Conference Reflections: Navigating Time and Wellbeing in the Digital Age

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A critical issue facing citizens and institutions today is how we are to preserve our time and wellbeing in the digital age. The mass proliferation of digital technologies in our homes, work, and social lives is fundamentally reshaping how we use and experience time. Living in a state of permanent connectivity is eroding the traditional temporal boundaries between work and leisure (Adisa, Gbadamosi, Osabutey 2017). As a result, individuals are no longer temporally synchronised with one another in the timing of their work and personal activities (Eriksen 2001; Jordheim 2014). Even during moments of supposed rest, free time is often fragmented by the relentless presence of digital notifications and the constant consumption of online content (Černohorská et al. 2025). Understanding how these transformations are affecting our subjective experience of time and overall wellbeing is essential for protecting the health, cohesion, and sustainability of everyday life.

In response to this challenge, the EU CHANSE-funded TIMED (TIMe experience in Europe's Digital age) project brings together a multidisciplinary consortium of psychologists, sociologists, philosophers, computer scientists, and neuroscientists from six countries – the Czech Republic, UK, Poland, Spain, Germany, and Switzerland – to investigate how digital technologies are reshaping time and wellbeing across Europe. Over the past three years, the consortium has collected data from more than 16,000 participants through surveys, interviews, and experimental studies.

On 8 May 2025, the TIMED consortium convened an expert workshop at the University of Fribourg, Switzerland, to critically engage with the core question driving the project: how can we preserve time and wellbeing in the digital era? The event brought together leading scholars and practitioners to share insights from their research and policy work. Dr Devina Sarwatay (City St George's, University of London, UK) and Emma Mills (Birchwood Community High School, UK) discussed children and young people's experiences of digital technology. Professor Sylvie Droit-Volet (Université Clermont Auvergne, FR) explained how and why our experience of time is shaped by our experiences and wellbeing. Marta Pucilowska-Schielman (Digital Citizenship Institute, PL) emphasised the importance of digital hygiene, and Professor Mariek Vanden Abeele (Ghent University, BE) explored the power of disconnection for

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reconnection. Diana Affi (Google Maps Platform, CH) described the potential for AI to save us time, and Professor Dietrich Henckel (German Society for Time Policy, DE) and Pete Whitehead (Public First, UK) discussed how time-based policies for digital wellbeing can be developed and implemented.

The consortium's reflections on the talks and discussions identified crosscutting themes illustrating key points of tension that people and societies face when navigating time and wellbeing in the digital era. These included 1) gender inequalities in the use, management, and regulation of technology, 2) intergenerational disparities in how digital experiences are narrated and understood, 3) widespread misconceptions about the mechanisms through which technology may affect wellbeing, and 4) ongoing debates about where the responsibility lies for regulating technology use. To facilitate access to time and the maintenance of wellbeing, we believe that academics, practitioners, regulators, and product developers should prioritise exploring these areas in their work.

The workshop highlighted that there is significant *gender inequality* in access to digital technologies, perceptions of acceptable online behaviour and social norms and narratives pertaining to who is responsible for managing technology use. Dr Devina Sarwatay's research on young people in India illustrated how parental expectations around social media use are deeply gendered. Her findings showed that girls not only have less time to spend on social media compared to boys but also face stricter behavioural constraints when online. Critically, gender inequality was also present in the supervision of access to time on social media; women, especially mothers, were disproportionately responsible for making and enforcing rules about children's use of social media. These insights were echoed in Marta Puciłowska-Schielman's reflections on digital hygiene, which further emphasised how mothers often bear the burden of managing children's digital behaviours and ensuring healthy technology use. The discussions highlighted an urgent need for measures to increase gender equality in both the access to, use of, and responsibility for education and supervision of digital technologies.

