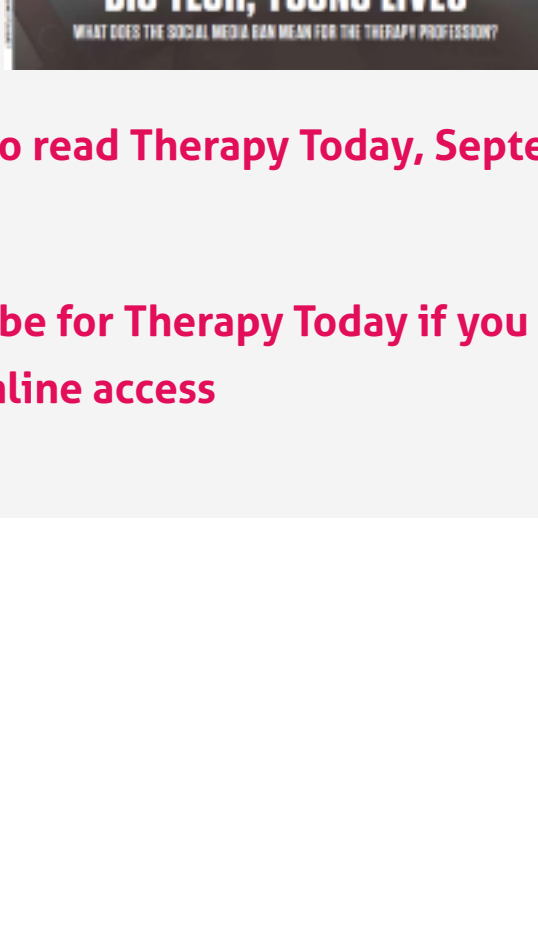


The big issue: Big Tech, young lives

Therapy Today, September 2026

Jeanine Connor explores what role therapists have in helping young clients navigate the online world

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Rarely a day goes by without a news story about Big Tech. The five US technology giants – Microsoft, Apple, Alphabet (the holding company for Google and YouTube), Amazon and Meta (which owns and operates Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp and Threads) – have a combined market value approaching \$15 trillion,¹ generated through digital advertising, cloud computing, hardware, online retail and the commercial use of consumer data. Critics, including Amnesty International, argue that their size and market dominance allow them to set the terms of global digital life: deciding how we communicate, what information we encounter and, increasingly, how long we remain engaged.²

This year the spotlight has been on the impact of social media on young people's mental health, creating intensified debate. A landmark US trial in March resulted in a seismic shift, when Meta and Google were found negligent for engineering platforms with infinite scrolling to deliberately hook young users. The case was brought by a 20-year-old woman who alleged she became addicted to various social media platforms from the age of six, leading to depression and suicidal thoughts. The jury found that Meta and Google intentionally built addictive social media platforms that cause harm, and ordered them to pay \$6 million in damages. In a separate case a New Mexico jury fined Meta \$375 million for engaging in 'unconscionable' trade practice, endangering children and exposing them to sexual predators. According to the courts, it seems that young people's declining mental health is, at least in part, a story about deliberate product design.

Meta's defence denied responsibility, highlighting instead difficult home lives and personal vulnerabilities. Although Meta and Google have stated their intentions to appeal, the outcomes have added fuel to regulatory debates globally, including here in the UK. Critics of the Online Safety Act³ say it doesn't do enough and are pushing for amendments to the bill to address deliberately addictive design features on online platforms as well as harmful content. The UK Government ran a national consultation 'Growing up in the online world' between March and May this year, but some campaigners said this was not enough and called for the UK to follow Australia's example and ban social media use for under-16s. Before he stepped down as Prime Minister in June, Keir Starmer announced that the Government would implement a ban on social media platforms offering services to under-16s, with the aim of bringing in the first set of regulations by spring 2027. It remains to be seen whether the new PM, Andy Burnham, will uphold the ban and what it will look like in reality if he does.

Whether a ban is the silver bullet campaigners hope for is a matter of much debate, but in the meantime parents, teachers and other concerned professionals are navigating conflicting advice and recommendations, with many turning to us for support in managing the potential impact of this rapidly changing landscape. So how can we ensure we are informed enough to address their concerns? And is there more we could be doing as a profession to ensure the right measures are taken to keep young people safe and enable them to thrive online and off?

