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Opportunities and constraints framing children and young people's internet use

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Abstract

Now that the internet has reached most homes, workplaces and communities in many societies, a burgeoning volume of multidisciplinary research is making it clear that 'using' the internet is far from straightforward. Rather, ordinary people have been struggling to come to terms with this complex and changing bundle of technologies that, supposedly, might deliver new opportunities for information, education, communication, entertainment or even, more grandly, 'empower' them in relation to identity, community, participation, creativity, democracy. Children and young people are intriguingly positioned within these debates, on the one hand, as the youthful experts leading the way in the development of internet literacy and yet, on the other hand, peculiarly vulnerable to the risks consequent on failing to develop internet literacy. This article draws on recent findings from the 'UK Children Go Online' project to critically appraise the emerging balance between opportunities and constraints – here theorized in terms of Habermas' lifeworld and system world – that are shaping children and young people's use of the internet.

Author biography

Sonia Livingstone is Professor of Social Psychology, Department of Media and Communications, London School of Economics and Political Science. She has published over 100 articles and chapters on the subject of media audiences, focusing on audience reception of diverse television genres, with recent work focusing on children, young people and new media, especially the domestic and familial contexts of using the internet. Books include *Making Sense of Television* (Routledge, 1998), *Mass Consumption and Personal Identity* (Open University, 1992, with Peter Lunt), *Talk on Television* (Routledge, 1994, with Peter Lunt), *Children and Their Changing Media Environment* (Erlbaum, 2001, edited with Moira Bovill), *The Handbook of New Media* (Sage, 2002, 2006, edited with Leah Lievrouw), *Young People and New Media* (Sage, 2002), *Audiences and Publics* (Intellect, 2005, edited), and *Harm and Offence in Media Content* (Intellect, 2006, with Andrea Millwood Hargrave). Books in preparation include *Children and the Internet* (Polity), *The International Handbook of Children, Media and Culture* (Sage, edited with Kirsten Drotner), and *Public Connection? Media Consumption and the Presumption of Attention* (Palgrave, with Nick Couldry and Tim Markham).

OPPORTUNITIES AND CONSTRAINTS FRAMING CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S INTERNET USE

SONIA LIVINGSTONE

CONTEXTUALIZING INTERNET USE

Can research with children and young people, who are so often seen as a pivot point of social change, help us understand the emerging relations between the internet and society? Many researchers are, rightly, critical of the technological determinism implicit in public, policy and industry hyperbole about how the internet impacts on society (Woolgar, 2002). For, as research has shown, society is asking many of the same questions about the internet that it has asked of previously-new media and information technologies – this is particularly evident in the moral panics that surround children's use of the internet. Moreover, research on new media is now producing some equally familiar answers (Wartella & Jennings, 2000). For example, it seems the new media supplement rather than displace older media. And that established social norms – of distinction, inequality or difference – are being reproduced online as offline.

In short, a more subtle account is emerging of evolutionary rather than revolutionary change, pointing to ways in which the internet, socially shaped by the diverse political, economic and cultural contexts of its development and use, is implicated in the recombination, reconfiguration and remediation of a range of everyday social practices, forms of knowledge and institutional structures. As we noted in Lievrouw and Livingstone (2006: 5), although new media 'are usually created with particular purposes or uses in mind, they are commonly adopted and used in unanticipated ways -- reinvented, reconfigured, sabotaged, adapted, hacked, ignored. This process, with its often-unintended consequences, reinforces the persistent sense of 'newness' and pivotal change associated with ICTs' (see also Livingstone, 1999). Stressing the importance of contexts of use in shaping what the internet is and can be for today's so-called 'digital generation' of children and young people means identifying both continuities and change in relation to the everyday contexts of home, family, school, locale, peer network, and so forth.

In translating this insight into a research agenda, it is crucial to note that not only is 'context' difficult to delimit (Ang, 1996) but these contexts are themselves changing. Attracting the attention of many commentators is the sense that social spheres are somehow blurring and altering in their relations to each other. So, in young people's lives, it seems that the internet is implicated in, or co-determining of, the blurring of leisure and education, as children use the internet at home for

educational purposes and, to the disapproval of their teachers, as they also use the internet at school for more entertaining purposes. Similar blurring of once-distinct practices and spaces, altering traditional hierarchies of authority and power, is evident for adults in relation to home and work, and for everyone in relation to public and private, around traditional gender divides, or over the local/global relation (Livingstone, 2005).

