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# Opportunities and Pitfalls for Young People in the Online Space

**Abstract:** The purpose of this paper is to point out the opportunities and pitfalls of the virtual environment for children and young people. We start with the analysis of a technocratic paradigm which emphasizes a utilitarian view of the world. Technology companies not only seek to improve the design and ergonomics of their products, they also influence their products to shape people's intentions and habits. Children and young people face the risk of digitalisation on everyday basis. Undoubtedly, technology has a positive impact on young people. In this paper, we list positives such as developing technical and creative skills, collaborating on projects, global connectivity and more. However, the Australian Psychological Society has proposed to recognize a Problematic Internet Use (PIU) as a legitimate diagnosis—Internet addiction disorder. In addition, digital world represents other risks such as cyberbullying, cyber acquaintances, sexual abuse and many more. We also provide advice to parents on how to protect their children from possible dangers of the virtual world.

**Keywords:** anthropocentrism, problematic Internet use, technocratic paradigm, young people

## Introduction

In today's digital era, it would be rather naive to expect for the "good old times" (times before the Internet) to return. It would also be questionable what benefits this would have. Instead of looking back to the past that is long gone, let us try to create our future in a digital world without catastrophic scenarios of robots, microchips and technology manipulating and taking over humanity. In recent "corona crisis" the only people able to live without technology are those who

are in no need of education, those who do not work from home or those who do not need to fill boredom with social media or do not need to contact their friends or relatives. We know very well that such individuals are in a minority. It is indisputable that digital technologies have become our much-welcomed companions and have helped us in many ways. However, the current situation has made us feel more vulnerable, threatened and aware of our dependence on technologies. Nevertheless, is there a way to survive in this Internet-controlled world without a mobile phone in your pocket and several different screens in every household?

## Anthropocentrism and Technocratic Paradigm

In his second encyclical *Laudato si'*, Pope Francis speaks of anthropocentrism. He understands it the way it is defined in the Catechism of the Catholic Church:

Each creature possesses its own particular goodness and perfection. For each one of the works of the “six days” it is said: “and God saw that it was good.” “By the very nature of creation, material being is endowed with its own stability, truth and excellence, its own order and laws.” Each of the various creatures, willed in its own being, reflects in its own way a ray of God’s infinite wisdom and goodness. Man must therefore respect the particular goodness of every creature, to avoid any disordered use of things which would be in contempt of the Creator and would bring disastrous consequences for human beings and their environment.<sup>1</sup>

According to Pope Francis, there was an anthropocentric deviation in the modern era, which we can compare to “Promethean vision of mastery over the world.”<sup>2</sup> This modern anthropocentrism ended up prizing technical thought over reality and, as a result, man does not perceive nature as a valid norm and haven for life. Nature then becomes only a space and a matter to accomplish one’s work regardless of the consequences and that results in disregarding the value of the world. Pope Francis states that if man considers himself an absolute master, then the foundations of their own life begin to crumble because “instead of carrying out his role as a co-operator with God in the work of creation, man sets

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<sup>1</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993), n. 339, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/\\_INDEX.HTM](https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM).

<sup>2</sup> Pope Francis, “Laudato Si’: On Care for Our Common Home [Encyclical].” (May 2015), 116, [https://www.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si\\_en.pdf](https://www.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si_en.pdf).

himself up in place of God and thus ends up provoking a rebellion on the part of nature.”<sup>3</sup>

This situation leads to “a constant schizophrenia, wherein a technocracy that sees no intrinsic value in lesser beings coexists with the other extreme, which sees no special value in human beings.”<sup>4</sup>

Technocratic paradigm emphasizes the utilitarian view of the world. It is evident that technologies such as mobile phones and social media are intentionally designed to form habits in their users and consumers. Ranging from size and colour to ergonomics and sounds, technology companies spend enormous resources on design. While such design is advertised to improve user experience, the underlying reality is the effort to increase the amount of time users are actively engaging with the product. The realization that various technologies are designed to shape one’s intentions and habits serves to reveal the importance of habit in human life. Moreover, this realization emphasizes the importance of creating habits that orient us towards human flourishing rather than towards some sort of technocratic utility.<sup>5</sup>

Pope Francis states that instead of creating partial solutions, we should change the way of life. He continues to say that current ecological, environmental and social crises require “a distinctive way of looking at things, a way of thinking, policies, an educational program, a lifestyle and a spirituality which together generate resistance to the assault of the technocratic paradigm.”<sup>6</sup> Instead, an authentic human development requires “another type of progress, one which is healthier, more human, more social, more integral.”<sup>7</sup>

## Young People in a Surge of the Digital Era

Media are generally defined as the means of mass communication and include broadcasting, publishing, and the Internet. The scope of media continues to increase significantly, as digital technology becomes more accessible. Social media has become a common method of communication and online gaming provides another way to interact. The prevalence of rapid communication through

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<sup>3</sup> Laudato Si’, 117.

