

# **Conceptualizing and responding to online harms in youth digital culture**

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**University of Surrey, UK**

## **Workshop Report**

This half-day virtual workshop welcomed 97 attendees and 13 speakers from around the world, including postgraduate and early career researchers and mid-career and senior academics, as well as researchers, practitioners and policy-makers from private, third-sector and statutory bodies and organisations. The workshop consisted of keynotes, parallel sessions and a discussion session.

### **Workshop aims**

The workshop aimed to explore the latest evidence and best practice when it comes to understanding and responding to young people's contemporary digital cultures, in particular the risks and harms they encounter and experience online. The workshop was planned in response to the ongoing 'online harms' and 'online safety' public policy agenda, which continues to seek solutions to harmful online behaviours and protect the safety of internet users (including children and young people).

The online harms policy agenda as pertains children and young people has, for some time, been critiqued for its tendency to rest upon and advance simplistic assumptions and narratives about youth, risk and digital media. The workshop aimed to interject some nuance and heterogeneity into the narratives about young people's digital lives. The evidence is clear that young people tend to find regulations and interventions designed to educate them about and protect them from risk and harm disengaging and disconnected from their diverse lived experiences and the realities of their digital cultures. It is apparent that we are neither engaging with the complexities and social contingencies of the risks and harms they face, not attending sufficiently to the opportunities, pleasures and rewards that they perceive and experience with digital media.

To that end, the workshop aimed to bring together scholars and policy and practice stakeholders to discuss how we could and should respond to young people's digital lives in all their complexity. As a counter to the adult-centric assumptions and perspectives that dominate in public and political discourse and policy-making, all contributors presented papers that drew upon evidence and best practice based on research directly with young people. As well as keynotes and paper presentations, the event involved thought-provoking, productive and inspiring discussion and debate about the issues among the attendees.

### **Event themes**

#### ***Keynotes***

The keynotes explored institutional and regulatory responses to young people's experiences of online harms. Professor Andy Phippen from Bournemouth University discussed research

from the Headstart Kernow project and critiqued the unhelpful responses that vulnerable young people receive when disclosing online harms, which often focus on blaming, rather than helping and supporting, the individual. Professor Phippen's keynote underscored the importance of listening to young people and responding effectively when they need help. Professor Emma Bond's (University of Suffolk) keynote explored how universities are responding to online harassment, abuse and hate crime affecting students. Drawing on evidence from the Digital Civility project at the University of Suffolk and data from 135 universities across the UK, Professor Bond outlined the uncertainties and lack of action in universities in response to online harms. She discussed the innovative approach developed in collaboration with students to challenge the culture around online safeguarding and the measures implemented to identify and respond to the harms that students face.

Key themes emerging from the keynotes include:

- How can we develop responses to online harms to be based on young people's accounts of their lived experiences rather than the assumptions and interests of adult stakeholders? What is the scope for and value of collaborative and participatory research, policy and practice agendas?
- How can we challenge a fatalistic and decontextualized approach to online harms? It is insufficient just to emphasize the law and personal responsibility. Young people's experiences of harm occur within a socio-cultural context that adults themselves can be complicit in and that can be exacerbated by institutional and regulatory responses.
- How can we support, rather than blame and revictimize, young people who report harm and ask for help?
- How can we tease apart, as well as identify the intersections between, the 'digital' and the 'social'? A lot of the risks and harms that play out online reflect and reinforce wider vulnerabilities and inequalities, and are far from 'new issues', but this often goes unrecognized in 'adultist' and 'alarmist' narratives.
- What training, guidance and support do practitioners and stakeholders need to re-conceptualize and respond differently and more effectively to young people's digital lives and experiences of harm online?

### ***Parallel sessions***

The parallel sessions explored a range of topics, including:

- Young people's experiences of abusive online sexual behaviours;
- Young people's accounts of navigating risk and harm online;
- Young people's accounts of 'life online'; and,

- Practice models and processes for ‘regulating youth online’.