How should research conceptualize these contexts of childhood? I have previously contrasted two approaches, both child-centered (rather than either adult-centered or technology-centric), but drawing on rather different disciplines. One, deriving from psychology, tells a developmental story, usefully focusing on age as a major factor shaping internet use, but tending towards a universalist account; the other, deriving from the new sociology of childhood (James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998), tells a cultural story, inviting an analysis of internet use in relation to the historical changes in childhood itself, though tending to neglect a place for media technologies within its account of childhood (Livingstone, 1998). The differences may be summarized thus:

Psychological

Focus on 'the child' – singular, universal
 Asserts child as developing, becoming
 Stresses child as vulnerable, acted upon
 Argues for segregation, protection of the child

Sociological

Focus on 'childhood' - diverse, contextualized
 Asserts child as person in his/her own right
 Stresses child as skilled, sophisticated, agentic
 Argues for inclusion, recognition of children

To polarize approaches is always a simplification, justified here as elsewhere as an analytic technique that precedes the call for a more integrative approach. Following a more sociological and historical approach, the 'UK Children Go Online' project began by stressing the agentic/ cultural approach to childhood, following a growing tradition of research on young internet users as pioneers in the new media environment, and seeking to represent their voices and experiences, to recognize their skills and creativity, and to acknowledge their unofficial or alternative activities online as well as offline. However, as this article will show, the evidence both supported and qualified this attempt, providing indications not only of children's agency but also of the constraints or limits imposed by their structural positioning in society (Qvortrup, 1995).

The starting point of our contextualized, child-centered approach, then, was to build on the sociological and historical accounts of how childhood itself is undergoing change, and so seeing the internet as 'arriving' at a certain point in that ongoing history. Sociologists of childhood point, perhaps most significantly, to today's unprecedented period of 'extended youth' with, on the one hand, young people staying at home longer, financially dependent on their parents and continuing in education while, on the other hand, young people entering into consumer society, sexual identity and taste cultures ever earlier, thus expressing their independence from their families (Cunningham, 1995; James et al., 1998). Giddens (1993) characterizes the family's response to this shift as one of a transformation of the hierarchical Victorian family towards what he terms the 'democratic family', a model of intimate relationships based decreasingly on authority and rules and increasingly on trust and negotiation.

As I argued in *Young People and New Media* (Livingstone, 2002), a parallel pressure on the family and its embracing of a media-rich home is the apparent decline in welcoming (or at least neutral) public spaces for children. As the outside is construed as 'unsafe' for children (or, sometimes, as youth is construed as dangerous for the public), the home becomes a sanctuary for children's safe exploration and leisure. Even within the home the media are no longer simply positioned in the living room for everybody to share, negotiating how they will use that common cultural resource, for increasingly, each room might contain a television, each person has their own mobile phone, and increasingly, homes contain multiple computers and internet access. Hence, it seems, today more than ever, families are 'living together separately' (Flichy, 1995).

My argument, then, is that the history of childhood, together with theorizations of the individualization of leisure, sets the context for the ways in which the internet is 'used' by children at home. In several ways, the media enable the 'project of the self', as Giddens put it, by facilitating

creative experimentation, the expression of taste and identity and, especially in relation to new media, the development of valued expertise. What's new about new media particularly – their diverse, alternative, peer-to-peer, interactive character – seems especially to fit with children and young people's preferences and style of youth culture, supporting them as 'media-savvy pioneers' in the new media environment (Drotner, 2000). As we shall see, these trends, together with the tension between independence and dependence, and the democratization of the family, complicates parents' attempts to regulate their children's access to and use of the internet, especially since children are, in many ways, the internet 'experts' (Livingstone & Bober, in press).

Does all this mean that, for children, the heterarchical, interactive internet – used in the privacy of the home, supposedly by youthful experts, enthusiastically evading the constraints of public expectations - affords an unfettered opportunity for creativity, exploration, networking and, even, subversion? Much of the research being conducted on children and young people's engagement with the internet examines these questions, as if a methodological stance that seeks to represent their voices, to understand their contexts will, of necessity, reveal their creative and agentic engagement with the internet. Which, in many ways, it does (Chandler, 1998; Chandler-Olcott & Mahar, 2003; Mazzarella, 2005; Nissen, 1998; Skelton & Valentine, 1998). But, in terms of media and social theory, this is to activate one side of a set of theoretical polarities – agency over structure (Giddens, 1991), tactics over strategy (de Certeau, 1984), resistance over conformity, lifeworld over system world (Habermas, 1981/7). It is the tension between these poles that I explore below.

