

---

# Reflecting on Youth Mental Health and Tech Regulation in Anticipation of the Metaverse



---

**Prof Sonia Livingstone**, Professor of Social Psychology, LSE

---

Whistle-blower Frances Haugen's revelation that Facebook (as was) had held back research showing that the company was aware that using Instagram can damage girls' mental health triggered a widespread debate over tech platforms' responsibility, especially for vulnerable children. The research turned out not to be so robust, and the findings were hardly surprising to the research community, given the established debate over the (still-contested) link between social media and youth wellbeing. In this multi-stakeholder and highly contested domain, social scientists have sought ways to counter moral and media panics, transcend polarised debates and gather robust evidence that can guide the way forward.

But the challenge remains as to how we can recognise and address the problem of mental health among youth in a digital age. Two questions are particularly difficult to answer:

1. How shall we apportion responsibility for digitally-mediated risks of harm between platforms, government, public services and the public?
2. How should we balance the needs of 'vulnerable' minorities against the freedoms of the majority of internet users?

## Framing the problem

On the question of responsibility, I suggest that even in these days of social media, much policy and public debate tacitly assumes a Web 1.0 world in which communication operates on a pull, not push, basis – a world where users make choices, wise or not, about sites to visit, images to look at, communities to join. The talk is often still of '*the* online domain' rather than the *multiple* and highly personalised online worlds that diverse groups experience, being differently targeted (arguably discriminated against) by platforms using a host of commercially-driven push and nudge strategies based on sorting people's feeds, pathways or bubbles.

This makes it easier to fall into the trap of victim-blaming talk or, more subtly, talk that puts the responsibility on young internet users and demands their constant resilience.

On weighing the status of minority audiences, and setting aside the fact that if you add them up,

they constitute a majority, it remains tempting for policymakers to assume 'average' or 'typical' users. Even from researchers, having read (and contributed to some of) the evidence reviews showing the uncertain relation between youth mental health and digital engagement, I am becoming uneasy at the 'on the one hand, on the other hand' conclusions that can seem to reproduce attention to the 'average user' rather than those – however few – who are distinctively at risk online.

So, I welcome the emerging critique of platform policies and design that seeks to make visible the diversity of actual users living contextually specific lives. This critique builds on a long tradition of work on imagined versus empirical audiences and textually inscribed or real-life readers, as well on the increasing calls for by-design solutions – safety-by-design, privacy-by-design, security-by-design and – important in my work – child-rights-by-design.

Such moves are intended to counter the ways in which platforms can be seen as deliberately risky-by-design, driven by exploitative business models, designed to evade regulation, realised through opaque affordances, with minimal provision for rights or remedy. Especially highlighting the operation of algorithms, we now hear everywhere the metaphor of falling 'down the rabbit hole', though Instagram or TikTok or the many others, are hardly delivering 'a wonderland' for *some* young people.

### Listening to children's lived experiences

It seems increasingly urgent to counter the 'outsider voices' currently dominating the debate (whether government, policymakers, industry,

worried parents or panicky media) with 'insider insights' (especially children and young people's voices, representing the lived experiences of diverse cultures both on and offline).

In recent work for the EU-funded [ySKILLS](#) project, my colleagues and I have been interviewing adolescents with mental health problems about their lived experiences and digital engagement:

- A 16 year old, in therapy for past experiences of sexual abuse, tells us of someone "doing a TikTok live and he had killed himself in TikTok ... and that ended up on people's pages and people were reposting it."



