Author: Patrick Sims
Organisation: Project Development Officer, The National Autistic Society
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Autism and the internet: Risks and benefits

It is very difficult to know where to start with an article such as this, when the majority of people reading it will already have strong views regarding autism and the internet, including social media and online gaming.

Some may see the "mouse" as a friendly pet hamster offering comfort and security to otherwise, lonely and isolated people. Researchers such as Begley (2014) and Kranjc (2011) expound the virtues of social media as the favoured and least anxiety provoking means of social communication for many autistic people.

However others may envisage the internet as a dangerous rabid rat looking for an opportunity to wreak havoc and mayhem onto communities and to ruin lives (Ledingham and Mills 2015; McCoogan 2016).

This article will attempt to explore the middle ground by raising awareness of the risks that social media and IT in general can pose to autistic people, whilst highlighting the undoubtable advantages that technology can bring to the socially isolated if used appropriately and with caution.

Hacking

It is the names of Gary McKinnon (Ledingham and Mills 2015) and Laurie Love (McCoogan 2016) who most famously exemplify the difficulties that arise when autistic people get caught up with accusations of hacking. Both men respectively faced and are facing very long prison sentences in the USA because of allegedly hacking into various secure computer systems such as the Federal Reserve, US Army and NASA.

In 2012, the then Home Secretary, Theresa May, intervened in the Gary McKinnon case stating he was not well enough to be extradited as he was "a suicide risk" (McCoogan, 2016). Due to a change in law giving all extradition powers to the justice system, Laurie Love now has to

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convince a judge that he is not fit enough to be extradited. As of December 2016 he has been unable to do that.

As a consequence Love now faces extradition, despite many MPs writing to the then president Barack Obama vociferously arguing that he be allowed to stand trial in "his home country" (Joseph 2016, A). If found guilty, he faces up to 99 years in an American jail (McCoogan 2016; Joseph 2016, b).

McKinnon and Love have both been diagnosed as autistic whilst being investigated for computer criminal activity (Ledingham and Mills 2016). Kushner (2011) refers to the notion of the "Autism Defense" in which people use an autism diagnosis as a means of escaping a trial or a way of receiving a lenient sentence. The American legal system have made it clear that they feel this tactic is being used by Love`s Defence Team (Joseph, 2016, a).

Alternatively, the process of McKinnon, Love and others going through the criminal justice process has highlighted an otherwise unrecognised and undiagnosed condition.

Ledingham and Mills (2016) suggest that hacking is not motivated by financial gain but rather:

- attention
- adulation
- self-satisfaction
- recognition.

All of these factors suggest low self-esteem, something often found in young autistic adults (Howlin, 1997). One approach may be to work hard at building self-esteem through childhood, whilst another is to channel the autistic person`s computer skills into something positive (Begeley, 2014, Batey and Comer, 2013).

Cyberbullying

Being online can present a small risk to all of us, but being autistic does increase the risk of possible exploitation (Arora 2014):

- underage autistic children being misled or tricked into sharing pornographic images that are then used to humiliate and bully (Levine 2013).
- building friendships with who they think are teenagers with similar worries and interests, but who are in reality mature adults (Levine 2013)
- sending "personal and sexual photographs to a person that is trusted and seems committed only to have these images shared as some sick joke or prank (Levine 2013).

Cyber bullying is potentially a huge problem for some autistic people (Romano et al, Batey and Comer 2013), whether directly from on-line forums or from people using social media to increase the scale of bullying (Arora 2014).

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Case study

 I.P. had a diagnosis of autism since 12 years of age. Despite some communication differences and not always interpreting her social world totally accurately IP had a close number of good understanding friends. She did well in her A levels and was accepted at her first choice university. A group of girls were originally very friendly to IP so gained access to her email, mobile and Facebook details. When IP refused to give into pressure to buy the group luxuries such as designer clothes and jewellery (using her parents` credit cards) a campaign of malicious emails, texts and Facebook postings occurred.

A mature student who became aware of the problem went with IP to her personal tutor and sat with IP whilst she phoned her parents. Sanctions were taken against the girls and IP was set up with new social media addresses and security, as well as being given a named person to go to regarding any support that might be needed.

Parental roles

At first thought the idea of parental controls can appear to solve many problems with regard to protecting children from content deemed "unpleasant" or "inappropriate". However does the "parental control" route work short-term let alone long-term? Levine (2013) gives an example of a 10 year old boy being able to bypass these types of safety measures. There is also a risk that parents become complacent and stop taking an interest in what is occurring on their child's PC or phone.