YOUTHFUL ACTIVITIES ONLINE

Findings from the 'UK Children Go Online' project, a multi-method project encompassing focus groups, in-home observations, and a national survey of 9-19 year olds (Livingstone & Bober, 2005; Livingstone & Helsper, in press) showed that children and young people are, in many ways, indeed the 'internet generation', for they lead in the adoption of the internet, outstripping their parents and other adults in access and use:

- 75% had accessed the internet from home – more middle class than working class children
- 92% had accessed the internet in school and 64% elsewhere, resulting in a total of 98% who had accessed the internet somewhere and very few nonusers
- 36% had more than one computer at home, and 24% lived in a home with broadband access, figures that continue to increase rapidly
- Access is increasingly multi-platform - 71% access the internet at home via the PC, 17% via digital TV, 8% via a games console and 38% via their mobile phone

The new media pose new challenges for families as they seek to manage their personal relationships and the time-space dimensions of their domestic environments. Since families are stratified in terms of the economic, cultural and social resources with which they can meet these challenges (Murdock, 2002), the quality of access and, especially, the nature and breadth of internet use continues to be uneven and unequal. Nonetheless, even a simple tally of online activities reveals that young people are, indeed, using the internet to explore, create, network and subvert (see also Pew, 2005). Consider this list of activities, here asked of the 84% of 9-19 year olds who use the internet at least once a week:

- | | |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| ▪ 90% schoolwork | ▪ 54% (age 12+) visit civic sites |
| ▪ 94% information | ▪ 46% download music |
| ▪ 70% interactive use of sites | ▪ 40% (12+) window shopping |
| ▪ 71% email | ▪ 34% made a website |
| ▪ 70% games | ▪ 26% (12+) read the news |
| ▪ 55% instant messaging | ▪ 25% (12+) personal advice |

- 21% visit chat rooms
- 21% (12+) plagiarize
- 10% look for pornography

Each of these activities is, rightly, attracting attention in terms of the agentic, perhaps even pioneering orientation youth is adopting towards to the internet. Yet, detailed scrutiny of these activities also reveals a disappointing, initially puzzling lack of depth. If we look behind the findings that 7 in 10 interact with sites when they visit them. It shows that young people are likely to do the quizzes on websites, and that a third have create their own webpage. But overall, they average only 1.5 of these activities, and most activities have been undertaken by a minority only – for example, while 44% have completed an online quiz, only a fifth have voted on a website, 17% have contributed to a website message board, and just 8% have signed on online petition – suggesting rather less interactivity that might have been expected of this supposedly pioneering ‘internet generation’.

A similar picture lies behind the finding that 1 in 3 has made their own website. When those young people were asked, is your site online, responses were as follows: 34% never online, 17% was online but not anymore, 17% yes but not updated for a long time 21% not sure if still online and 32% yes, online and updated regularly. Interestingly too, when asked why they made the website, 45% said the school had required them to make the site for a school project, though, 34% - the next most common answer – said, ‘I like doing creative things’, thus revealing the balance between choice and constraints, or agency and structure in directing young people’s activities. Last, when the two thirds who have not tried to make a website were asked why not, the most common answer was, ‘I don’t know how to do it’ (54%), closely followed by ‘doesn’t interest me’ (41%).

CONSTRAINTS ON YOUTH ONLINE

Expressions of lack of interest are, in many ways, puzzling, and young people’s choices contribute to the continued ‘digital divide’ in use if not so much in access. This matters, not least because it is stratified by socioeconomic status, as well as by age and gender (Livingstone & Helsper, in press). However, rather than criticizing young people for disappointing levels of interest, skill or participation, we should regard responses indicating lack of interest critically. The emerging picture, I suggest, is that children and young people show themselves keen to take the first steps towards exploration, creativity and engagement but they do not necessarily ‘follow through’. Here we must turn to a structural account of the conditions of participation, usefully framed, I suggest, in terms of the more-or-less open or closed ‘opportunity structures’ within which children and young people may exercise their agency (Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996). I shall examine these opportunity structures in relation to four key institutions that shape young people’s activities – the state, commerce, school and the family.

