Sociability, smartphones and tablets

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> Jeanette: *Communication between friends (has changed). Just that example of sitting on the sofa with the iPads altogether…the number of times I've said:* 'Why don't you talk to your friend who's come round? Why don't you talk about your day?' *(….) I always used to talk to my friends. You'd go up to your bedroom, you'd chat about what you learned at school, about him, about her. And now with the boys they're playing these things. With the girls they're probably texting each other about things rather than talking.*

> (Mother of a 12 year old)

> Daniel*: Well, when I got my BlackBerry it made me more social because of BBM – that was a really big thing. With BlackBerry it made you know what was going on. Because when I didn't have a BlackBerry people would say:* 'There's this happening, there's this happening'. *And I'll be:* 'Oh, where did you hear this? *Oh, BBM'. I was:* 'Oh, I don't have BBM'. *(…) Before, when I didn't have the BlackBerry, people said that:* 'I live 60% of my life on BlackBerry'. *I was:* 'You can't really live that much of your life on a phone!' *But then as I got into the phone I started to realize what they were saying, and my parents started seeing that I'm spending too much time on the phone.*

> (15 year old boy)

Clearly Jeanette and Daniel have different views on how smartphones and tablets have affected children's sociability. For Jeanette, these technologies are undermining social interaction among a new generation of children. In contrast, for Daniel such technologies are socially liberating, enabling him to be much more informed about his peers. That said, Daniel's last comments suggest he would understand Jeanette's viewpoint, that parents might see this change in a different light.

Yet given Jeanette thinks that the girls she refers to are communicating – being social via texting – why does she think children are now being less sociable? Meanwhile, Daniel has not actually said that his parents are wrong to believe that he is spending too much time on the smartphone. As we shall see later, other children also have their apprehensions about the temptation of these technologies.

The chapter explores two overlapping themes that will help to make sense of the above quotes and more generally throw light on the differences and similarities between parents and children's perspectives:

- To what extent are technologies like smartphones and tablets changing children's interactions compared to an older generation of children who used their precursors: PCs and laptops to access the internet and mobile phones? Do the newer devices raise different concerns among parents?

- What do parents and children consider to be appropriate norms about face-to-face and mediated sociability? How do they both evaluate the children's interactions through such devices as smartphones and tablets, especially in terms of how the devices affect children's sociability?

Sociability, sometimes referred to as sociality, is not a precise theoretical concept but an umbrella term used in everyday language, along with various synonyms like 'being social' and

related concepts like 'social skills', to capture the nature of our interactions, our communications and our relationships. There is therefore scope for ambiguity about how to apply these labels. Yet, in different ways the theme of sociability has been discussed across a number of sub-literatures on information and communication technologies (ICTs). Hence, this chapter first reviews how sociability is discussed across three literatures – the one on the internet, the one the mobile phone (especially in relation to teenagers) and the one on parental concerns about children's experience of ICTs. It then draws on empirical evidence from the *Net Children Go Mobile* project about parents' and children's perceptions of smartphones and tablets.

Literature reviews

The internet's consequences for sociability

When the internet first became widely available in the mid-1990s there was initially some enthusiasm about meeting people in new virtual communities (Castells 2001). Thus, there was a certain degree of surprise in the academic community when some of the earliest studies suggested that the internet led to adults becoming less sociable (Kraut et al, 1998[1]; Nie, 2001). At the time two arguments were proposed to explain this. One argument, sometimes referred to as 'time displacement', was that time spent online meant that there was less time to spend offline interacting with friends and family. The other line of argument recognized that sometimes people were interacting on the internet but questioned the quality of interaction online and by implication the quality of mediated relations constructed through the online world. Some deemed the medium to be impoverished compared to face-to-face interaction by

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[1] The follow-up study with this group modified its position, but still thought that the internet might make introverts less sociable (Kraut et al, 2002)

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virtue of the fact that non-verbal cues were missing. Therefore, such frameworks have more recently been referred to as 'cues filtered out' theories (Baym, 2015).

