



Cyberspace and young people

Barbara Staniforth, Elizabeth Butterfield and John Fenaughty detail recent developments in technology and their potential impact on children, young people and their families

Introduction

Technology is changing society at an increasing pace and social work has made good use of advances in technology in terms of easier access to information, more efficient communication, increasing access to global developments, and use of research findings. New developments occur rapidly, and the wide-ranging nature of the social impact on children, young people and their families is staggering. In relation to social work, these developments are particularly relevant to the field of child protection, and service delivery within it.

Literature review

There is a growing body of literature and research regarding advancing technology and the benefits and challenges that accompany it. This literature relates to history (Marson, 1997), education (Johnson 1999; Sandell and Hayes, 2002; Schoech, 2000; Berman, 1996), therapeutic support and self-help (Finn, 1996, 1999; Meier,

2000) and community coalition building, (Henrickson and Mayo, 2000). Ethics (Kanani and Regehr, 2003; Finn 2002), information sharing (Panos, 2003) and liability issues (Banach and Bernat, 2000) are also explored.

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Recent developments in cyberspace carry implications for social work practice

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Awareness has increased regarding the risks to children posed by cyberspace. Butterfield and Broad (2001) describe some of the dangers for children, while Durkin (1997) outlines ways in which paedophiles may use the Internet to their advantage. While Quayle and Taylor

(2002) have developed an assessment tool for professionals working with paedophiles who operate online, Gonchar and Roper-Adams (2000) outline the importance of assessing the potential impact of the virtual world when considering the 'Person in Environment' theories.

The social impact of communications technologies, both positive and negative, is nowhere more evident than with our youth. Recent developments in cyberspace carry implications for social work practice. These risk

areas are identified from accounts, practices and experiences encountered by the Internet Safety Group (ISG) in New Zealand.

Potential risk areas

Chat environments

Chat environments, including instant messaging (IM) and mobile phone text chat, allow conversations in real time. Children and young people may be at risk in these chats because a fellow chatter may take on any identity and a 50-year-old man could pretend to be a 14-year-old boy. Traditional stranger danger safety messages regarding the Net may be ineffective, because those online are often quickly perceived as trusted friends rather than the relative strangers they actually are.

The risks associated with chats increase when face-to-face meetings are arranged. In a New Zealand survey, 32 per cent of 7- to 19-year-olds who used the Internet reported going to face-to-face meetings (ISG, 2002). It is worth noting that most of these interactions were positive, with the people the survey respondents met close to the age they had said they were. In addition, 46 per cent of the 2,068 11- to 19-year-olds surveyed reported they had their own mobile phones. This percentage has risen to 73 per cent in the latest ISG survey in 2005. Nearly a quarter of those (24.5 per cent) in the 2002 survey said they used their phones to interact with people they did not know.

Safety strategies are absolutely essential when setting up such face-to-face meetings. The 2002 ISG survey revealed that only 37 per cent of participants reported they would tell their parents about meeting people in person from online settings. Even more disturbingly, 18 per cent reported they had no safety rules at all for such meetings.

Young people use cyberspace for maintaining existing relationships, but also for seeking new acquaintances – usually for friendship, perhaps for romance and sometimes for sexual interaction (ISG, 2002). Safety messages such as ‘don’t give out personal information’ can be irrelevant to youth, who understandably view the Internet and the mobile phone as critical to contemporary social life.

Sexual predators

Sexual predators are adept at exploiting people’s trust, and they target environments where people are more likely to let their guard down. Cyberspace is ideal for contacting vulnerable children, sometimes completely under a parental radar. Paedophiles will often groom a child for abuse, building a close, sometimes secret, relationship while methodically isolating the child from those they trust, and introducing the child to sexual language and ideas (Berson, 2002). Images of child sexual abuse are used by some paedophiles to groom children by normalising sexual contact between adults and children (Berson, 2002). Grooming online is accelerated in comparison to face-to-face occurrences, with many more children able to be groomed simultaneously.

New technology is also presenting challenges for sexual offender treatment programmes. Offenders use cyberspace to contact children, access child abuse images and make contact with other paedophiles. Some of these perpetrators are adolescents themselves, which raises implications for youth justice and young offender programmes.

Online publication of personal information

Helping young people understand the global scale of the Internet, especially the inability to control images and information once they have posted something online, is an important prevention strategy. Young people

are increasingly participating in blogs and online dating sites. In both of these settings, young people often post material online that may potentially render them quite vulnerable. Once posted, the individual loses control of the distribution of this material in terms of how it is used and where it ends up. The advent of new generation mobile networks is facilitating the quick and cost-effective transmission of very clear images through mobile phones, making education regarding all online image-sending essential.

