Written evidence submitted by Dr Bex Lewis, Senior Lecturer in Digital Marketing, Manchester Metropolitan University (SMH0093)

Author of *Raising Children in a Digital Age: Enjoying the Best, Avoiding the Worst* (Lion Hudson, 2014), which the *Financial Times* described as 'sensible' in a sea of scare books.

Executive Summary:
1. Screentime is not necessarily bad, and should be measured on its own terms.
2. Understand the online environment, and how children are actually using it.
3. Are screens so very different from other tools, e.g. books
4. Understand technological determinism versus social shaping of technology.
5. Are people *really* addicted to the internet?
6. Would a fixed screen time work?
7. A brief note on age verification.
8. The social benefits of online communities
9. Using technology for health benefits, including mindfulness
10. We need to listen to the children.
11. Care with the language used required, and who should be involved.
12. The digital as part of wider culture.
13. Challenging assumptions: digital is not separate from 'real life'.

Expert Voice
I am frequently called as an expert voice on the topic of children and the internet on the media, with the topic of screen-time and 'addiction' growing over the past few years: http://drbexl.co.uk/press/, and have collected some news stories related to screen time and 'addiction': https://wakelet.com/wake/57b64b41-0329-4a8e-a8d2-bdef29068bf1. I have particular interests in understanding digital culture and the digital environment, identifying positive uses, and in digital literacy.

I am still undergoing cancer treatment, so don't have the capacity to write huge swathes of original material, but want to be able to contribute in some way to a topic for which I have undertaken research, and am a positive voice for the positive use of technology and social media.

Evidence Submitted:
1. We need to challenge the impression that we are given in much media discourse that screen-time is necessarily 'bad'. 'Online' communication is viewed as second-rate, as we see from Livingstone: "Even though … face-to-face communication can… be angry, negligent, resistant, deceitful and inflexible, somehow it remains the ideal against which mediated communication is judged as flawed." Livingstone, S., *Children and the Internet: Great Expectations, Challenging Realities,* 2009, p. 26. The LSE project on children and the media is an excellent resource: http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mediapolicyproject/category/childrenmedia/.

2. If we start from the default position that all screen-time is bad (and all equally bad, challenged by this Business Insider article), then we start by looking for solutions to a problem, assuming causation where there may only be correlation. We need to understand the digital environment as it is,

consider our own attitudes and how they shape our fears and expectations. This section from my book deals specifically with screen-time (p176-178):

a. Ever since the 1999 American Academy of Pediatrics discouraged television viewing for children younger than two, citing that age group's critical need for "direct interaction with parents" and others, we've been left with the impression that screen time is bad.[3] As Hanna Rosin, a technology journalist, notes, such statements assume that an hour spent watching TV is an hour not spent doing something deemed more constructive, but, as we've already seen, most children continue to have a varied range of activities. She was visiting a developers' conference, anticipating that she would get some up-to-date guidance on screen use. She found, however, that most were proffering the same old advice, with rules including no screen time during the week, no more than half an hour a day, only on long journeys, and never use it as an e-babysitter – although one excused this as educational: "I only let her watch movies in Spanish."[4]

b. The CHILDWISE Monitor Report 2012 indicates that most children over five are getting somewhere between four and eight hours of total screen time per day, including TV, the internet, games consoles, and mobile phones. The average time spent on the internet has remained constant at around two and a half hours over the last four to five years, although an increasing number are looking at two or three screens at once. The largest amounts of time spent online involve social networking and gaming. In March 2013, the Medical Research Council in Glasgow published the results of a study involving over 11,000 children, which explored possible links between behavioural problems and children's screen time. "It found little direct connection between the two once other factors such as parental attitudes and wellbeing had been taken into consideration."[5]

c. Some parents are happy that their children spend so much time online because it shows they are passionate about something. Parents should be encouraged to help their children identify websites that encourage their passions. For example, it has been seen that those who watch online football will probably want to go out and try the game for themselves. Other parents recommend that families plan their screen time, suggesting a monthly day of no screens, screen-free time from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. in school holidays, and/or no screens in bedrooms after 9 p.m. One CHILDWISE 2012 statistic that parents may be interested in is that "those who access the Internet in their own room spend an average of two hours a day online, those accessing elsewhere at home use for just one hour a day on average".

3. As someone who grew up without a screen, the next section drew upon something I was familiar with. With no screen, I used books to embed myself

within 'another world' in a way that many refer to young people's interaction online (p182-183):

a. Hanna Rosin challenges the notion that books are inherently better than screens, **observing that her daughter tends to use books to avoid social interaction, whilst her son uses the Wii to connect with friends.**

b. Some parents have responded by treating digital technology the same way as other toys, lumping them all together in one basket. The child can play with whatever they choose from the basket. For a couple of weeks they spend hours on the digital device, as they would with any other toy, then it falls out of rotation as every other toy does, and is forgotten for several weeks.11 Effective practice includes encouraging children to see their media use as a healthy part of their whole range of activities.

4. Most of the fears parents/the media have are tied to technological determinism, which assumes that the technology itself is at fault, and that we have no choice but to go in the direction that it forces us to go in. There are still hangovers of the notion that the internet is 'virtual' and a 'wild west', rather than a reflection of our wider culture. It is the culture that surrounds and creates digital culture, and the people within it who decide, for example, what is acceptable, what is made, what and how algorithms work. We need to look more at the '<u>social shaping</u>' of technology – the <u>affordances and constraints</u> it gives.

