

Archbishops Commission on Families and Households

The role, place and scope of digital in families and households – a think piece

If you were to ask 50 people “what is digital?”, you will get 50 different answers. For younger people, the question is often a little perplexing – “digital” is a fully integrated element of their lives, not something you draw out. For older people, it frequently comes down to social media, video calls and/or a sometimes slightly uncomfortable relationship with technology. And yet, paradoxically given its ubiquity, for most of us, digital generally has a very narrow scope or definition.

Or perhaps think about how digital and technology have featured in the news and media over the last week. There will have been some simply awe inspiring stories – a transformative development in healthcare for example. And there will have been a story about how data is now helping to find new solutions to one of life’s most intractable problems. But on balance, the coverage will have likely focused on the negatives, on the risks to children and young people, or the threat to democracy. And closer to home it will be centred around a frustrating on-line shopping experience. We won’t remember when things just worked.

These complexities – our journey with digital and technology, the overarching narrative, the exponential evolution of the digital world - all contribute to a digital anxiety, to an often-visceral response, like so many of us with numbers and spreadsheets, to simply push things aside.

And so, if you don’t ask about digital, it is often not even mentioned. The majority of responses to the Commission’s call for evidence were silent on digital and technology, yet digital and technology are central to our lives. This digital “silence” – the failure to properly see or hear because of digital, is potentially a far greater threat than digital itself. It is also a huge, missed opportunity.

Not thinking digital means we are missing a huge element of children and young people’s realities. Not thinking digital means we may well miss many of the positives which came alongside the traumas of the Covid 19 pandemic. Not thinking digital means missing the opportunity to reflect on some of the most fundamental aspects of our lives, in particular, relationships.

So, to take these three things in order:

Digital realities. In a recent piece of work which looked into the role of digital in social work practice¹, an area where hearing the voice of the child is such a fundamental principle, getting to understand a young person is still in many cases a physical meeting, emails, a video call using Teams, forms. Yet for most children their realities are constructed from

¹ Rethinking Digital. Research in Practice (2022). Unpublished work.

multiple sources, using multiple tools, with information and communication almost always a mixture of text, imagery, and voice. The apps which many adults still risk dismissing as mere entertainment are in some cases the main source of information for children. The gap between the children's reality and that of the adult is wide, and the fragments of information gleaned outside of that child's digital-reality represent an imperfect and incomplete picture at best.

With this realisation of a new reality where digital is so integral, we must rethink how we communicate, how we source and share knowledge and information. There are myriad examples of attempts to curate what is becoming an almost infinite world of information, but these attempts appear to really just highlight the challenge of trying to use an old world approach to a very different new one. An increasing number of commentators are suggesting we need a rethink about the ways in which we learn. And in doing so we will need to think again about how we know who and what to trust, and about the people who influence us.

Digital and the pandemic. There has been a vast amount written about how digital became such a central part of our existence during the pandemic. How it maintained at least a visual connection with people, how it enabled many to find a new hobby. We saw how digital offered new opportunities for individual control and agency. We heard how digital could "level up" in ways national policy is struggling to. But in many cases, it also amplified already weak or negative aspects of our lives – exclusion, hidden harms. So far, the narrative is still that these harms were not the fault of digital, but of underlying issues. But we must continue to guard against making false associations between negativity and digital, or we risk losing the many positive gains.

There was much made about the way in which our work, personal and private lives became blurred. But there has been less said about the contrasts which were also exposed. The pandemic showed us just how different the reality of our work and public lives was from that in our personal one. And it reminded us how very different our expectations are in different contexts – we will tolerate poor user experience more in a healthcare setting than from our bank for example. In the same way, our overall expectations of the digital experience are different from in a physical world. And we are now seeing how that same digital force which blurred contexts is now being used to create, recreate, and manage our different contexts and realities. As the fast tracking of digital in our lives gathers even more pace, we must be aware of these increasing nuances and complexities.

And as we reflect further on those gaps and blurring of contexts and boundaries, on how different are the digital realities of children to adults, we might reflect too on how, in many cases, the lock-down experience was in fact less of a change for younger people than adults. This blurring was and is already managed in myriad different ways by young people making use of those multiple tools and those multiple realities. Digital creates another potential paradox between the blending of our different lives with different ways to keep them separate.

Digital and relationships. How can digital help us think more deeply about relationships? Not necessarily intimate relationships - though digital has undoubtedly changed the landscape there. Nor perhaps the way in which digital has enabled new opportunity to build new relationships across disparate communities of interest, of experience, of common identity. Digital has been transformational there.

Rather, digital helps us think again about the space between us – that relational space. In every household there has been a discussion about how much we missed “seeing” other people. How, come the end of lock-down, it was so good to be together again. In the workplace we are thinking more about the pros and cons of people being together. These discussions are about the core of our relationships – about being present. But digital has also caused us to think again about that very notion of presence – what does it mean to be in the same physical space as someone else? Is a virtual connection less or more important than a real one? Does a virtual presence hold the same value in our understanding of attachment to others, and hence to feeling safe and secure?

So, what next?

We must not turn away from digital or fail to see or hear because of it. We must take time to reflect on our own journey with digital, and how that has defined our own personal relationship with technology and digital. And we must use those insights to challenge our own digital anxieties.

Overall, we have a responsibility to balance the narrative and to broaden the focus. This might feel difficult when families are struggling with the realities of children with their heads in their phones and the anxiety of not knowing what they are doing online or with whom. But trying to stop or restrict the use of technology and digital access is increasingly being seen as an attack on rights. Certainly, it confounds our development, and most likely is futile.

We must try and understand the different perceptions of risk, particularly by age, and understand that for some children, on-line is their safest place, the place where they can experiment and regain control.

We must re-discover our curiosity and help children and young people to develop theirs. We must learn to question and find new ways to check on the veracity of the information we absorb on-line.

We must always ask about the digital aspect in any discussion. We must use digital as an analysis tool to understand better what is happening about us. We must use our curiosity to become positively sceptical, ask more, and not immediately mistrust or dismiss.

We must embrace the opportunities of digital to rethink how we think about communities and relationships – the opportunity to including others, the opportunity to moving beyond single time bound events, the opportunity to extend and blend time, place and people in infinite ways to better respond to individual need.

We must embrace the biggest challenges posed by digital - the moral and philosophical dilemmas posed by artificial intelligence for example. Many commentators argue that today's examples of AI are just hints of the world to come.

Overall, we must work out a new paradigm, a new way of making sense of what is a new and different world. Digital reality is not taking an off-line thing and putting in on-line. It is something new. We should be aware when we are tempted to diminish or excuse its presence – it doesn't have to be "additional to" or a "supplement" – this contributes to what is rapidly becoming a false binary of either/or. Digital is not a choice – it is an integral part of our current and future lives.

Who knows, by thinking digitally, we might even be able to hear and listen again.

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