Youth and the internet: a guide for policy makers

By Jonathan Rallings
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It is sometimes difficult for older generations to properly appreciate just how quickly the environment young people are growing up in today is being changed by technology. Even relatively young adults in their thirties came of age in an era where mobile phones were the sole preserve of bankers or wealthier estate agents, whilst the internet was an emerging novelty, slow and periodically accessible via dial-up modems accessed largely in institutions rather than the home.

For young people in 2015, though, life without information and communications technology seems as unfathomable and quaint as an era before sliced bread. Unlike any previous generation in history, young people today have instant access to the sum of human knowledge and information through the click of a mouse. This provides unparalleled opportunities for learning, global connection, and innovation as never before. But alongside the numerous benefits bestowed by the internet, it is increasingly clear that the potential for relentless and all-consuming contact with the virtual world is also presenting new and unpredictable challenges for young people.

It is interesting, but not necessarily surprising, that it is only now that policy makers are beginning to fully conceive of the different nature of childhood in a digital age. The sheer volume of enormous regulatory and moral issues for global society which the internet has thrown up – whether it be privacy of personal data; the facility for terrorism, extortion and exploitation; or the floodgates opened to an exponential growth of media content, to name just three – has left little time to fully consider what effects might be experienced by a generation which has no concept of a world without instant connectivity.

But it is time to think more clearly about these issues and how to best support our young people with the challenges already arising. Signs are emerging of the effect that information technology may be having on the development of the first cohort of young people to have grown up entirely in the post-internet age. Although much of the evidence is so far inconclusive there are interesting trends emerging: For example studies are indicating that empathy levels have decreased significantly in young people compared to previous generations.¹ There are suggestions that a surfeit of exposure to data may be changing concentration levels by decreasing attention spans (in adults as well as children).² Language and spelling is evolving rapidly due to the proliferation of text abbreviations.³ Questions could even be raised over how far a generation glued to their gadgets will gain the subtle social skills that can only be learnt through direct interaction with other humans – such as distance and personal space for example?

¹ This 2010 meta-study compiled the findings of 72 separate studies between 1979 and 2009 suggesting empathy was reduced by as much as 40%: http://ns.umich.edu/new/releases/7724
² This article considers this particular issue: http://www.theguardian.com/teacher-network/teacher-blog/2013/mar/11/technology-internet-pupil-attention-teaching with the central problem suggested by teachers as being distraction cause by mobile phones with games and apps on phones rather than attention spans altogether. To some readers this may sound like simply a modern spin on an age-old problem of children acting up in class...
³ http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationopinion/9966117/Text-speak-language-evolution-or-just-laziness.html
There are more surreptitious changes too. For example most of those reading this paper are likely to have been schooled in an age where writing an essay meant sitting down with a pen and paper and constructing it in contiguous form from start to finish. The word processor now allows young people much greater fluidity in their writing, but how is this impacting on their ability to construct thoughts? Or take the demise of the reference book hastened by the availability of online resources. Instant access to the sum of human knowledge at the touch of a button is amazing, but you can only search for what you know to look for – and if it’s not listed at the top of a Google search it seems that less than 5% of us even look at the second page of results. How does today’s young person accidentally stumble across knowledge in the way past generations would flick through an encyclopedia discovering their ‘unknown unknowns’? With algorithms increasingly determining the advertising, recommendations, and news, we are drip-fed online, how much is the world view of a maturing young generation being narrowed if they are insidiously directed only to information which reinforces their existing preferences or prejudices? What effect might this have on democracy in the future?

In his book, *The End of Absence*, Michael Harris highlights that, most pertinently, the young of today seem to be losing the space and time – even boredom – which previous generations may have taken for granted as a means for self-reflection and a chance to accrue deeper individual understanding and knowledge of the world around them. The constant connection and, now, mobile accessibility of the internet means almost every spare minute is filled with the potential for diversion of some sort.

