



# Digital Nutrition

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Part 1

# Understanding the attention economy

DIGITAL NUTRITION

# Regulation

# 1 | Regulation

Almost everything that we consume is regulated. The food we eat. The cars we drive. The medication we take.

This means we can't use a product until it has been shown to be safe for consumers.

In the digital space, we don't have these same consumer protections, because we are not the consumers. We are the product.

Or rather, our time, and our attention is the product, which is sold to advertisers.

# You are the product

## 2 | The attention economy

Your attention is the product that is being sold to advertisers. This is called the 'attention economy'.

The attention economy is built on knowing us and putting content we are drawn to in front of us, all to encourage us to spend evermore time on our devices.

The attention economy can be helpful – you might be happy about receiving a personal feed, curated just for you.

But algorithms can also target our worries and vulnerabilities, delivering content that play on our concerns.

## Discussion

Bailey, who is 12, follows several makeup artists on Instagram. She frequently likes videos about skincare routines and celebrity transformations.

After a while, her feed starts to include more posts about stronger skincare products, 'baby botox', lip fillers and other cosmetic procedures.

**Some have argued that this is targeting not just her interests, but her insecurities, and selling both to an advertiser. What do you think?**

- Why might someone who is under the age of 18 have been shown inappropriate content?
- How does this make you reflect on the ethics of the attention economy?
- Can you think of an example of this type of targeting on your own feeds?

## 3 | Algorithms are built to know us

When we go online, we leave a digital footprint, just like when you walk on the beach – a trail of information left behind about ourselves.

This information, this data, by way of the digital platforms' algorithms, informs what content and advertising you see and personalises it to you.

Knowledge is power – we should be aware of how much information social media collects about us – and how much we tell the world. Understanding this can impact the way we behave online.

## 3 | ...and make us addicted

Personalising content can also mean we see some information again and again and not see other information at all. This can change the way we think.

When everyone's digital world has become self-curated, it creates 'information silos'. We now exist in 'echo chambers' or as part of 'you-loops'.

This means you may be seeing completely different news, ideas, culture, and arguably 'facts' than someone sitting next to you on a bus or living in the same household.

**Echo chamber:** when the information you see online confirms what you already think and everyone you interact with holds the same opinion as you.

**You-loop:** When the content you see online is determined by what you have looked at before, meaning you get stuck with a limited set of information and content

## Discussion

- Think about how you use and relate to your own devices in relation to the quotation on the screen: How do they make you feel?
- Who do you think creates and designs algorithms?
- Why do you think they have been designed in this way?

**“It is not just that silky touch screen that cultivates this soothing scroll, but also it’s applications themselves which are tailored just for us – to exploit both our hopes and fears in an endless stream of constant renewal.”**

# Exercise 1

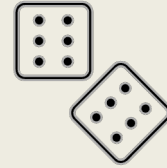
## Algorithmic resistance



**Go incognito**



**Digital spring cleaning**



**Game the algorithm**

# Hate, harm and disinformation

## 4 | The attention economy can allow harm to flourish

As well as personalising content for us, algorithms are designed to show us more and more content that will engage us; the content that grabs us, that we will react to, like or comment on.

To catch our attention, algorithms are more likely to show us something bigger, funnier, or more extreme. This content is more likely to get a reaction from us.

This creates an environment where hate, harm and disinformation can thrive: disinformation or misinformation is often more interesting or “impressionable” than the truth.

## 4 | The attention economy can allow harm to flourish

Because algorithms are designed to prioritise content that gets engagement from people, it doesn't matter if that content makes people feel bad or good, so long as they engage with it.

Content which creates an emotional response – which can include fear, insecurity or anxiety – is more likely to be prioritised. Content like this can impact our mental health.

**This is often content that is distorted from reality: more violent, more extreme, or more upsetting.**

## Discussion

Blake searches for information on a recent protest. On one news site, they see headlines emphasizing **“peaceful demonstrations for change.”**

On another, the coverage focuses on **“riots and chaos in the streets”**, accompanied by graphic videos of violence (some of which appear to be from a different country).

Why do you think the protests have been framed in different ways?

- Think about what harmful content you may have encountered online - how has this been distorted from reality to pull at your emotions? Why do you think it has been fed to your feed?
- Whose responsibility is it to make social media safe? Is it up to an individual person? Governments? Tech companies?

## Exercise 2

# The walkthrough method

Just because our media usage is personalised doesn't mean that you shouldn't talk about it with others.