Harassment – from cyberbullying to death threats

A range of harassing behaviours can be perpetrated using communication technologies. Traditional schoolyard bullying, conducted in cyberspace, can have additional impacts because victims can be bullied 24 hours a day. If done in a school community, bullies are usually fairly easy to identify, yet victims of ‘cyberbullying’ may feel that the messages are untraceable, which may inhibit reporting.

Cyberbullying can take many forms: emails, IM, text messages and spoofing the victims’ identities by using their email addresses and circulating their contact details or other personal information. Putting derogatory or obscene messages about the victim in chatrooms or message boards or creating websites about the victim and inviting harassing guest book comments also happen.

Repeated harassment is often labelled cyberstalking. Explicit death threats, unlike civil or criminal harassment, can be one-off

incidents and still amount to a criminal offence. All bullying and harassment, regardless of legal definition, can be emotionally devastating. The seriousness of cyberbullying is clear: it can be as upsetting and disturbing to a victim as a death threat and has been associated with the suicide of young people (Hudson, 2005; O’Rourke, 2006).

A 2005 ISG survey of 1,528 students in a mid to low decile school found that nearly three-quarters of them (73 per cent) had a mobile phone. Approximately a quarter of those with phones (23 per cent) reported receiving an offensive, abusive, pornographic and/or threatening text message. A smaller, but nonetheless significant, proportion (14 per cent) disclosed sending such messages.

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Addiction

One of the numerous Internet activities that young people can spend a lot of time on is online gaming. In certain role-playing games, a player can maintain a particular identity in a game for months at a time. While some game players form very positive online social communities, players can get over-involved in the games, some of which are so violent that they are age-restricted, such as Grand Theft Auto, or even banned in New Zealand, for example, ManHunt. The ISG is also aware that several neighbourhoods in New Zealand have dealt with petty crime waves because young boys had to finance both their online game time at 24-hour Internet cafés and the gambling they were doing on the outcome of a computer game competition.

Financial and security vulnerability

Scams and fraud are emerging areas of risk online for everyone, but children are less likely

to have the financial viability necessary to be defrauded. However, a growing number of students do have their own credit cards and are vulnerable. If a child misuses their parent's credit card, such as using that card in an online gambling casino, the parent will be liable for all charges, even if that card was used without their permission.

Antisocial material

Antisocial information is readily available on the Net, including hate and cult material, drug recipes, hacking 'how-to' websites, weapon and bomb designs, and weapon sales sites. Sometimes this is displayed on very professional mainstream-looking websites, helping to legitimise the ideology promoted. Teaching good searching and surfing skills and critical evaluation of sources online can help children manage inappropriate material.

Legal pornography

Many purveyors of pornography unscrupulously target the young and unsuspecting. An accidental click on a pornography site can open multiple pornography site windows, one after another, which is called mousetrapping. Some websites can automatically load themselves into a user's 'Favourites' folder or onto the desktop. Pornographers also register domain names that are one letter off the names of popular kids' websites to catch the unskilled typists.

Some sites have long and wordy terms and conditions to read before accessing supposedly free pornography. As a result of this, many curious children and adolescents click 'I agree' not knowing that they may have agreed to having their online session transferred to a 0900 phone line at much higher costs or that they may have accepted the download of a redialler program, which then makes expensive toll calls to remote countries.

Online pornography, now available through mobile phones, can be found in spam, websites and chatrooms. File sharing programs are very popular with many young people because they can be used to download music and movies. However, pornography, some of which is extreme, is increasingly traded through file-sharing programs and can be very easy to stumble across in a search for a movie.

The impact of this exposure on young people's sexual development is not yet known, as such easy access to vast quantities of explicit sexual material has never been possible before. A survey in 2002 by the Chinese government showed 70 per cent of young people surveyed were using Internet pornography as their sex education (Farrell, 2002). Also, in 2004, the Child at Risk Assessment Unit in Australia released preliminary reports of a dramatic increase in the number of children under 10 sexually harming other children. Almost all in their study had accessed pornography online and 'many thought that was the Internet's sole purpose' (Wallace, 2003). More research in this area is urgently needed.

Illegal pornography

Objectionable material, as defined in the New Zealand's Films, Videos and Publications Classification Amendment Act 2005, includes a wide range of images, such as bestiality and necrophilia, but the Department of Internal Affairs (DIA) censorship compliance unit concentrates its efforts on images of child sexual abuse. A number of those caught trading this material by the DIA are school-age males as young as 14. Child sexual abuse images record the horrific sexual abuse or torture of children – usually in still images, but sometimes in videos or films with soundtracks, written accounts or audio accounts.

Recent research by the DIA with 109 sexual offenders convicted of offences related to objectionable publications on the Internet shows the impact of technology. Of these offenders, 16 worked or had frequent contact with children. Sixteen others had access to children that included babysitting, volunteering at school, coaching a sports team or chatting on the Internet with children (Manch and Wilson, 2003).