<sup>4</sup> Laudato Si’, 118.

<sup>5</sup> Stephen Okey, “What Comes After the Failure of Technocracy?” *Church Life Journal* (September 2021), <https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/what-comes-after-the-failure-of-technocracy/>.

<sup>6</sup> Laudato Si’, 111.

<sup>7</sup> Laudato Si’, 112.

easily portable devices has established a standard, creating an environment where the digital world is constantly accessible.<sup>8</sup> However, there are specific issues to consider for children and adolescents as they are still learning to navigate the online world at a younger age. While children and young people are the biggest users of the Internet and its many positive benefits, they are also at risk of being exposed to age-inappropriate content, cyberbullying or losing their privacy. We need to be aware of the impact of media and digital technologies in order to provide balanced and optimal advice and support.

## Positive Impact on Young People

Modern digital technology has a number of positive effects on children and young people. Many professions nowadays require the expert use of technology and children and young people who have such skills will benefit in many areas that positively affect their development.

Media and digital technologies in general have the following advantages: Social media sites provide opportunities for young people to connect with friends and family and develop technical and creative skills. These sites facilitate connection with a diverse and widespread group of people and provide a deeper understanding of global issues. There is also evidence that media can have a positive impact on children's social skills and that experience of using social media platforms is generally positive. Education can be enhanced in a number of ways through various media. For example, students can participate in self-directed learning, collaborate on group projects or exchange homework ideas. Engaging with digital materials allows children and young people to enhance and strengthen their learning about an inexhaustible range of topics. Access to technology provides young people with essential skills necessary for future roles in adulthood.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Paulína Bartošiková, "Kresťan vo Vire Digitálnej Doby [A Christian in a Surge of the Digital Era]," *Logos 4* (April 2020), <https://www.milost.sk/logos/clanok/krestan-vo-vire-digitalnej-doby>.

<sup>9</sup> The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists, "The Impact of Media and Digital Technology on Children and Adolescents" (May 2018), <https://www.ranzcp.org/news-policy/policy-and-advocacy/position-statements/media-digital-technology-impact-on-children>.

## Problematic Internet Use (PIU)

Whilst there is no internationally agreed definition on what constitutes PIU, a sensible working definition is the following: “the pervasive long term and heavy use by a person of internet and computer-based technologies, including gaming, that is out of keeping with one’s educational, social or occupational role, wellbeing and health.”<sup>10</sup> Some authors and commentators consider that PIU—in its most severe form—could be considered an addictive condition (Internet addiction), showing features such as dependence, mood alteration, tolerance, withdrawal and harm to psychosocial functioning. PIU is becoming increasingly recognized as having a potentially significant impact on mental health to varying degrees and not all types will require specialist mental health intervention. If such problems exist with other mental health disorders, such as depression, anxiety, distress, and substance abuse, it is important that these are assessed and treated. As PIU is relatively new and not formally recognized as a mental disorder, research into treatment is still at an early stage.<sup>11</sup>

## Negative Impact on Young People

Some examples of negative impact of modern technology on children and young people include the following—unproductive leisure time, a lack of meaningful interests of the child, passivity, one-sided personality development, neglect of academic responsibilities, growing addiction, cyberbullying, poor social interaction, low empathy, exposure to inappropriate content and health risks including obesity, impaired vision or hearing, poor attention, and sleeping disorders caused by blue light.

Moreover, young people can experience the following in today’s virtual world:

- **Discrimination:** the Internet is an open space accessible for everyone to express what they like or do not like. Children and adolescents can experience intolerance, racism, xenophobia, extremism and hate speech—an abusive, hateful expression, discriminating a person or a group based on something like race, ethnicity, religion, or sexual orientation;
- **Gaming and gambling;**

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<sup>10</sup> Paul Tam, “Virtual Addiction: A 21st century affliction,” *Finance Matters* (Summer 2011): 6.

<sup>11</sup> The RANZCP, “The Impact of Media and Digital Technology on Children and Adolescents.”

