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Original Citation

Gallagher, Bernard (2016) The Role of Digital Technology in Child Protection: Still Helping and Harming? Child Abuse Review, 25 (5). pp. 327-331. ISSN 0952-9136

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Editorial

The Role of Digital Technology in Child Protection: Still Helping and Harming?

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It is just over 10 years since I guest edited a special issue of *Child Abuse Review* on 'new technology' - as it was then known (Gallagher, 2005, p.367). The central theme of my editorial was whether this technology was 'helping or harming children', and more particularly, how the former might be maximised and the latter minimised. There have, over this time, been huge advances in hardware, none more substantial, perhaps, than the advent of the smartphone, which has rendered internet access and mobile communication available almost anywhere and anytime. There have been equally major developments surrounding software, including the widespread utilisation of social networking sites (such as

Facebook and Tumblr) and apps (including Snapchat and Yik Yak). Facebook, for example, was launched only in 2004 and now has 1.4 billion users (Viner, 2016).

These changes have resulted in digital technology - as it is now more commonly referred to - having an even more profound impact upon how we communicate and socialise, on our leisure and learning, and in how we are provided with and receive services. With these new opportunities, though, come novel problems: the Dark Web, revenge porn, sexting and trolling, to name but a few (Balfe *et al.*, 2015). It seems, then, to be an apt time to re-examine the theme from roughly a decade ago; to ask how digital technology might now be helping and harming children and young people (CYP); and to highlight some of the current, key issues in these arenas.

The first paper in this special issue, from Sandy Wurtele and Maureen Kenny (2016), is concerned with that most critical of issues - prevention - with a particular focus upon 'technology-related sexual solicitation of adolescents' (TRSSA). Wurtele and Kenny begin by providing an overview of what is known about this phenomenon. Although it is primarily contextual, there is, within this material, an early and powerful illustration of the complexity and the lack of consensus that can surround digital technology-related child maltreatment (DTRCM).

Wurtele and Kenny then turn to the main purpose of their paper: a review of the effectiveness of efforts to prevent TRSSA, which include: cyber-safety websites for youth, and school-based ICT safety education. In providing this account, Wurtele and Kenny highlight another aspect of DTRCM - that the efforts to address these wide-ranging threats are themselves extensive. The authors point out that there is some evidence that these initiatives may be effective in addressing TRSSA and also identify ways in which interventions could be improved. Their overall conclusion, though, is that there are serious weaknesses in the efforts to prevent TRSSA, and their judgements - of 'many… inaccurate

warnings', 'panic driven recommendations' and 'untested assumptions' - make sobering reading (p.334). These are themes that recur throughout this special issue.

The next paper, by Michelle Wright (2016), segues usefully with the previous one in that it presents research on one of the four categories of intervention identified by Wurtele and Kenny; namely, 'parental mediation' - in this instance, regarding 'cyberbullying'. Wright's work is also useful in that it acts as a reminder that while online sexual victimisation tends to receive much more attention in the media, CYP are considerably more at risk of cyberbullying. Wright's specific interest is the association between different parental mediation strategies, and both cyberbullying and psychosocial adjustment difficulties (depression, anxiety and loneliness).

Wright reports that, in general, *restrictive mediation* was positively associated with cyberbullying and psychosocial problems, whereas these associations were negative for *co-viewing mediation* and *instructive mediation*. Wright speculates that the adverse outcomes associated with restrictive mediation may be due to the impact of this strategy upon CYP's ability to acquire key skills: 'Restrictive mediation might be linked to the overprotective parenting style in which parents do not allow their children to develop problem-solving skills and social skills" (p.354). Wright's work has important implications for parents/carers, but also for practitioners, in their attempts to help ensure CYP are safe when they use digital technology. Her work also has wider implications in that it highlights the often multidimensional nature of individual interventions, and the need to assess specific elements of an intervention when judging efficacy.

The preceding focus on parenting is maintained in the third paper in the special issue, although it is examined from an entirely different perspective. Lauren Lamberton and colleagues (2016) present exploratory research on some of the opportunities and challenges that arise when providing online family support services (FSS).The study is based on the

work of *Netmums*, the UK's biggest online parenting organisation. Netmums was set up in 2000 but added a professional support arm, the *Parent Support Project*, in 2008. Lamberton and colleagues point out that although there are quite extensive online FSS, there is little research on this provision - a situation she and her colleagues sought to address through interviews with Netmums' professional staff.

Lamberton *et al.* reveal that Netmums' staff encountered a range of prospects and problems. There was one issue, though, about which they were especially vociferous: 'child safeguarding'. The authors state that although Netmums had a 'well developed' and improved child safeguarding policy, there were issues in terms of the practice response to child protection concerns. Several of the Netmums' professional staff also expressed a concern as to whether all service users appreciated fully the limits to confidentiality when they used the site. Lamberton *et al.* suggest that, overall, digital technology can be used to provide valuable support to families but that this work is not without challenges. It may be that these are the same sorts of challenge that arise when supplying offline FSS, but in the online sphere they can take on an additional, distinct and testing digital character.

