DISCUSSION

REFLECTIONS ON THE PEEL ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION 2017
HOSTED BY BCS

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David Evans (BCS)

REFLECTIONS ON THE PEEL DISCUSSION

This document sets out some immediate reflections on the workshop held at the PEEL exhibition on the 15th September 2017 at The Hospital Club, London, and then a full record of the discussions that took place.

INTRODUCTION

Digital technologies can deliver so much benefit for society. Across so many aspects of life, technology is disrupting the status quo, changing the fabric of our commercial, social and citizen relationships. This means a very different future for today's children than for previous generations. Yet there is something eternal and recognisable in the challenges children face. Those of us who come at these issues from a technology background must have humility and patience, listening to those who understand different aspects of how children grow and thrive, and being ready to see our responsibilities in solutions. As with so many other human challenges, the best way of facing them is together.

It was with a spirit of humility that we approached this topic at our workshop, surrounded by images and writings expressing a truthful and positive view of childhood and growing up. We are all finding our way through a changing environment, and we are incredibly grateful to the participants who shared their wisdom and perspectives in search of common ground.

In that same spirit, this next section of the document sets out some of the early reflections from that session, seeking further input and challenge from the expert community that exists around a shared desire — for all children to thrive and prosper in the digital age.

THE RIGHTS OF CHILDREN

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is a powerful agreement signed up to by 194 countries. Our discussion suggested that the principles stand the test of the digital age. Some of the language may need to be recast in the light of digital technologies, and in particular, with the longevity and persistence of digital content. However, for the most part the view seemed to be that the rights needed to be re-asserted in the digital context.

Children do not see an online/offline world, only the world – and in that world, governments have an obligation to meet children's basic needs, and to help them reach their full potential. The Internet is not an adults-only space; children are and will be present. Therefore, we need to adopt similar measures as in the offline world. This means education and parental responsibility, but it also means providing help to children when they get into trouble, and it means that we all take responsibility for designing a safe environment for children.

The difficulties of adapting the digital environment for children are just as challenging — and potentially costly — as in the physical environment, but before becoming lost in the art of the possible we need to agree and assert the human necessity.

PROPOSED COMMUNITY GOAL

To assert that the UNCRC applies to the digital environment, and develop a model interpretation of its application in online services.

CHILD-SAFE BY DESIGN

Building on those rights, it is clear that the area of concern is not so much the services that are designed specifically for children, but the overall digital environment of services that were not designed with children in mind.

Research shows[1] that the most popular platforms amongst children tend not to be services designed primarily for children. As the online environment has matured and children have become increasingly present, these services have had to retrofit controls — sometimes in conflict with their direct commercial interests. For those that have gone 'above and beyond', a lack of credit for so doing makes future investment more difficult.

[1] https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/media-literacy-research/childrens/childrens-media-lives

The discussion suggested that meaningful and implementable design standards would be incredibly welcome, but that starting points would be challenging. Digital start-ups in particular would be very hard to influence. However, voluntary frameworks with wide support could influence future platform and tool-kit development. In the long term that might provide the basis for regulation.

PROPOSED COMMUNITY GOAL

To explore the concept of a design framework, for designing with children in mind.

EDUCATION FOR A DIGITAL AGE

It is challenging to know what to teach young people when we ourselves are struggling to come to terms with the environment we find ourselves in — but this is not a new challenge. Critical thinking and self-esteem are just as applicable to the world today as they have been throughout human civilisation. In the digital age they may be a survival necessity. There are concepts — such as algorithms — that if understood can provide dramatic insight into how the online world is working.

Our discussion suggested that there are specific knowledge and skills that benefit young people in this regard, some of which are already well understood. However there is a broader question about the fundamental approach to education, incorporating ideas not just about short term safety but a view of the skill-set young people will need; equipping them for the digital world is simply equipping them for the world. Nurturing respect for oneself and for one another is the core premise. This is a daunting prospect.

PROPOSED COMMUNITY GOAL

To establish a broad and timeless basis of future educational need arising from the digital environment.

CONCLUSION

The workshop provided space for reflection and discussion of this topic amongst such a diverse group. The result was an incredibly rich and contextualised dialogue, with some broad and ambitious community goals. If these are to be pursued, it will require further reflection and steering from experts such as those present.