In the majority of cases the use of IT, video games and social media are very positive activities in moderation, as long as sensible guidelines are set and enforced by parents and carers. For example being very clear about what is acceptable, and open about monitoring and checking websites (Arora (2014), Levine 2013).

Most parents would want to know what their child had been doing and with whom if they had been out for the evening and would often do some safety checking beforehand, for example where, who, how long? Have the same openness regarding computer friends and activities as you would with face-to-face socialisation (Levine 2013). Do not wait until you are worried because a sudden interest can be misinterpreted as interference or a lack of trust.

Levine (2013) discusses the issue of when does a person become old enough to be trusted? This question can open up a can of worms regarding informed consent, particularly for parents who have autistic children who are over the age of 18. Should parents who are in a position to do so, enforce this on adults because of a perceived need to protect them (Arora 2014).

Whilst not fool proof, Levine`s (2013) suggestions of parents sharing the internet experience with their children, and having regular and open discussions with them about what is safe, makes sense. As the internet means so much to so many autistic children, parents taking an interest in it would appear natural, supportive and a way to build a further bond with their child.

Addiction

The other concern for parents of autistic children and adults is that of internet/gaming/social media dependency. Autistic people appear to be at higher risk than others of addiction to, and compulsive use of, social media (Finkenauer et.al. 2012). It is easy to see how an autistic person facing daily challenges understanding and communicating in the "real world", may find sanctuary and even compensation in a world that appears safe and offers an opportunity to meet and communicate with people in a comfortable way (Shane-Simpson et al 2016).

Research also suggests that a person with "autism traits" experiencing anxiety and/or depression is in more danger of internet addiction (Ramano 2014). Mazurek and Wenstrup (2013) support these views, warning that there is a risk that pathological use of internet games can lead to anxiety, social phobia and depression as well as having a negative impact upon school attainment.

Benefits

Many autistic people report feelings of loneliness and isolation due to difficulties in interacting with other people (Begley 2014). The same author reports that a number of autistic children and adults find communicating via a computer much less stressful and a more enjoyable experience than traditional ways of maintaining friendships. No two friendships are the same so it seems really important not to devalue ones that occur online.

Levine (2013) argues that the notion of online friendships and relationships is hard for the pre-dawn internet era to understand. However, is it really more difficult to comprehend than friendships/relationships maintained by letter often with weeks/months between each response? At least social media allows for an almost instant response, sometimes even seeing the person that you are talking to. If people who have been lonely and isolated suddenly find a way to feel that they now have friends then what is the benefit of passing value judgements informing them that they are not proper friendships?

The internet is a very important tool in terms of sharing information with autistic people, their families and carers. It enables people to realise that they are not alone with their experiences as well as offering support when no one else is able to (Begley 2014, Arora 2014). It also means that organisations struggling with resources are able to offer support to a greater number of people and in a timely manner.

Online support is available all the time, not just 9.00-5.00 office hours. Dependent on the support and information required there is often no waiting time. As a parent/carer, being able to rattle off a desperate email after the children are in bed, when you are at a low ebb, knowing that you will soon get a response or support from someone who has experienced the same as you - can be the one thing that enables you to cope.

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Conclusion

This article has highlighted both positive and negative impacts that the internet, social media and gaming can have on some autistic people and their families. It has also discussed issues that may arise for parents with autistic children and suggested possible strategies. Ostensibly, and this was never the aim, the article has demonstrated that if used appropriately and in moderation computers can be of great benefit to autistic people in terms of offering a form of socialisation that meets their needs.

It can be beneficial for parents and carers in terms of accessing information and support, and of being able to share their child`s interest. Before the internet this might have been more difficult. Yes negative things can happen, but surely there are risks in all aspects of life. Are social media risks actually harder to predict than being mugged in your street, attacked in town by a gang or bullied at school? If we stopped using all inventions because there are risks or because they are hijacked by people for crime or to hurt others, life would stagnate.

The great thing about computers is that serendipity has actually meant that they are potentially the greatest ever asset for autistic people. They open up a new world of potential friends, opportunity and employment. It is perhaps the non-autistic world who has concrete thinking and needs to accept change in terms of redefining friends and socialising to include social media. The internet will not be un-invented so parents, schools and youth groups need to work together to make it as positive and beneficial as possible for autistic people. This is their great opportunity for choice and a more level playing field!

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