Few would disagree that exposure to the internet is undoubtedly changing the experience of childhood and adolescence. What is harder to define is what exactly is changing and to what extent the change is for better or worse – or even how much it matters. What are young people potentially losing, or gaining, from this permanent state of interaction? Our cultural narrative of the ‘generation gap’ between teenagers and their parents and the way in which technology has exacerbated this gap in the past (e.g. the car, the phone, recorded music etc.) is so engrained, is it perhaps blinding us to some extent from the scope of change that is going on? Is it possible that the creation of the internet may one day, in hindsight, represent a more fundamental moment in terms of human social and cultural – and even physiological – development?

Something that does not appear to have changed is the basic challenge of adolescence with its attendant emotions, anxiety and obsessions. Baroness Beeban Kidron’s informative documentary *InRealLife* (2013) – looking at this very issue of how the internet is impacting on youth – shows clearly that teenagers today, speaking in their own words, are still recognisably teenagers as most of us would describe them (often from our own personal experience).

What has altered drastically, though, is the level of risk that young people may potentially expose themselves to when growing up due

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4 This webpage shows a breakdown of the percentage of clicks a site receives according to its positioning in a Google search: https://chitika.com/google-positioning-value.
5 *The End Of Absence*, Michael Harris (2014).
6 Interestingly, it is also not quite a film-maker but a film historian, David Thomson, who has tantalisingly set out in various books, including *The Whole Equation* (2004) and *The Big Screen* (2012), his premise that the humble screen has perhaps proved the most evolutionary invention for mankind since the industrial revolution. He argues this on the basis that it has facilitated a fundamental shift in the way we think through expanding our experience of the world at large and offering us constructs and behaviours to compare ourselves against. Certainly the speed and extent to which portable screens in the form of mobile phones have taken hold of society in just a decade or so, makes this analysis seem somewhat more insightful than face value might suggest.
7 This view is reinforced by other recent media portrayals of teenage lives such as the highly successful *Educating Essex* and *Educating Yorkshire* series.
to the extremes to which the consequences of teenage behaviour can be magnified when facilitated by the internet. This is illustrated all too clearly in the film by poignant interviews with young people reflecting on addictions to pornography and gaming they have developed from their internet use, or, perhaps most shockingly, the young woman exchanging sexual favours in order to retrieve a stolen phone.

Just as in the ‘offline’ world, we are learning that cyberspace also presents its own bespoke dangers to child wellbeing which as a society we are only just beginning to acknowledge and react to. And the reality is that it is the most vulnerable, less likely to have attentive parents to supervise them, and often lacking basic education, who are most exposed to the dangers that advancing technology poses – the internet in particular. These young people, who have always been most at risk of problems such as addiction or exploitation, now face greater extremes in terms of the consequences of their actions due to the internet. Increasingly, disturbing case studies of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse are linked to internet ‘grooming’ of vulnerable young people – not only to facilitate ‘contact’ abuse by arranging to meet up in real life, but increasingly through the soliciting of explicit imagery via social media or the incitement of sexual activity on webcams. These are serious safeguarding concerns.

Young men experiencing a world where they can access freely available and worryingly graphic pornography online appear to be warping their understanding of both their own and young women's sexuality. There is some evidence this is also contributing to both genders’ expectations of relationships and what is accepted as ‘normal’ is being altered – leading to a potentially regressive twist in the quest for gender equality. Even young people themselves are expressing their concerns about pornography in the internet age, with an IPPR survey finding 80% of young people saying it was too easy to access pornography online, and 72% feeling that it is leading to unrealistic views about sex – particularly among boys. Although the government has recently moved to encourage Internet Service Providers to offer content filters which restrict access to various explicit material online, it is not clear yet how effective this strategy will be in helping keep young people safe online not only from pornography but other disturbing sites promoting self-harm or suicide for example.

The same report also found that 46% of 18 year-olds felt that sending naked pictures to each other – a practice more commonly known as ‘sexting’ – was ‘part of everyday life for teenagers nowadays’. Given teenage hormones it is not exceptionally surprising that young people should be using technology in this way, but not all will be fully equipped to consider the future consequences of their actions. Barnardo’s own internal research has found that some young people gather as many as 2500 ‘friends’ on social networking sites – as a sign of status. But this can present major risks when these ‘friends’ can often be less trustworthy than the young person assumes and private photos are suddenly effectively public in the hands of others. The term ‘revenge porn’ is

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8 Barnardo’s recent report Hidden in Plain Sight (2014) shows that it is not just girls who are sexually exploited but boys too. The Wud U? app which the charity has made widely available is helping to increase the awareness of both genders about appropriate sexual responses and how to protect themselves from sexual exploitation.

