



# Monthly Review

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## EDITORIAL

### **New technologies and digital tools: A double-edged sword?**

*As new technologies and digital tools continue to evolve in child protection – proliferating during the COVID-19 crisis, how can we ensure human rights are preserved and promoted?*

There seems to be a never-ending growth in the resort to new technologies and digital tools, such as virtual meetings or search engines, artificial intelligence, social media and YouTube, photolisting, DNA tests, etc., to facilitate child protection work. Much has already changed since the last issue of the Monthly Review on this topic in child protection in 2018 (No. 218 of January-February 2018). Whilst the advantages of such tools are strikingly apparent, especially in terms of time and cost savings as well as physical distancing, the pitfalls are sometimes hidden. How can their benefits be maximised and risks be offset? Ignoring their limits may result in barriers to children fully accessing all their rights, including in relation to data protection, human dignity and inappropriate contact.

#### **Benefits and risks in alternative care matters**

Alternative care practices within child protection, such as supporting families or finding alternatives, when care becomes necessary, is resource consuming, e.g. training social workers, physical visits, offices etc. Undeniably, digital technologies have contributed to alleviating the drain on resources, such as document scanning, electronic archiving, remote learning to improve the capacity of professionals and social media, to keep families connected or to cooperate on cross-border matters.

Yet, is there a risk threshold when recourse to digital tools breaches the do-no-harm principle, e.g:

- when remote meetings inaptly replace a physical meeting – noting that key elements of family assessments relate to the physical environment (home, family, social)?
- when hotlines are under-resourced and/or are manned by persons who lack training?
- when directories of referral services lack quality assurance about what is included?

To this end, the ISS/IRC strongly encourages all those working with children to participate in the three-hour [MOOC on COVID-19: Adapting Child Protection Case Management](#), available in Arabic, English, French and Spanish, which provides some guidance to the above questions and more. To date, 7,023 have already participated.

## Benefits and risks in adoption matters

### Call for promising practices

The ISS/IRC is preparing a comparative research on new technologies and digital tools. We invite you to share any promising laws, policies, practices that have improved your work with children, as well as any limitations that you face (with any potential solutions to counter the limits).

Information may be sent to [irc-cir@iss-ssi.org](mailto:irc-cir@iss-ssi.org) by 20 September 2020.

The rapid growth of the resort to digital tools, in particular in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, has raised, once again, the issue of their benefits and limitations for adoptees and their families (see Editorial in Monthly Review No. 173 of June 2013). Whereas some stages of the process may be undertaken online, the initial information meetings, the preparation or the meeting and initial probationary period of the child and the potential adopters cannot be undertaken without physical contact. Let us not forget that non verbal communication, in particular in children, is essential.

Furthermore, beyond the limits of DNA tests (see Editorial of Monthly Review No. 222 of June 2018) or the risks of resorting to social networks for searches of origins (see Monthly Review No. 01/2012 and No. 218 of January/February 2018), the use of the latter by some adoption bodies to ‘publicise’ children (see Editorial of Monthly Review No. 10/2007) or by the adoptive parents themselves to share private moments of their adoption experience, question the respect for the adoptee’s private life. Should the respect for the child’s dignity and the consideration for the child’s best interests not take account of the future and long-term consequences of those actions and decisions made now (see Editorial of Monthly Review No. 203 of July 2016)?

## Resort to new technologies and digital tools in surrogacy matters

Reproductive technologies are likewise exponentially growing. Setting aside the medical aspects, the use of digital tools in this field must also be subject to international standards. For example, should social media allow for advertising of surrogacy services in countries that explicitly prohibit the practice without any targeted sanctions? Should remote meeting platforms be monitored to avoid the organisation of contractual arrangements that are contrary to international standards? When an emergency arises and borders are closed, should the priority be placed on facilitating the access of intending parent(s) to the children born through surrogacy? Should such arrangements not include clauses for unexpected circumstances, including the establishment of trust funds? Surely, gatekeeping mechanisms should be in place to make sure that the child’s rights are fully protected – that preparation/evaluation of intending parents and surrogate mothers has occurred (see p. 11), that authorities are confident he or she has not been sold as defined in international standards, that he or she has full access to his or her origins, etc.

**As new technologies and digital tools constantly arise, it is our duty to adapt our practices in a way that upholds human rights. To this end, the ISS/IRC encourages all States to take note of the [roadmap](#) that is being prepared by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to ensure that human rights are at the heart of standards on digital tools, including artificial intelligence.**

The ISS/IRC team,  
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