Audio file

Transcript

00:00:00 Roz Pacey

Hello and welcome to the OII podcast from the Oxford Internet Institute, part of the University of Oxford. The OII podcast looks at issues and developments in the digital world that matter to us all.

00:00:12 Roz Pacey

Today we're joined by Professor Andrew Przybylski and Dr. Sakshi Ghai. Andrew is professor of human behaviour and technology here at OII. His research seeks to find evidence on how the Internet and digital age is affecting our lives.

00:00:26 Roz Pacey

Sakshi is a postdoctoral researcher at OII and investigates the effects of digital technologies on adolescent well-being, with a particular focus on those living in sub-Saharan Africa, South and Southeast Asia.

00:00:38 Roz Pacey

Hello, I'm Roz Pacey, welcome.

00:00:41 Andy Przybylski

Hi.

00:00:42 Sakshi Ghai

Thank you for having us.

00:00:43 Roz Pacey

Today we're going to discuss how the digital world is affecting society and individuals. So what concerns are we seeing about tech usage?

00:00:53 Andy Przybylski

Well, so I think most of the concerns that we have about tech usage, at least the ones that make headlines are those that kind of draw a sharp and maybe artificial line between the online and the offline.

00:01:04 Andy Przybylski

World and so normally when we think about harms or we think about how the Internet or games or platforms might impact well-being of young people in particular, we compare how they use technology to maybe what our experiences were and we use that as a guide. So many of these things were cycle over time you know concerns about.

00:01:24 Andy Przybylski

Screen time or playing too much video games, or, you know, contacting strangers or being contacted by.

00:01:31 Andy Przybylski

Dangers those tend to be kind of the perennial concerns, but then others will come kind of rise and fall. Things about, say, the unrealistic depictions of beauty, peer pressure, aspects of bullying that's facilitated by some aspects of platforms, those, those, those typically are the ones that rise to the surface.

00:01:53 Andy Przybylski

And and I say that because in many cases, those actually aren't the things that might actually be most harmful or more most visible about how the Internet is used and misused.

00:02:05 Roz Pacey

And what's the evidence? Tell us about the impact living in a digital world has on our well-being.

00:02:10 Andy Przybylski

Well, the main piece of evidence that I take away from studying this for the past more than a decade is that it's very easy to write a paper that pokes at the Internet and points out and problematizes it. And so, you know, the main thing that you get from looking at the research literature is that there have been these cycles of panic or cycles of concern and they kind of ebb and flow. So while today we're talking about TikTok two years ago, we were quite worried about Instagram. Four years before that, it was Pokémon Go, World of Warcraft, violent video games, you name it.

00:02:45 Andy Przybylski

So the evidence base kind of shifts overtime. It doesn't necessarily get any better. Sometimes it gets a little worse, but its focus is always changing to whatever the technology that the kids are using today.

00:02:56 Roz Pacey

I see. And when we consider social media in particular. Are there any specific well-being concerns with that?

00:03:03 Andy Przybylski

Well, yeah. So I mean there are there are the obvious ones today, which is that you know upward or downward social comparisons, unrealistic standards of beauty. Those are the ones that have talked about most frequently, but I think that the really it's important to be a bit more concrete than that to move away.

00:03:20 Andy Przybylski

From.

00:03:20 Andy Przybylski

Things like how we might have moral or norms-based feelings about how teenagers spend their time and and really try to prioritize studying those things that might be acutely or concretely harmful. Things having to do with, say.

00:03:33 Andy Przybylski

Child online sexual exploitation and very dangerous forms of technology use like operating a motor vehicle while using a phone.

00:03:43 Roz Pacey

We know that there are concerns about children's use of technology. What do we know about the impact it has on their development and their well-being specifically?

00:03:50 Sakshi Ghai

The research in the space just to pick up and build on what Andy was saying is very mixed. When we look at the effects of social media on both young people's well-being but also adolescent.

