

## Childhood Policy Programme

### Perspectives on children navigating a digital world – panel discussion

**August 2020**

On 25 June 2020, the British Academy hosted an online panel discussion which brought together different perspectives to consider the complex relationship between children and the digital world.

This online event formed part of the British Academy's Childhood Policy Programme. The programme was set up to reframe debates around childhood in both the public and policy spaces, and to break down academic, policy and professional silos in order to explore new conceptualisations of children in policymaking.

The Academy's series of childhood provocation papers, written by experts from across the arts, humanities and social sciences, accompanies the programme. This event provided an opportunity to debate and discuss issues surrounding two of these provocation papers - Professor Sonia Livingstone FBA's paper 'Can We Realise Children's Rights In A Digital World?' and Dr Amy Orben's paper 'Outpaced by Technology' which explore how our understanding of the implications for children of new technologies is currently outpaced by technological innovation.

The event was chaired by Dr Molly Morgan Jones, Director of Policy at the British Academy.

Speakers at the event comprised:

- Professor Sonia Livingstone FBA, Professor of Social Psychology, Department of Media and Communications, London School of Economics and Political Science
- Dr Amy Orben, College Research Fellow, Emmanuel College, University of Cambridge and Research Fellow, MRC Cognition and Brain Sciences Unit, University of Cambridge
- Baroness Beeban Kidron OBE, Founder and Chair, 5Rights Foundation
- Rhian Beynon, Assistant Director Policy & Campaigns, Barnardo's
- Professor Lorna Woods, School of Law, University of Essex

## Provocation Speeches

Sonia Livingstone and Amy Orben opened the event by building on the arguments in their respective provocation papers, published as part of the British Academy's [Reframing Childhood Past and Present](#) series.

Sonia Livingstone discussed how, while the full range of children's rights (as set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child) apply to the online world, it is very challenging to apply them in a fast-moving, fast-innovating, globalised digital environment. Many platforms contain 'adult' themes – sex, gambling, hate, aggression – but the fact that it can be nearly impossible to identify who is a child online means that children's rights are not protected in these spaces, and children are essentially left to their own devices in online spaces designed for adults. Sonia raised the question of where the balance of responsibility for keeping children safe online should sit – should the onus be on children (and their parents and carers) to become safe, knowledgeable digital citizens, or the internet companies to protect children from harm? Sonia also spoke of how we are moving from a past of children's invisibility online to one where they are hyper-visible. A 'digital panopticon' exists in which children can be recorded, profiled, tracked, nudged and targeted by corporations and states. The consequences of this transformation are not yet known.

Amy Orben discussed the insights into children and the online world that can be gained from exploring reactions to past technologies. There are some similarities: reports from the 1940s spoke of children 'addicted' to the radio, of concerns they spent too much time doing this and the fears of parents who feel this new technology is something beyond their control. There are also differences, a key one being the speed at which online technology now develops and changes. The ability of research to keep up with rapid and accelerating online development is a challenge. Research, by design, is a slow-moving, rigorous, robust process. Also, funders and researchers may only turn their attention to a topic once there are already concerns, which can be too late. Amy spoke of 'technological entrenchment' and the difficulty of changing a technology after it is already widespread. This can mean that there is only a small time window for effective intervention with regards to a new technology.

## Panel Responses

Rhian Beynon, Lorna Woods and Beeban Kidron then responded to the two provocation authors. Points put forward during this section include:

- Vulnerability is inherent in childhood, but aspects of the digital world, such as social media, create additional vulnerabilities for children at different life stages. Certain groups of children are particularly vulnerable, such as children in care, those who have suffered abuse, and those with mental health difficulties.
- Online technology offers many advantages to children, and during the recent lockdown many children have benefited from the support and socialisation the online world offers. However, this must be balanced against children being exposed to the many risks.
- The pre-internet regulatory framework which makes the distinction between publishers (who have liability) and platforms (who don't) does not translate well online. Many internet services do not sit neatly in this framework, but instead inhabit a middle ground between the two. Social media companies, for instance, might not

create the content on their platforms but they do design algorithms that determine who sees the content.