These questions are undoubtedly topical, but with campaigns, lawsuits and new legislation hitting the headlines daily it's hard to keep up. As BACP registered therapists we are obligated to 'keep our skills and knowledge up to date',⁴ which is no mean feat when things are changing so fast. We also agree to 'protect the safety of clients' and 'enhance the quality of professional knowledge and its application'.⁴ These ethical values encourage us to apply our experience, knowledge and expertise both within our therapy rooms and in wider society, in the interest of the greater good.

Why banning won't work

The film *Molly vs the Machines*,⁵ shown on Channel 4 in March, is an impactful documentary with some vital messages about the impact of Big Tech on young lives. It fuses the death by suicide of 14-year-old Molly Russell in 2017 with the infiltration of Big Tech and artificial intelligence (AI). A 2022 inquest recorded the cause of Molly's death as 'an act of self-harm while suffering from depression and the negative effects of online content'.⁶ I had the privilege of meeting and chatting with cast and crew, including Molly's father Ian Russell, at a preview screening in January. What impressed me most was the shared language as we discussed 'online' and 'offline' worlds, acknowledging that both are real, and the courage, generosity and determination of everyone involved in the film to take personal tragedy and use it as a force for good.

Given his devastating loss, it might be assumed that Molly's father would support the proposed amendment to the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill to ban access to social media for under-16s. He doesn't, and says that 'Blanket bans on social media would fail to deliver the improvement in children's safety and wellbeing that they so urgently need.'

Dr Harry Dyer, Associate Professor in Education at the School of Education and Lifelong Learning at University of East Anglia and author of *Designing the Social: unpacking social media design and identity*,⁷ agrees. He believes that a ban alone will be counterproductive, pushing young people towards riskier behaviours while allowing platforms to avoid accountability. 'The announcement of a ban for young people is essentially setting up a bouncer for a building that's already on fire,' he says. 'Checking ID on the door isn't going to put the fire out, and it's going to do nothing to protect the people already inside.'

He goes on to say that data from Australia suggest that 'as many as two-thirds of young people are still using social media despite the ban, and that's likely to continue to be the case here in the UK, suggesting that this won't actually be effective in the task it sets out to accomplish'.

We all know that young people find ways to circumnavigate age restrictions – people under 18 smoke, vape, drink alcohol and watch scary or sexy movies. Under-16s engage in sex. Under-13s are active on TikTok and Snapchat. Those who oppose a social media ban – and believe that under-16s would actually adhere to it – fear the 'cliff edge' when they turn 16 and are suddenly allowed access. We know from our work that some demographics, such as those within the LGBTQ+ community, those who are neurodivergent or others who are socially isolated, depend on social media for support and connection. Banning access until they turn 16 would potentially do them more harm than good.

Jo Holmes, BACP Safeguarding Officer, adds: 'We're concerned about the potential impact on young people who rely on online platforms for support. The worry now is that vulnerable children and young people may move to less-regulated platforms, increasing their exposure to abuse, exploitation and other online harms.' She maintains that we must avoid assuming that a social media ban alone will guarantee their safety.

Some therapists argue that the digital media 'debate' is political and beyond our remit, but Aaron Balick, psychotherapist, supervisor and author of *The Psychodynamics of Social Networking*,⁸ disagrees. He believes we have a responsibility to contribute positively to the public conversation, and told me, 'The tech is going to develop with or without us, and I'd rather have us involved in a productive way. The consequences of our digital world arise in the therapy room, and our work is at the deep end of psychological complexity. You could even say we are the defenders of relational complexity.' Psychotherapist and coach Susie Masterson agrees. She told me, 'It's incumbent on all of us to keep abreast of the debates that influence public policy because we deal with the impact on our clients every day. There is a common assumption that therapy is about looking inwards, which is absolutely the case, but it's not the full story.'