00:04:03 Sakshi Ghai

Development. So of course, on one hand we see a lot of research that largely looks at correlational evidence, highlighting the link.

00:04:12 Sakshi Ghai

The rise of social media use and the rise of mental health disorders, on the other hand, there's been also research in the last five years or six years or so, which is much more robust and open, which is sort of debunking some of these earlier findings that really paint a very horrifying.

00:04:32 Sakshi Ghai

Picture of how social media use affects young people. So really what we're seeing in the last few years is almost this.

00:04:43 Sakshi Ghai

Meta scientific shift in in the way scientists are trying to debate, debunk some of these early findings and where we are with it now is that we have a lot of work from our group that looks at and has debunked and points to the fact that actually there are.

00:05:03 Sakshi Ghai

no sort of strong evidence to suggest and highlight this negative correlational link, and this is work from Matti Vuorre and Andy himself. And they've looked at.

00:05:17 Sakshi Ghai

In a global study of over 168 countries, so really, really trying to cover very much most of the world's population and not just a handful of countries in the West to highlight how the evidence base is actually does not look as bleak as some of.

00:05:36 Sakshi Ghai

As some as some of what we hear and pick up constantly in the media.

00:05:40 Sakshi Ghai

So I would say that the past, while the evidence has been mixed, there's been new research that is now highlighting that actually it's not negative. And naturally, you know there is no simplified and neat answer with establishing such a link because it's very nuanced and it you know, we can unpack some of these factors of what really, truly affects because one can almost imagine.

00:06:03 Sakshi Ghai

There are a host of factors structural environment genetic that impacts mental health of young children. So where technology fits in into this debate and this is really an important question, but again picking up on what Andy was saying, it's really important to start thinking more deeply about.

00:06:23 Sakshi Ghai

What some of these really harmful risks are versus what some of the risks we might perceive are, are, are harmful.

00:06:32 Roz Pacey

Sakshi, I heard you say the word meta science. Can you explain what that is and why that's important?

00:06:37 Sakshi Ghai

Yeah. So it's been really interesting in the world of science and scientific research over the last 10 years, we've seen this sort of sub discipline within science, which is emerging, where scientists across different.

00:06:53 Sakshi Ghai

Fields, but also within psychology also within everyone who studies digital technology are rising up to the occasion and really trying to to study the world of science. It's almost the science of science or it's research on research.

00:07:06 Sakshi Ghai

And really trying to look at some of the scientific practices that that have been employed over the last few years. So whether that's the way we analyze our data. So our data analytical practice is the way we sort of pick our measures, but also the way we make our work transparent and open.

00:07:26 Sakshi Ghai

And there's been sort of a host of issues within the within the psychology community in the last decade that really has put to question the value of psychology and the value of what some of the findings we hear in the media that have really been popular are even.

00:07:44 Sakshi Ghai

True. So there's been a rise of replication crisis in psychology for the last almost over a decade now, and this meta research or meta science has really emerged as a consequence to answer that.

00:07:59 Andy Przybylski

And I think you know Sakshi's right to highlight meta science here because it's particularly important when we're studying kind of in high stakes areas and we're focused on something like the study of the Internet and young people and their mental health and well-being because it's absolutely essential to get this right and to not be kind of calibrating our policy or our advice or our decision making.

00:08:19 Andy Przybylski

Around technology and young people to what our pre-existing biases.

00:08:24 Andy Przybylski

The the reform, the meta science reform movement in psychology and the behavioral sciences really does place special emphasis on transparency and reproducibility and and kind of collecting and understanding your data in a way that gives you an opportunity to to test and maybe even disconfirm your pre-existing biases. And so the Internet and and and our thoughts about how young people.

00:08:44 Andy Przybylski

Use it. It's very politically charged. It's very personally charged.

00:08:48 Andy Przybylski

And so one of the really nice things about meta science and these techniques that and the emphasis on transparency that's actually talking about is that it it provides us an opportunity to kind of see these problems and these challenges through a new lens, a little bit of a debiasing lens in in a way that absolutely right could help us debunk things but also help us.