9 There is still too little research on the impact on young people but it is clear that worrying changes are taking place. Further reading on this disturbing topic is contained in the report Basically... porn is everywhere Horvath et al, Middlesex University/Office of the Children’s Commissioner for England (2013)


11 Young People Sex and Relationships: The New Norms, Parker I (IPPR, 2014)
now common parlance as intimate pictures of what are mostly young women are placed online as an act of humiliating vengeance, usually after a relationship breakdown. Previous generations have taken for granted the ability to emerge from adolescence with embarrassing adolescent mistakes mostly forgotten. But for today’s young people, most of whom are publicly sharing their lives through social media, their teenage indiscretions are possibly likely to remain readily accessible for the rest of their lives – including by employers. It is still uncertain how far this may present itself as a disadvantage going forward.

The issue of sexting is one element of the wider phenomenon of cyber-bullying which experts are increasingly concerned is affecting the lives of many children and young people. In previous generations children who were bullied at, say, school would be likely to find refuge at home over the weekends or during school holidays. But in a world of instant connection and social media, vulnerable young people are increasingly finding themselves tormented day and night with little or no respite. It is concerning but not surprising to find that agencies such as ChildLine are suggesting that calls to them about cyberbullying (up 87%) and sexting/pornography (up 145%) are increasing at alarming rates.\footnote{http://www.nspcc.org.uk/globalassets/documents/annual-reports/childline-review-under-pressure.pdf}

It is important to remember, though, that the internet still represents a vastly positive advance for young people – which is perhaps why it is valued so highly by them. InRealLife, for example, documents the positive engagement of connection between hundreds of young video bloggers – ‘vloggers’ – convening on Hyde Park to meet each other for the first time after connecting online. It shows a sensitive and supportive relationship between two young gay men discovering their sexuality at opposite ends of the country who may never have otherwise found each other. It might equally have contrasted the vastly improved access to knowledge and information today’s schoolchildren benefit from. Or the way in which individual stories can now touch the lives of many people in ways not seen before, such as that of Stephen Sutton, the young man whose online videos of bravery and optimism in face of terminal cancer led to millions of pounds being raised for charity as well as undoubtedly raising awareness of cancer risks for countless young people.

This all emphasises how the internet has brought amazing opportunities for young people – to learn, to interact, and to allow them a greater sense of their relation to a globalised world. Social media and content platforms such as YouTube, Vine or Vimeo are allowing young people to communicate in ways like never before – to connect and create together. Young people appear to be increasingly creating and inhabiting their own world of media, distinct from the mainstream, with some attracting millions of followers, achieving the sort of fame and influence among their peers which previous generations would only have attached to film or rock stars.

The benefits for young people can be enormous – as it facilitates greater peer-to-peer learning than was ever possible before. It is a space where even the most isolated and vulnerable young people, or those coping with some of the issues discussed in this paper like identity or bullying, can find like-minded friends and communities to validate and make them feel less isolated. There is also a vast quantity of information – both official and informal – to
allow young people to cope with their ‘growing pains’ which in previous times may have isolated them.

That is not to say that this new world of connectivity does not raise big questions about peer pressure and privacy. Whereas previous generations were subject to peer pressure largely confined to small communities within towns or schools, now young people are confronted with comparing themselves to their peer group on a global scale. It is not clear what impact this may or may not be having as yet, but it is difficult to imagine that it does not from time to time cause insecurities in even the most confident teenagers. Even the biggest fish must sometimes feel small when swimming in the largest possible pond.

