Monthly Review

EDITORIAL

@doption: New technologie ... and new challenges for all

In a worldwide context in which new technologies have become part of our daily personal and professional life, this month's Editorial reflects on how these have affected adoption.

New technologies – and these include a whole range of developments and related social communication networks (Internet, e-mails, Facebook, Skype, scientific developments, etc) – have undoubtedly had an impact on all those affected by adoption. Indeed, the adoptee, the biological and adoptive families, the professionals, the authorities and agencies, all make use of these technologies. They must therefore be made aware of the positive aspects related to their use prior to, during and after the adoption, as well as of the potential responses available and necessary to limit any potential risks (see p. 8).

Easy access prior to adoption

Access to information on adoption has become increasingly easy, although not necessary increasingly reliable or ethical. Indeed, any prospective adoptive parent can easily write a few keywords into a search engine and find pages and pages of information that is not necessarily genuine, updated and useful. Equally, websites and social networks have become a means of accessing (non-professional) support provided by persons experiencing or having experienced similar situations to that of the prospective adoptive parents. This information may, however, often be based on their personal and specific experience and not be of a general nature, thus raising the uncertainty of this information as applicable to others. Although it becomes difficult to restrict the information that may be shared through these means, this situation reiterates the importance of adoptions being framed in a professional mechanism. Indeed, the undertaking of independent or private adoptions, including also direct contacts by e-mail or social networks with child care institutions, may increase the risks of partial, misleading or unreliable information being offered to prospective adopters as well as that of falling into irregular practices (see, for example, the story in *Finding Fernanda*, Monthly Review Nº 01/2013)

Additional and more detailed support during the adoption procedure

Whilst prior to adoption, the information shared thanks to new technologies may raise particular challenges, new technologies provide a means for prospective adopters to remain involved throughout the process and even to prepare themselves and the child for the adoption. Indeed, modern means of communication have, for example, enabled prospective adoptive parents to see the child in his country of origin through visual support. Equally, e-mails and other communication technologies may provide the opportunity for closer follow-up of adoption proceedings in both countries involved – i.e. between the prospective adopters and their accredited body, between the accredited body and the Central Authorities and/or local contacts, etc. Thus, information – whether positive developments or potential obstacles – will be shared promptly and may then be given appropriate follow-up. In addition, some documents that once used to take long periods to reach the addressee can now be sent quasi immediately, thus reducing some unnecessary delays.

Other new technologies that are rather scientific developments may also be mentioned at this stage of the adoption proceeding. Indeed, it must also be questioned how DNA testing, for example, may be a means of ensuring the mother's consent to her child's

adoption or of searching for biological parents, as has been respectively the case in Guatemala and Spain. In fact, some of these developments are still not failproof, thus questioning the certainty of their results. This reflection cannot limit itself to the present Editorial given its multiple implications, but such new scientific developments have certainly also had an impact on the adoption process in many countries.

Technologies and search for origins

There is no doubt that the most common stories heard – and publicised – on searches for origins now involve new information technologies, such as the Internet and social networks. Have we not heard about an adult adoptee looking for his parents thanks to Facebook or a biological parent looking for his biological child through fora for adoptees? Although the ISS/IRC understands the needs and recognises the right of adoptees to know their origins, it also wishes to raise awareness as to importance of offering adequate support in this process provided by trained and competent professionals (see, for example, pp. 7 and 8 as well as Monthly Review № 01/2012).

Issues for reflection

Although it remains a challenge to fully respond to the impact of new technologies, some initiatives may be reflected upon to move towards a better use of these technologies in adoption proceedings. For example, authorities should consider the development of legal instruments, policies, guidelines, including sanctions in cases of abuse. Authorities, agencies and the professionals involved must offer support in cases of search for information on public websites. In addition, the development of training enabling professionals to better respond to these situations should also be considered (see p. 8) in order to be able to fully include these issues in programmes of preparation of prospective adopters as well as in post-adoption services (see p. 7). Practical tools for prospective adopters have become available (see Monthly Review № 01/2012 and p. 8)[1].

Finally, and focusing on the potential positive contributions of new technologies, such as the issue of photo-listing of children with special needs, reflection should also be furthered on how to promote the rights at those at the heart of the process in order to meet the intended positive use of these technologies. In relation to the use of internet listing, the *Guide to Good Practice Nº2* of the Hague Conference on Private International Law states that '[g]ood practice and the use of the Internet is possible. One approach to ethical use of photos is through a *very restricted* [emphasis added] web page, which may contain the details of adoptable children, who are hard to place (usually because of their special needs)'[3].

In the presence of these challenges, the focus must remain on the protection of the rights of those at the heart of the adoption process and on the consideration of solutions enabling the prevention of risks and the fight against those abuses that may result from the resort to new technologies. In this sense, the ISS/IRC is about to launch a Circular among its network, aimed at gathering information on existing practices relating to this issue and at undertaking a brief analysis.

The ISS/IRC team
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