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FOSTERING DIGITAL
WISDOM FOR THE
DIGITAL AGE

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The Digital Age

Given the almost ubiquitous use of digital technologies by children in the UK and elsewhere today (Ofcom 2020) educators have a responsibility to help children negotiate the risks and maximise the opportunities associated with living in the digital age (Harrison 2021; Livingstone et al. 2017).

Although the term 'digital age' is contested, in the interests of brevity, I define it here simply as a period in history where humans are formatively influenced by various forms of communication mediated through digital technologies. In order to bring some focus to this paper, I will limit my comments to a discussion of what might be described as the king of the digital technologies – the Internet.

The British scientist Sir Tim Berners-Lee invented the World Wide Web in 1989. Berners-Lee worked at CERN and his original idea for the web was to support automated information sharing between scientists and other universities. The World Wide Web became what is now popularly known as the Internet and today there are 4.66 billion active internet users worldwide – nearly 60 percent of the global population is online. What's more, most of these users are not tethered to the Internet by cables and wires, as around 93 percent of them access the internet via mobile devices.¹

We have come a very long way in a very short space of time, and in doing so the Internet has brought many benefits as well as many challenges for humanity. The benefits are well known, and in many ways the Internet might be said to be the unsung hero of the pandemic as it allowed scientists and medics to collaborate at speed on a global scale, enabled many people to continue to work and learn whilst in lockdown and for friends and relatives to maintain connections. Whilst acknowledging these and other benefits, it is the threats to ethical living and human flourishing that I want to focus my comments on today.

Much has been written about how the digital age, and in particular the internet, is raising new ethical questions and concerns. For example, Shannon Vallor, a Professor at the University of Edinburgh Future Institute, explains in her book *Technology and the Virtues* (2016) that technology is reshaping our habits in rapid, complex and unpredictable ways that create profound risks and opportunities for human flourishing on a global scale. Whilst Vallor writes more broadly about the impact of digital tech on societal change, Dean Cocking and Jeroen van den Hoven introduce us to what they call the 'many faces of evil online' (2018, p. 1). The opening pages of the book make shocking reading as the authors provide examples of appalling behaviour that the Internet has facilitated. These include examples of multiple forms of abuse, crime, radicalisation and threats to wellbeing amongst others. The Financial Times journalist Rana Foroohar explains how Big Tech companies such as Google, Facebook, and Amazon have not lived up to their original intentions to bring benefits to humanity and have 'lost their soul'. Those of you who have watched the popular Netflix documentary 'The Social Network' will be familiar with these arguments. Given the almost daily negative headlines about immoral and unethical behaviour online, it is perhaps not surprising that the UK media regulator Ofcom (2020) has found that parents are increasingly believing the risks of being online outweigh the benefits for their children. Perhaps of equal concern is Ofcom's research that shows that

¹ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/617136/digital-population-worldwide/>

the number of 10-year-olds in the UK who own a smartphone has doubled in the last five years. When a child possesses an unrestricted smartphone, they can in theory communicate with almost anyone, anywhere, instantly and normally when no-one is watching. In the absence of regulation or the ability to put virtue into practice, children are likely to trip up on occasion, leading to them undertaking moral misdemeanours online of the sort described by Cocking and Van den Hoven. My argument is that something needs to be done to help children pause, reflect on their online actions and make better decisions about how they interact online. It is for this reason I advocate a character-based approach to digital citizenship education.

A Character-Based Approach to Digital Citizenship Education

Before explaining and providing argument for a character-based approach to what is commonly called digital citizenship education, I want to state a couple of important caveats. Firstly, in my focus on education (and the educators – primarily teachers and parents) I do not want to be seen to be absolving tech developers nor Governments of their considerable responsibilities. They make and should regulate the technologies and need to do more to ensure that they don't bring about harm to individuals or society more widely. However, there is a lack of action by many tech companies and governments to take responsibility and ensure digital environments help people to live well in the digital age. Until they do, I argue that a character-based approach to digital citizenship education will provide some protection against online moral misdemeanours. The second caveat is that in my focus on character and virtue I don't want to be seen to be over-moralising. I don't think it is fair to judge children's behaviour online too harshly, especially when many adult designers of technologies have not taken the moral high-ground. The Facebooks, TikToks, Instagrams of the world have invented a new playground full of ethical obstacles for our children. We need an approach to education that takes this into account and helps children develop the character and wisdom required to flourish online.

I want to very briefly sketch out my theoretical approach before concluding this paper with a more extensive overview about what might be practically done. Firstly, whilst prioritising a virtue ethical philosophical position, I don't want to dismiss the importance that other moral theories including, notably, deontology can bring to the table. For example, clearly a parent or teacher would be remiss if they did not insist on some rules for how and when children use the Internet - these might include restricting phone use and access; limiting what content can be viewed online; or imposing an agreed netiquette for online communication. However, we need to recognise that digital-rules are hard to enforce, and children and young people are well known for being able to find ways to bypass them – such as acting anonymously online or using so called 'burner' phones. As such, digital rules should be understood as both limited and limiting; they will likely be abstract, won't attend to the specifics of any situation and are primarily concerned with making explicit the minimum expectations of behaviour. Whilst they are necessary, digital rules might best be viewed as the foundations upon which character and *cyber-phronesis* can be built.