Can you share

- 1 post that made you feel bad**
- 1 post that made you feel good**
- 1 post that you found interesting**
- 1 post that you questioned**



# Exercise 3

## The misinformation toolkit

- Look around
- Spot the bot
- Image conscious
- Just because you want to believe it, doesn't make it true
- Take a beat

Part 2

# Action for healthy digital habits

DIGITAL NUTRITION

# Think quality not quantity

## 5 | Think quality over quantity

We are often told to spend less time on screens or given a screen time limit of a certain number of hours a day.

But it is important to understand that not all screen time is equal. Screen-time limits do not account for the many different reasons we use devices.

## 5 | Think quality over quantity

Different types of engagement can make us feel differently – the quality or type of content being consumed.

- **Active Screen Time** which is like healthy food and involve cognitively or physically engaging in screen-based activities;
- **Passive Screen Time**, which is like junk food and includes scrolling and passive gazing

**Think about your own screen-based activities: what activities do you think count as active and passive time on screens?**

## Discussion questions

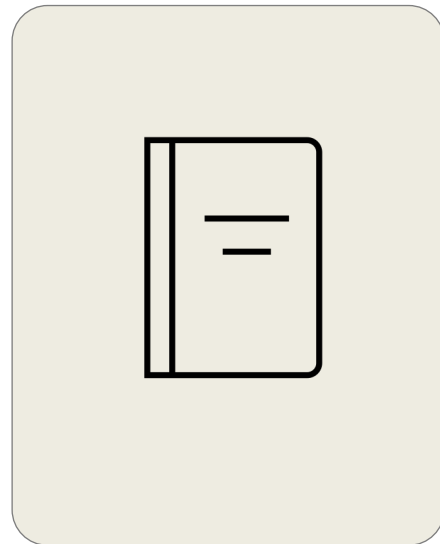
- What activities count as passive time on screens?
- What activities count as active time on screens?

## Exercise 4

# Keeping tabs on your usage

### Keep a phone-fed journal

- a. What you opened your phone/tablet to do.
- b. Where you eventually ended up.
- c. How long the session was.
- d. You can also then write down how your mood was at the end of the session. Did you feel bad, did you feel good?



# Exercise 5

## Tackling your addictions

- Turn your phone to Grayscale
- Decide your max
- Stop pushing me
- Clean up your home screen
- Limit your usage of individual apps

# A healthy digital diet

## 5 | A healthy digital diet

To have a healthy relationship with technology, we need to make healthy choices around what we consume in the same way we think about food.

We need to put good quality, positive and information rich content into our minds, and limit content that we know can make us feel bad – like eating too much junk food.

To do this, we can think about a healthy digital diet and break down our digital consumption into different categories.

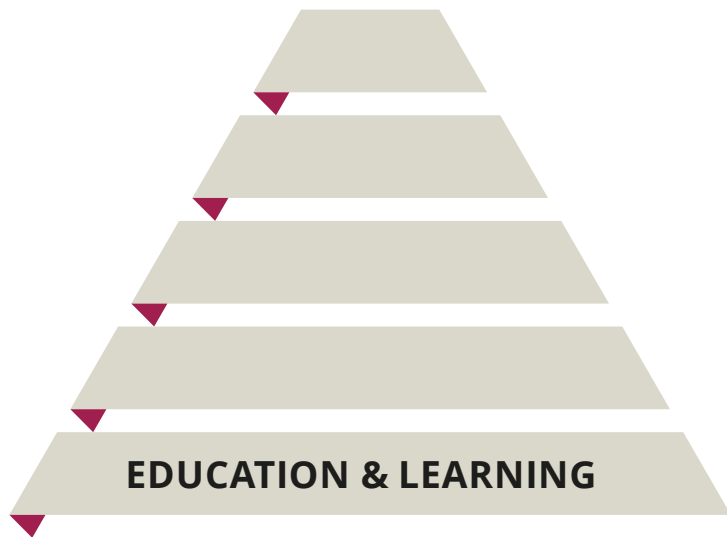


## EDUCATION

Digital technologies are now a central part of education and learning. Working to understand and identify trusted news and information sources is important.

Many young people access much of their schoolwork via apps such as Google Classroom. Educational games can also be part of a healthy digital diet, such as those for numeracy, reading or new languages.