00:09:08 Andy Przybylski

Understand more deeply where, where our pre-existing beliefs might be blinding us either to harms or or to solutions.

00:09:15 Roz Pacey

Andy, you mentioned a study with 168 countries involved. So for those that are growing up in the Global South, is there much research showing how they're affected by screen time and Internet use?

00:09:28 Sakshi Ghai

Yeah. So let me just start off by saying first that actually much of the existing work in this space that looks at the impact of social media and adolescent well-being has largely focused on the Global North so this study which which with within our group with which represents 168.

00:09:47 Sakshi Ghai

Countries is really the first of its kind.

00:09:51 Sakshi Ghai

To look at the effects broadly across the world, and having said that, there is of course the other side of the equation which often gets missed out, which is that actually these parts of the world, which is the global South which comprises of Latin America, Africa, Asia really constitute almost.

00:10:11 Sakshi Ghai

88% of the world's population, but more than that, it's the majority of our adolescents. So I think it's really promising to have one study that really does account and paint a picture globally.

00:10:26 Sakshi Ghai

But I think we need a lot more work in this in this space to help us disentangle the effects of screen time, and I will very quickly say that given the structural and the socio economical and cultural differences, it's also very hard to put global South in one box in my own work, we've tried to sort of, really.

00:10:48 Sakshi Ghai

Let's entangle each of the continents and look at what are the impacts and risks and opportunities of social media use and digital well-being.

00:10:56 Sakshi Ghai

Across the different continents. So how children growing up in Africa might face very different challenges versus in Asia. While there are a lot of similarities, there are also very unique challenges and that you know that. So for example, in Africa, if the scientific priorities are really on primary healthcare or basic education.

00:11:16 Sakshi Ghai

And perhaps looking at the impact of digital media use and young young children's well-being is not the most important or the most culturally salient question. On the other hand,

how we think of technology in the West is also very different of how we think about technology in the global South, I mean, I.

00:11:37 Sakshi Ghai

Grew up there and growing up in India now.

00:11:40 Sakshi Ghai

You know, the technology has really penetrated through the rural villages and there sometimes we may see you know, technology in the hands of a child that might be used for learning and not just learning as a supplement. That might be the only access to education they might have. So I think it's also trying to understand.

00:12:01 Sakshi Ghai

The context and you know really really. So the screen time we think about which is scrolling through social media might actually be enabling education or employment opportunities for some of these.

00:12:15 Sakshi Ghai

Young adolescents growing up.

00:12:18 Andy Przybylski

I think that's absolutely right. And and I think that if we even look at a country like the UK, you can immediately see the the types of cultural specific lenses that we we have and we project onto how we study the Internet. And I'll just take the example of this idea of a digital divide, which is kind of consumed policy and and thinking in the UK and and.

00:12:37 Andy Przybylski

In in in high, high, high income countries for the last 15 or so years that it's you know extremely important that we equip people in rural areas with high speed broadband to unlock different types of economic opportunity.

00:12:52 Andy Przybylski

Communities and and this is very specific to to our culture and to our conversation. And you know there may be two or three big conversations like that here in the UK that kind of guide it's guided by commerce and it's guided by by how capitalism is organized here. But but in all the different places that Sakshi's talking about, you know, even even within a region even within a country.

00:13:13 Andy Przybylski

There are agendas that are just as big and looming as these.

00:13:17 Andy Przybylski

And so when we study the Internet, even here at the OII, we do tend to study it through the lens of the big debates about screen time and phones destroying a generation and and. And we really are are projecting that onto a whole set of populations, mostly young people who who would barely understand.

00:13:37 Andy Przybylski

The the the basic premise, the basic premise of these debates that we're taking so seriously, whether it's here in Whitehall or or in the US Congress.

00:13:48 Roz Pacey

So if we think a little bit more about those children, those young people that are growing up in the global South, in India, in Africa, are there specific challenges they face? You've talked a little bit about the benefits, but are there any risks that they're facing that haven't been studied so much?