Contrary to popular belief, it seems young people are actually more concerned about their online privacy than other generations, being more likely to check and adjust privacy settings on the internet than other, older, age groups. This is hardly that surprising for a generation which is increasingly aware that one misjudged photo or comment online may affect their job prospects or happiness for the rest of their lives. It also helps to explain the popularity among young people of apps specifically designed to prevent an archivable record for the future – like Snapchat, which allows a photograph to be sent which is then ostensibly deleted automatically after a momentary amount of time (usually six seconds). However, even Snapchat is not immune to breaches of privacy, after it emerged last year that third-party apps had allowed messages to be intercepted and ‘screen grabs’ taken, resulting in user photos being saved and stored. This has served to further underline the maxim that, really, nothing that is posted on the internet should ever be assumed to be ‘deletable’.

So young people are seemingly caught between two opposing and contradictory forces – one drives them to share online as much as possible to keep up with their peers, whilst the other emphasises the potential pitfalls that one wrong move on social media etc. might lead to. It is unknown what strain this might be putting young people under and what impact it may be having on the mental health of some, even at the same time that the internet is so celebrated and cherished by teenagers generally.

The positivity that the internet can bring to young people’s lives, though, must challenge the temptation for older generations to instinctively consider the internet as ultimately threatening to childhood. The reality is that like any other technical advance, there are likely to be myriad positives and negatives experienced by young people at an individual level. For example an overreliance on electronic communication by some young people may be viewed negatively by some, concerned about the importance of interpersonal skills to success in life. But we must remember there have always been young people less comfortable with oral or interpersonal communication who are now more likely to value online communication as offering the benefit of more time and space to think through and write their thoughts in a considered way without feeling a need for an immediate response. Equally it should be remembered interpersonal skills may become considerably less important in an economy immersed in social media and online communication anyway.

13 http://blogs.ou.ox.ac.uk/policy/young-people-are-the-most-likely-to-take-action-to-protect-their-privacy-on-social-networking-sites/
14 http://uk.reuters.com/article/2014/10/10/us-snapchat-photos-idUSKCN0HZ2AW20141010
However, it is time policy makers begun to pay more attention to what needs to happen not only to reduce the potential for harm, but to accentuate the positives for growth. As responsible custodians for our young people we need to consider how we can allow them to reap the benefits of living in the internet age whilst being protected from the negative risks that exist online – just as we do for the offline world. Policy makers must view issues as they arise from the standpoint of how to mitigate the harmful elements of venturing online, rather than opting to do nothing and hope children and their parents will self-regulate or supervise.

Following her experiences making *InRealLife* Baroness Kidron has pulled together a proposal for a series of ‘iRights’ – basic rights which children and young people should expect when going online.

**iRights**

**The right to remove:**
Every child and young person under the age of 18 should have the right to easily edit or delete any and all content they themselves have created.

**The right to know:**
Children and young people have the right to know who is holding and profiting from their information, what their information is being used for and whether it is being copied, sold or traded.

**The right to safety and support:**
Children and young people should be confident that they will be protected from illegal practices, and supported if confronted by troubling or upsetting scenarios online.

**The right to make informed and conscious choices (agency):**
Children and young people should be free to reach into creative and participatory places online, using digital technologies as tools, but at the same time have the capacity to disengage at will.

**The right to digital literacy:**
To access the knowledge that the internet can deliver, children and young people need to be taught the skills to use and critique digital technologies effectively, and given the tools to negotiate emerging social norms.16

16 iRights: Empowering Children and Young People Online
Barnardo’s is one of a large number of organisations and individuals which has pledged its support to the iRights campaign. It is unclear how feasible it may be to achieve all these principles or what the implications on public resources may be to do so. But perhaps the significant point behind iRights is a growing realisation that the freedoms we have created within the virtual world do not always afford the same protections towards children that would be expected in the ‘real’ world. Resolving this inherent contradiction is likely to become an increasing theme of public policy in the coming decades as technology becomes ever more immersive and the boundaries between cyberspace and real life blur even further.17

iRights – which was debated for the first time in the House of Lords in November 2014 – represents an important first step in addressing issues related to children and the internet. But our growing understanding of the fundamental effect which the internet is having on childhood suggests that, alongside rights for young people online, we also need to be far more alert to assessing the potential impact on youth as we anticipate and regulate new technologies. This paper urges policy makers18 – often policy makers who sit on the other side of the ‘digital divide’ (such as the author himself) – to start to think in more sophisticated ways about information technology and how young people use it. This will involve developing a different mindset and shaking off many preconceptions about what we assume about the younger generation. The final section of this paper suggests some key principles to guide future policy development around youth and the internet.

