

# Commentary: Cause for alarm? Youth and internet risk research – a commentary on Livingstone and Smith (2014)

**David Finkelhor**

Crimes against Children Research Center, University of New Hampshire, Durham, NH, USA

## Introduction

“For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow,  
which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.  
Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet* (On Children)”

If you have spent any time with young people in the last 10 years, you know how enthralled they are by the electronic technology. But if you review the research on youth and technology, the themes are mostly about danger and distress.

Is this because the technology is indeed a new ‘pied piper’ seducing innocents into dangers unaware? Or is this the sign of a generational-gap alarmism that has discounted what youth are really experiencing?

This commentary argues that more explicit critical attention should be paid to a set of alarmist hypotheses about technology that have animated much of the current research slant on the topic.

The Annual Research Review by Livingstone and Smith (2014) certainly does not embrace the pied piper view. It is filled with findings that dampen many of its more anxious notions. They point out that serious and repetitive online bullying is rare, occurring to only 5% of youth in most countries, less than traditional face-to-face bullying. They cite findings that a majority of youth are not viewing pornography online. Relatively small numbers are also sending out sexual images. While 2%–14% may receive sexual solicitations, only a tiny subgroup ends up being sexually victimized by someone who solicited them online. They conclude ‘abuse by perpetrators known to the child offline is far more common than grooming by strangers online.’

But at the same time, the Livingstone and Smith review does shine light on where much of the scholarly community has chosen to focus its energy, a focus that has grown and not abated even with the emergence of reassuring findings. So it may be useful to articulate and debate more directly some of contentions of the alarmist narrative that seem to animate much of the concern.

## Three alarmist assumptions

The alarmism reflected by so much of the scholarly and journalistic literature appears to make several

assumptions that are worthy of more explicit discussion. (a) The first is that the digital environment is perilous for youth, that it is ‘deviance amplifying’ compared to preexisting environments. (b) The second is that the youth problems manifesting in the digital environment are fostered by that environment and depend on its specific dynamics. (c) The third assumption is that the remedies for these problems lie in specialized Internet education programming.

But these are not evidence-based assumptions, and a reasonable case can be made for a contrasting set of hypotheses: (a) that the digital environment is no more perilous and perhaps less perilous than other offline environments youth inhabit; (b) that the problems that do occur are not unique, but rather extensions of social interaction or media consumption problems that cut across environments and are best conceptualized holistically rather than as special to the digital technology; and (c) that the appropriate responses should not be specialized Internet safety training but more generic education about life skills, social interaction, emotional intelligence, and media literacy. In this view, we may look back on digital technology like we do today about the telephone. It was revolutionizing and has become integral to everything we do, but it did not organize our thinking about youth development or social problems. Although it plays a part in sex and aggressive behavior, we did not end up problematizing ‘tele-bullying’ or ‘tele-predators’, perhaps for good reason.

Since this alternative point of view is novel and more speculative than the cautious summary provided in the Livingstone and Smith review, it is useful flesh it out, including some of the research in the review and elsewhere that makes these hypotheses plausible and worthy of more consideration.

## Does the digital technology promote more risk or more safety?

What is the evidence that the digital technology is perilous or deviance amplifying? The contentions widespread in the alarmist literature are that the technology gives sex offenders unparalleled access to children, and through its anonymity and related mechanisms also emboldens sexual and aggressive behavior. Television programs like the popular To

Catch a Predator series certainly made the dynamics look very scary.

Indeed, some laboratory experimental work does show that online anonymity may have disinhibiting effects (Christopherson, 2007). But technology and social problems interact in very complicated ways. The mere possibility of plausible deviance amplifying mechanisms does not necessarily mean that the internet is amplifying deviance.