All the organisations present — including BCS — will need to reflect on their own roles in delivering these goals, and our respective appetites and resources. However, there is a clear need for a wider shared perspective and a longer range of planning than any individual or organisation is able to deliver on their own. We will continue to listen to each other, continue to refine our strategy and our goals, and look for opportunities to work together to make real, long term, and meaningful progress — to ensure that future generations are equipped to thrive, to have their needs met and to reach their full potential.

What follows is a record of the workshop on the 15th September 2017.

THE KIDS ARE ALRIGHT (AREN'T THEY?)

BRIAN RUNCIMAN (MBCS)

The list of potential dangers for our children as they navigate the complexities of digital life, and its crossover and connections with 'real' life, are long. How can we help them? How can we engage them in the conversation? BCS held a roundtable to discuss this as part of the launch of Project PEEL which is designed to give young people a voice on self-identity...
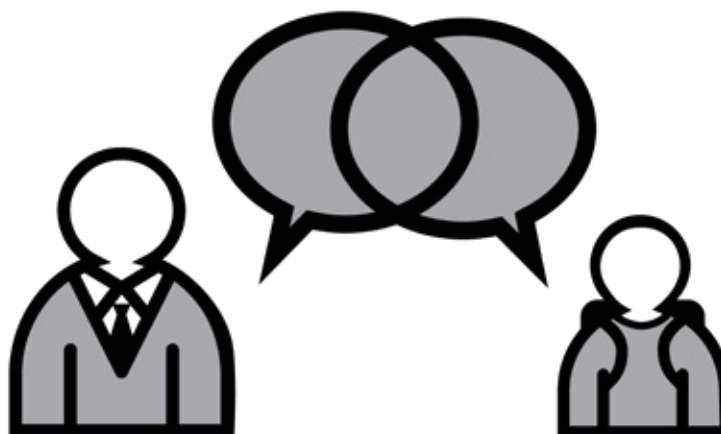
While adults struggle to keep up with the breakneck pace of change in the digital world, the simplistic view is that children can cope better because they have grown up with technology, and know how to use the devices. A derivative of the 80's stand-up comedy troupe of adults needing to get their child to program the video for them.

However, technical knowledge is not a substitute for adult experience. Issues of self-esteem and growing up are not changed by knowledge of capacitive screen operation. In the PEEL film used to introduce the event, a young person neatly drew attention to the complexity of issues around 'self' with a simple declaration on social media: 'there is always someone prettier than you, better than you, smarter than you.'

BCS, as it makes IT good for society, asks: what does the world we want to live in look like? In this context, the vital question is: what do our children need from the digital world? We want our children to be creative, capable, safe and empowered in the digital world. The starting point is the rights our children should expect.

Matthew Taylor, Chief Executive of the Royal Society for the Arts, hosted the event. With tongue in cheek, but also in the interests of engendering as broad a discussion as possible, he commented in his introduction, that while these conversations are often controlled by 'do-gooders' we need ideas from all corners. He played devil's advocate with these thoughts: 'there isn't really a problem, we just identify mental health problems better now and, in fact, everyone is more inclusive these days.' And on solutions: 'things will solve themselves anyway, because if things don't work they will fail eventually.' These are not necessarily majority views, he said, but need to be in the conversation.

From the initial discussions, the participants were asked to come up with three broad types of idea: principles that underpin the subject; policies that we could focus on; and innovations that could help.

DISCUSSION 1:

# HOW DO WE UPDATE AND MAKE REAL THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD IN THE DIGITAL AGE?

"MANY OF THESE ISSUES ARE SOCIETAL PROBLEMS, NOT PURELY DIGITAL ONES."

There are rights in existence, namely the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The UNCRC was mentioned as a good vehicle to use for updating rights because, as a widely-adopted convention, amendments would have a similarly wide impact.

In fact, are the UN children's rights already correct in principle, but just need a little tweaking or re-framing for digital age? Do digital rights crossover with existing child's rights?

Previously the child was largely a passive recipient of rights, but in the digital world they need to take a more active role. And as children are full participants in the digital environment, the whole of society needs to be involved in their safe participation. Schools and parents took the lion's share of responsibility in the past because they had most control of what children's lives touched upon. Now children's lives have a wider range of touch-points, digitally enabled, beyond the confines of the home and school.

