, as the media affordances accompanying online shopping (e.g. drop-down menus) sort donor sperm into clickable boxes of 'race', 'hair' and 'eye colour', directly influencing the choice of gametes and inviting a detailed 'designing' of future kin (for a more in-depth analysis of the online commercialisation of sperm, see Andreassen, 2018: 98–134; Andreassen 2020).

Second, many families connect with each other online, leading to extended kinship relations, as described earlier in this article. Online media has proven to be of central importance for locating genetic relatives. Most likely, online-initiated connections between genetically related individuals will only grow in the future, as an increasing number of people map their DNA via online sites (e.g. myheritage.com, 23andme.com and ancestry.com) with the aim of facilitating genetic relations.

Third, online media is vital for the cultivation of extended families, once located. Weston (1991) describes how chosen families cultivate bonds of belonging and dependency – and thus *create* family – through the actions of cooking food, caring for children, providing emotional support and sharing joy and celebration (Weston, 1991: 103 ff.). Today, this belonging is constituted online, where bonds are created through the sharing of everyday life (often in the form of photos) and support provided to each other on Internet platforms. One interviewee, Tina, told me that she used the parents in her extended donor family as a 'mothers group', with whom she could discuss health issues, child development and other subjects. The mothers posted questions and everyday concerns in their closed Facebook group, in which they supported each other and tried to help each other with potential problems and worries. Similarly, a woman expressed in the Facebook Group: 'I am happy to be in contact with the other donor families. We are four mothers with 6 children [from the same donor]. When we meet, it is like a "mothers group"' (Sandra, Facebook). In Scandinavia, where many parents take maternity leave for up to one year, the welfare state (municipalities) often pools mothers (and sometimes fathers) who are on maternity leave into local groups called 'mother groups'; ideally, the parents in these groups support each other, share knowledge and discuss problems in a (rather) safe space. Often, members of a local group become close and continue their relationship beyond their period of maternity leave. The description of extended donor families as 'mother groups' illustrates the closeness and support that is often demonstrated and practised by these donor families. It also demonstrates how various online media enable everyday connectivity, despite a lack of physical proximity. Mamo (2010) describes how lesbian reproduction has been transformed from a 'do-it-yourself' practice (involving sourcing sperm from friends and practising home insemination) to a medicalised, institutionalised practice characterised by neoliberalism. While acknowledging this development, I would also underscore that a fundamental part of this transformation has been caused by online media becoming reproductive technology.

Concluding remarks

When Weston wrote *Families We Choose*, she closely associated reproduction with heterosexuality and a nuclear family setting. Consequently, identifying as a sexual minority liberated women from

the imperative to reproduce: 'almost all [interviewees] associate their sexual identity with a release from any sort of procreative imperative' (1991: 210). Differently, in contemporary Scandinavia, where the welfare state subsidises fertility treatments and sperm is available for sale online, reproduction and the imperative to reproduce has expanded to include non-heterosexual couples as well as single women (and others with uteruses).

Contemporary queer reproduction in the era of the Web 2.0 has led an increased number of children born into queer families of lesbian couples and solo mothers to connect online. Often, these connections are driven by a search for genetic relations, as they are normally instigated by the mothers of the donor conceived children in an attempt to connect with other mothers who have conceived via the same sperm donor. Many of these mothers form new extended donor families with a number of donor siblings. In this way, biology and genetics are re-inscribed as building blocks in new queer family formations. Today, families of choice and the *creation* of families outside the traditional heterosexual and nuclear family framework can be formed via biological connections; as such, extended kinship of biologically related donor families represents a break with and a challenge to both heterosexuality and nuclear family making.

Not all families with donor conceived children mobilise biology in their kinship making. In the analysed empirical material, some lesbian couples chose to downplay biology and thus not search for or contact donor siblings. This can be interpreted in different ways: it might reflect an attempt to protect the (lesbian) nuclear family, and thus homonormativity; or it might suggest that same-sex families continue to be fragile, especially if the parenthood of the non-biological mother is viewed with suspicion. One way of confirming parenthood might be to insist on the nuclear family model, which excludes donor siblings. Importantly, in modern donor families, marriage and nuclear family making is associated with lesbian parenting, whereas biologically-driven kinship seems more aligned with solo mothers' extended families. This marks a fundamental difference in the understanding of biology, in that biology seems to have lost its former hegemonic ties to the nuclear family.[4]

Most likely, the Scandinavian queer baby boom is a harbinger of future global trends in LGBTQ+ reproduction. While limited to families with donor-conceived children in Scandinavia, the present article has sketched new patterns of queer reproduction (related to biology, coupledom and media technology) and outlined a new theoretical framework for queer reproduction that is relevant for broader understandings of contemporary and future queer reproduction. Whereas Weston (in her time) saw biology as the driving force in heteronormative kinship making, I point to a framework where it may be more accurate (today) to assign coupledom as the driving force in normative kinship making. Consequently, I also argue that coupledom might trump heterosexuality in contemporary kinship making, and that the kinship making of solo mothers with extended donor families might be considered as queer as lesbian motherhood. Most importantly, I argue that media technology facilitates connections between donor siblings, organises and develops extended families and cultivates family bonds of belonging. Media technology should therefore be seen as a

reproductive technology in itself, and, as such, it must be taken into consideration in any examination of contemporary queer kinship.

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[1] If so-called 'open donor sperm' is used, the identity of the donor can be released when the donor conceived child turns 18 years old.

[2] Use of Facebook is not completely free of cost, as one pays with one's data, which Facebook tracks and capitalises on (van Dijck 2013).

[3] The families may include 'butch' lesbians, gender queer parents or trans men who identify as 'fathers', but they do not include cis men or traditional/genetic fathers.

[4] Disclaimer: biology is still associated with heterosexuality and nuclear family making in heterosexual family making.