However, the picture even at that time was far more complicated. Other contemporary quantitative studies found that either the internet led to more sociability or that it made no difference (for a review see Katz and Rice, 2002). Meanwhile, the clues filtered out approaches assumed interaction was purely online, but since most of those with whom we interact online are already known offline in general people do not solely rely on online channels for maintaining relationships. Hence, there were later discussions of the internet 'supplementing' or 'complementing' offline ties (e.g. Peng and Zhu, 2011). The clues filtered out arguments were also challenged in research that showed how textual interactions could be quite rich, such as one study focusing on the communications of Trinidadian diaspora with friends and family back home (Miller and Slater, 2000). And more recently there have been discussions of the various strategies people use, such as adding emoticons, to enhance textual media like email, to inject them with sociability (Baym,2015). That said, communication online still has its academic critics, concerned that it only creates shallow relationships (e.g. Turkle, 2011)

Since the early discussions of sociability online there have been two developments. First, the internet continued to evolve and while there had always been communication online many think that this is now a more significant component of 'Web 2.00', especially because of social media. Therefore, empirical research has in recent years focused on social networking sites, including studies that have stressed how these have become important sites where specifically youth socialize, especially given constraints on their ability to 'hang out' together offline (boyd, 2014). Second, the research interest changed. Sociability in itself was never an academic concept, whereas social capital – the idea that individually or collectively we can benefit from developing trust through a sense of reciprocity - had a more scholarly track record in the writings especially of Bourdieu (1985), Coleman (1988) and Putnam (2000) and in general

research on this topic had been growing from the mid-90s (Wilken, 2012). What followed was a shift in argument from asking what effect the internet had on sociability to asking what effect it had on social capital. Did the internet enhance social capital, decrease it or make no difference? The older arguments were transposed to this new framework, new refinements emerged such as whether social networks were more significant for bridging or bonding capital and later studies asked about the types of activities on social networking sites that promoted these different types of social capital (e.g. Ellison et al, 2011). It is not the intention in this chapter to follow up debates on social capital, but rather to draw attention to how questions about sociability on the internet at a certain period went out of academic fashion.

Mobile phones and sociability

Although for the most part mobile phone researchers did not use the word 'sociability' in the same ways as early internet studies, the notion was arguably implicit in analyses of how this technology changed the nature of interaction. This was captured in the early literature in terms of the 'perpetual contact' that mobiles enabled (Katz & Aakhus, 2002). 'Hyper-coordination' referred to how teens, especially, presented themselves to peers through the ways in which they used the phone, where they used it and even by how they carried it (Ling and Yttri, 2002). Meanwhile, 'connected presence' referred to the reassuring feeling that others were always potentially available to us because of the mobile phone (Licoppe, 2004).

In the first mobile phone studies specifically of children, the focus was often not on children in general but on teenagers as relatively early adopters of mobile phones, and especially as pioneers of texting. (Ling, 2004). Such studies noted the types of 'lightweight interaction' (Ito, 2005) we shall see in the chapter's later empirical material that helped maintain relationships with peers and enhance awareness of peers' activities. Moreover, that sociability was mediated through what various studies noted was a very personal and intimate device,

more so than say a PC, as young people carried their social worlds around with them (Vincent, 2003).

In general, that mobile phone literature was less concerned about the quality of mediated relationships compared to contemporary internet studies, although there were negative sides to new developments in sociability. Frequent mobile phone contact with close peers could create 'bounded solidarity' (i.e. reinforcing cliques – Ling 2008), possibly be to the detriment of maintaining other relationships and making new ties Campbell 2015), while constantly being available to peers and being expected to reply to them could produce a feeling of being entrapped (Hall and Baym, 2012). In general, though, the sense that comes across is that these young people are very enthusiastic about mobile phones and that the researchers themselves saw this in a positive light (for a review, see Ling and Haddon, 2008).

Parental concerns about ICTs and children's sociability

There is a long history of concerns about ICTs and children both in the academic literature and in more general societal discourses (for a review, see Critcher, 2008). These form the backdrop to parental worries about their children's experiences of technologies, which in turn influence 'parental mediation'- i.e. how parents try to influence their children's experience of ICTs (Haddon, 2015).