While diverse in nature, the various paper presentations spoke to the complexities of life online for young people, who are navigating and negotiating the intersecting risks, rewards, opportunities and harms afforded in contemporary digital life. What was striking was the unequal nature of this terrain for differently situated young people, in which decontextualized notions of risk and harm fail to account for the diversity of young people’s lived experiences. As with the keynotes, the papers emphasized the need to contextualize young people’s experiences of life online and to address the root causes of harmful online behaviours, rather than just monitoring, controlling, blaming and/or punishing young people. The papers on regulating youth online particularly foregrounded the problematic ramifications of the over-regulation of young people’s digital lives. Across the papers was an emphasis on responding robustly to risk and harm and taking seriously young people’s accounts of their experiences, but doing so in a way that attends to and addresses the complex causes and contexts at play.

### ***Discussion session***

We were delighted to offer all attendees and speakers the opportunity for free-form discussion about the themes emerging from the keynotes and parallel sessions. This discussion was constructive and balanced, and focused particularly on how to advance the research, policy and practice agenda pertaining to online harms and young people’s digital lives. All were in agreement that it is imperative that the youth voice – with all the diversity and social and cultural contingencies thus entailed – is front and center to the agenda. In particular, we discussed the need for robust and effective preventative action, focused especially on education in schools. Attendees spoke about how educational efforts around the world can be hamstrung by institutional imperatives, adult-centric assumptions and anxieties about young people, and a failure to go beyond the provision of (so-called) ‘facts’ and warnings about risk and danger online. There was a call for action for genuine reform of how we engage with and educate young people about the issues, alongside an acknowledgment that it cannot all rest on schools. It is a society-wide effort; some attendees, for example, raised the issue of sensationalized media reporting of Relationships and Sex Education in schools which can inhibit schools, as well as the challenges schools have in managing the demands and interests of different stakeholders (pupils, parents, local and national government, and so on). In that sense, attendees were keen to see a collaborative and constructive approach between research, policy and practice stakeholders, in which all can work together to devise and implement approaches that are evidence-based and youth-centered.

### **Next steps – Outcomes**

Immediately following the event, a mailing list of attendees and presenters was compiled. The aim is to establish a network of research, policy and practice stakeholders who can share updates and identify opportunities for collaboration in terms of publications, research projects and knowledge exchange between research, practice and policy. Already there are

plans to produce outputs that will be shared around these stakeholders' networks. It is also intended that members of the network will coordinate responses to consultations and other government announcements.

The aim is also to publish contributions from the workshops as a special issue. *Children and Society* has been identified as a potential home for the special issue and has been approached with a proposal.

### **Feedback**

The workshop was valued by speakers and attendees and seems to have represented an opportunity for collaborative and constructive discussion. Here's some feedback:

*Thank you for putting together such a fantastic event – I know how hard these things can be to organize! It is so important that young people's voices are heard on all this and I am already thinking differently after today!*

*It's tiring how repetitive this area has become... your event was a breath of fresh air!!*

*Massive thank you for pulling together the day – fantastic opportunity to connect with people who are interested in taking a youth-centered approach to online harms.*

*Thank you for your generosity in creating this community*

*Thank you for organizing and hosting such an interesting event*

*You did an amazing job at organizing this event and I can't stop telling everyone all about it!*

*Thank you for hosting such an informative and engaging event – I really learnt a lot!*

### **Acknowledgments**

I'd like to thank the Institute of Advanced Studies at the University of Surrey for supporting this event through their workshop programme. I'd also like to thank the Centre for Criminology and the Digital Societies research groups in the Department of Sociology at the University of Surrey for agreeing to sponsor and promote the event.

Thanks also goes to the excellent keynote and panel speakers who prepared and delivered such thought-provoking papers, as well as the attendees who contributed to making the event a success through their engaged and active participation throughout.