The view of the participants was that digital and 'real' rights should be indivisible, so we need to take the existing rights and rigorously apply them in the online world. But some specific issues, for example the right to remove content, are not in the UNCRC. It could be that digital rights become a subset of the main UNCRC - perhaps in the procedures that support the existing rights; how they are implemented in the digital context and who is responsible for doing that.
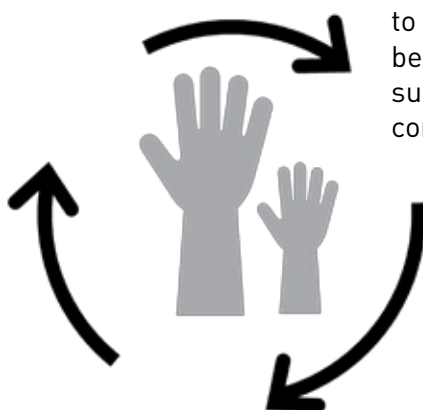
ANALOGISING

In these discussions a number of useful analogies came out. For example, we do not let our children play on building sites — but the sites still need to be secured. So, for those who run websites that are inappropriate but still accessible to children — what are the analogous responsibilities?

Is the principle that children have the right to find environments safe for them?

Another good analogy is that of brand safety. Advertisers demand that their ads not appear next to inappropriate content, such as extremist content but, strangely, children's behaviour online is not protected in the same way.

In the physical world, we try to limit risk. Playgrounds, for example, evolved from concrete-based iron equipment through to better designed areas, complete with soft areas. This developed through council responsibility, the involvement of equipment manufacturers, parental concern and so on coming together to get better solutions. There are still risks in playgrounds, but they are mitigated at the design stage and, of course, still demand parental oversight.

Along similar lines, swimming pools play a part in education: schools facilitate and promote education and participation, but the pool provider meets safety standards, and parents facilitate education and participation and fulfil positive role models. The risks associated with swimming are known and understood — and we can draw lessons in the digital environment.

And what about the issue of the right to (own) one's identity? Identity can develop and change as we grow, too. Which shows the importance of the right to remove information, content, or images, and the vital role of age verification.

Producing policies in these areas was agreed to be notoriously difficult. Research to evidence issues is a key factor in raising awareness that change is needed, with news stories cited as a good way to back this up. Any policies which are drafted need to be user-centred, and created in constant dialogue with young people. Often older people assume things on behalf of young people, but we need to consult more with them to find out the reality of different situations.

The larger context is that many of these issues are societal problems, not purely digital ones. Describing them purely as digital issues has an isolating effect, whereas the conversation should be broader.

So, what came up...?

1 Principles
2 Policy
3 Innovation

PRINCIPLES

How we socialise the use of digital is not a digital problem, it's societal.

Young people's voices need to be heard.

We want children to flourish, taking into account that children at different ages and experience levels have different issues and needs.

Social media should make you happy, healthy and safe.

We should all have the same digital rights as we enjoy in the physical world.

Whatever is created needs to be human-centred.

There should be a right to be forgotten.

Children must come before profit.

We need to enable children to have control and be safe digitally — to have agency.

Young people should be able to shape their education rather than be passive recipients of it.

Training should be positive and used for advantage, not just about risks and 'what not to do'.

Young people need to understand that they own their own data and that they can withdraw their consent if they don't like what's being done with it.

Children need to understand the issues raised when someone else has their data, and what it can be used for.

POLICY

Education — schools should invest in projects to address issues, perhaps through a personal development curriculum.

Parents need education on the digital environment as it pertains to children, ideally commencing pre-natal.

We need better, memorable public education messages. Like the five-a-day healthy eating message, or a version of the well-known 'stranger danger' campaign for the digital space.

A debate is needed about what young people are doing versus how much time they spend doing it, for example: smoking is never good thing, and that's a joined-up message in public life. However, sex education is designed to support young people in having agency.

The PHSE curriculum should be more about lived experience to help with thinking and decision making — providing a space for children to be able to think about resilience.

The role of social media companies needs examining. They started as enablers of content and, indeed, profit from it, so do they have a role in regulating its use?

INNOVATION

Every choice needs to be an informed one, and delivered at the decision making point: what about emojis that convey terms and conditions?

Perhaps a kite-mark, analogous to the https alert, could be developed to mark worthwhile content — maybe via a w3c standard?