One question not sufficiently addressed in the current literature is how the rates of deviant behavior compare in offline versus online environments. The available evidence does not support the alarmist contention about the Internet. In the peer aggression domain, studies most generally suggest that bullying still occurs at higher rates in face-to-face than in digital contexts (Livingstone, Haddon, Gorzig, & Olafsson, 2011; Ybarra, Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Wolak, 2009). In the sex crime domain, in the US studies show that a small proportion of sex offenses against children (under 2%) had an online component (Wolak, Finkelhor, & Mitchell, 2009). Still, as Livingstone and Smith point out, many questions remain about how to compare vulnerability, risk, and harm across environments.

Another window on this issue of deviance amplification is to look at rates of social problem behavior during the era in which the digital technology has been absorbing an increasing amount of young people's time and attention.

Here too, the results are generally reassuring. Many risk indicators have been improving. In the United States, the United Kingdom, and perhaps in other places most heavily affected by the digital revolution violent crime overall and crimes against and involving youth have been declining (Van Dijk, Tseloni, & Farrell, 2012). There are indications that bullying has also been declining in the United States (Finkelhor, 2013) and internationally (Rigby & Smith, 2011). Sexual abuse of children has been declining in the United States (Finkelhor & Jones, 2012) and the United Kingdom (Radford et al., 2011); and there are signs that teen sexual behavior has become more responsible, at least in the United States.

These trends should compel scholars to at least consider whether the digital technologies could be protective in some ways. In fact, there are many possible hypotheses about how the technologies could be protective, but these have attracted scant attention in comparison to the endangerment speculations.

For example, in the 1980s in the United States, at the height of a public panic about child abduction and missing children, entrepreneurs floated many ideas for electronic devices that could alert parents to children who were in danger or allow them to summon help. None of those crime prevention devices caught on. Then suddenly in 2000s, everyone including children by the millions acquired such devices: cell phones. Yet there were few hurrahs that

a formerly intractable problem in remote child supervision had been dramatically mitigated. Nonetheless, a strong motivation for many families to acquire cell phones or equip their children was safety.

So some aspects of the digital technology, like cell phones, allow youth to summon help and stay in touch with caregivers when youth may feel at risk. Other aspects of the technology allow victims and caregivers to document dangers and offenses and mobilize action about formerly hard-to-confirm problems. Claims of bullying or illegal sexual solicitations are no longer he-said-she-said credibility contests, but have text, images or video confirmation that can persuade authorities and parents that they should indeed intervene. Such evidence may even be a deterrent to acting out.

The technology has also provided considerable new avenues for law enforcement to combat offenders who target youth. They have pioneered undercover investigations to catch online sexual abusers. They have used the gathered evidence from hard drives and chat logs to more aggressively prosecute offenders and increase the conviction rates.

The technology may have also altered the dynamics of youth risk taking in positive ways. While online risk taking may lead to risky and dangerous encounters and exposures, the actual consequences and dangers may be less immediate and serious online compared to offline. Poor judgment that in offline (hitchhiking, drinking, etc.) leads directly to sexual assaults and violence may require more steps in the online context before the face-to-face encounter and the worst outcomes ensue, and in this delay, better judgment may prevail. Interactions online tend to be drawn out and may allow more thought and less impulsiveness.

At the same time, the internet may have enticed kids to actually stay at home more, to do their adventure seeking from their armchair, which all things considered may be a safer place. It may permit or encourage more interaction with parents in between adventuring, remind youth about the more conservative values of the home environment, and change the herd dynamics of face-to-face peer groups, all of which may also dampen risk taking. The simple proliferation of engaging technological activities for young people may be alleviating boredom which has always been a great driver of delinquency. There has been little exploration of any of these possibilities, but they are interesting hypotheses to be pursued once the scholarly imagination moves beyond the techno-panic mindset.