There are concerted efforts from the state to engage youth - construed as young citizens - in online forums that can, it is hoped, overcome the inequalities of opportunity and the apathy towards civic participation that impedes young people offline. As Montgomery, Gottlieb-Robles and Larson (2004: 2) observe, there is ‘an abundance of civic and political activity by and for youth’ which ‘invite[s] young people to participate in a wide range of issues, including voting, voluntarism, racism and tolerance’. Young people are constantly invited to ‘have their say’ by contributing, emailing or voting online. Yet research is increasingly revealing how frequently young people pass up these invitations, not because they lack interest in these issues, but rather for reasons of efficacy: the consequences of ‘having your say’, especially online, remain opaque, and young people are, fairly, skeptical. In focus groups, the following comments were typical: ‘Young people’s opinions are not at all valued, especially not by politicians’ (Anne, 15) and similarly, ‘Yeah, you can email him [your member of parliament] but is he going to listen?’ (Hazel, 17).

Interviews with public sector website producers, as part of the UKCGO project, revealed a mismatch between the user as imagined by the producers and actual users approaching these sites in everyday contexts. One key mismatch was that while producers hope young people will ‘have their say’, the question at the forefront of young people’s minds is the question, who is listening? Consequently, many appear to ‘check out’ the sites and then leave, neither interacting nor returning (Livingstone, in press). A second mismatch could be found between the alternative, perhaps even radical interests of young activists (Kahn & Kellner, 2004; Olsson, 2005) and the ‘official’ vision of youth engagement, this latter according more with a model of top-down information delivery than open dialog. A third was that the producers – in the attempt to appear ‘youthful’ or ‘fun’ rather than adult or official – seem to avoid designing into the site a clear account of who is addressing young people, thus stimulating distrust about the kind of invitation open to them. As Faruq (15), said, ‘It’s like you don’t know whose doing what, whose website it is, who wants what, who wants you to learn what’. In sum, inviting young people to participate while clarifying neither with whom they are participating nor what consequences might be expected arouses critical distance rather than engagement. This is not only because young people are skeptical about adult invitations but also, more specifically, because they have been the target of considerable warnings regarding the dangers of false friends online – such activities as engaging with strangers and contributing personal information are frequently framed as risks to young people’s safety. As Sabrina (15) says (noting that *Mykindaplace* announces to young people, ‘we want your real life stories’), ‘why would you send in a photo, that’s just stupid I wouldn’t give out my phone number or my address or anything like that’.

Making judgments regarding, for example, the authority, reliability and impartiality of websites and, thus, the opportunity structure they afford to their users, is not a straightforward task, and young people’s skills are not as sophisticated or widespread as the optimistic notion of the ‘internet generation’ would have one believe, even though their social construction as ‘cyber-expert’, particularly in relation to the reverse generation gap between children and parents, is valued by youth (Facer & Furlong, 2001; Livingstone, in press; Livingstone, in press). Yet lack of internet literacy limits participation just as its presence enables it and internet literacy, like other forms of literacy, is unequally distributed across the population. The UKCGO survey found, for example, that in the past week, 4 in 10 young internet users visited fewer than five websites, suggesting a narrow or cautious approach to the internet among many users; further, 2 in 3 9-19 year olds had received no guidance on how to judge website reliability (Livingstone & Bober, 2004a).

Discriminating opportunities from risks, though a key dimension of internet literacy, is not only a challenge to young people (and the adults that seek to guide them) but also often a failure of design by site producers. In other words, ‘illiteracy’ can result from website ‘illegibility’ (Livingstone, van Couvering, & Thumim, in press) or from interpretative resistance to the ‘preferred reading’ of online messages. After all, ‘far from being isolated, neutral objects, computer interfaces play out a range of assumptions, authorizations, and challenges to literacy practices’ (Johnson-Eilola, 1998: 190) Such design failures are more easily addressed with ample funding, and it is notable that, in responding to a parallel invitation to participate from the private sector – from commerce – is often treated with less skepticism by children and young people. To them, questions of trust or safety seem answered by the reassuring familiarity of big brands, and this familiarity is signaled by design features less readily available to public sector sites – high production values, sophisticated games, updated content, desirable freebies and downloads, and so forth. Examination of young people’s favorite sites shows the close links between commercial media culture and online activities, with fandom (of sports teams, music groups) or familiar content (from television or magazines) guiding them not only in their taste preferences online but also in making difficult decisions of trust online. As one 17 year old boy commented, ‘Kids prefer ‘fun’ sites, whether it's commercial or not doesn't bother them.’