We need a shift in the language we use. We're currently using concepts/ language that suits the 'real life' world, for example, 'stranger danger' is widely taught and effective, but the concepts don't translate neatly to the online world.

Large corporates already know a lot about us — can we use this insight to enhance children's digital lives? We need to encourage self-organising communities (e.g. young mums on mumsnet, local support groups, advice). This can give people a richer knowledge of their neighbourhood, enlivening places and communities and providing support networks.

We need better and advanced age verification — we wouldn't expect to turn on the TV in the middle of the day and see pornography, so how is that okay online?

Support for some of these changes will require algorithm adjustment.

To address issues around the length of time children spend in the digital world, what about an 'app forest' that grows the more time a child is not on a screen (e.g. exam times). This could produce groups supporting each other to not be going online, offering rewards for this behaviour. There is an app called Moment which will show you how much time you spend on your phone.

We need to help young people to be more self-reflective, critical thinkers with resilience through a re-activation of human principles. Some technologies already offer local support services to someone if they search for terms like 'suicide' and 'self-harm' or allow users to block trigger words. This data could be used to monitor someone for support and early intervention (taking into account the issue of data protection, of course).

DISCUSSION 2:

ARE WE MAKING SURE THAT CHILD-SAFE DESIGN IS HAPPENING?

WHAT ARE THE PRINCIPLES THAT SHOULD INFORM IT?

"LONG BEFORE THE DIGITAL WORLD BECKONED, CHILDREN WERE RISK-TAKERS."

Long before the digital world beckoned, children were risk-takers. And even if we de-risk a particular set of websites, children will try to find a way to use others. Children could be taught what is healthy and then reminded from time to time. An example approach is the fitbit, which encourages people to exercise and gives them periodic prompts.

Because of the vast number of 'bedroom start-ups' and different countries producing online content, imposing safety standards at the design stage seems to be a logistical impossibility. Therefore, we need to impose safety at the point of use. The problem here is two-fold: first, who is the regulating authority, designating what standards exist and which websites are adhering to them and, second, how could that regulating practically be carried out with the vast amount of online content being created?

SOME IDEAS

A rating system to help parents and young people navigate the choice of products and services, for example like the red/amber/green rating on food for salt, sugar and fat. Rating could cover three simple categories: age monitoring, timing monitoring (with 'nudges' to remind the user to take time out), and content control. These ratings could be crowd sourced.

How about a version of BBFC ratings?

Ratings systems could be combined in some way with a device which knows its users behaviour better.

What about 'junior versions' — is there an argument for creating a cornered off 'Safe Facebook', or should we, as a matter of course, make all of Facebook child-safe?

Digitally-driven tool-kits could be created so that families can choose age appropriate content together.

Design standards should be backed by legislation.

How about appealing to the principle of ethical investment. The government could use monetary incentives to drive standards and make digital ethical investment more appealing.

Should this discussion be more about education than restrictions? We could show the effects of poor online hygiene with a video when you first go into a social media site. It could show a young person posting something online and how it affects other people — so that it becomes clear that what you say online impacts on others.

Models of good behaviour — by talking to young people in a language that's theirs.

Blacklisting can be an important tool at certain ages.

What if terms and conditions were displayed through a video?

Ethical and child-centred design should be taught in universities as part of computer science degrees.

What about a software designer accreditation in child-safe design?

DISCUSSION 3:

WHAT SHOULD WE BE TEACHING OUR CHILDREN TO HELP THEM THRIVE IN THE DIGITAL WORLD?

"A LOT OF THE DESIGN WORK
IN THE DIGITAL WORLD HAS
ALREADY BE DONE."

Niel McLean, who is heavily involved in Computing at Schools, introduced this discussion. He noted an example from another industry that can be applied: car safety campaigner Ralph Nader spotted in the 1960s that it was the design of cars that was killing people – it wasn't a fault with the education of the driver.

Unfortunately, a lot of the design work in the digital world, as with cars, has already been done. What can we do? Niel commented that knowledge comes first, with understanding next, but what we often need to understand are the motivations and the incentives that underpin behaviour.

A good goal would be to create the 'conscious consumer' who is aware of being manipulated by 'nudges' or the feeds that they're shown, without scaring them. There is something to be said for ensuring young people feel okay about making 'mistakes' and to live with the consequences - adults do it all the time — but they have to have relevant knowledge of those consequences.