Photo: by bruce mars on Unsplash

- A 17 year old with a bipolar diagnosis: “when I am in a manic, I’m pretty sure I just send random shit to people.”
- A 17 year old with experience of an eating disorder and domestic abuse told us how, “If you’re on TikTok, what you mostly do is you send them a link of a Twitter one... And then if you go onto the Twitter link, then if Twitter takes down the video, they’ll just send you a link of this app called Dropbox, which downloads any illegal video. And you can either just download it or they’ll DM it and you can access it.”
- A 14 year old with a problematic relation with food: “in lockdown, people were doing... ‘what I eat in a day’. I think the algorithm or something changed for me. My whole feed was just full of ‘what I eat in a day’... I’m like 12, thinking about it. I eat three meals, and then these people are having a strawberry for brunch, and that was a big thing.”
- A suicidal 18 year old: “it’s naked children on a social media. They don’t have the choice. People are getting hold of people’s photos... Someone’s gone out their way, without their permission, to post photos. It destroys people’s lives. Honestly, it’s vile.”

To many adults, it may seem as if “she/ he’s always staring at the phone.” But what’s happening on that phone can be dramatic to the young person and invisible to observers. Yet much of it is visible to the platforms, so what should they be doing differently?

## Ways of thinking, ways ahead

In the child rights space, we’re seeing growing recognition of the importance of respecting a child’s best interests. This means attending holistically to the specific balance of factors that

shapes their world. But can we figure out how the best interests of the child can be respected in digital environments, when platforms say they don’t even know who is a child online, let alone their mental health status or offline risk or support structures? Can we design with children’s best interests in mind?

While I was thinking about all of this, over the past year or so, a new debate suddenly hit the headlines: the Metaverse! As major companies get excited about the Metaverse – as if *Second Life*, *Habbo Hotel*, *Club Penguin* never happened, and never went wrong for kids – again, thorny questions arise about how the affordances of the digital amplify, exacerbate, perpetuate and intensify some harms in ways that merit attention and intervention. And about how to protect the needs and human rights of vulnerable users.

It seems urgent that we find ways to recognise vulnerability, even as we fully acknowledge that children are agents, actors, citizens, not just victims in need of protection. After all, online and offline, they are not living in circumstances of their own making, some have had a lot to contend with, and the power of platforms dwarfs the agency of even privileged and resilient groups.

I also find it helpful to continue to refer to online and offline, even as I fully acknowledge that the digital is fast becoming infrastructural in society, and that young people move seamlessly across multiple environments without marking the difference. This is because I don’t think we’ve got to the bottom of how there are problematic disjunctures in visibility, power and design across those environments. Or of how, although mental health difficulties result from many circumstances unrelated to

technology, the established supports in place in our homes, schools, neighbourhoods and public services are being disintermediated and disrupted by digital innovations.

We must also keep in mind that, in asking how to mitigate the risk of harm, we do not forget that digital innovation offers young people many opportunities, including access to vital sources of help, that all risk does not result in harm, and that some exposure to risk is needed to build resilience.

In these short reflections, I can only pose, not answer, the big questions with which I began.

Recognising that multiple stakeholders must share the responsibility in multiple ways, it remains difficult to figure out what can be done about the digital platforms – without returning to the old

binary of child protection versus adult freedom of expression (as if children do not also need and have the right to freedom of expression, and as if many adults are not also calling for greater protection online). And without seeming to promote tech solutionism or being panned as techno-determinists. One way forward is to take a child rights-approach, working with UN human and child rights organisations, since this approach prioritises human rights due diligence for business in ways that are accountable to governments.

It's beginning to seem urgent that we collate our evidence, critical arguments and calls for action in anticipation of the Metaverse.

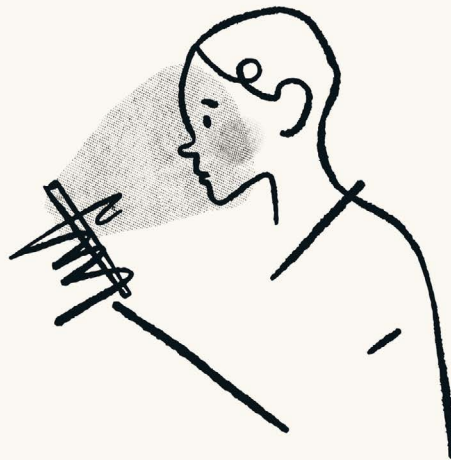


Photo: by visuals on Unsplash