1. Disengagement is not an option

Given many of the issues raised in this paper, a question which is sometimes asked is why young people don’t just stop going online altogether to avoid, say, bullying? But that is to misunderstand the fundamental shift in society and culture that is taking place. Older people, familiar with learning more traditional forms of communication, are better equipped to distinguish between the internet and ‘reality’, drawing boundaries in their lives between online public sharing and offline privacy. For those whose childhood has been spent entirely in the evolving digital age, such artificial boundaries appear to be becoming increasingly meaningless as more evidence emerges of the perpetual 24/7 culture of online contact which exists among young people in the modern world.

Without greater understanding of how society is likely to evolve as internet technology continues to relentlessly innovate, can we confidently assert that not engaging with the internet will not end up being even more damaging for a young person’s future outcomes than any of the threats which surround using it in the first place? Indeed – intriguing other research into the views of young people suggest those who use the internet regularly have higher wellbeing scores than those who don’t.19 This suggests that although many

17 For example virtual reality gaming technology is expected to become prevalent within the coming years which may significantly alter the public perception. It appears that a future where a child may be able to don a headset to play a violent or sexualized ‘game’ in an immersive virtual reality world is no longer in the realm of science fiction. This may lead to some significant public policy questions around how far children can or should be safeguarded in virtual worlds just as we would expect them to be protected from, say, the dangers on the streets in their immediate environment. http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/gadgets-and-tech/gaming/virtual-reality-the-future-is-here-and-its-gamechanging-9548995.html

18 This report recognises that government already has experts thinking about technology policy as well as experts in children’s policy. This report is suggesting though that both need to help each other for government to make the right decisions around digital strategy that place children at the centre.

young people are articulate enough to express their discomfort at the way they can see the internet is impacting on their lives and interactions with others – such as when discussing the growth in sexting – the prospect of pulling away from the online world is not likely to be a positive experience for most, possibly due to a perception of the social exclusion that may befall those who withdraw.

More pertinently they may be increasingly aware of how disengagement could impact on them economically. It is reasonable to assume that as the current cohort of teenagers assume control of the world, that social media, instant information, and digital communication will underpin most advanced economies to a far greater degree than at present. Those with an instinctual understanding of how to effectively employ these evolving media are likely to hold a significant advantage both socially and in the workplace. Young people are likely to be more acutely aware of cultivating an online presence to help them secure employment – those with no online footprint risk increasingly being viewed more suspiciously by employers in years to come as potentially people with something to hide.

### 2. Young people do not understand the internet equally

It is important that there is a nuanced perspective of young people's capability when using the internet. Too often assumptions are made that because they have grown up with the internet young people are automatically more comfortable with or adept at using this technology than older generations. It is likely that to some degree this is true – simply because young people coming of age now have no experience or awareness of a world without communications technology – but it also needs to be properly understood that young people's capability in using the internet can vary just as it does in other older age groups.

Barnardo's report *Helping The Inbetweeners* (2012) highlighted that although all the young people interviewed for this study on careers advice were acutely comfortable in using the internet to access social networks – often interacting through apps on their phones such as BB Messenger or Facebook during the interviews themselves – some also admitted they lacked the ability to conduct even such a basic function as a Google search by themselves. This is important when policy in this area, for example, has been to increasingly annex careers advice to remote services on the internet.

Indeed young people do not always consider themselves more capable than their parents when it comes to using the internet – a recent EU-wide survey showed only 37% of UK children and young people aged 9-16 agree that the statement “I know more about the internet than my parents” was ‘very true’. Whilst it is fair to assume that the older teenagers are more confident in their knowledge than younger children, nevertheless the same study indicates that there is still a good third of young people across the whole of Europe who do not feel dramatically more ‘net-savvy’ than their parents.

It is also worth remembering that the very nature of youth means that even where young people have a greater capability of using the internet they are less likely to always have an awareness of the consequences of their actions – particularly the most vulnerable young people.