The possession of 'good' character and *cyber-phronesis* (Harrison 2016) is essential, in my view, if young people are to autonomously, and with good judgment, manage their use of digital technologies in a way that contributes to their own and others' happiness, wellbeing, and overall flourishing. The conception of *phronesis* draws heavily on neo-Aristotelian theory to promote the wise enactment of character virtues that are responsive to different situations as fundamental for individual and societal flourishing – offline and online. I first used the term *cyber-phronesis* in articles that built on my PhD study into the influence of the Internet on the character virtues of 14-16 year olds. At the time I found the term useful to describe the key quality that I believed educators should focus their attention on when undertaking digital citizenship education. As an aside, I found out later that etymologically, its prefix "cyber" derives from the term *kybernetes*, which two thousand years ago meant "helmsman" in Greek. This is a happy coincidence as my idea behind *cyber-phronesis* is that, like helmsmen, Internet

users are confronted today with the challenging task of navigating a complex environment and ethical contours of the web that provide both opportunities and risks. Our task is to help children navigate these themselves, to help them make the right choice at the right time when online and, often, when no-one is watching.

It's not just me who thinks wisdom is an important virtue to possess when online. In a recent study conducted with my colleague Gianfranco Polizzi (Harrison and Polizzi 2021), we found that the virtue that most adolescents wanted their friends to show on social media was wisdom, with 38% choosing this as one of their top two desired qualities when presented with a list of eight. Furthermore, wisdom was also reported as the virtue that parents most want their children to show online, with 56% choosing this as one of their top two qualities. Promisingly, in the same study, we found that 13-16-year-olds were more likely to give a virtue-based reason (e.g., "because it is the kind/thoughtful thing to do) to explain how they would react to an abusive post on social media rather than a utilitarian reason (e.g., "because the same thing might happen to me") or deontological reason (e.g., "because of the rules of the social media company").

How might we cultivate *Cyber-phronesis*?

The big question is, how might we intentionally go about cultivating *cyber-phronesis* in children? In addressing this question, I direct most of my comments at schools and teachers, whilst recognising that much responsibility also lies with parents and also policy makers to prioritise this area. A good place to start addressing this question is current approaches to digital citizenship education. Currently, digital citizenship education is often poorly taught; schools and teachers are sometimes too reactionary, deterministic and / or start from a deficit-based understanding of digital technologies (Harrison, 2021). This is often due to a lack of teacher expertise, and it not being prioritised in the curriculum. The situation is further compounded by poor research about the impact of technology on children, an understandable absence of longitudinal research and little or no impact evidence about digital citizenship interventions. The technology changes rapidly, and researchers can't keep up. What is lacking primarily is any framework for digital citizenship education, meaning there are no overarching organising principles that help teachers respond to digital evolution. It might be said that those tasked with teaching digital citizenship education are trying to hit a moving target whilst shooting in the dark. I believe the situation can be improved if schools review their current approach and implement new approaches that build on the revived focus (in the UK and many other countries) on character education.

At the Jubilee Centre we are conducting research and working with teachers to bring insights into how this might be achieved. As a virtue, *cyber-phronesis* will be largely caught through observing online and offline role models, experimentation, reflection and growing up in environments that prioritise certain ways of living and behaving. Yet many of our efforts are currently directed towards more explicit taught approaches. In doing so a balance must be struck between showing how the education of the virtues might be practically achieved, whilst seeking not to undermine the considerable and widely acknowledged complexities of *cyber-phronesis*. Our approach has been to break *cyber-phronesis* down into component parts, each of which can be cultivated through targeted pedagogical approaches whilst also providing some structural constructs that can bring overall coherence to a programme of study. These components draw on the Jubilee Centre Framework (Jubilee Centre, 2017) as well as previous research such as that on virtue literacy (Arthur et al, 2014) and are as follows: 1) cyber-wisdom literacy; 2) cyber-wisdom reasoning; 3) cyber-wisdom self-reflection; and, 4) cyber-wisdom motivation. The next task is to direct educational activities at the cultivation of each of these. Across schools in England we are currently trialling a series of four lessons that does exactly this. The lessons are taught as part of Personal, Social, Health Education (PSHE), Citizenship Education or Computer Science and require students to engage with narratives (in videos and in books), dilemmas (based on real life events)

and exemplars (famous and near-peers) to learn about the nature and importance of cyber-*phronesis*. New insights are expected from this Jubilee Centre intervention in 2022 when the data from the trial has been analysed. We are expecting promising results as the intervention and methodology build on a previous trial that showed how virtue reasoning and perception related to online behaviour can be educated through an explicit, conscious, planned and reflective character-based approach to digital citizenship education.

Concluding comments

In giving this brief paper, I am aware I have raised many more questions than I have answered. I believe this is true of much research and practice in the digital age, as the pace of change makes it hard for any of us to keep up. However, I also believe that inaction is not an option. In the absence of good research to guide practice, starting to think about the issue through the lens of virtue ethical theory is appealing. As I have shown, it can shine a light on what a practical way forward might be. A further attraction is that by focussing on virtues and wisdom we do not have to rely so heavily on creating rules to manage the Big Tech of the day or indeed for tech not yet invented – as a character and wisdom-based approach, it is somewhat futureproof. I want to end on a hopeful note – if schools can give more focus to character education and preparing students for the tests of life (rather than a life of tests) then we will help not just children today but also future societies. Afterall, it is those who have been educated to live well in the online and offline worlds that will become the tech designers, policy makers, parents and educators of the future.

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