Blaming smartphones, but missing the point

Interview by Sabine Gysi
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Psychologist Candice Odgers explains why the use of digital technologies by adolescents is not a black-and-white issue. It appears to amplify risk for some adolescents, while creating positive opportunities for many others.

Sabine Gysi: Increasingly worried voices in the media and public discourse are suggesting that the use of mobile devices and social media is leading to serious mental health problems for young people. Is there evidence that this is the case?

Candice Odgers: There is no good evidence yet to support this claim. Of course, there has always been a correlation between symptoms of depression and spending more time online and consuming media. But this does not mean that time spent online causes depression.

In fact, in the most recent study that caused all of the panic about social media and depression, digital media use accounted for only a small fraction (less than 1%) of the differences in depressive symptoms among girls, and no association was found among boys. To be precise, 99.64% of the differences in girls’ depression was due to something else, and the tiny correlation that was reported provides us with no way of discerning whether social media use leads to depression.

The most stunning thing about this reported correlation is how much panic it has created!

SG: What can the data tell us?

CO: There is shockingly little good evidence on this topic. Most studies to date have been correlational, showing that kids who are more depressed also report spending more time online. This is not surprising, and it tells us nothing about mobile device use as a cause of kids’ mental health problems. However, if you look closely, most research being used to make the case that time on smartphones and social media use is harmful for kids’ mental health includes only highly selected samples of adults!

A recent study surveying over 120,000 adolescents in the UK reported finding no associations between moderate levels of digital technology use and mental health. Experimental evidence is sorely lacking for adolescents. However, some experimental work has shown that virtual communication can actually help adolescents bounce back emotionally following social rejection.

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SG: What does the correlation between kids’ use of mobile devices and social media look like?

CO: One of the most consistent findings is that kids who report the most problems online – for example being bullied, having negative experiences on social media, being solicited – are also struggling in their offline lives. Offline risk predicts online risk. It is unlikely that the phone, or kids’ use of their phones, is causing many of these problems. Instead, the smartphone may be a powerful mirror, reflecting back problems and potentially magnifying existing problems in their offline lives.

SG: If smartphone and digital technology usage magnifies existing problems, it might also magnify advantages. Can we conclude that technology is good for kids, too?

CO: It is too simplistic to think of this as a “technology is good or bad for kids” story. But there is growing evidence to suggest that many kids are using new technologies in healthy and helpful ways. For example, a review of 36 studies published between 2002 and 2017 indicates that digital communication is being used to enhance teens’ relationships by enabling them to share intimacy, display affection, and arrange meetups and activities.

SG: Does this mean we should dismiss concerns about mobile phone use and increasing rates of depression and suicide among youth?

CO: Absolutely not. To be clear, increasing rates of depression and suicide among young people constitute one of the most pressing health crises we are currently facing. Mobile phones and social media are pervasive in the lives of young people, and we need to understand to what effect. But instead of focusing on just one aspect – digital media use – we need to fully explore other potential causes of increased depression and suicide risk – e.g., increases in income inequality, discrimination related to sex, race, or sexual orientation, aftershocks of the Great Recession, and opioid usage in the United States.

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It may be tempting to blame adolescents’ constant connectivity for unwanted changes in their behavior and health. It may be even more tempting for parents to pick up a phone and yell at researchers like me for sharing results they don’t like. But before dialing, they should consider whether the problem that concerns them really stems from adolescents’ smartphone use. As a psychologist and parent, I remain sympathetic to parents. I also sympathize with young people who deserve programs, policies, and interventions based on evidence, not fear – even in the digital age.

SG: Would it be helpful for kids’ development if parents had more options for controlling their media use?
Developing family media plans is a smart idea and one that is now supported by recent guidelines from the American Academy of Pediatrics. Mobile devices and media are here to stay, and parents need tools and support so that they can develop media-use plans that align with their goals for their children and the demands of their day-to-day lives. So yes, additional parental controls are part of a family media plan that will be useful for some.

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But once kids hit adolescence, parental controls will only go so far. Just as in the offline world, successful parental monitoring strategies rely on children disclosing to parents what they are doing, seeing, and worried about. Strong relationships, active mediation, and open communication are key to keeping our kids safe online; coercive and overly restrictive parenting strategies often fail and are unlikely to be successful in managing digital experiences. Perhaps not surprisingly, parents report more conflict with their children over rules regarding screen time than they do about what kids are doing online!

SG: In your recent article in Nature you talk about the dangers of the “new digital divide.” Can you explain what you mean by this?