00:14:03 Sakshi Ghai

Yeah. And I think with when it comes to risks, one can almost imagine the risks that we often talk about, especially on adolescent well-being. Like Andy mentioned, whether it's body image comparisons and so on and so forth, that impacts young children negatively can almost imagine.

00:14:23 Sakshi Ghai

Having very similar risks in the global South.

00:14:26 Sakshi Ghai

However, I think when it comes to really thinking more deeply about how some of these risks might be amplified. So I raised this idea that the impact of social media or the risks and benefits associated with social media use or digital media use perhaps might be more amplified.

00:14:47 Sakshi Ghai

In these contexts, because of the cultural differences, but also because of the digital divide.

00:14:52 Sakshi Ghai

And to take a more concrete example, when we think about digital divide or even when we think about social media use, we often think about screen time and we think about and and the way we measure screen time in the West is very much. Do you have a smartphone now in India and rural India? And this is this is 1 qualitative from a.

00:15:12 Sakshi Ghai

Small qualitative research study that I did during my PhD, which was really looking at young adolescents and women in Northern rural India to try and understand the impact of digital inclusion exclusion on them.

00:15:26 Sakshi Ghai

And I think they're one of the stock things that really stood out. Was that digital inequalities coexist with other inequalities like gender. So there the challenge was that actually women or young women were not being given access to the phones, not because of fear of screen.

00:15:46 Sakshi Ghai

Time or not, because of sort of the same moral panics like Andy was alluding to that we think about in the West, but actually for very different they were very different moral panics that emerged. So, for example, the culture of honor, which is very prevalent in.

00:16:02 Sakshi Ghai

The South Asian belt where, you know, women have very restricted mobility outside the house, women have very little access to educational opportunities outside the house. Women have very little access to employment. Having the phone in their hand and having their own phone and a phone that's not owned by their brother or by their husband.

00:16:21 Sakshi Ghai

And that they have their own access and agency to, I would argue has has negative impact. The digital exclusion has negative impact possibly on their well-being.

00:16:33 Sakshi Ghai

So I think in every context, if we really start to disentangle the impact is going to be very different, but also very nuanced. And if we take the case of the UK, I mean, even if we compare it with a global North Country, I think thinking more deeply about, you know, how between.

00:16:52 Sakshi Ghai

Not only is, is are we are we not thinking about screen time and digital media use between these countries, but also within our country, even in the global North there are ethnically diverse socioeconomically diverse different sexual minorities.

00:17:08 Sakshi Ghai

That might be differently affected, and I think in all our conversations and in all our language around when we raise these concerns, I think we we're we're not paying attention to the populations that are hit hardest, but that might need the most attention and.

00:17:28 Sakshi Ghai

You know, that's really where we really need to with a microscope, try to understand what some of these amplified risks are, which might be online child sex abuse and might not be so much of the sort of fears that we think might emerge from just screen time.

00:17:45 Roz Pacey

And overall, do you think the rise in digital technologies can help to break down some of the inequalities we see between the West and the global South?

00:17:52 Sakshi Ghai

Yeah, I think that's a complex question which requires a more complex answer, but I think we can almost imagine it doing a little bit of both. So on one hand.

00:18:05 Sakshi Ghai

Digital media, or digital access in and of itself has been a big leveller.

00:18:12 Sakshi Ghai

In many parts of the global South. So for example, a child in, whether it's rural Ethiopia or rural Bangladesh, getting access to the same quality of education through YouTube or through whatever medium that they have access to, can almost be.

00:18:33 Sakshi Ghai

Huge leveler. On the other hand, of course, it's also exacerbated a lot of the inequalities that exist between the West and the global South because.

00:18:42 Sakshi Ghai

Even the way technology has developed in its design, it has been predominantly from the based in the Silicon Valley, Oregon, you know, handful of a handful of companies that are largely based in the North America. And I think that really puts the power asymmetries.

