

Santa's little helper and star of Instagram, #elfontheshelf: Normalising surveillance and digitising a childhood phenomenon

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The Elf on the Shelf (EotS) has become – as well as being a best-selling book and toy of the same name - a cultural phenomenon. “It's a fun-filled Christmas tradition that's captured the hearts of children everywhere who welcome home one of Santa's Scout Elves each holiday season. The magical Scout Elves help Santa manage his naughty and nice lists by reporting back to him at the North Pole nightly. Along with their friends, the Elf Pets® Reindeer and Elf Pets® Saint Bernard, Santa's elves bring the spirit of the season to life! Adopt a North Pole friend today.” So says the marketing copy found on the EotS website.

For the marketers of EotS, it's also a huge money-spinner, earning millions worldwide. Originally self-published as a book by a retired teacher in 2005, the EotS book now sells with an EotS toy who sits on the shelf and, according to its story, reports back to Santa. The EotS resides in many homes and schools pre-Christmas, giving parents and teachers leverage in the lead up to Christmas with the aim of moderating children's behaviour (making them 'nice').

EotS can also be viewed as a more sinister societal surveillance tool, normalising the 'panopticon' and making parents complicit with the concept of spying, not dissimilar to an Orwellian Big Brother. While 'magical' rather than technological, EotS can nevertheless be seen as normalising and promoting a parentally-endorsed surveillance culture. Simultaneously, the EotS also has become both a chore and a source of fun for parents of Santa believers globally, as parents (usually mothers) each night change the elf's location and position.

This paper explores the way mum bloggers/Instagrammers have approached this toy/cultural phenomenon, with some seeing it as a way to garner followers and likes and present their 'ideal', creative parenting style. Other mums on Instagram have chosen to use humour to subvert the toy, deriding it as a waste of time or tapping into its inherent creepiness factor, with extremely adult poses and captions. The representations of the toy show the approaches parents now take in the social media age – presenting a carefully curated image of their parenting style and identity. These social media traces simultaneously reinforce or subvert the inherent surveillance normalisation of this new Christmas phenomenon.