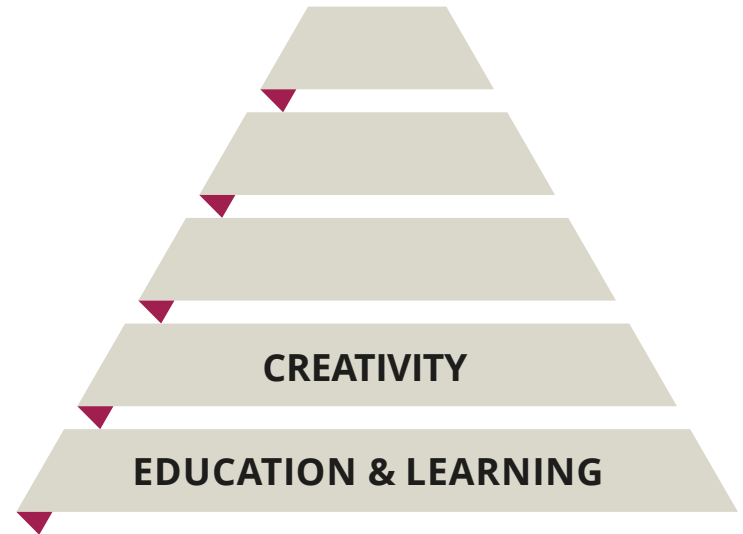
Giving young people skills online to explore topics of interest to them, and how to do this safely and critically, can support their digital literacy



## CREATIVITY

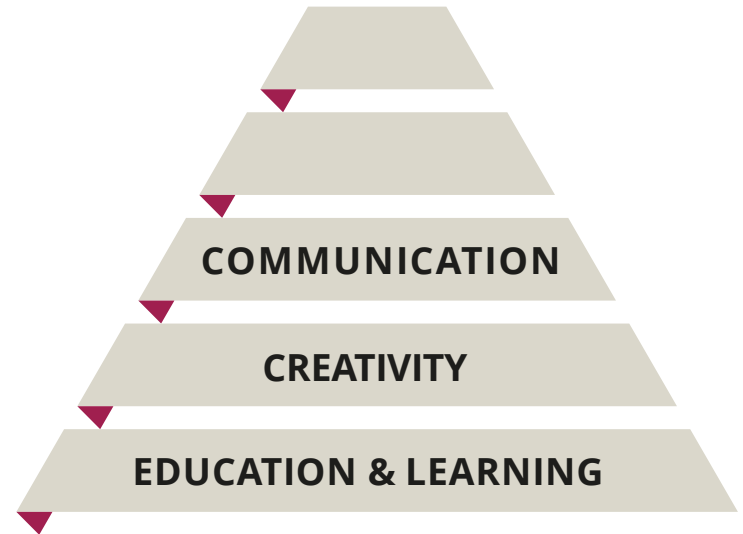
Digital tools can support creativity.

Given the known links between creative activities and wellbeing, particularly for teenagers, it can be good to encourage positive opportunities to use technology to explore creative interests, such as photography, drawing or music.



## COMMUNICATION

Communication is central to the use of technology, providing opportunities to seek and find communities among peers, as well as supporting people to feel safe by keeping in contact with family and friends.



## PARTICIPATION

Gaming and participation online can be fun and a way to support fine motor skills, problem solving and community.

Such activities should still be monitored in relation to their age appropriateness and safety concerns.



## PASSIVE

The format of the never-ending scroll can encourage consumption of content in a passive way.

This can sometimes help to relax or switch off but can be damaging when unhealthy or harmful content is delivered at high dosages.

When seeking to use technology to switch off or relax, try to use long-form or curated content.



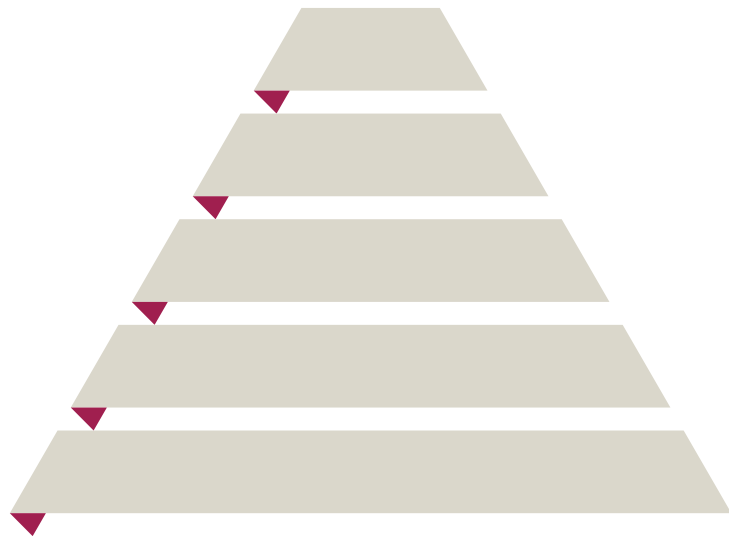
## Exercise 6

# Your current digital diet

Create a pyramid that shows how much time you are spending on each of the categories: education; creativity; communication; participation; passive.