Copyright infringement

Young people often trade or copy music files in peer-to-peer, file-sharing environments. Music industry companies have been rigorous in their monitoring of those who have downloaded their copyrighted material. It remains to be seen if individuals will be prosecuted for these crimes.

A particular area of concern for educational establishments is plagiarism. This can range from the indiscriminate cutting and pasting of others' work into assignments to the use of cheat sites, where, for a fee, students can download entire assignments. Young people may not realise the significant academic penalties that may be associated with such plagiarising.

Children as perpetrators

One of the growing risks online for children and young people is their own active participation in antisocial or criminal activity. Incidents of criminal hacking and criminal harassment, involving children as young as eight, have been reported to the ISG. The inclination of many to be more uninhibited online than offline certainly applies to children as well as adults, but there are also serious developmental issues to consider, particularly children's inability to consider the full consequences of their actions.

Child protection in a virtual world

Children who have not had the benefit of sound attachments and/or who live in conditions of adversity or poverty may be even more likely to be drawn to these technologies as they seek to connect with others. More research is required here. Social work is used to responding to many of these situations when they occur in the offline world, but must now adapt to deal with very real situations that are experienced in the online, virtual environment. 'Tech savvy' children are part of a culture. Social work recognises that working across any culture requires knowledge, the use of appropriate language and, ultimately, an openness to learning. This means that social workers must

first understand the advances in technology.

Assessment

Social workers need to include questions about technology and cyberspace in their routine assessments or investigations. We need to be fluent,

conversant and up to date on how technologies are being

used. As in motivational interviewing, we have moved beyond asking closed questions such as 'do you use the Internet?' to 'how many hours a day do you spend gaming?' It may be important to clarify the location of significant relationships and supports described by a child. Assessment tools, such as ecomaps, may be amended to include a child's best friends, who can be in a gaming group scattered across the world or someone they have never met and who lives in another country.

Working with families and caregivers

Families can be seriously affected when any of their members are victimised. While parents

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and caregivers may be in the best position to help prevent abuses occurring in the first place, this is becoming increasingly difficult. The facts that young people are often more conversant with these technologies than their caregivers, and that they have increasing use of them while not under direct supervision, make family intervention difficult. Children and young people have numerous options for accessing the Internet, such as cafés and libraries. An ISG survey in 2002 showed that of the 2,388 youth accessing the Internet, 43 per cent did so at a friend's house. This means that in cyberspace the foster parent or parental supervisory role is difficult to maintain.

Due to the widespread availability of cyberenvironments,

education is likely to be the best form of online risk prevention. Social workers should be able to discuss the implications of technology with families with whom they come into contact, and provide some guidance to parents who may be less aware of the technologies than their children. This would apply as well to foster families and those who provide service to children in care, as these children or youth may in fact be more vulnerable, due to multiple placements and attachment issues.

By offering education and support to parents and foster parents, social workers can gain powerful allies in online risk prevention. The goal is to create a cybersafe culture in the home or placement that the child or young person themselves supports. This can be more easily achieved with a strong alliance between parents or caregivers and social workers. There is a

need to discuss the changing role for parents or caregivers as children age, especially in relation to the balance of protection/education roles that they play.

An ISG survey on mobile phone bullying in 2005 found that just over a third of those who had received offensive, abusive, pornographic or threatening text messages had not told anyone about receiving such abuse. Three factors may be involved here.

1. The trusted adults that children and young people might normally turn to for support may be viewed as not tech savvy enough.
2. Young people may believe the myth of anonymity on the Internet, and think it simply is not possible to catch the perpetrators.
3. Perhaps most importantly, children may be afraid that parents or caregivers will react to a problem by taking away the technology.

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Education with parents and caregivers needs to include, as with other difficult issues such as drinking and driving, the importance of keeping good communication open and not reacting too strongly, even when very worried. Taking a positive interest in and having discussions about a child's online life are both helpful here.

Where to start?

There are many ways for social workers to become more aware of, and comfortable with, advancing technology. The ISG has developed a series of workshops for social workers and other helping professionals in New Zealand. These are one option for upskilling quickly. Getting to know the technology directly through using it is another way to become more fluent: join

a chatroom, text friends or use IM. Talking to children or adolescents and getting them to teach us new tricks can open up doors of communication and make us more comfortable and accessible. Social workers are used to working in the spaces between people and their environments. Cybertechnology presents yet another facet to the concept of environment that social workers need to acknowledge in their work.

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Barbara Staniforth is a social work lecturer at the School of Social and Cultural Studies, Massey University, Auckland.



Elizabeth Butterfield is the executive director of the Internet Safety Group.



John Fenaughty is research manager at the Internet Safety Group.