New Filters to manage the impact of social media on young people's mental health and wellbeing

Introduction and background

In 2017, a UK wide survey was conducted by the Royal Society for Public Health (RSPH) to explore the impact of social media on 14-24 year-olds. The survey revealed that social media has a number of potential positive effects on young people's mental health and wellbeing. However, there were also several potential negative effects such as anxiety, depression and negative body image.
Following on from the RSPH survey, an All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on social media was established. This group ran a further inquiry which was launched in April 2018. The inquiry received written evidence from 37 expert stakeholders and held 5 oral evidence sessions. This report provides a summary of the evidence which was heard by the inquiry and makes a number of recommendations for mitigating the negative impact of social media.

Key points

The current evidence base

- Although the inquiry received evidence identifying many correlations between social media use and positive and negative mental health and wellbeing, the lack of robust scientific research was consistently highlighted. Witnesses also pointed to the contradictory nature of some of the evidence with some research finding that social media had a positive impact and other research finding the opposite.
- Throughout the inquiry, the term 'social media addiction' was frequently used. However, it was pointed out that there is currently no clinical diagnosis for social media addiction, although gaming disorder is now included in the International Classification of Diseases (ICD).
- In the absence of more robust causal evidence of the negative impact of social media, the APPG recommends the adoption of a 'precautionary principle' which involves assessing the desirability of regulation in the face of a plausible but still uncertain risk of harm.

Positive effects of social media

- The APPG was provided with evidence that interacting with others online had helped people to open up about their feelings, find support, and create human connections. In written evidence, the Young National Children's Bureau (NCB) members expressed the valuable role of social media in keeping them connected and informed, and enabling them to express themselves.
- Social media also plays a role in helping young people to feel less isolated and lonely. In evidence submitted by the Samaritans based on their Digital Futures12 report, they set out some of the ways social media can facilitate this process and have a protective effect on young people's emotional wellbeing by reducing social isolation. One witness to the inquiry explained how social media had supported her recovery from mental illness as she was able to talk to and meet other people online with the same mental health condition.

- In evidence received from Internet Matters, Dr Linda Papadopoulus pointed out how technology takes away physical barriers to social connections, which can be particularly important for children who struggle to find their tribe at school and/or have special interests or special needs.
- The inquiry heard how social media can be a useful source of information for young people. A recent study of 1,346 young people aged 13-18 in the UK conducted by the University of Birmingham found that for many young people, social media provided a valuable learning resource, with 63 per cent reporting that it was a good source of health information.
- Written evidence received from Facebook, owner of Instagram, cited a range of Instagram accounts which are dedicated to specific mental health issues, as well as hashtags such as #edrecovery and #bodypositive. These enable young people to connect with one another, document their recovery, and offer encouragement and support for others going through similar experiences.
- Young members of the National Children's Bureau identified a number of apps which helped with mental health or wellbeing, including those that helped with meditation and mindfulness. Examples included the Breathe2Relax app for stress management; and the Headspace app for meditation. They also mentioned apps which put them in touch with mental health professionals, such as the website 7 Cups.

Negative effects of social media

- Although evidence is largely inconclusive regarding the direct negative correlation between social media use and mental health issues, the inquiry heard that heavy use of social media was having a detrimental impact on various aspects of young people's mental health and wellbeing. In evidence received from The Children's Society and Young Minds, the Good Childhood Report 2017 was referenced to

have shown a connection between intensive social media use and mental ill health. Thirty-eight per cent of young people reported that social media has a negative impact on how they feel about themselves, compared to 23 per cent who reported that it has a positive impact. This was particularly the case for girls, with 46 per cent stating that social media had a negative impact on their self-esteem.

- Evidence received from Barnardo's reported that just 12 per cent of children who spend no time on social networking websites have symptoms of mental ill health, the figure rises to 27 per cent for those who are on the sites for three or more hours a day.
- Professor Yvonne Kelly from University College London cited research involving 10,000 fourteen year-olds, stating that: 'The average 14 year-old may be using social media for 3-4 hours a day. For that average fourteen year-old, they will be getting less sleep, poorer quality sleep; they are much more likely to have low self-esteem, more likely to be deeply unhappy with their physical appearance, more likely to experience cyberbullying as either the victim or the perpetrator'.
- The inquiry heard that although social media allowed young people to link with other like-minded individuals, this could be triggering to a young person vulnerable to, or already experiencing, a mental health condition. It was heard that relying on social media to access support could isolate the individual from "real world" help, "glamorise" mental health conditions and impede recovery. The Samaritans told the inquiry that the publicising of suicide methods, in particular novel ones, as well as the glamorisation of suicide, can lead to further deaths through a process known as "contagion"; they referenced research which shows that young people are more likely to engage in imitative behaviour. The risks of glamourising self-harm and suicide were echoed by Dr Lucy Briddle from the University of Bristol.
- A number of witnesses highlighted the links between social media and negative body image. For example, evidence submitted by Healthwatch Essex based on interviews with over 2,500 young people revealed that overwhelming exposure to body ideals could negatively contribute to their self-esteem and self-confidence. It also encouraged harmful behaviours to achieve 'results' including disordered eating, body shame, disengagement from exercising publicly and stigmatisation from peers.
- The issue of cyber-bullying was cited by several witnesses. In 2017, RSPH found 7 in 10 young people have experienced cyberbullying. The inquiry learned of a survey revealing that half of girls in the UK aged between 11-18 have experienced some form of harassment or abuse on social media.
- Evidence presented to the inquiry suggested that girls may be more vulnerable to the negative effects of social media than boys. Drawing on her research, Professor Yvonne Kelly reported that: '14-year-old girls were heavier users of social media with 2 fifths of them using it for more than 3 hours per day compared with one fifth of boys. Only 4 per cent of girls reported not using social media compared to 10 per cent of boys'.

Action being taken to address potential harms

- The inquiry heard several examples of measures that the social media industry had introduced with the objective of protecting children and young people when using social media, as outlined below.
- YouTube Community Guidelines include rules prohibiting nudity or sexual content, harmful or dangerous videos, harassment and cyberbullying and promote child safety. Facebook Live now offers suicide prevention support and

the platform has introduced artificial intelligence to detect suicidal posts even before they are reported.

- Instagram has announced changes to their approach on self-harm content including a ban on any graphic images of self-harm and non-graphic, self-harm related content in search, hashtags and the explore tab. It has also committed to improving resources for people posting and searching for self-harm related content.
- The Twitter Trust & Safety Council provides input on their safety products, policies, and programmes. Council members include Childnet, the Cybersmile Foundation, the UK Safer Internet Centre and Anti-Bullying Pro.

Recommendations

- The Government should introduce a statutory duty of care for social media companies in the form of a statutory code of conduct for all relevant service providers, which includes the definition of key harms for the independent regulator to focus on. Ofcom should be resourced to assume responsibility for regulatory duties. The code of conduct should be upheld by all social media platforms with registered UK users aged 24 years and under.
- There should be a Social Media Charter, developed and implemented by Government which would help mitigate some of the negative effects which social media can have on mental health and wellbeing, whilst promoting the positives.
- The Government should publish evidence-based guidance to help those aged 24 and younger to avoid excessive social media use. There should be further research to determine what constitutes 'excessive use' and the extent to which it varies amongst different demographic groups.
- The Inquiry recommends the establishment of a Social Media Alliance which would be funded by a 0.5 per cent levy on the profits of social media companies. The Alliance would: commission and review the growing evidence base on the impact of social media on health and wellbeing; support ambitions for a comprehensive digital education; and establish clearer guidance for the public.