**Once you have filled it out, ask yourself:**

- Are you happy with your current pyramid?
- Is there anything you'd like to change?
- What changes can you make?
- How can you become more active in your choices?



# Positive and negative aspects of digital usage

## Digital nutrition



### PASSIVE

Non-Interactive viewing with low level of intellectual and social engagement are often used as a way to switch off. Such forms of relaxation are reasonable in moderation but the type of content being consumed should be considered and monitored.

! Avoid long sessions of consuming content with low levels of positive stimulation.

### PARTICIPATION

Participation activities such as gaming can be a good way to have fun with friends, hone problem solving skills and as a way to relax.

! Be mindful of addictive qualities of some games and online gaming crossing into unsafe spaces.

### COMMUNICATION

Healthy communities can support wellbeing, such as chatting with friends and family on invite only networks.

! Trolling, large unregulated group chats featuring bullying, sharing toxic content.

### CREATIVITY

Art and music making practices and creativity can be supported by digital tools, such as graphics pads for drawing and music or film-making software.

! Filtering photos into unrealistic body ideals or creating disinformation.

### EDUCATION & LEARNING

Digital tools are now crucial to education. Encourage use for research and homework and by using trusted news organisations.

! Misinformation or seeking out information about damaging practices.

## Discussion questions

- What activities count as passive time on screens?
- What activities count as active time on screens?
- Can you think of a time when your phone provided you with community? Has it ever made you feel isolated or alone?
- When has something on your phone educated you? And when has it distracted you?
- When does your phone keep you safe? When does it put you in unsafe situations?

## Exercise 7

# Thinking critically about your healthy and unhealthy digital usage

In groups, write a list of the platforms and apps you use and the type of digital activities you do regularly. Use the large print outs of the cone diagram and decide where the platforms and activities on your list fit into the categories shown (it might be more than one) and write them on the diagram.

- Which digital platforms do you use most in each category (can be more than one category e.g. an app you use for communication might also fall into passive.)
- Which activities or platforms do you use for healthy use? Which activities could also slide into unhealthy? Or toxic? Use the suggestions in the category descriptions to help think of examples. Represent these in your diagrams by drawing emojis or exclamation marks.
- Share what you have done as a group with the other groups.

# Extension

DIGITAL NUTRITION

# Future ethical frameworks for technology

Social media is funded by advertising, which is buying our attention - brands want to make money from our attention, and we are willing to give it.

Brands and advertisers therefore bear some responsibility for the harm that circulates on platforms which they fund. How can we incentivise advertisers to ethically invest in social media?

This could look like a type of certification, or frameworks, that are awarded to companies that meet high standards of social and environmental performance, accountability, and transparency in terms of their social media advertising?

Do we – as a society - question the source of funds that drive tech companies need to dig deeper and deeper into our subconsciousness, holding our attention for just one more video?

# The role of government

The food we eat, the cars we drive, the medicines we use are regulated. This means that they are all tested for safety before people can use them. For digital technology, instead of testing to prove something is safe prior to hitting the market, content on digital platforms is not called into question until it is flagged as unsafe after someone has seen it.

That is different than almost everything else that we buy or put into our bodies. The Internet, and social media which followed it, were not tested – or rather, they were not tested by government agencies with regard to consumer safety. And it is (for the most part) unregulated.

Social media affects the society we live in:

- The National Police Chiefs' Council report that disinformation on social media was the primary driver for the violent disorder in the UK in August 2024.
- Lord Darzi's recent NHS report suggests that the dramatic rise in mental health needs is likely to be connected to social media.
- Ofcom has reported that young children people viewing violent content is an inevitable part of being online.

**Should governments regulate social media and digital tech companies? Can they?**

## Discussion questions

- The model of social media advertising has been described as process by which “human beings and their attention are treated as a commodity that can be harvested” – do you think this is an ethical business model? What might a more ethical model of social media look like?
- Research the role of big tech and social media whistleblowers – why do you think tech and social media companies lack transparency about their products, compelling whistleblowers to come forward?