Another worskhop focused on the issue of *intergenerational conflict*. There was broad agreement that digital experiences are too often narrated through the perspectives and language of adults, leading to an incomplete and sometimes distorted understanding of how children engage with technology. When adult voices dominate, children's goals, needs, and lived realities with digital technologies risk being overlooked or misinterpreted. This framing was also evident in programmes aimed to improve digital wellbeing. Marta Pucilowska-Schielman highlighted that digital literacy programmes are often focused on what adults can teach children rather than what children can teach adults. The workshop participants stressed that children and young people are experts in their own digital lives. Their insights are crucial for

developing more inclusive and effective educational initiatives, research, and policy responses. However, it was acknowledged that doing so requires careful research which enables children and young people to express the totality of their digital lives in their own words.

Emma Mills identified *digital addiction* as a prominent concern among both parents and young people. However, broader discussions revealed that the concept of addiction, and the mechanisms underlying it, are often poorly understood by the general public, particularly in relation to clinical definitions. Screen time was frequently equated with addiction, with longer durations interpreted as indicative of more severe dependency. However, as Professor Mariek Vanden Abeele emphasised, the notion of screen time is too imprecise to be analytically useful, as it fails to capture the diverse ways in which individuals engage with digital media.

Moreover, educational programs intended to enhance users' digital literacy often overlook the role of individual personality traits in shaping one's ability to self-regulate technology use. Public narratives surrounding the impact of digital technology on wellbeing frequently invoke biological explanations for 'addiction' – for example, the belief that the 'dopamine hits' provided by content 'cause addiction'. However, current scientific evidence supporting these claims remains weak or inconclusive (Orben et al. 2024).

Critically, our own research suggests that negative emotional outcomes following technology use often stem not solely from exposure to distressing or inappropriate content but from users' own perceptions that technology is inherently harmful or that they have 'wasted' their time. Although many people express a desire to shift towards a more analogue lifestyle, the degree to which digital technologies are embedded in everyday life, including in administrative tasks, healthcare, and basic services, presents a significant and often overlooked obstacle to reducing screen time.

Therefore, there is an urgent need to develop accessible public resources that clearly communicate the current scientific understanding of how digital technology use affects neural activity and development.

At the heart of the issues discussed above lies a fundamental question: of *responsibility for digital time*, i.e. who is responsible for regulating how children, young people, and adults spend their time on digital technologies? Currently, most digital literacy programmes adopt a user-centric approach, placing the burden of responsibility on individual users – or, in the case of children, on their parents and carers. This model fails to account for the structural tensions between public concerns about screen time and the business models of technology providers. A central metric of success for many digital platforms is user duration. The longer someone engages with a service, the more 'successful' the product is deemed to be. As a result, many digital products are deliberately designed to maximise time spent online, often using persuasive algorithms

to keep users engaged. This creates a conflict of interest between users, who may wish to limit their screen time, and providers, who are incentivised to prolong it. Critically, however, TIMED's own research suggests that users associate spending more time on technology than intended with feelings of dysregulation, guilt, and regret.

To address this imbalance, it is crucial to shift some of the responsibility for managing screen time from users to providers. One way to do this could be through legislation that prohibits the use of algorithms designed to increase user duration. Another, more transformative solution would be to redefine what constitutes 'success' in the tech industry. Instead of prioritising time-on-platform, success could be measured by improvements in user wellbeing. Such a shift would encourage the development of technologies that support, rather than undermine, healthy digital habits. These measures should, however, be considered in parallel with institutional, organisational, and governmental policies that protect citizens' access to uninterrupted, restorative free time in an increasingly connected world.

The talks and discussions during the workshop demonstrate that the impact of digital technology on wellbeing remains a pressing concern for individuals and societies alike. Whilst research, including that of the TIMED consortium, is significantly increasing our understanding of the impact of technology on our time and wellbeing, further work is required. In particular, there is an urgent need to translate these insights into practical guidance for the public, and into actionable frameworks for institutions and policymakers. Bridging the gap between evidence and implementation will be essential to promoting wellbeing and protecting the value of time in the digital age.

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