Parental concerns are quite diverse, including worries about the influence of the content children experience through media (e.g. pornography, representations of violence). But they often have echoes of the time-displacement theses, that children are spending 'too much' time with television (Winn, 1977) and later home computers (Turkle, 1984) at the cost of other activities. Here we find cross-cultural variation in the fears about what is displaced: for example, while taking time away from education studies is mentioned by Western families, it was paramount in a study of parents' attitudes in rural India (Pathak-Shelat and DeShano,

2014). But sometimes what is displaced is broader, including time for exercising, creative play and, of interest in this chapter, socialising with peers and developing social skills. Clearly, while many internet researchers may have moved on to focusing on social capital, parents still talk in terms of their children's sociability.

The strongest parental concern is about children becoming 'addicted' to technology, and again there is cultural variation as gaming addiction received particular media attention in China and Korea, where parents were more sensitized to the danger of excessive use (Lim and Soon, 2010; Haddon, forthcoming). In Western studies, parents worries are often expressed through the food metaphor whereby parents seek a 'balanced diet' of activities in their children's lives (Livingstone, 2002), wanting a balance in their children's lives that too much time with ICTs could upset. The particular significance of this concern in the academic literature is that this may be happening at a crucial stage in children's development, including when they are developing social skills (Turkle, 1984).

The New Children Go Mobile project

Having considered the various relevant literatures, we now turn to the empirical study reported in this chapter. *Net Children Go Mobile* was a multi-country European project lasting from 2011-2014 that was funded by the European Commission's *Safer Internet Programme*. The project's aim was to look at possible online risks faced by children as smartphones and tablets provided a new channel for accessing the internet. The motivation for this was a longer term concern about risks related to internet use in general, that had originally led to the *EU Kids Online* project (2006-2014). Many of the *Net Children Go Mobile* members were from *EU Kids Online* and so in effect these became sister projects, sharing much of the same structure (e.g. quantitative and qualitative studies, common questions, and common modes of analysis

across countries).

Mascheroni and Ólafsson (2014) reported the quantitative findings from *Net Children Go Mobile* while Haddon and Vincent (2014) discussed the European qualitative research covering Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Portugal Romania, Spain and the UK. In addition, there was a specifically UK qualitative report, which is why there are more UK quotations in this chapter (Haddon and Vincent, 2015). Since there was limited research on smartphone use by children, the qualitative research reported here had to cover more general questions about adoption, use and consequences before dealing with the risk agenda and it is some of this material that forms the basis for the analysis below.

The main fieldwork was carried out from January to September 2014, and was conducted in two phases: interviews and focus groups with children were generally completed by the end of April 2014. The focus groups with adults (parents, teachers, youth workers) continued in certain countries until September 2014. There were 55 focus groups with children (N = 219) and 107 interviews (N = 108) across the nine countries.[2]

Parents' views

> Nick*: I think there's more consciousness of it in mainstream press (now), about children being exposed to too much of one thing and also about quality time with parents. Not having time to actually engage with them and just letting them do things where they just go off…. which sounds a bit hypocritical, given that I just used to come home from school and go off on my bike, but that was a world in itself. But I guess it was physical and it was social. It involved other children so there was friction, there were social lessons to be learned whereas I feel just being on an iPad is a bit lonely. Whilst it's OK for a while, if you're doing that for your whole entertainment…*

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[2] In some of the focus groups and interviews we only had the age range that had guided the choice of the sample (e.g. 11-13 years old). When this happens In the quotes and average figure is given (e.g. 12).

(Father of a 10 year old)

In many ways this father provides in one quote many of the themes identified in the literature review. Nick refers not to academic research per se but to media discourses about time displacement ('*too much of one thing*'). He values the importance of the time children spend interacting or socialising with parents ('*quality time*') while acknowledging that when he was a child this did not actually happen so much since he prioritized time with peers. While not using the word 'sociability' he nevertheless valorises '*social*' behaviour and learning '*social lessons*'. And in the last line he picks up on concern about the solitary use of technology (the iPad), using the unbalanced diet metaphor once again ('*your whole entertainment*').