00:19:02 Sakshi Ghai

And that really puts the OR raises the question of how power asymmetries between the West and the global South play out, where a lot of the global South, and this is this is true for how?

00:19:15 Sakshi Ghai

Not only global South children, but also true for other young adults that are growing up in the global South who are going to very soon, even the ones that are digitally excluded in the next 4-5 years or so, are going to very soon see an increase in access. But the kind of problems.

00:19:35 Sakshi Ghai

And even when it comes to content moderation that we are thinking about and what are the buffers and safeguards we can put for children in the global South is not something that is coming from from these technology companies.

00:19:51 Sakshi Ghai

In the way that they should, given that much of the these populations may use digital media in a different language. So there are all sorts of sort of these risks.

00:20:06 Andy Przybylski

I agree with what Sakshi is saying and and I would, I would, I would provide only one caveat to say that I think that the one one of the most effective ways that it might be leveling is that it gives us the potential for a higher level of transparency or a higher level of visible.

00:20:22 Andy Przybylski

Ability uh, you know, both between and within cultures that would otherwise not be available. And that's a big part of the leveling that's actually was talking about at least, at least for me. But I think there's something much more interesting that that could happen in the future, which is that you know the the advantages that that come with you know.

00:20:42 Andy Przybylski

Democratizing access to different types of technology it it does do a little bit to erode those pre-existing kind of structures. Power structures and industrial structures and economic structures.

00:20:53 Andy Przybylski

That would have made it harder for someone to learn in a part of the world about one of their interests or hobbies, or ways of making money without YouTube, simply because there was a lack of access. But, but I think that the the spread of technology of these technologies, especially with this Western and northern bent to them.

00:21:13 Andy Przybylski

It comes with its own kind of inertia. We bake in a lot of assumptions in terms of how technology should be governed and developed.

00:21:21 Andy Przybylski

And those things themselves, I'm optimistic are right, are ripe for their own kinds of disruption, which is to say that there's different ways to govern and structure these technologies than they have been in the past. In the first two or three generations over the Internet. And I really hope that the kinds of experiences and the kinds of generations that, that.

00:21:40 Andy Przybylski

That Sakshi is talking about that they actually feedback in and question some of these models in a way that actually gives provides what people in the West think of as good ideas in terms of better ways of governing and making online spaces more safe, but also more generative.

00:22:00 Sakshi Ghai

And just to sort of build on that, I think there's also this, there's also this challenge that we often, at least in the research community, are looking at this link between social media use and young people and really thinking about the very important differences.

00:22:20 Sakshi Ghai

Globally, so of course Western context versus global North versus global South differences. But I think we are almost reaching a point where we need to move beyond these over generalized global North Global South.

00:22:32 Sakshi Ghai

Differences to really start to pick up and investigate the very individual level and micro level variables that actually affect young people. So whether it's the family parental ecosystems but also the larger macro variables like culture and values and how these intersect because.

00:22:52 Sakshi Ghai

I think these are the levers that we have that can help us identify targeted whether it's interventions or it's safeguarding measures.

00:23:00 Sakshi Ghai

Or it's flourishing, I mean we almost often almost are very apologetic about the way we talk about social media use in in the lives of young people. But we rarely talk about how it actually can also contribute to whether it's increasing social connections or it's improving positive identity development.

00:23:21 Sakshi Ghai

And really, how we can reach a place where we can ensure that kids thrive in the digital world and really flourish and also ensuring at the same time they are safeguarded from some of these very deleterious harmful risks.

00:23:35 Sakshi Ghai

Without making it too polarized a topic to even debate, so I think we need to start asking deeper questions and going beyond these large global differences.

00:23:48 Roz Pacey

Thank you very much Andrew. Thank you, Sakshi.

00:23:51 Andy Przybylski

Thank you.

00:23:51 Sakshi Ghai

Thank you. Thank you so much.

00:23:53 Roz Pacey

If you would like to find out more about Andrew and Sakshi's work, follow the links attached to this podcast.