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20 *Helping The Inbetweeners* Jane Evans and Jonathan Rallings (Barnardo’s 2012)
21 *Children’s Online Risks and Opportunities* Livingstone, Mascheroni et al (EU Kids Online and Net Children Go Mobile, 2014)
Too often though, the concept of the digital native has obscured any need for children’s internet use to be viewed in policy terms as a separate issue. As Sonia Livingstone puts it in her essay on improving digital rights for children as the internet expands across developing countries:

“Sometimes the discourse of ‘digital natives’ seems to be uncritically accepted (i.e. the kids are already ahead of adults online, so there’s no need to address them specifically). Or they are assumed to be the sole responsibility of their parents (who, after all, pay the bills). Or they are simply forgotten about, seemingly invisible in general talk about ‘the population’.”

In fact public discourse around young people’s relationship with the internet is primarily situated within the narrow context of an extended debate around censorship of media which has been ongoing for decades (whether it be rock and roll, video nasties, violent videogames, gangsta rap etc.). Advocates of any form of censoring of the internet frequently position themselves primarily motivated by a wish to ‘protect the children’, whilst opponents, reluctant to concede any ground to internet censorship, have more recently argued back that blanket electronic tools to restrict access risk also denying young people important information around sensitive teenage topics such as homophobia or neutral advice about illegal drugs.

Whilst censorship of the internet is – and remains – an important debate which society needs to have, the reality is that it is only one of a wider set of issues needing to be discussed in relation to the relationship young people have with the internet, as this paper shows.

3. Think about children when considering the effects of new technology

It is only 25 years since Tim Berners-Lee developed the world wide web, but already the world seems a fantastically different place and policy makers need to be constantly aware of the propensity for further change. To make a crude comparison, after the invention of film in 1895 it took nearly a decade for people to start to conceive using it to invent ‘narrative’ rather than simply film events, 15 to 20 years for the first Hollywood studios to emerge as an entertainment industry, 30 years for sound technology to be developed etc. leading to the cinema we have now. Similarly since the conception of the web in 1989 it took around five years for retailers to start to grasp the potential, 15 years before Facebook radically kick-started the potential of social media, 20 for real-time communication through Twitter, BB Messenger etc. to begin to make a major impact the nature of mobilisation and political activism (such as in the Arab Spring, or even the London riots, both in 2011).

Even allowing for the current accelerated pace of technological advance, it is unlikely we have really grasped the full implications of the internet we have now, let alone the impact of future innovations – such as Google Glass or virtual reality headsets, both of which are in their infancy. Of course making predictions about the future is terribly difficult and unreliable. But given that the impact the internet is having on childhood is a topic which has been

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24 We Are Legion (2012) is an interesting film exploring the growth of internet activism (or ‘hacktivism’), particularly highlighting the impact this is having on young people.
relatively unexplored until recently, it is important that future policy making better thinks through and tries to anticipate the specific impact on children as well as society as a whole. There is a whole industry of experts as well as futurologists emerging to help advise and predict where technology may lead society – and crucially policy makers should be listening to children and young people themselves on a regular basis to help anticipate trends.

It needs to be remembered too that the impact of technological change may stretch further than simply policy relating to the technology itself. The near destruction of the music industry by the internet, or the ongoing decline of the publishing industry and traditional journalism, may be the thin end of the wedge. There is speculation that as computers become increasingly sophisticated the next wave of jobs to be affected may be distinctly more white collar – with many professions such as teachers, accountants, bankers, even lawyers, variously predicted as potentially being made redundant in the near future.

What does this mean for an education system which still infers these professions are about as secure as any in the present age? And what might the impact on child poverty be if, as authors such as Andrew Keen are warning, increasingly sophisticated fledgling technologies – such as 3D Printers, Artificial Intelligence, and the ‘internet of things’ – start to reduce the size of many other industries too (retail for example), leading to greater global inequality: a potential feudalism led by a small number of individuals with the skills to program computers.