Jill (mother of 13, 12 and 9 year old children) indicated a similar worry about children being anti-social when she described how her visiting 14 year old niece would have the screen of her smartphone close to her face all the time: '*She doesn't interact with the others, with my other children. I feel a bit out of control, with what she's doing on it all the time. And I'd rather she be like the other two (older children).*' In fact, the niece was socially interacting in that much of her use of the screen related to social network sites. The 'problem' for Jill was that her niece was not communicating with those peers (in this case, cousins) immediately around her. To add another layer of meaning, part of that concern may also reflect the fact that the niece was visiting them, and this is a special situation where the parent felt it was appropriate to prioritize face-to-face interaction with the other children. In other words, rather than considering parents' general statements about children we need to take into account how the specific context in which this behaviour occurs may also make a difference to adult evaluations of children's actions.

This comes across even more clearly in the first quote right at the start of this chapter when Jeanette complained that her children did not interact face-to-face with friends who had made

the effort to visit them. This particular quote also referred to both issues from the old sociability debates – the boys gaming, displacing time for communicating, and the girls texting, but such mediated communication is devalued compared to the face-to-face communication.

While Nick and Jeanette provided particular succinct articulations of concerns identified in the literature, they were not isolated. If not actually complaining about this vision of children being together but not communicating aloud, some parents were at least uncomfortable with what was to them an unfamiliar form of socialising, like Jan (mother of a 12 year old): *'Yes, all meeting up with each other. But they'll meet up with each other in Minecraft, which is, I think, a bit spooky really. They can be sitting there not talking to each other, but communicating.'* Others expressed an even stronger reaction than just a malaise about this generation of children, as when Jill (mother of a 15 year old) commented: *'I hate it with a vengeance but I kind of know there's not a lot I can do'.*

This very last response about '*not a lot I can do'* also picked up on the particular difficulties of intervening in children's use of intimate devices, a quality the smartphone inherited from the mobile phone. The *Net Children Go Mobile* study found that although some parents demanded it, the right to check what was on the mobile was often resisted and resented, especially by older teenagers (described in more detail in Haddon 2015). Other parents thought such intervention was a lost cause:

> Sarah: *I'm not even allowed to touch it.*
>
> Lisa: *Yes, they would go completely ballistic, if I tried to.*
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> Sarah: *No, she won't even let me hold it, when she's showing me a photograph. I have to… 'I need to hold it because I need to…' …She can't let go of it. In case, I somehow, see something.*
>
> (Mothers of 14-16 year olds)

If the above quotes provide the examples best exemplifying themes already identified in the literature, we can now start turning to more nuanced responses. One of these was to see any changes in socialising as evolving from previous behaviour, such that they did not reflect a sudden break from the past.

> Stan: *I just wonder whether it's just, this is just an extension of the texting world, so they all group through texting. And now they just happen to have a different method of communicating, which is a little bit easier to use. And a bit more instant. But it's… I think this generation's sort of grown up all the way through it. It's not like it's a new adoption for them.*
>
> (Father of several children ranging from 11-16 year olds)

The smartphone (and the tablet) may be 'new' ICTs, but Stan refers here to continuities from children's use of the basic mobile phone that have been available to young people for much longer. In fact, this generation had '*grown up all the way through it'*. And the language stresses the underlying incremental nature of change in his eyes: '*little bit easier to use'*, '*a bit more instant'*. In fact, some parents took a more relativistic perspective as when Ellis' mother Mary reflected back in time to when she and her brother were themselves children, noting similarities to the current day in order to put into perspective some of the concerns about children and the latest ICTs (in this case, in a discussion of Ellis' smartphone)

> Mary: *I'm not worried about the amount of usage time by Ellis. He's getting much more out of it so I'm not worried that modern times are any different from the '80s…since the Sinclair ZX whatever it was called. My brother's a computer programmer. He was constantly on his computer back in the '80s. I don't think anything technologically is really robbing our children of any childhood differently from the '80s.*

(Mother of a 12 year old)

Referring to an even earlier period, 50 years ago, in the focus group of those working with children Rachel questioned Nigel's view about the extent to which this new generation is radically different. Here she refers to the history of moral panics, noting how people were concerned about older technologies that we now take more for granted.