### *Should we define problems as being unique to a technology, like cyber-bullying or cyber-stalking?*

The second contrarian point of view is that most of the problems that are happening technologically are

not unique to that environment. Indeed several strands of research have provided some support for this. The studies on online sex offending show that most online offenders are persons who know their victims from offline contexts, like school or church, and that the dynamics of online and offline offenders are similar (Wolak & Finkelhor, 2013). Livingstone and Smith (2014) cite research showing the considerable overlap between online and offline bullying. This may mean that cyber-bullying is not really that distinct a category, and it might be better to think of the electronic media as just another tool that sex offenders or bullies utilize. Of course, there are certainly specialized offenders, like there are specialized safe crackers or car thieves, but in criminology broader categories like robbery and sex offending have tended to prevail. Those who have coined and championed a variety of new digital specific problems have not yet made the case that this framework is justified.

Livingstone and Smith also point out that in terms of personal and psychosocial characteristics, to a great degree it is the same youth who get in trouble offline who get in trouble online. So, here again the evidence at the current moment does not point toward special internet risk factors.

The alarmist literature is also rife with claims about unique harmfulness of Internet dangers: for example the size of the audience for the digital slurs, their permanence, and the difficulty of escape. But few good comparative analyses have been done to really test such suppositions. For example, how many other youth were typically apprised about nasty rumors when they were spread without technology? How many school-transmitted rumors came from anonymous sources? We do not know whether youth consider internet threats more insidious or harder to respond to or ignore. But some scholarly attempts to show special impact to internet related episodes have not met with success (Turner, Finkelhor, Shattuck, Hamby, & Mitchell, In Press).

### *Do we need special internet safety education?*

The third contrarian hypothesis is that prevention programming would be more successful if it were generic and about life skills rather than about technology. Certainly there are useful, safety-enhancing technology related skills like how to use Facebook privacy settings. But it may be that the most effective prevention skills for safety and health both on and offline are about conflict management, empathy promotion, emotion regulation, consequence anticipation, refusal techniques, bystander mobilization, and help-seeking.

There are several problems with organizing prevention education to be specifically about technology. First, it may put the emphasis on skills (like privacy settings) that are less germane to preventing

the problems and become obsolete very quickly. Second, even when Internet education contains interpersonal skills, it may frame the education in a domain where youth are most skeptical of adult credibility and expertise. Third, Internet safety education may compete with and sideline a broad range of other programs that have been refined and tested through years of research. The literature suggests that most of what is currently being done in the way of Internet safety education is not based on established effectiveness principles, and is not being evaluated (Jones, Mitchell, & Walsh, 2013). Nonetheless, police officers are flooding into schools with new untested internet safety programs. This is a bad precedent and risks wasting much money and setting back progress in prevention education by many years.

A much more prudent and promising strategy is to take existing evidence-based safety programs and add components to them that address specific technology issues and that illustrate use of generic prevention skills in the technology environments. But for the most part, the Internet safety education mobilization has not adopted this approach.

### *Conclusion*

What we are facing in this field is more than a simple wave of technological anxiety of the sort that has greeted many other historical social changes. We are also dealing with incentives for scholarly entrepreneurship that can sometimes run ahead of the science. There is cachet and appeal to establishing new fields and defining new concepts. There are new funding and research opportunities to be leveraged by accepting or even fanning the popular fears. This can reduce the incentive to confront the anxieties more directly or to try to direct funding and research into enhancing existing programs.

But social science can be at its most useful when it tries to allay social policy driven by alarm and emotion. Scholars have a responsibility not only to warn the public and policy makers of the possible existence of an over-reaction in the technology safety area, but also to actively entertain and research disconfirming views. This is not just an academic concern. Some innovators say that school administrators balk at allowing more education-enhancing technology into classroom because they see the medium as a portal for cyber-bullying, Internet predators and sexting. Can social science help educators balance these concerns?

But another responsibility of social science may be to provide perspectives from those whose voice may be poorly represented in the public discourse. In this case, that under-represented perspective may be that of young people themselves. It is worth considering what the digital technology research agenda would look like if it were set by young people themselves?

Certainly, some of that research at least would be devoted to providing more texture and substance to the things that appear to create so much excitement among young people and the ways in which it may be serving and promoting their development.