CO: Traditionally, the “digital divide” has referred to differential access to new technologies. That gap still exists, but in many countries it is shrinking. What we’re seeing now may be the emergence of a new kind of digital divide, where differences in online experiences may be amplifying risks among already vulnerable adolescents.

For example:

- In the United States, low-income teens spend about three hours more each day engaging with screens than their peers from more affluent families, and their online activities are different.
- For example, higher-income kids are more likely to read news and search out information online than their more disadvantaged peers (see PISA study) and in our own research with over 2,100 young adolescents in North Carolina, we found that teens from low-income households are more likely to report that online activities lead to offline problems at school and conflicts with others (described in Nature).
- Children from low-income families are also spending more time unsupervised and unsupported in the online world. As one example, a 2014 study of 3,500 children aged 9 to 16 from seven European countries showed that parents in wealthier homes are more likely to “actively mediate” their child’s online activities.

In general, adolescents who encounter more adversity in their offline lives are most likely to report negative experiences online (e.g., cyberbullying) and to report that online experiences lead to serious offline problems (e.g., social media experiences leading to offline fights or trouble at school).
“Most adolescents seem to be benefiting from time online. But the different experiences and uses of digital technologies may be generating a new digital divide.”

Thus, the real risk is not that the use of digital technology is threatening the health and well-being of all adolescents. Most adolescents seem to be benefiting from time online. But the different experiences and uses of digital technologies may be generating a “new digital divide,” with new opportunities for the most advantaged youth but increased risk for the most vulnerable.

SG: How can we reduce this new digital divide? What recommendations can you give to scientists, parents, educators, technology companies, and policymakers?

CO: For parents and educators: Offline risk tells us a lot about online risk. The digital and social landscapes have changed remarkably for young people with the introduction of mobile devices and social media, but this has not created a new species of children. Many of the best evidence-based practices in parenting and learning do still work and the really good news is that new technologies may help us to facilitate these best practices. For parents looking for a balanced and evidence based set of guidelines, I would recommend: Media Moms and Digital Dads.

For scientists: Let’s get to work and produce the type of data that will inform evidence-based policy, practice, and interventions with kids. This is a big and complicated problem that will require team-based, interdisciplinary, and open science strategies. But we need to move quickly, as fear is winning in the absence of facts. A commitment to transparency, open sharing of data, and team science will be critical to discovery and honest translation of the science in this field.

For technology companies: Advances in machine learning, digital mental health, and AI are needed to make the online world a place of opportunity rather than posing added risk for our most vulnerable youth. What children see and experience in the online world is increasingly shaped by algorithms, and these need to be engineered in ways that ensure safety and digital inclusion. Many technology companies are publicly addressing issues related to the relationship between mental health and the use of their devices and apps.

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Facebook recently pledged $1 million in research funds to help us better understand the “relationship between media technologies, youth, and well-being.” The best use of these types of funds could be to develop tools, screening algorithms, and outreach strategies for the most vulnerable youth, those at risk of falling further behind as the digital divide widens.

For policymakers: Income inequality and the growing divide between the “rich and the rest” has been labeled the “defining challenge of our time.” For low-income children growing up in the digital age, risks will be amplified and opportunities lost if we do not work to close the “new digital divide”
and commit to combating online as well as offline inequalities. Here the focus needs to be not only on differential access, but also on differing experiences, and effects.

- **Parents**: Offline risk tells us a lot about online risk. Many familiar parenting strategies still apply in the digital world.
- **Scientists**: Let’s get to work and produce the type of data that will inform evidence-based policy, practice, and interventions with kids.
- **Tech companies**: One in three users worldwide are now children. We need innovation in the development of new technologies that is not only widely used by, but that also helps support, children and their families.
- **Policymakers and educators**: We have new opportunities, and obligations, to leverage new technologies in ways that close existing opportunity gaps and improve the lives of our most vulnerable children.

Candice Odgers is a Professor of Psychology and Social Behavior at the University of California, Irvine, and a Research Professor at Sanford School of Public Policy, Duke University.

Odgers studies how social inequalities and early adversity influence children’s future health, with an emphasis on how new technologies can be used to understand and improve the lives of adolescents. Odgers is a Jacobs Foundation Research Fellow 2016-2018 and a Fellow of the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research.

Read BOLD blog posts by Candice Odgers

*In her recent article in Nature, Candice Odgers pushes back against growing fears that smartphone and social media use are universally bad for young people. She details what the science currently says and outlines how researchers, parents, policy-makers, and technology companies should move forward to better support children in the digital age.*

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