Of course, history shows society can never accurately predict exactly what will happen in the future. But it is important that we try and consider more deeply what the potential impacts of new technologies may be on children and young people, in a way that we have patently failed to do with the development and growth of the internet. To that extent Barnardo’s would urge that government considers putting in place a ‘Child Impact Assessment’ requirement over policy relating to new technology – akin to an Equality Impact Assessment – which would allow children’s policy makers to be involved so that we can better anticipate what the negative consequences might be in the future.

4. Young people do care about their privacy

It is important that policy makers do not assume that young people have no concerns about privacy. It needs to be remembered that the imperative of youth is to develop an identity of one’s own – and this means, in particular, that most teenagers will wish to seek a space to interact out of sight of their parents. Barnardo’s own research shows some young people have created second Facebook pages for precisely this purpose. Anonymity on the internet can present specific problems and in extreme cases safeguarding risks it is true – this is something agencies, including our own, are currently grappling with. Barnardo’s has attempted to provide ‘safe’ spaces for its service users to interact online, but has found many unsurprisingly prefer to find their own forums to hang out in, just as teenagers do in the ‘real’ world.

25 Articles on this particular topic have appeared in most mainstream newspapers on a regular basis this decade – such as this one: http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/jun/15/robot-doctors-online-lawyers-automated-architects-future-professions-jobs-technology

26 The Internet Is Not The Answer, Andrew Keen (2015)

27 The internet of things is a term being used to describe the anticipated advances where households gadgets such as TVs, Fridges, Heating Systems – you name it – will be linked to the internet for convenience but potentially at risk of being hacked.
More importantly professionals working with young people need to be better equipped to support them to stay safe online by themselves – otherwise young people may increasingly place themselves at risk as they venture towards less regulated, less moderated and generally more dangerous parts of the internet.

5. Think of the most vulnerable

Although this paper has highlighted some of the deeper risks the internet can hold, as well as the opportunities, the likelihood is that most young people will not experience the most extreme consequences from their internet use. But the risks for the most vulnerable young people – either through misuse and/or abuse, or simply lack of online access and restricted opportunity in the future – are likely to be significantly greater. Children's policy that is focused on children most at risk – such as that around looked after children or those with learning needs or disabilities – should ensure that adequate attention is paid to the online dynamic of their lives as well as much as the ‘real world’.

These are the children that Barnardo's works with and we are seeing the changes in their lives first hand. They need clear education in the risks they face online, just as much as the dangers that they may encounter in the more traditional ‘real world’. Part of this may involve developing their cyber-skills from an early age so that they are better equipped to understand how the internet can help them achieve their aspirations and goals beyond a narrow perspective of social media or gaming. Already an increasing number of public services are being placed partially, or even wholly, online – benefit claim processes, job search engines, or careers advice services represent just a snapshot of myriad examples. This reflects an assumption that everyone will be able to easily get to a computer and understand how to use these services online, whilst failing to recognise that even in 2014 only 76% of the UK’s adult population accessed the internet.28 Knowing how to navigate cyberspace is already becoming an essential life skill for young people to thrive in the modern world.

Most urgently, though, policy makers need to specifically think about how they can support the most vulnerable young people to fully access and engage with the online world. Ensuring all young people are online may involve unexpected new measures – such as a requirement for internet access before a family is entitled to be eligible to adopt or foster; or very specific initiatives – for example, in supporting young people with learning difficulties or disabilities to learn basic digital skills. This is likely to be increasingly important when the effects of ‘digital poverty’ become more prevalent in the coming years.

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28 Internet Access – Households and Individuals 2014 (Office for National Statistics, 2014)
Conclusion

For better or worse the internet is only likely to become increasingly important and pervasive in the future. As this paper has tried to show, the online and offline worlds inhabited by our young people are already intricately entwined together in ways which we wouldn’t have dreamed possible even a decade or so ago. We have been remiss in anticipating how this would change their lives so dramatically and perhaps we could have done more to think about the effects we are beginning to see now. It is never too late though. Technology is advancing on and on all the time at a rapid pace – we have further opportunities to consider how inventions emerging now might affect the infants and children in our nurseries and schools in the future. That way we can ensure we are better prepared to support our next generation of young people and the new challenges they will undoubtedly face.
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