

# Innovative technologies for autism critical reflections on digital bubbles

## Agenda – Seminar 1: The Social Bubble

Hartley Suite, University of Southampton: 9:00-15:00 – Friday 28<sup>th</sup> November 2014

This first seminar explores whether technologies create a social bubble and, if so, do they increase social isolation, or provide helpful ways of engaging with other people in a remote way?

Specifically, computer-mediated communication has become a pervasive part of everyday life and concerns have been raised about how technology seems to increasingly encourage people to avoid physical and direct social interaction with each other. At the same time, technologies have been argued to have particular potential and benefit for people on the autism spectrum precisely because direct social interaction can be controlled, managed or avoided. Therefore, if society is increasingly operating within digital social bubbles, could it be that society is also becoming more autism-friendly?

09:00 – 09:30: Arrival and refreshments

09:30 – 09:45: Welcome and introduction – Dr Sarah Parsons, University of Southampton

09:45 – 10:00: The role of technologies for supporting individuals and families – Mr Andrew Monaghan, CEO – Autism Hampshire

**10:00- 10:35: Talk 1 – Dr Nicola Yuill: University of Sussex**

### **Collaborative Technology for Face to Face Social Interaction**

There's a stereotype that people with autism like computers more than they like people. In my talk I turn this on its head: does technology have to be something that isolates us all in digital bubbles or can it actively help social interaction in autism? I will describe examples of designing and using technology – shared devices, toys augmented with digital technology – in ways to support face-to-face collaboration in children with autism across the spectrum, and explain why in the ChaTLab we think that collaboration is so important for humans.

10:35 – 10:55: Discussion in small groups and feedback

**11:00- 11:15: BREAK**

**11:15 – 11:50: Talk 2 – Professor Kevin Durkin: University of Strathclyde**

### **Young people will find their digital bubbles: How can we support them?**

The traditional response to young people's enjoyment of media is to assume that the contents and/or processes are harmful, and must be curtailed. An optimistic alternative is to assert that digital technologies deliver panaceas. Another possibility, advocated here, is that examining the practices, experiences and needs of media users themselves will provide a

richer understanding and a firmer base for constructive input from social scientists. Illustrations are presented from research with young people with ASD, SLI, ADHD and TD.

11:50 – 12:05: Discussion in small groups and feedback

**12:10 – 12:45 Talk 3 – Dr Mark Brosnan: University of Bath**

**Is social communication impaired in ASD when the interaction occurs online?**

People on the autism spectrum have been characterised as both having a weakness in social communication and interaction as well as an affinity for using digital technologies. This talk explores social communication through digital technology (the social networking site Facebook) by those on the autism spectrum to ask whether weaknesses in ASD can be ameliorated by relative strengths in ASD. Facebook posts by those with ASD provide evidence of a preference for digitally-mediated social communication, which can represent a forum in which social communication (including empathy) can be effectively maintained.

12:45- 13:00 - Discussion in small groups and feedback

**13:00 – 13:45 – LUNCH [including research posters]**

**13:45 – 14:20 - Talk 4 – Dr Judith Good: University of Sussex**

**Technology as a gateway for social communication in the “real” world**

One approach to supporting the development of social communication skills in children with ASC has been to develop virtual environments in which children can practise these skills in a safe and predictable environment. However, this then begs the question of whether (and how) these skills will transfer to the “real” world. Our experiences in the ECHOEs project showed that, even when children are interacting with the virtual environment on an individual basis, they will nonetheless spontaneously seek to initiate communication with individuals in the room so as to share their experiences or excitement about the virtual environment with others. This suggests that, firstly, the virtual world/real world distinction may be a lot more blurry than we think and secondly, rather than trying to foster generic social communication skills, we need to think more carefully about the sorts of contexts and situations which give children with ASC something “worth communicating about”.

14:20 – 14:45 – Plenary discussion

14:45 – 15:00 - Concluding comments