Nigel: *The social interaction with youngsters now is that they are very much always Facebooking, Twittering, all that stuff. Society has changed!*

Rachel: *I think that's showing your age.*

Mary: *I am with Nigel, though. I think what are we…? We're sociable creatures. We should interact…*

Rachel: *But 50 years ago that's what people were saying about the television or the radio. Isn't it part of development and we have to go with it. Rather than saying 'no' to it, saying: 'How do we get around this? How do we make it acceptable?*

(Youth workers)

In arguing how we should make it '*acceptable*', Rachel is acknowledging the social concerns that regular apply to children's experience of new technologies and, in effect, raising the question of how we should question or rethink these issues.

In fact, parents were positive about children's use of ICTs, including smartphones, where they led to socialising that might not have taken place otherwise. Deirdre, Helen and Rula (Mothers of 13-14 year old boys) started by talking about their children participating in closed online gaming groups on laptops but later when discussing *FaceTime* they implied that a range of

devices, including tablets, had enabled their boys to meet up online with friends from abroad at times when they might normally not be doing much at all.

> Deirdre: *So, (my son and I) talk about stuff. Like the Minecraft on laptop you could access worldwide far more easily than on Xbox… but you have to be invited onto a certain server. So my son is playing with his friends in the States, with Carl. But only their friends. It's their server, they've set that bit up. So, he's invited Tom (Rula's son) to play on that server and Bill (Helen's son) to play on the app server. So only them. Of course, they're not talking online, because they can't through that…. they can only 'see' it if they're tied to each other. But they (also) FaceTime each other on the other devices.*

> Helen: *At ten to eight on a Sunday morning! They're there and they're talking to each other!*

> Deirdre: *Yes, they're talking to each other, FaceTiming. So it's a different social set up. Because they can actually… there is 'face to face' contact,…it's just that it happens to be through ICT, which is just mind boggling for us. Why can't you just be around a table?*

> (Mothers of 13 year old)

While a slight sadness creeps in that the children as not interacting like the parents did when they were young ('*around a table*'), the three parents were nevertheless impressed that their children have made the effort to do something jointly through these ICTs, and that it even involves communication early on a Sunday morning. It was a far different social arrangement compared to what the parents are used to ('*mindboggling*'), but it was acceptable.

Some parents acknowledged that being social was also becoming manifest in new forms because of a range of ICTs. For example, later in the chapter we will see how the children reported that the checked their peers' social network updates more frequently now because it

was easy to do through smartphones. This behaviour was sometimes acknowledged by parents to be 'social' in the sense that it made children more aware of what their peers were doing. Mothers in the focus group of parents of 14-16 year olds appreciated how smartphones had enabled their children to keep track of each other more, with Lisa noting that when she asked her daughter: 'Who's around this week? *Or: 'Did you talk to anyone today?' She can reel off where everybody is! They know exactly where each other is. And I said: 'Did you speak to anyone'. And she went: 'No'. But they know!*

Lastly, parents can think critically about their own nostalgia for their childhood, expressed in some of the earlier quotes.

> Jeanette: *I think the (smartphone's) definitely made a difference in all the ways I've said. I just think it's probably mostly they're not forced to do the things we used to have to do, I'd have been playing out in the street.*

> Interviewer: *Were you forced to play out in the street?*

> Jeanette: *I say 'forced' because there wasn't anything good on telly after a certain time. We couldn't just play wherever we wanted to, so Sunday afternoons were classic, weren't they, there was nothing on telly. You just go out, you go out and play, you go out and call on your friends.*

> (Mother of a 12 year old)

Whereas Nick had been among the parents valuing outdoor activities with peers, here we see that in Jeanette's childhood '*playing out on the street'* had not been the priority (being undermined by tempting technologies). For this parent, going out to play with friends had, a generation earlier, been merely a default because there was nothing better to do, specifically when there was nothing (interesting) on television!   In other words, even twenty years ago

ICTs could sometimes offer attractive alternatives to socialising – there was certainly a place for them in Jeanette's life as a child.