Popular opinion about social media bans is divided, with two large-scale public campaigns pitted against each other. In the blue corner Mumsnet's 'Rage Against the Screen' campaign demanded that Government implements an under-16 social media ban to 'ensure children are safe online'.⁹ In the red corner the NSPCC is calling for Government to hold Big Tech to account, which, it believes, would deliver more long-term protection than implementing bans.¹⁰ This campaign is backed by Ian Russell, who cautions, 'If there were quick-fix solutions, honestly, we would have found them.'¹¹ Russell's 'slow fix' campaigning, as joint Co-Founder and Chair of the Molly Rose Foundation (mollyrosefoundation.org), helped push through the Online Safety Act,³ which makes tech companies legally responsible for ensuring safety by blocking access to harmful content. If they don't they face large fines, hitting Big Tech where it hurts.

Lacking common sense

There is evidence that new legislation is already working. Elon Musk co-founded xAI software Grok in 2023 as an alternative to, what he deems, 'politically correct' search engines and 'primitive' AI. At the launch he told reporters that Grok was designed to 'have a sense of humour' and admitted that it may 'lack common sense'.¹² Earlier this year Ofcom opened a formal investigation into Grok following accusations of conspiracy theories, antisemitism, political extremism and Nazism as well as its so-called 'nudification app'. Politically Incorrect – yes. Nonsensical – yes. Humorous – absolutely not. The app allowed users to upload photographs of anyone, without their consent, and generate naked or partially naked images in sexually provocative poses. A UK investigation by Ofcom and the Information Commissioner's Office found that Musk's xAI image-generating tool had been used to create an estimated three million sexual images in 11 days, 23,000 of which appeared to depict children. As a result the company restricted access to paying users, which was a start but not nearly good enough, because paying to non-consensually nudy images rather than being allowed to do so for free is still abhorrent. Some countries have issued Musk with hefty fines, while others have implemented a total ban on Grok.

Women's Resource Centre, an umbrella organisation for the UK women's sector, says new technologies such as Grok have created a predictable safeguarding crisis. It warns that women will 'continue to bear the cost of online "innovation", image-based abuse, deepfakes and sexualised harassment' because systems were 'designed without women's safety at their core'.¹³ They say the women most affected by image-based abuse are survivors, activists, women in public life and marginalised women who are already vulnerable. I would add younger women to that list too. Women's Resource Centre warns that AI tools 'dramatically accelerate the scale and speed of harm' and has issued a call to action for strict and immediate enforcement of the Online Safety Act; safety by design, to make platforms accountable for features that enable abuse; and taking on Big Tech with bold action, serious penalties and no loopholes.¹³

Susie Masterson spent 20 years working in technology before training as a psychotherapist and believes that AI and the predominantly male 'tech elite' are at the forefront of geopolitics, economics and culture. She told me, 'We cannot build a healthy future for women if the architects of that future don't understand the female psyche', – which is why she speaks so widely and so passionately about the ethical considerations of AI. Masterson says that all her female clients use chatbots for mental health and/or relationship support, and many bring stories to therapy about non-consensual image generation or misogynistic websites such as 'Check Her Bodycount', which uses AI to estimate how many people a woman has had sex with based on her social media profile. Masterson insists, 'It's important to be aware that algorithms are biased and patriarchal. Women's achievements are largely suppressed, minimised or erased, and women's needs have been discounted or ignored. Inevitably this means that women are both underrepresented and misrepresented in the content that is fed to the algorithm.'

Catching the bad stuff

Molly vs the Machines is a tragic story of platforms built to control people for profit. As well as sharing Molly's story writer and director Marc Silver was heavily influenced by Harvard professor Shoshana Zuboff's hefty tome *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: the fight for a human future at the new frontier of power*.¹⁴ Both works document online surveillance and the covert harvesting of private data that enables targeted advertising and emotional manipulation. Zuboff admitted that, as 'an objective professor', working with Silver on the film required a 'mental gear change' to 'make her facts and figures breathe' and share the human story.¹⁵ It was imperative that she did, in what turned out to be an excellent example of disseminating professional knowledge and applying it to the greater good beyond the realms of academia.