Where is the research about the technology's virtues: making downtime less boring, helping stay in touch with friends and family, managing social anxiety, participating in adult worlds, stoking imagination, giving a sense of mastery, and fueling optimism about the future?

## Acknowledgement

This commentary article was invited by the JCPP Editor-in-Chief and has been subject to internal review. The author has declared he has no competing or potential conflicts of interest in relation to this article.

## Correspondence

David Finkelhor, Crimes against Children Research Center, University of New Hampshire, 126 Horton Social Science Center, 20 Academic Way, Durham, NH 03824, USA; Email: david.finkelhor@unh.edu

## Key points

- This commentary describes 3 alarmist hypotheses about technology that have animated much of the current research slant on the topic.
- It urges a more critical view of these hypotheses and consideration of alternatives.

## References

- Christopherson, K.M. (2007). The positive and negative implications of anonymity in Internet social interactions: "On the Internet, Nobody Knows You're a Dog". *Computers in Human Behavior*, 23, 3038–3056.
- Finkelhor, D. (2013). *Trends in bullying & peer victimization*. Durham, NH: Crimes against Children Research Center, University of New Hampshire.
- Finkelhor, D., & Jones, L.M. (2012). *Have sexual abuse and physical abuse declined since the 1990's?* Durham, NH: Crimes against Children Research Center, University of New Hampshire.
- Jones, L.M., Mitchell, K.J., & Walsh, W.A. (2013). *Evaluation of internet child safety materials used by ICAC task forces in school and community settings, Final Report?* Available from: <http://www.ncjrs.gov/App/Publications/abstract.aspx?ID=264178> [last accessed 23 April 2014].
- Livingstone, S., Haddon, L., Gorzig, A., & Olafsson, K. (2011). *Risks and safety on the Internet: The perspective of European children: full findings*. London: LSE, EU Kids Online. Available from: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/33731/> [last accessed 23 April 2014].
- Livingstone, S., Haddon, L., Gorzig, A., & Olafsson, K. (2011). *Risks and safety on the Internet: The perspective of European children: Full Findings and policy implications from the EU kids online survey of 9-16 year olds and their parents on 25 countries*. London: EU Kids Online Network. Available from: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/33731/> [last accessed 23 April 2014].
- Livingstone, S., & Smith, P.K. (2014). Annual Research Review: Harms experienced by child users of online and mobile technologies: The nature, prevalence and management of sexual and aggressive risks in the digital age. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 55, 635–654.
- Radford, L., Corral, S., Bradley, C., Fisher, H., Bassett, C., Howat, N., & Collishaw, S. (2011). *Child abuse and neglect in the UK today*. London: National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children.
- Rigby, K., & Smith, P.K. (2011). Is school bullying really on the rise? *Social Psychology of Education*, 14, 441–456.
- Turner, H.A., Finkelhor, D., Shattuck, A., Hamby, S., & Mitchell, K. (In Press). Beyond bullying: Aggravating elements of peer victimization episodes. *School Psychology Quarterly*.
- Van Dijk, J., Tseloni, A., & Farrell, G. (2012). *The international crime drop: New trends in research*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Wolak, J., & Finkelhor, D. (2013). Are crimes by online predators different from crimes by sex offenders who know youth in-person? *The Journal of Adolescent Health: Official Publication of the Society for Adolescent Medicine*, 53, 736–741.
- Wolak, J., Finkelhor, D., & Mitchell, K.J. (2009). *Trends in arrests of "online predators"* (pp. 1–10). Durham, NH: Crimes against Children Research Center – University of New Hampshire.
- Ybarra, M.L., Finkelhor, D., Mitchell, K.J., & Wolak, J. (2009). Associations between blocking, monitoring, and filtering software on the home computer and youth-reported unwanted exposure to sexual material online. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 33, 857–869.

Accepted for publication: 21 January 2014