In this respect one can argue that one of the significant changes that may have occurred for the current generation of children is that there are more online (and even television) activities on offer and more portable devices like smartphones and tablets to access these new options. In other words, there are more positive alternatives available competing with 'going out' and more alternative spaces and moments for mediated communication to supplement face-to-face socialising.

In sum, this section first illustrated how some concerns reflected in the general literatures on sociability and parenting have found their way into parents' discussions of smartphones and portable technologies like tablets. More specifically we again find the long-standing concern about ICTs leading children to be more anti-social is now also voiced in relation to these portable devices. Arguably there have been some developments in the broader technological landscape children inhabit that can exacerbate these concerns. Mediated communication options have been increasing, for example with the arrival of social networking sites, and smartphones and tablets in part add to this trend. It may well be that because there is more to do on smartphones compared to older mobile phones that some behaviour, such as sitting side by side with peers while on the device, has also simply become more visible.

Yet, to put these concerns into perspective, although mobile internet access changes children's options somewhat, as part of the changing internet in general, some parents recognize how this is not leading in itself to children behaving in totally new ways. Sometimes parents point to various continuities or parallels with the experience of children in different eras. Even if some parents have qualms about mediated communication, other parents can see ways in which smartphones can actually enhance their children's social behaviour. And parents can

sometimes reflect critically on any nostalgia about their own childhood, qualifying the valorization of going out to play with friends because even when they were themselves young technologies like television sometimes offered attractive alternatives to socialising. In this respect, the other change in these technologically savvy children's lives more generally is that nowadays there may be 'better' (or at least 'other') things to do online, and once again smartphones and tablets may add to this trend of having alternatives to hand.

Children's views

In an initial exercise at the start of the interviews with the children the participants listed positive and negative aspects of the devices. By far the most common thing these young people commented on was how smartphones had affected their communications.[3]

As with their European counterparts, many of the UK children interviewed felt that now they communicated more because of the smartphone.[4] Assuming there is some truth in their observations, one key reason for the change that they noted was the smartphone's sheer convenience. As Joshua noted: *Probably because it's just more readily available.not having to go up to your room, wait 20 minutes for the laptop to turn on.* Others added that the smartphone had led to more communication amongst peers in general (compared to the days of texting) in part because the WhatsApp messaging system was free and in part because of its greater affordances, allowing group messaging.

Anuj: *In the morning when I wake up I find there's been text on the group already, because it's free. (...) because if you had normal text people only message you if they need to message you. And you can't really create groups on text message so I think that's*

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[3] This was also relevant because the whole research project was aimed at exploring online risks. On the whole, children did not prioritize these risks when listing negative aspects, and when they were willing to discuss online risks in their view the smartphone and tablets had not increased risks. They were simply more devices through which risks could be experienced.

[4] One confounding factor is that when these children compared their current lives to a few years ago, they might be becoming more sociable with peers partly because of becoming simply more mature themselves.

why you might message more. So if you want to tell, let's just say, about your birthday party, or something, you could instead of sending it individually, and paying a lot on the text message, on the group you could send it one time for free and everyone would know about it on the group.

(12, boy)

Yet others pointed to the way the smartphone gave new mobile access specifically to social networking sites. For example, Abdur (12, boy) noted that when *Facebook* was accessed solely through his computer he used to check it once or twice a day. Now that he could access it through an app on his smartphone he checked it *'constantly: Oh yes, who's doing this, who'd doing that?'* In fact, given that some of the interviewees adopted the smartphone in the same period as they joined social networking sites, it was really the combination of the two innovations that had made a difference in their lives.

