

FINDING A COMMON DOMAIN

Digital technologies have much to offer the world's young people. Their views on digital integration need to be heard.

It's an old saying that children should be seen and not heard. Yet for WSU researcher Amanda Third, such an attitude prevents us from using the power of digital devices to improve life for all children and society more broadly.

A principal research fellow in digital social and cultural research in the Institute for Culture and Society at WSU, Third has joined with colleagues to research how to ensure children's voices are heard. This has included an Australian Research Council-funded project and leading a multi-million-dollar research programme in the Young and Well Cooperative Research Centre.

"I believe that by listening to children we can get better outcomes," Dr Third says.

The team's research focuses on young people's use of digital technologies such as mobile phones and social media apps, exploring children's attitudes towards such technologies and their potential to improve young lives.

The research has been adopted by Australian telecommunications giant Telstra as part of its digital inclusion strategy and has helped the children's safety charity Alannah and Madeline Foundation support digital literacy and online safety in 2,200 schools and 900 libraries.

The team's reports have also raised public awareness of the benefits of young people's use of digital media for safety and wellbeing, particularly in creating connections within marginalised groups such as the homeless, Indigenous young people, the disabled and same-sex attracted young people.

With the Young and Well CRC, Third and her colleagues have developed evidence-based support tools such as web and mobile apps and online resources that have reached 36 million people globally.

"It's about delivering technology, programs and education in a way that meaningfully intersects with a young person's experience of life. If we don't do that, they won't buy in, and the interventions won't have impact," she says.

GLOBAL IMPACT

The team's research feeds into the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the most widely ratified treaty in history. In particular, Third is focused on promoting Article 12, which states the opinions of young people should be considered in making decisions about issues involving them. Her approach is unique internationally.

"Many people representing three generations in multiple countries have benefitted from [the team's] innovative, highly collaborative approach to changing the global conversation about youth and technology," says Anne Collier, former chair of the USA's National Task Force on Online Safety.

In 2014, ahead of UN celebrations to mark the 25th anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, Third and her team were invited to present at the opening of the Day of General Discussion. Third's group delivered a seminal report, Children's Rights in the Digital Age, which drew on 17 organisations, 16 countries, and eight languages. Appropriately, the starting point for the UN study was input on its design from members of the Young and Well CRC's Youth Brains Trust — a group of 20 people from across Australia aged between 12 and 25.

The report was distributed to more than 3.2 million recipients and has since played a key role

in setting the global agenda on children's rights in the digital age. It is also central to a larger study involving 500 children from 26 countries, who took part in workshops to discuss their experiences with information and communication technologies and their hopes and fears for the digital age. Their views on the impact of digital technology on family life, social wellbeing and political advocacy were included in UNICEF's 2017 State of the World's Children report.

"If young people can see they can play a role in setting the agenda then we are helping create the next generation of change-makers," says Dr Third.

Most recently, studies from Third and her colleagues have supported the Children's Commissioner for England to call for a General Comment on children's rights and digital media. In UN parlance, General Comments are non-binding statements that accompany UN rights. Third says they provide critical guidance to states and NGOs on the meaning and interpretation of rights and they help set agendas for policy and practice.

NEED TO KNOW

- WSU researchers are exploring how young people and technology interact
- The work has reached 36 million people globally
- It has informed UN work on the rights of the child in the digital age

POINTS OF VIEW

Third says a key challenge of her work is the difference in perspective between adults and young people about digital media. "In an area like privacy, adults worry about stranger danger and children being exposed to potential predation [whereas] kids are more worried about privacy from nosy adults. The emphasis is different."

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It is in these differences in emphasis that Third sees a potential bridge for the generation gap. She points to a recent study where young people were asked to design online scenarios around situations such as online stalking after a relationship break-up; too much time online; or even mobile phone costs. Then they sat with an adult and showed them how they would address the issue digitally. The results exceeded expectation. "We had hoped for skill transfer and for the adults to see things through the child's eyes a little bit," says Third. "But it very quickly became a conversation between adults and young people about the meaning of social media and the way digital media is reconfiguring the world for us."

Third's team published a report which outlines best-practice approaches in creating opportunities for intergenerational exchange

of knowledge around social networking and cyber safety.

BULLY BEEF

At the heart of Third's work is her commitment to using digital technologies to improve the opportunities, mental health and wellbeing of young people. "We know that, under certain circumstances, digital spaces can powerfully support young people's mental health and wellbeing, but we are yet to understand how to best support those who are most vulnerable," she says.

While she concedes cyberbullying can pose a threat to vulnerable children, Third believes there is an over-emphasis on the issue by adults and the media. "Cyberbullying stories often demonise young people and their digital and social media use," she says. "The research suggests that hyperbolic stories about how bad things can get are actually frightening young people."

The focus on cyberbullying also risks missing the bigger picture. "We are on the precipice of a new era," says Third. "Technologies such as virtual reality, augmented reality, artificial intelligence and robotics are here and while we are preoccupied with cyberbullying we are not paying enough attention to the risks and opportunities of these new developments."

Researchers are just beginning to understand what knowledge is needed to leverage the powerful potential of digital media. "Children need to be embedded in the processes of researching and designing interventions. We need a lot of goodwill to achieve these things but I am confident we will get there." ■