The film includes video footage of Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg who, despite evidence of harm, routinely denies accountability. In 2024 he announced that Instagram, Facebook and Threads would be scaling down internal checks even if it meant 'we're gonna catch less bad stuff'.³ Despite claims by tech giants that algorithms are 'topic agnostic', the film shows evidence to the contrary.

Journalist Adele Zeynep Walton also believes that algorithms are personal. Walton's sister died by suicide aged 21 after turning to social media for help with her mental health. Instead of signposting support, the algorithm directed her to a pro-suicide website, provoking Walton to dig more deeply into online harms for her book, *Logging Off: the human cost of our digital world*.¹⁶ Despite personal tragedy, Walton, like Zuboff and the Russell family, believes that bans would fail to address the problem, and instead argues that platforms should be forced to build in protection by design. Legislation such as the Online Safety Act is targeting pro-suicide websites to help prevent future tragedies.³

Many experts argue that platforms are dangerous by design. Research by Dr Quynh Hoang, a lecturer in marketing and consumption at the University of Leicester, found that reducing screen time is extraordinarily difficult, 'not because of lack of willpower but because features like infinite scroll, autoplay and algorithmically timed notifications are built to defeat it'. She believes that the latest verdict adds pressure on Big Tech to redesign features that drive compulsive use.

In the UK the House of Lords has conducted an inquiry to establish a clear vision for media literacy as well as barriers to its achievement.¹⁷ Concerned ministers identified vulnerability to misinformation, scams and harmful content, with media literacy in the UK falling behind international understanding. There are calls to raise public awareness with signposting to resources and targeted support for parents. The committee also found that media literacy education in schools is 'limited' or 'optional', and recommends embedding it across the curriculum, starting with early years, and including regular updates to training and resources. The House of Lords committee, for which Ian Russell served as an expert witness, also wants Ofcom to set out minimum standards for platform providers and use its powers to better understand the effectiveness of these activities.¹⁷

What now?

As therapists and BACP members we are ethically obligated to keep our skills and knowledge up to date,⁴ but what does that mean in practical terms when it comes to staying tech smart? I spoke to cyberpsychologist Catherine Knibbs, who cautions, 'We don't need to understand every platform, game, meme or trend, but we do need to keep up to date with emerging issues, spaces and what risks they pose'.¹⁸

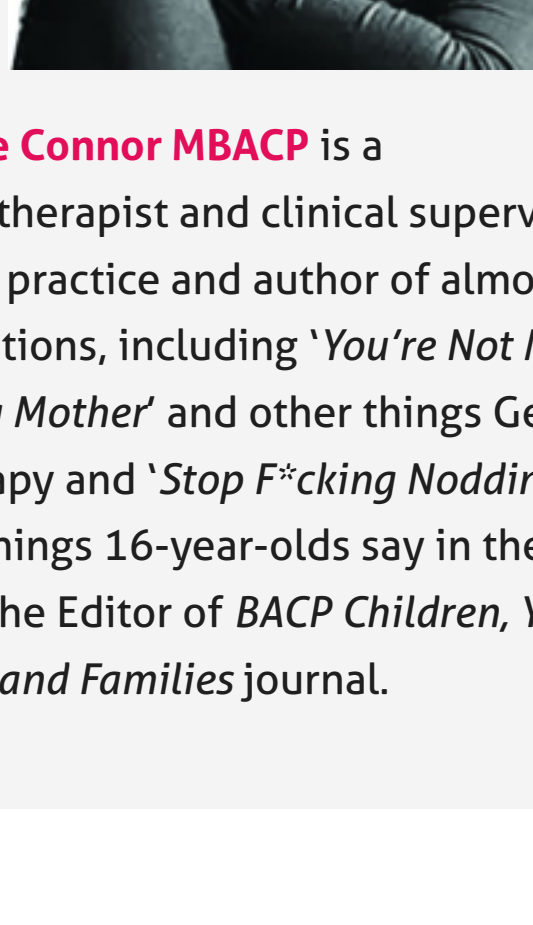
Aaron Balick cites the example of a client using dating apps, which therapists might not understand, and says that's OK because 'you are trying to understand your client first, the platform is secondary. How is the client using the platform? Are there patterns emerging that offer challenges or opportunities for their relational life? By understanding how the client is using the platform you can help them make better choices about how they engage with it. The potential harm isn't about misunderstanding how tech works – it is more likely to lie in being reactively dismissive, judgmental or feeling out of touch, with the tech getting in the way of seeking to understand your client on their own terms.'