Alan: *I talk a lot more to people in general because the ability is there in my hands, it's much easier to... Previously if I didn't have Facebook I wouldn't be talking to this person, but because I have Facebook and they have Facebook and I have my phone and it's quite easy to communicate with them.*

(15, boy)

No wonder that the *Net Children Go Mobile* survey showed that 59% of children in the UK thought that the smartphone had enabled them to feel more connected with their friends (Livingstone et al, 2014; the average across the European countries was 81%, Mascheroni & Ólafsson, 2014). In contrast to some parental worries about smartphones making children anti-social, clearly many children themselves felt the technology was enhancing their sociability. Parent Lisa had earlier commented that her child, like others, had a greater awareness of peer

activities because of the technology. In the second quotation right at the start of the chapter, Daniel had confirmed this with the observation that it '*made you know what was going on.*' Some the European interviews added further insights into the specificities of that sociability, as when Ionela (girl, 10, Romania) described how: *I started befriending them more because of WhatsApp, going into groups and finding more things about them.*' Stefania (girl, 13, Italy) noted how online communication supplemented offline contact in her account*: This year I started to practise athletics, and I met this girl who is the best friend of a (girl) friend of mine. So I met her, but through the smartphone, messaging [...] we became closer friends thanks to the opportunity to keep in touch without ... meeting face to face, just through messages.* Meanwhile Hannah (girl, 12, Ireland) added that with the smartphone*: 'I feel more connected with people, as I have freedom to talk to them whenever I can.'* In sum, the smartphone facilities appear to enhance the number of channels for strengthening relations and create a sense of peers being even more available.

However, children could also be critical of these developments. One problem was that was now too much sociability. One downside of more communicative possibilities was the sheer traffic this generated. In the initial exercise at the start of interviews we saw how those in focus groups had written down a list of positive and negative things about the smartphone. In the UK interviews Pranev (12, boy) explained why one of his negatives was 'Notifications during the night': *If one of my friends stays up later than all the others and I get that one notification and then my screen will turn on and wake up and the light will come on. And usually my brightness is right up so it will wake me up and then have a disturbed sleep so... That is a common problem.'* In fact, Abdur, in the same focus group, then added that he generally pointed the screen downwards precisely to avoid that problem. This led Wilson to join in:

Wilson: *I got rid of (WhatsApp) ...because normally I used to lay there and then suddenly,*

because I'm in loads of groups...and then they're all talking to each other at ten o'clock at night.I used to have this really annoying text message sounding, it's like a laser, it goes pew-pew-pew...then I just kept hearing it go de-de-de, de-de-de because everyone's speaking to each other. It's so late, why?

(12, boy)

Moreover, it was not just the late timing of this flood of messages but sometimes their trivial content (in the eyes of young people themselves, not just the parents), that drew some criticism. For example, Alan (15, boy) noted: '*You get things like people instagramming their food which I don't see the point in to be honest. Because it's just food. It's nice but there's no need to share it with the world!*' Or from the European interviews:

Gaia*: There's much more communication now, because ... SMS had a certain cost, so you sent one, without writing two thousand things. Instead, now one writes thousands of messages, with thousands of emoticons, thousands of nonsense, really useless things, thousands of exclamation marks, and stuff!*

(15, girl, Italy)

Clearly for some young people the 'lightweight communication' identified in the mobile phone literature can be too lightweight, especially when any intimacy is lost through the fact that the message was broadcast.

The other side of the coin of peers being more available because of more channels on the smartphone was that the children themselves were more available to others, and often felt obliged to be so – as noted in academic discussions of 'entrapment'. Jens (15, boy, Belgium) lamented: '*What bothers me is that you're always busy, and that you have no rest!*' In fact, in

the *Net Children Go Mobile* survey 72% of the European sample felt they had to be always available to family and friends since having a smartphone (Mascheroni and Ólafsson, 2014).

This extra sociability also had its pitfalls. Given the increase in communication, as smartphones add various forms of internet messaging to texting, some young people felt that it was even more likely that these devices could increase the chances of replying too quickly, without forethought.

> Alan*: If you see that message and it fires you up a little bit...then you're probably going to reply to it and not think through what you're going to say. And that then leads to problems and issues with other people.*
>
> (15, boy)

Finally, a number of comments made by children indicated that they were, like the parents, aware that the smartphone could be just too tempting and take away from the face-to-face interaction that they also valued.