- Internet fraud: internet scams, hacking, illegal streaming, copyright infringement;
- Inappropriate encounters, grooming and sexual abuse: Grooming is building a close friendship and emotional connection with a child in order to manipulate, exploit or abuse them. Also creating relationships with random people (chatting) has become very common among young people;
- Cyberbullying: a form of bullying through a computer, mobile phone or the Internet. It includes abusive and aggressive expressions such as comments on photos, sending hateful messages and insults, posting photoshopped or private pictures, spreading rumors on social media, and impersonating someone online to hurt them;
- Happy slapping: using a mobile phone to record a bullying incident that may include one or more kids slapping, hitting, kicking or punching the victim and then sharing it online;
- Inappropriate content: this includes nudity, violence and violent videos, verbal aggression and profanity, hate speech, promoting intolerant and extreme behavior, substance abuse and drugs, weapons, as well as various content that may induce fear, anxiety, depression, or feeling of threat. Further extremes such as anorexia, bulimia and self-harm are frequently displayed through websites, forums and blogs initiated by young individuals;
- Unwanted content: spam, hoaxes, computer viruses, adverts, etc.;
- Misuse of personal data.<sup>12</sup>

## How to Protect Children from Dangers of the Virtual World?

Responsibility for media literacy as well as appropriate and safe use of technology exists at several levels, that is, family, school, community, and government. All levels should work in order to minimize potential harms. Parents, carers, and those working with young people should be made aware of the benefits and potential problems associated with media use. They should be encouraged to acquire knowledge on these topics to be able to help young people set reasonable limits as far as media usage is concerned in a way that enhances their development and minimizes problematic use.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Dominika Briliaková, “Nástrahy Digitálneho, Online Sveta pre naše Deti [The Risks of Digital Online World for Our Children]” (April 2021), <https://www.zskomnam.sk/article/sk/nastrohy-digitalneho-online-sveta-pre-nase-deti>.

<sup>13</sup> The RANZCP, “The Impact of Media and Digital Technology on Children and Adolescents.”

Miro Drobný and Monika Gregussová in their *Deti v Sieti* [Children in a Web] publication offer the following advice for parents:

(1) Early Prevention

The authors recommend speaking openly with children about potential risks early enough, before they experience these risks themselves. Do not hesitate to start the discussion about drugs, self-harm, suicide, occult groups, violence and abuse through other people's life stories. Provide them with your views and opinions as to why some people behave in certain ways and most importantly, discuss what consequences such behavior may have in the future. It is much more effective when the child can identify these risks themselves rather than having them presented by their parents. The sooner parents initiate such conversations, the more likely the child is to pay attention and learn from it.

(2) Access restrictions/Parental control

Several types of blocking software are available to restrict or entirely prevent access to age-inappropriate sites, including those featuring pornography, drugs, violence, abusive content, or content that may be frightening for children. Many sites nowadays, like YouTube, offer this function already without needing to download any additional software. Similarly, many Internet and mobile providers offer this service as well. It controls the access to the specific site by comparing URLs with clearly defined categories set out in the database of these sites. Based on the results, it either allows or blocks the access. While there are certain advantages of access restriction, this is only a partial solution.

(3) Solid relationship foundation

The best protection against dangerous impact of the Internet is having strong and secure relationships in reality. A child with a supportive family background knows that they can rely on their parents in situations when they come across something they do not understand or makes them scared, when there is anything that bothers them, when they are in trouble or make mistakes. They are less likely to look for the solution in self-harm, drug use or violence towards the others. It is also much easier for the child to resist manipulation and pressure in the real world but also in the virtual one.

(4) Critical thinking

It is crucial to teach children how to think critically, meaning that not everything found on the Internet is true, not everyone has good intentions, and the online world contains both positive and negative aspects. They might stumble upon something harmful unintentionally or simply out of curiosity. Unfortu-

nately, there is no way parents can create a world that keeps their children from encountering such content. Therefore, children need to learn how to differentiate, create their own opinion and choose what is right.

(5) Showing interest in the life of the child

Pay attention to your child's day-to-day life. Initiate conversations about their positive experience and accomplishments. Consider their friendships—are they getting along with friends? Are they doing well at school? Do they engage in hobbies that bring them joy? On the other hand, is there anything that bothers them, triggers self-doubt or low confidence, or anything causing feelings of loneliness? Extra attention and support is needed in moments of significant life events, such as the loss of their best friend, heartbreak, or experience of their parents' divorce. Pay attention to the child's behavior, habits, feelings and expressions, especially when something changes unexpectedly. You may not notice the first signs of an eating disorder, self-harm or drug use, but it is much more challenging for the child to mask them later. One of the first warning signs may be the type of websites the child visits the most often.

