Digital by default: the new normal of family life under COVID-19
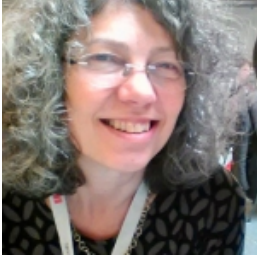
Sonia Livingstone discusses the potential consequences of families' reliance on technology during the COVID-19 crisis. She concludes that life under lockdown has the potential to either hasten a digital future in which our lives are tracked and monetised in unprecedented ways, or make the public more aware of such risks and thus resistant to all things digital.

Just a few weeks ago, children went to school, parents worried about their screen time at home, and the digital future was the stuff of science fiction. Under COVID-19, school has gone online, worries about screen time have gone through the roof, and life is fast becoming digital by default. Technology is the taken-for-granted means of playing, seeing family, doing schoolwork, hanging out with friends. Teachers, babysitters, museums, youth clubs, social workers – the whole infrastructure of childhood has moved online. So have the threats to childhood – bullies, scammers, groomers, fake news manufacturers and manipulators of all kinds.

No wonder that anxieties about the future are rising. As I learned when researching my forthcoming book with Alicia Blum-Ross, *Parenting for a Digital Future*, parents make sense of parenting by looking back to their own childhood and forward to their children's adulthood. In that intergenerational space of recollection and imagination, parents frame their hopes and fears for their children, and figure out the steps they can and should take, given their particular circumstances.

But under Covid-19, it's not just our childhood that feels far away, but our lives just a few months back. Our future just a few months hence is equally unclear – "when this is all over" is the new mantra, but we don't know how to plan for it, and uncertainty is stressful.

What's striking when people compare their own childhoods to those of today's children – and never more so than now – is that digital technologies seem to crystallise the difference. Compared with earlier times, digital devices absorb children's attention, dangle from their ears and accompany them everywhere. They clutter our homes, drain our finances, and seem to have become the focus of pleasures and worries, the means of delivering rewards and punishments, and the occasion for both family conflicts and shared togetherness. As we argue in our book, the very visibility of these technologies, along with a lively public and media debate over how parents are supposedly mis/managing them, gets everyone talking about them, keeping them top of mind.

But these highly visible digital innovations risk obscuring many other important influences on family life. Recent generations have seen many transformations – in demography, stratification, job security, welfare provision, family structure, migration, identity politics, and more. It is these that predominantly shape parental expectations and fuel their anxieties. It is these that imbue everyday technological decisions and conflicts with such emotional intensity. And it is these, far more than their screen time or social media habits, that account for the problems children and young people experience. It is, therefore, these major societal transformations that have resulted in families being so unequally positioned when faced with the challenge of being locked down, including as regards their capacity to embrace a digital-by-default life.

Perhaps because society has preferred to treat parents as a homogenous group, criticising their digital parenting while averting its gaze from the fundamentally unequal difficulties that beset them, that recent headlines have betrayed some surprise in reporting, among other Covid-19 news, the discovery that not all families can afford the technology or connectivity to support home-schooling, or that at-risk children are vulnerable to intensifying levels of offline and online abuse, or that children with special educational needs or other needs cannot be reached online by the systems of care that previously supported them offline.

While I have argued that the digital is sometimes too salient, distracting us from the fundamental social and political challenges that families face, that is not to say that the digital is irrelevant. Covid-19 has triggered a step-change in our digital lives, as in our health, economy and world politics. To support parents, and reduce their anxieties, we are witnessing an explosion of online resources for parents promising to optimise children's online opportunities and help them combat the risks. For the most part this is exciting and welcome, though undoubtedly many organisations have an eye to their bottom line too. But much of this may not be as helpful as hoped.

As we heard in our fieldwork, parents can feel oppressed by generalised injunctions and exhortations about what they should do, especially when these are accompanied by tacit judgments about good and bad parenting – and good and bad parents. Parents are more often spoken for than heard – recipients of advice on all sides but too rarely invited to discuss their needs or co-produce resources. As a result, much of this online provision is created for "everychild" (typically an able-bodied middle-class child living in a nuclear family home with technologically-competent parents and fast broadband). Meanwhile, real parents are likely finding it difficult to locate, evaluate and select resources and guidance appropriate for their child and their family's circumstances.

On the one hand, the new normal of digital family life is unfolding organically, as people adapt to unprecedented circumstances. A key message from our research is that the consequences will be diverse, as parents variously embrace, resist or find ways to balance the digital and non-digital, as well as the different dimensions of the digital. Geeky families may relish the chance to share their passion for technology and develop new expertise. Others will be resisting the onslaught of digital-by-default, whether because of the dystopian associations of a digital future, or because they are determined to hold onto other ways of living. Most will seek some kind of balance, though balancing, we learned from our research, can be as effortful as staying upright on a rolling log, and require a constant – and exhausting – monitoring of events and outcomes.

On the other hand, digital-by-default has long been government policy: a gradual but determined shift away from (expensive) in-person state provision towards all things digital. Among many other consequences of Covid-19, we are living through an extraordinary experiment in relying on our national digital infrastructure. And it is problematic in many ways. A long-standing concern has centred on the ways in which socio-economic inequalities mean that not all benefit fairly, with the resulting digital inequalities fuelling further socio-economic inequalities in a vicious cycle.

A more recent concern centres on datafication and digital surveillance, whether by the government or businesses or both, as ever more of our private lives move online, mediated by proprietary platforms whose activities are far from transparent and whose business interests may be quite different from the interests of children.

"When this is all over," will we find that families' well-meaning efforts to find ways for children to play, see family, do schoolwork and hang out with friends online under lockdown have hastened a digital future in which our lives are tracked and monetised in ways that few fully understand? Or will we find the public more resistant to all things digital, more aware of the value of alternative ways of living, more determined to find their own balance and have their voices heard?

Notes

This post gives the views of the authors and does not represent the position of the LSE Parenting for a Digital Future blog, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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