As BACP members we agree to 'protect the safety of clients' and 'enhance the quality of professional knowledge and its application'.⁴ For me this means avoiding collusion with myths and misinformation and resisting the temptation to stick our heads in the sand. It's also about resisting the lure of black-and-white thinking, because things are rarely as straightforward as they seem. It means sharing the onus of responsibility rather than pointing the finger of blame elsewhere. It could include lending our voices to campaigns, sharing accurate knowledge and data on social media, or writing to our local MP to insist on regulation governance to enforce online safety policies.

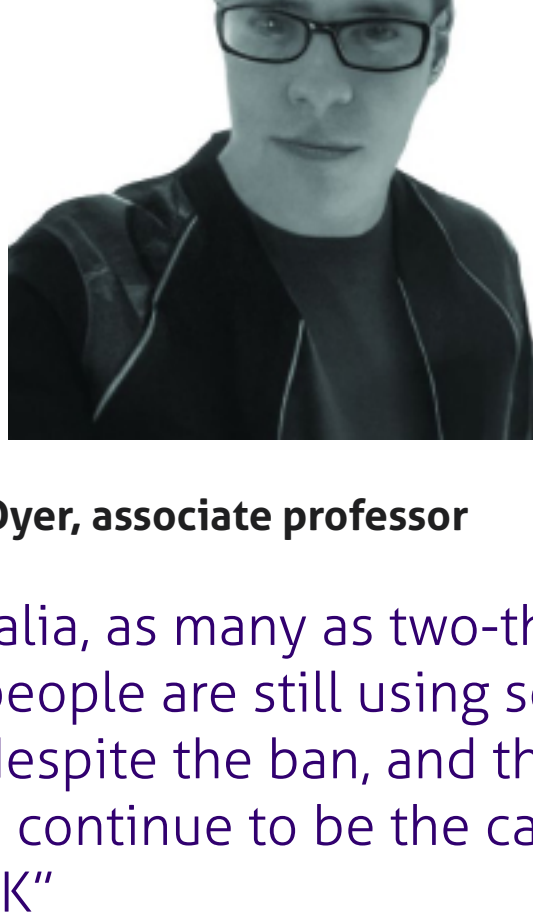
For Masterson it means keeping abreast of what's happening in the world of technology, particularly AI, because that's what's shaping our clients' lives. For Balick it means avoiding fearful reactivity on both an individual and a societal level because it gets in the way of thinking. He suggests viewing technology as an object of curiosity just like anything else, and told me, 'Human psychology hasn't changed much. You know what you're doing – it's just the way it's mediated that's changed.' Balick thinks it's possible to use our psychological understanding about how people make meaning of their lives and relationships through technology to be of service to clients and for the greater social good rather than being hung up on the technology itself.

The fact that AI is shaping our digital future is beyond doubt. So too the indisputable fact that dignity, privacy and protection should be treated as human rights rather than optional extras, online as well as off. The question isn't whether Big Tech can keep us safe – it's whether we collectively insist that it should. It's worth remembering the quote [of unknown origin] that states, 'One person can make a difference, and everyone should try.' With this in mind, how will you apply your psychotherapeutic experience, knowledge and expertise to enhance the quality and wider application of professional knowledge about the impact of technology? When will you start?