The fourth paper in this special issue, from Sarah Greenhow and colleagues (2016), is also concerned, in part, with parenting, but again from a quite specific context; namely, adoption. Greenhow *et al.* explain that with the advent and spread of digital technology, adopted CYP and birth relatives can increasingly search for, and contact, one another - so-called 'virtual contact' - and they can do this without professional support. The authors explore how this form of communication interacts with traditional forms of adoption communication, and its effects upon relationships and longer term contact, with particular regard to adopted CYP and their birth relatives.

Greenhow *et al.*, like the preceding authors, show that the influence of digital technology in child protection is often not a simple question of 'good' or 'bad' but is more complex than this. They found that digital technology-facilitated contact can have an adverse impact upon adopted CYP, especially when it occurs 'out of the blue' or where it comes to replace traditional forms of exchange. Such contact can, however, also be beneficial to adopted CYP, particularly when it 'supplements' existing contact, facilitated through traditional means, and then become 'integrated' with it. Greenhow *et al.* argue that it is not digital technology *per se* that is the issue, but rather by whom it is used, and when and how it is used. They add that any assessment of this 'virtual contact' must also take into account CYP's preferences, in terms of communication mediums, but also any vulnerability they may possess.

The fifth and final paper in the special issue, by Claire Lilley (2016), underlines the extent to which digital technology might be harnessed to protect CYP. Lilley reviews the literature on the availability of, and evidence base for, digital (and some wider) technologies that are used to manage convicted internet child abuse image offenders. Lilley makes clear that there are a large number and extensive range of digital technology 'tools' available for this work', which can be divided into two groups: the 'situation specific'; and the 'non-situation specific'. Lilley also makes clear that there is 'widespread use' of this technology by police services across the UK.

It is rather disheartening, if not disturbing, then, to read Lilley's assessment that there is a poor evidence base for these technologies. She also contends that there are ethical and practical challenges associated with the use of much of this technology. Lilley concludes with a warning - one which should, perhaps, be applied to all digital technology-based attempts to help children: 'as the unit cost of technology gets cheaper, and it gets easier to implement, there is a danger that technology will be applied arbitrarily' (p. 396).

The special issue concludes with reviews of two 'e-safety' training packages, both of which are aimed at those working with CYP. The first review, by Vera Slavtcheva-Petkova (2016), is of the 2014 NSPCC/Child Exploitation and Online Protection centre course *Keeping Children Safe Online*; and the second, by Emma Bond (2016), is of the 2016 Childnet International Prezi-based *Staff E-Safety INSET Presentation*. Both reviews provide useful and critical overviews of their respective training packages but they also serve to underline some of the issues raised in the preceding papers, particularly around the complexity of digital technology vis a vis child protection. Slavtcheva-Petkova highlights, for example, the tension that can exist between warning young people about 'self-harm and pro-eating disorder websites' (p.399), and acknowledging the help some of them may get from these sources. Similarly, Bond asserts that it is not only CYP who have to 'keep safe' when using digital technology but also professionals (from a reputational point of view).

It is evident from the above papers that digital technology can both 'help' and 'harm' in respect of child protection but also wider child wellbeing. Many, if not all, readers will be aware already of this dual capability of digital technology. Indeed, examples of digital technology-based forms of such help and harm abound. West Sussex County Council (2016), for instance, has developed an app to assist vulnerable CYP talk about their experiences; the problem of sexting has morphed to spawn the new and additional threat of 'sextortion' (Wolak and Finkelhor, 2016); and software has been developed to enhance the identification and removal of child abuse images online (Internet Watch Foundation, 2016).

A more innovative message, perhaps, to emerge from this special issue is that the role of digital technology in child protection is more nuanced, but also uncertain, than the above implied and simplistic dichotomy might suggest. There is a relatively large body of existing research on the extent and nature of risks that digital technology poses to CYP, and at least some of this is of a high quality, as exemplified by the work of the US Crimes Against Children Research Center (http://www.unh.edu/ccrc/) and the EU Kids Online research

network (http://www.lse.ac.uk/media@lse/research/EUKidsOnline/Home.aspx). Some authorities, though, have not drawn upon this evidence base, and have developed interventions that may leave CYP at increased risk of victimisation and other negative consequences.

The threats from digital technology-based harms and the responses with which they have been met, have been shown to be multidimensional, with many of these individual 'dimensions' having discrete child protection implications. For example, the capacity of a digital technology-based interaction to cause harm to a child may be dependent upon his or her particular circumstances (Greenhow *et al*. 2016); the efficacy of an intervention may vary according to the specific form it takes (Wright); and difficulties in managing child protection concerns may heighten when communicating digitally (Lamberton *et al*. 2016).

One of the starkest themes, though, to emerge from this special issue concerns the evidence base surrounding the role of digital technology in child protection. All of the above authors indicate that this evidence base is either non-existent, limited or of a poor quality. This seems especially acute in relation to digital technology-based interventions to help CYP or to directly tackle the harms they face.

Digital technology has come to have a major presence in most aspects of our lives, including child protection. However, the design and implementation of this technology, within the child protection sphere, has developed at a far greater pace than has our understanding of this technology.

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