

Opinion: Five reasons why we need to look at childbirth and the media

July 14 2016, by Dr Ranjana Das

Dr Ranjana Das from the Department of Media and Communication discusses why we need to look at childbirth and the media, and the 'Birth Stories' project she is involved in.

Birth in the media

Media and communications studies has recently seen a growing amount of interest in the [mediation of parenting](#) – especially, how parents of tweens and teens are using social and digital media to aid parenting roles and responsibilities. Equally, I see around me a long tradition of interest in [health and communication](#), and, of course, on the [sociology of childbirth](#). Somewhere between these areas falls birth and its relationship with our 24/7 mediascape. Birth is the moment where parenting begins, and is intensely mediated.

The media has a long line of examples to show how women's birthing bodies are represented – shows like [One Born Every Minute](#), or [Call the Midwife](#) and newspaper articles on multivitamins in pregnancy and the desirability of natural births – have joined artistic and fictional [representations of birth](#) for a long time now.

Women are increasingly turning to social media to discuss their [expectations and anxieties around birth](#), and to discuss post-birth trauma. Video sharing platforms and twitter document the births of many babies around the world. Clearly, something is happening here that needs

investigation – how is the media shaping and perhaps influencing perceptions of births, anxieties around births, risk perceptions and emotions arising out birth? How is the media being used to cope with these emotions, post-birth – one of the most vulnerable phases in a woman's life as a parent? In a society which is rightly invested in post-natal emotional health, the fact that social media forums witness a whole host of emotions from anonymous mothers before and after birth leads to the question – why do we need to look at the media and birthing?

5 reasons why we need to look at childbirth and the media

- Media images and texts shape the kind of expectations and emotions women carry to the laboring room. The demands women make of themselves, the expectations they have of what can, to an extent, be an unpredictable process, and the yardsticks with which mothers assess their birth experiences all occur within a mediated context.
- While the majority of births in the UK go well, there are many who leave the moment of birth with lasting trauma and look for support on social media. This is evidenced by pages upon pages of anonymous discussions on parenting websites.
- Global flows of people mean that practices and advice from cultures of origin often collide with those in the UK. The contrast (and connection) of cultures and generations is re-negotiated by birthing mothers, using information, advice and support that is constantly mediated.
- Birth is idealised, or conversely medicalised, and too often graded on the media and this could contribute to feeling of in/adequacy post birth.
- Birth experiences shape the earliest phases of parenting - and the ways in which social media is or can be used at these times

deserve critical attention.

Birth Stories: A British Academy Project

These are the factors behind a new project I am kicking off this summer with a grant from the British Academy. Titled "Birth Stories" – the project is generating a body of qualitative data including 50 unique birth stories recounted by 50 mothers in England during fieldwork, 50 online discussion and support threads bearing the voices of countless anonymous mothers, and media texts and visuals from television, the press and [social media](#). Speaking to women from cultures native and foreign to England, Birth Stories answers three kinds of questions.

- First, how is birth mediated in contemporary Britain, on texts and images on social and broadcast media? What do these tells us about how we as a society, present the birthing body, its agency, its sense of self and how are natural/medicalised births positioned in the public eye?
- Second, what emotional complexities arise in women's voices as they recount their expectations and experiences of giving birth? How do joy, disappointment, shame, blame, guilt and happiness fit into the earliest weeks of parenting?
- And finally, what are the experiences of mothers who are not native to the UK, what do they make of the differences in cultures, advice and infrastructure between their cultures of origin and the cultures where they give birth.

The impetus for this project arose at both personal and professional levels. As an academic working within audience studies, I often met colleagues who worked with motherhood, parenting, migration and reproduction, and gender and health. In conversations with them, it seemed that birth – the moment where motherhood begins - seemed to fall in between gaps across these various areas.

It was becoming clearer to me that the mediation of sexuality, gender, politics, religion, childhood, parenting being studied around us – had left a gap, and the mediation of birth, and the ways in which it shapes the very early stages of parenting – were under-explored. This professional assessment found personal meaning when I gave birth in autumn 2015, and shortly after, submitted my grant application to British Academy.

My experience, as an immigrant mother in the UK, as someone who had a critical hat on her head when reading [media](#) content/advice, and as someone who had lurked/participated on online discussion groups for new parents, ensured that the intellectual gap I had spotted became personally meaningful as I went through my own [birth](#) story, so to speak. The grant application to British Academy came back successful, and the project was funded for 2016-2018, providing excellent impetus to do something with this gap, and generate new data to analyse.

Provided by University of Leicester

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