> Victoria: *We arrange to meet on a Saturday at six in the afternoon and each one of us has our mobile and there are times when maybe we don't talk for ten minutes. And that is what we've met up for, to do that!*
>
> (15, girl, Spain)*:*

This could lead to complaints about peers constantly looking at the smartphone and not attending to other things that are around them, or that it affected their social skills.

> Elsa*: I think it stops face-to-face communication, which you need. Because social interaction is becoming so.... it's disappearing I think. Some people I talk to can just be so.... lack social interaction because they're so used to being just on their phones.*

(15, girl)

To summarize, the children argued that smartphones especially have led to greater communication with peers for a number of reasons: the increase in communication channels, convenience of using devices at hand, the affordances of the technology (group messages), and the fact that some messaging is now free. This has, in their eyes, lead to greater sociability, including, and in conjunction with social media, creating a broader awareness of what peers were doing, a theme originally explored in the mobile phone literature. However, there are a number of negative aspects to this including the problem of too much and untimely communication, trivial content, demands on their own availability, the potential for replying too quickly to messages and taking time from face-to-face interaction with peers.

Conclusions

We now return to the two sets of questions identified in the introduction about the changes in interaction arising from smartphones and tablets and implications for mediated sociability. If the children are right that there is more interaction because of smartphones especially, then interaction with these devices may simply be more visible to contemporary parents because it is more frequent than mobile phone use had been. In Jeanette's example at the start, we have the striking example of children visibly sitting together but not communicating face-to-face. For many parents, including older parents who were already past their teens when texting became popular, this felt so different from own childhood and could clearly produce strong reactions ('*spooky', 'mind boggling', 'hate with a vengeance'*). However, other parents were more sanguine about continuities with the past. We also saw that parents' nostalgia about their own childhood days of playing out with friends might sometimes be misleading. It did not

necessarily do justice to the fact that if there had been better alternatives on TV, this might have been prioritized over socialising!

Turning to the children's perspective, smartphones especially made a difference compared to texting on older mobile phones (by virtue of free messaging and the one-to-many communication), and compared to previous forms of internet access (because of the convenience of having portable devices to hand). The children also noted their greater use of these devices because of getting updates from social media. The children's perception is that this had created more interaction with the device and more communications. But, as seen in their comments, children could also view this as a very mixed blessing.

As regards the consequences of smartphones and tablets for sociability, a number of parents thought that the use of these devices, even if it involved mediated communication with distant others, should not be prioritized over face-to-face interaction with peers, especially in more special moments like visiting friends. Although these particular parents did focus on the quality of this mediated sociability as discussed in the academic literature, they certainly thought it to be inappropriate at times. We also saw the concern about the time displacement that was noted in academic internet discussions: entertainment on devices like tablets was sometimes seen as having the potential to displace interaction altogether, making children lonely. That said parents sometimes had a more complex view than in the academic debates, appreciating how interacting through devices can lead to new forms of socializing that would otherwise not have taken place and that there were different dimensions of sociability that could be enhanced through these devices, such as having a greater awareness of what peers were doing.

While being generally more positive than parents about the mediated social communications, children could also critically assess changes brought about by smartphones and tablets. Overall the children shared the parents' assessment that there were more mediated interactions because

of smartphones especially, and some even went so far as to say this helped to make them more sociable. And yet the parents might be surprised to know that some children agreed with them that on certain occasions, such as when making the effort to go out together, face-to-face interaction should take priority even if that does not always happen in practice. The children were also aware of various downsides of increased communications through these devices that were not mentioned by the parents in this study. In various ways, the enhanced potential for communications could lead to too much 'noise' that could be disruptive or tedious.

Finally, it is worth noting that few studies of ICTs cover both parents' and children's perspectives. In order to understand parents' reactions and interventions, it is important to appreciate what parents want for their children, their concerns, and their own childhood experiences that act as a benchmark, even while parents may reflect critically upon these experiences. Some parents' observations reflect academic debates, but so do their reservations about how much has really changed. Meanwhile, giving children the chance to express their views shows both where their evaluations differ from and agree with those of parents, providing insights that parents might not have thought about and showing how children have more ability to question the consequences of new technologies than their parents might credit them.

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