

What difference does ‘the digital’ make to children’s experiences of risk?

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Ever since the internet first arrived in the teenagers’ lives, one key question has long preoccupied many parents, policy-makers and media commentators as well as researchers: what difference does the digital make? It is easy to look around today and see teenagers absorbed in their screens. It is also easy to worry about the many problems that beset those same teenagers. But does that mean that the screen is responsible for the problems? Many assume the answer is yes, but—as with all media effects research—the case is not unequivocally established (Livingstone 2007).

After all, social trends over the decades since the internet became part of our lives show little long-term change in the incidence of childhood problems (with more evidence of decreasing than increasing problems; Finkelhor et al. 2013; Hagell et al. 2013). Moreover, as the social shaping of technology theorists pointed out a long time ago, technology cannot impact on social life independent of the ways that people design, distribute, and use it (MacKenzie and Wajzman 1999). So if we do point the finger at the internet, we need to clarify exactly how we suppose that internet design, distribution, or use is having an effect and how that intersects with wider social practices.

In this special issue, Brindova et al.’s (2014) large-scale correlational study sets up just this puzzle: watching television for more than 3 h per day is correlated with a host of

adverse symptoms (headaches, irritability, and depression). Boniel-Nissim et al. (2014) complicate the story by showing what many have suspected, namely a curvilinear relation between, in this case, amount of online communication and life satisfaction. More peer communication is experienced as positive up to a point, but too much communication is associated with lower measures of life satisfaction.

To resolve the correlation/cause problem in a domain where we can hardly experiment with teenagers’ lives, longitudinal research is helpful. Bickham et al. (2015) report that higher use of mobile phones and television viewing is associated, 1 year later, with greater levels of depression among teenagers (even controlling for demographic factors; see also Hemphill et al. 2015). Chang et al.’s (2014) larger longitudinal study shows that, if media-related risk factors are already high and, further, those factors increase from 1 year to the next, then the likelihood of cyberbullying (both perpetration and victimisation) also increases over that year.

This seems to establish the case for media harm. But, being cautious, we should note that it is not clear whether the authors have investigated or controlled for the possible role of offline risks in teenagers’ lives (classically, as a putative ‘third cause’ of the observed correlations). Here it is pertinent that Gommans et al. (2014) show how online risk factors are correlated with other (offline) risk factors such as substance, alcohol, or tobacco use. In other words, can we exclude the possibility that offline problems are merely shifting online in the digital age rather than that, somehow, ‘the internet’ is increasing the overall level of problems in young people’s lives?

This challenge is partly what Lester and Barnes set out to disentangle in their longitudinal study of teenagers’ experiences of traditional (or offline) bullying and

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cyberbullying. As the EU Kids Online project also found (in a cross-sectional survey; Görzig 2011), Lester and Barnes show that those bullied in both ways are the most harmed. So offline risks matter too. But herein lies a further complication, for while so far it has been possible for researchers to analyse offline and online risks independently, this is likely to become ever more difficult as the internet is increasingly entwined in all dimensions of our lives.

In sum, while it remains uncertain whether there is actually more bullying (or other risks) today than there was before the internet, it is likely that bullying (along with some other risks) is becoming more all-encompassing and difficult to escape. No wonder that victims are sometimes drawn into bullying others (Hemphill et al. 2015; Görzig and Ólafsson 2013)—if they see no escape, why not fight back? While the contributors' suggestions as to possible solutions are helpful, many of them focus on the internet once again—parental restrictions of internet use, providing online forms of support, and so on. But perhaps the causes of unhappiness in teenagers' lives are more fundamental, albeit exacerbated by perpetual online contact. Is not time to put the internet into context and link it to a broader analysis of the position of youth in society?

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