About the author

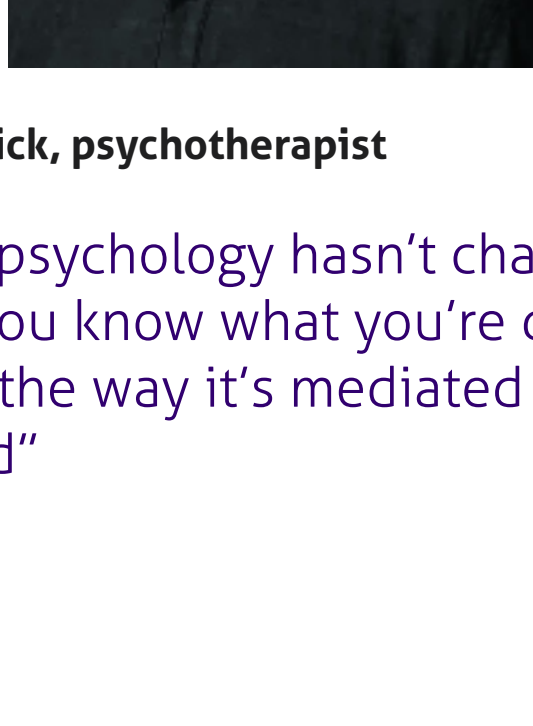


Jeanine Connor MBACP is a psychotherapist and clinical supervisor in private practice and author of almost 300 publications, including 'You're Not My F*cking Mother' and other things Gen Z say in therapy and 'Stop F*cking Nodding' and other things 16-year-olds say in therapy. She is the Editor of *BACP Children, Young People and Families* journal.



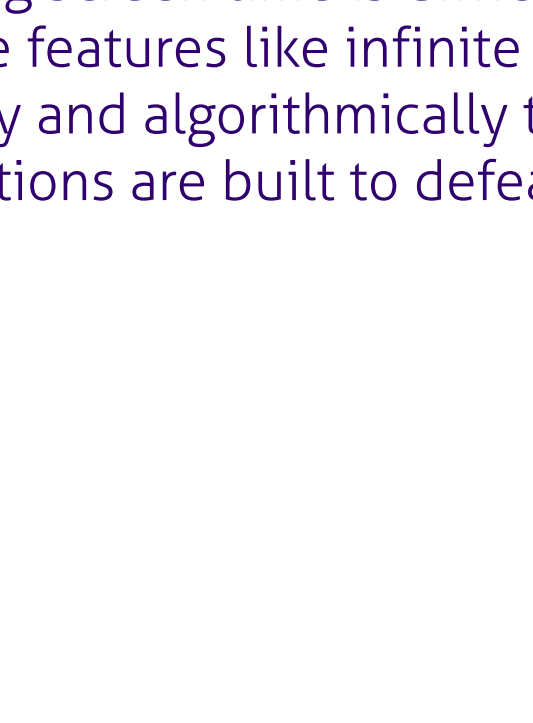
Dr Harry Dyer, associate professor

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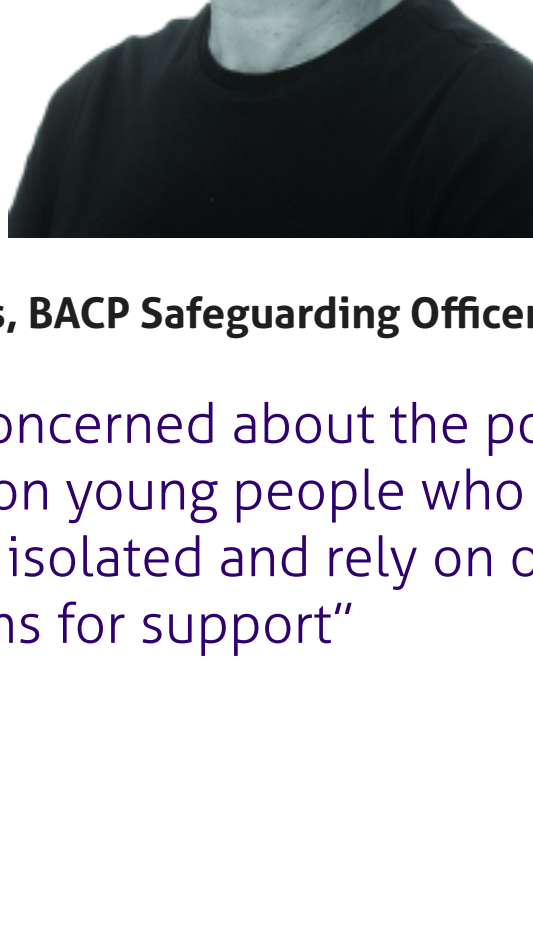
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