(6) Seek support

If you have a suspicion that your child suffers from any of the above, be proactive and do not hesitate to seek support. The sooner these problems are addressed, the better the chance for a positive outcome and resolution. Otherwise, ignoring these signs could lead to serious and potentially fatal consequences.<sup>14</sup>

As technology is becoming more widely used in schools from an early age, there needs to be a commensurate program of media literacy and responsible media use in schools to cover issues of cyber safety. It is recommended that educational input begin as soon as children first encounter technology.<sup>15</sup>

## Conclusion

Technologies have always been and will continue to be developed with a specific purpose, an idea, and a goal. A saying “good servant but bad master” can be applied in relation to technology. We have to make sure they serve us and not

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<sup>14</sup> Miro Drobný and Monika Gregusová, “Deti v Sieti; Ako Chrániť Seba a naše Deti na Interneti [Children in a Web; How to Protect our Children and Ourselves on the Internet]” (2013), <https://www.zodpovedne.sk/index.php/sk/component/jdownloads/finish/1-knihy-a-prirucky/9-kniha-deti-v-sieti-2013-14?Itemid=0>.

<sup>15</sup> The RANZCP, “The Impact of Media and Digital Technology on Children and Adolescents.”



the other way around. Undoubtedly, there are many advantages of using modern technology, especially in these rushed times. In this paper, I have highlighted the dangers of the technocratic paradigm, which is trying to manipulate people, especially adolescents. Although I have provided advice to parents on how to supervise their children, it is challenging to maintain constant control. In the modern virtual world, ancient Catholic wisdom—God sees you even if no one sees you—appears more valid than ever before.

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## Avantages et risques pour les jeunes dans l'environnement virtuel

### Résumé

L'objectif principal de cet article est d'identifier les avantages et les risques de l'environnement virtuel pour les enfants et les jeunes. Le point de départ est une analyse du paradigme technocratique, qui met l'accent sur une vision utilitaire du monde. Dans leurs principes directeurs ou philosophies, les grandes entreprises technologiques s'attachent non seulement à améliorer la conception et l'ergonomie de leurs produits, mais aussi à faire en sorte que ces produits façonnent les intentions et les habitudes de quelqu'un. Les enfants et les jeunes sont confrontés au risque de la numérisation. Cependant, il ne fait aucun doute que la technologie influence les jeunes également de manière positive. Plusieurs avantages ont été mentionnés dans cet article, comme l'amélioration des compétences techniques des jeunes, leur créativité, leur travail de conception, etc. Néanmoins, la communauté psychologique australienne préconise la reconnaissance de l'utilisation problématique d'Internet (Problem Internet Use – PIU) comme un diagnostic justifié – la dépendance à Internet. En outre, le monde numérique présente d'autres risques tels que la cyberintimidation, la fraude, les abus sexuels et bien d'autres encore. C'est pourquoi nous concluons par quelques conseils aux parents sur la manière de protéger leurs enfants des dangers potentiels du monde virtuel.

Mots-clés: anthropocentrisme, utilisation problématique d'Internet, paradigme technocratique, les jeunes

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## Opportunità e insidie per i giovani nello spazio online

### Sommario

Lo scopo principale di questo articolo è quello di evidenziare le opportunità e le insidie dell'ambiente virtuale per i bambini e i giovani. Il punto di partenza è l'analisi del paradigma tecnocratico il quale enfatizza una visione utilitaristica del mondo. Nei loro principi guida o filosofia, le grandi aziende tecnologiche si concentrano non solo sul miglioramento del design e dell'ergonomia dei loro prodotti, ma anche sul garantire che questi prodotti formino le intenzioni e le abitudini delle persone. I bambini e i giovani si trovano ad affrontare il rischio della digitalizzazione. Indubbiamente, però, le tecnologie influiscono positivamente anche sui giovani. Questo articolo menziona diversi vantaggi come il miglioramento delle competenze tecniche dei giovani, della loro creatività, del lavoro di progetti e così via. Tuttavia, la comunità psicologica australiana propone di riconoscere l'Uso Problematico di Internet (PIU) come diagnosi legittima, ovvero una dipendenza da Internet. Inoltre, il mondo digitale fornisce altre minacce come il cyberbullismo, la frode, l'abuso sessuale e molte altre. Pertanto, in conclusione, presentiamo anche alcuni consigli per i genitori su come proteggere i propri figli dai possibili pericoli del mondo virtuale.

Parole chiave: antropocentrismo, uso problematico di Internet, paradigma tecnocratico, giovani