5. A common cry (from adults and children) is "I'm addicted to the internet", and there is frequent media coverage of this topic. The EU Kids Online project interviewed 25,000 children, and found that nearly half of the children questioned were happy to describe themselves as addicted (if no specific definition was offered), as in many ways the term is seen as a "badge of honour". It was also found that only about 10 per cent demonstrated true signs of addiction, which is a specific medical condition. There is no doubt that games developers build in addictive behaviours that need regulating, but for many people, there are simply bad habits to which different solutions may work for different users. An article in [Business Insider] gives a helpful contribution to this debate.

a. We can look to where that 'addictive' affordance of much that has been built into online apps can be used positively, e.g. 'streaks' like those used by Snapchat can be used to e.g. learn languages, keep up with 'health habits', etc. http://drbexl.co.uk/2017/04/13/radio-discussing-snapchat-streaks-bbc5live/

6. Culture Secretary Matt Hancock recently suggested a limit to screen-time for children. The black/white nature of the notion of having fixed screen time doesn't work at a philosophical level, let alone at a practical level. It assumes that everyone needs the same amount of screen time, that all screen time is of equal quality, and that online/offline are fundamentally different spaces, whereas it's possible to use screen time to encourage movement whether through e.g. YouTube fitness workouts inside or e.g. undertaking geocaching or Pokemon hunting outside. If enacted, how do you manage that across multiple devices?; how is this going to impact on privacy? how many resources will be needed to 'police' this – resources which could better be invested in digital literacy courses?

7. No one yet seems to have found a way to verify age online, outside of credit card verification for 18+. Parents letting their children on before a platform's correct age is sending a wrong message about other rules, but also the platforms can't throw their hands up and say 'we say you have to be 13' ignoring all the research that shows that large numbers are on before then.

8. As a university lecturer, I have observed first-hand the real social benefits of digital media for students new to university. Social networks such as Facebook help them to integrate more quickly with their new community, while also having the support of their old community online. Working with a large number of vicars/ministers, I hear similar for their children who have moved to follow their parent's vocation. We sometimes hear them referred to as digital natives, <u>not something I'm a big fan of</u>, much preferring Dave White's <u>visitors and residents</u> theory.

9. There is a new project underway <u>https://www.digitalhealthgeneration.net/</u>, which is identifying how young people use digital and social media to access health information, including knowledge about illness/body image, etc., self-tracking, adding to our understanding of how young people use the internet. Apps such as Headspace and Calm are helpful for encouraging daily mindfulness, NHS Active 10 can encourage 10 minutes of activity a day, fitness counters can encourage game-playing in reaching certain challenges. Other websites and apps that allow people to understand what is 'normal', provide spaces to connect with others who are not geographically close by, offer spaces for advocacy, in the same way that the Facebook groups that I've participated in with regards to breast cancer have made the experience much more manageable (with the group specifically for under-45s the most active, including for fellow insomniacs). There will be further research re e.g. how digital helps autistic children – anecdotally for children with Aspergers the challenge of removing face-to-face helps focus on the message itself. There are many positives for <u>disabled users</u>.

10. As <u>Andrew Tomlinson at the BBC</u> said: "We're doing this because all the research tells us that children and young people respond best to their peers. Whether they're under pressure to take part in a dangerous prank, or to

victimise someone, or whether they're an online bully themselves, stories told by other young people are most likely to resonate and to help them cope, or change their behaviour." As Jane Tollin, Co-Executive Director, MediaSmarts (Canada): "If we want resilient kids we need to understand what young people's experiences are online, listen to their concerns, and intervene with their best interests in mind." Noting that young people 'need less surveillance and more mentorship online', she noted that "Zero-tolerance policies don't work. Encouraging trust and open dialogue is the best approach, particularly when dealing with mean and cruel online behaviour"

11. It is important that we share information re the digital environment, the digital benefits as well as the digital problems (life is not risk-free, so awareness is key to help manage any risks). We need care with the language used in referring to it via government ministers, royalty, and the media in particular, as they lead the thinking on this. Much of the work undertaken in schools focuses on e-safety, which tends to focus on the negative. Elements of that are important, but if it could be balanced with the positive opportunities offered, if parents are given confidence to understand this, extended friends and family as well as schools, church childrenswork and youth groups (a particular interest I want to research further), along with government legislation and social media companies considering the impact of the decisions that they are making, and underwriting further academic research that can allow intelligent decisions to be taken, and advice given, especially with regards to causation rather than correlation. There is a challenge because the topic is one that everyone has an interest in, and feels they can voice an opinion on, but the more expert evidence-based research, the better.

12. As I presented in November, we need to consider the external environment within which digital technology sits (the pressure from SATs, the fear of going outside without parents, political/economic fears, etc.) and understand how it's being used within a whole load of other pressures of life. Boundaries need to be set, government and social media companies should look at what they can do to support parents, we need to understand how children are using the internet - don't assume that they *can't* self-regulate, talk to them, ask what they are doing, make good use of social media agreements, encourage conversations between children and their responsible adults. Understand that online can be offline life amplified, so those that already have a tendency towards depression are likely to find that magnified, whereas others may find it helpful.

13. We need to see the digital/rest of life less as either/or *or* online/offline … but as different aspects of one life. Think how do they all work together? What can each tool/form of communication do well? What are the realities of the things that parents and others fear, and what are the assumptions that need challenging such as with the Rembrandt 'kids on phones' story, where they were actually looking up information about the artwork on the app, *not* ignoring the artwork.

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