In this section, the participants were asked to suggest three things for the digital sphere: one key thing young people should know; one key competency they need; and a motivator promoting that behaviour.

These are the results:

THINGS YOUNG PEOPLE SHOULD KNOW
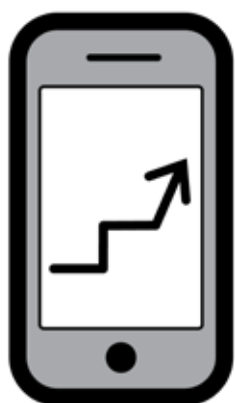
Know what kind of digital space you are in.

Realise that every click has an impact.

Online use is progressive.

Online is not a static environment, not bad, not good (it's like a bus that can take you to good or bad places.)

Be active digital participants not just consumers.

Get a greater understanding of algorithms, how it narrows choices affects engagement — but without driving fear.

Be able to find information on yourself and know how it is generated. Learn how to find reliable information.

ONE PIECE OF COMPETENCY

Decide how to behave in this space.

Know how to be responsible and the implications of actions.

Practice self-regulation.

Recognise how feelings are affected by online behaviour.

Learn to be creative online.

Bring individuality to your online persona.

Critical thinking. Know, for example, the library index metaphor;
How do I find information? How do search algorithms work, and what
is their bias? Where do I find online help? Case studies of hoaxes and
conspiracy theories.

MOTIVATION

In order to be who you want to be.

To have a holistic view of being a good citizen (underpinned by a 'digital
baccalaureate'?)

Role models, more self-identity material.

The ability to shape your own experience.

To create value in oneself, validating the individual beyond the pursuit
of 'likes.'

Seeing why data matters when it's gathered online — its impact
on your life.

To get self-esteem and related life-skills.

WHAT NEXT?
WHERE NOW?

This is the start of a conversation — BCS wants to encourage it, and it needs to include policy makers, parents, politicians, digital providers, philosophers, thinkers… children!

To get involved follow BCS as it pursues its 'Making IT Good For Society' agenda, visit **www.bcs.org/category/18771**

FURTHER READING

The PEEL Project

https://www.projectpeel.org

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

https://www.unicef.org.uk/what-we-do/un-convention-child-rights/

The 'edited' Convention, January 2017, part of the Growing Up Digital report from the Digital Taskforce led by the Children's Commissioner for England

https://www.childinthecity.org/2017/01/31/an-updated-uncrc-for-the-digital-age/

5Rights

http://5rightsframework.com/

Growing up With The Internet (House of Lords Select Committee on Communications) Report, March 2017

https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201617/ldselect/ldcomuni/130/13002.htm

Mike Ribble, nine elements of digital citizenship

http://www.digitalcitizenship.net/Nine_Elements.html

The Childnet Digital Leaders Programme

http://www.childnet.com/our-projects/childnet-digital-leaders-programme

Net Aware report 2017: 'Freedom to Express Myself Safely'

https://www.nspcc.org.uk/services-and-resources/research-and-resources/2017/net-aware-report-freedom-to-express-myself-safely/

PEEL

Exploring self identity

Social media, self-expression and self-identity present growing problems for young people. Trying to establish a true identity, whilst finding themselves within a 'selfie' culture of carefully curated Facebook and Instagram lives, has never been harder.

The exhibition and accompanying book are the culmination of a three-year study. Working with groups of young people, photography and poetry are used to explore their identity and uncover who they are rather than just what they look like. A special lenticular printing technology enables the exhibition prints to be viewed as a poem from one angle and a photographic portrait from another.

The PEEL programme is being developed and rolled out to primary and secondary schools for spring 2018. Agency ASHA, The Diocese of Gloucester and the British Computer Society are currently collaborating in partnership to pilot the programme in five schools, resulting in National Curriculum standard resources that will enable schools to run the programme. We will also provide training hubs around the country for teachers and schools who want to join and run the programme. As soon as the programme is ready, schools who want to participate will be notified and given a login code to download the resources online.

Resources will be available in spring 2018. All net profits go to The Big Cold Turkey Foundation and are distributed among projects and charities concerned with youth at risk.

PEEL concept and design: ArthurSteenHorneAdamson

PEEL

BCS Round Table
Discussion - part of
an Official PEEL Event