- Organisations have a duty of care to those who use their spaces, whether physical or online, and must design spaces in a way that mitigates the potential risks to those likely to use them. In the same way that a playground should have certain safety features, an organisation which creates an online environment that is aimed at or can be accessed by children should have a risk-identification and risk-mitigation strategy in their product design and in the operation of their services.
- Society shouldn't be so quick to accept 'new normals', such as accepting that social media in its current form is here to stay. If a 'new normal' is harmful and producing poor outcomes for children it should be possible for it to be challenged.
- Regulation should be seen as non-negotiable, not as an add-on. Also, regulation is a floor, not a ceiling: it outlines what is unacceptable, but it does not prescribe limits to how positive something can be. In this sense, regulation should not be seen as a hindrance to creativity and innovation.
- A cost/benefit framing that sets out the advantages and disadvantages of children's engagement with the digital world only provides a partial picture. It is important to consider the bigger picture: what kind of world do we want to live in? What world do children deserve? What conditions will best allow children to flourish?
- "Freedom of speech" should not necessarily equate to "freedom of reach": the right to speak does not give a speaker the right to access the maximum audience possible.
- Tech companies having the freedom to reach children partly in order to nudge and influence them – especially for commercial purposes – should not be something that is unquestionably accepted.

## Policy Changes

During the final part of the event, panellists and participants discussed some of the topics raised and considered what policy changes are needed to ensure that children can engage with and flourish in a digital world.

**Prioritisation:** Honest and open conversations are required on the relative importance of aspects such as children's mental health, their potential exposure to abuse, advertising revenue, and the freedom of platforms to distribute information (and mis-information). Only once the priorities have been clearly articulated can meaningful steps be taken towards improving children's relationship with the digital world and moving towards the desired outcomes.

**Children's voice and participation:** It is essential that children's voices and perspectives are included in discussions on how the digital world can best meet their needs and keep them safe. The tech sector should be encouraged to work productively with children's charities and other stakeholders on this.

**Responsibility:** Should the onus be primarily on children (and their parents) to become safe, knowledgeable digital citizens, or should primary responsibility sit with internet companies to protect children from harm? Expecting children to 'defend' themselves in an environment that has not been designed with them in mind does not feel like a fair environment. Parents, and vulnerable parents in particular, cannot be expected to keep up with all of the developments in technologies. Instead, the online world needs to be regulated: governments have a duty of care, and sanctions should be applied when rules are broken.

***A multi stakeholder approach:*** Tech companies are largely organisations that have commercial interests at heart, rather than children’s interests or children’s rights, and some of these organisations have remained largely unaccountable. The challenge is to get the interests of these organisations and other stakeholders to align, within a more cooperative model than that which exists at present. Other stakeholders need to have strong ongoing dialogue with these organisations in order to understand how they operate, with policy circles actively encouraging such dialogue. Additionally, stronger and more open relationships between tech companies, policy makers and researchers, in terms of collaboration, data sharing and knowledge transfer, would enable research to better evidence the impacts of technology on children. A development of frameworks for such relationships could encourage rapid research into newly developing technologies while also balancing access to user data by researchers (or others) with the danger of imposing another layer of privacy infringement on the users.

***Global perspectives needed:*** ‘Meaningful participation’ is vital. It is not enough to ensure that children in a developing country have access to laptops, for instance: they also need to have the necessary software, support and knowhow required in order to engage with the online world safely and meaningfully. Additionally, children in developing countries need to be able to have their voices heard in discussions on these topics that directly affect them.

***Regulation:*** Self-regulation of the tech sector has not been successful, and there is a need for an online harms regulator, who can implement a robust package of sanctions when required. Additionally, a distinction needs to be made between regulating the system that lies beneath the content and regulating the actual content. In cases where an algorithm pushes harmful content to vulnerable children, the platform itself need to be held to account.