The ‘walled garden’ serves as an appropriate metaphor for the ways in which the online world addresses children and young people as young consumers, appearing to offer ‘a whole community’, ‘all you could want to know’, ‘the best games’ and, of course, the chance to ‘have your say’ while

tightly controlling the kind of content or links that users can access (Burbules, 1998). Gardens, while fun, are not the locus of public participation. Nonetheless, the lively and creative interests of young people are increasingly the target of a vast, commercial leisure industry, devoted to the sophisticated targeting of youth, resourceful in the cross-promotion of media and consumer goods on and offline, alert to the possible exploitation of counter-normative tastes or interests as these evolve among youth, reflexively capitalizing on the same child-centered discourses of children's rights, empowerment and identity that cultural critics use to oppose the commodification of childhood and youth (Buckingham & Bragg, 2004; Kinder, 1999). As many have observed, young people's hopes and fears all become grist to the mill of mass consumerism, with marketing precisely targeting the particular or esoteric niches established by youth culture. The match between the commercial internet for youth, and children and young people's own needs and interests, has yet to be critically examined, particularly as critical literacy regarding online commercialism (awareness of sponsorship, advertising, branding, etc) among children may not be high (Graham & Metaxas, 2003; Montgomery, 2001)

The constraints imposed on young people's activities by school are, perhaps, more subtle, for the school is the institution that has most overtly embraced the potential of the internet to empower young people – as pupils, learners - expanding literacy, transforming education and opening up 'a whole world of information' to pupils who, previously, had to rely on under-funded libraries and overstretched teachers. Yet emerging empirical work points in other directions. For example, Clark (2003) queries the presumed 'social good' which computer and Internet access represents. In the UK, one prominent and large-scale evaluation sought, but did not find, convincing evidence that computer and internet provision at schools improve test scores (BECTa, 2003). Meanwhile, hopes of broader benefits than on test scores are also uncertain. Clark's 'issues ethnography' showed in the community centre what the UKCGO project observed in both school and home, namely the everyday ways in which the adults in charge judge, rule on, exclude those activities not deemed 'valuable' or worthy of the expensive equipment and investment involved (see also Seiter, 2005), even though educationalists argue that it is precisely in such informal or pupil-led contexts that learning is best facilitated (Papert, 1996). These normative judgments shaping the uses of a new technology exemplify a broader principle, namely that familiar social practices are reproduced in relation to the internet more easily than the internet is permitted to challenge or reconfigure offline practices (Woolgar, 2002). One key aspect of this reproduction of the familiar is that optimistic hopes expressed by many that the internet would herald new ways of learning – more open, heterarchical, flexible, dialogic, playful – are, as yet, little in evidence (Johnson-Eilola, 1998; Kellner, 2002), partly because an unsurprising list of pragmatic limitations (on the design of creative curriculum materials, teacher training, challenges for assessment and, last but not least, financial resources) impedes any transformation of learning and literacy.

At the same time, introducing the internet at school has further, equally constraining, consequences, becoming incorporated into the broader 'curricularisation' of everyday life: the very ubiquity of the internet, available for use across multiple locations, facilitates the ways in which 'leisure providers – sports centres, museums, youth clubs, community arts projects – are also increasingly charged with educational responsibilities, and required to justify themselves in these terms' (Buckingham, Scanlon, M., and Sefton-Green, J., 2001: 22); to this list, we could add the home, prime site of media-rich leisure for young people, yet equally charged with promoting their education and career opportunities. Undoubtedly, the perceived educational benefits of domestic internet access have fuelled its rapid diffusion. The mother of Anna (10) speaks for many when she says, 'I think from the children's point of view they are so incredibly lucky to be able to have the information in their dining room... and I think they are at an incredible advantage to other children. Not every family has got a computer, and I think children are disadvantaged if they don't.' Yet parents are no more able than teachers or others simply to 'empower' children by providing hardware, and the many difficulties and risks posed by the internet, both perceived and actual, are resulting in constraints being placed on children's activities. Although it true that the home is generally the least constrained location for use, this is often because young people's ingenuity has led them to evade the supervisory structures put in place to ensure their 'beneficial' use of the internet and to limit the risks.

For the most part, parental regulation of the internet at home is negative regulation, designed to avoid risks, rather than positive regulation to ensure valued activities. The UKCGO survey found that, as stated by the parents of 9-19 year olds whose child has home internet, children and teens are ‘not allowed’ to:

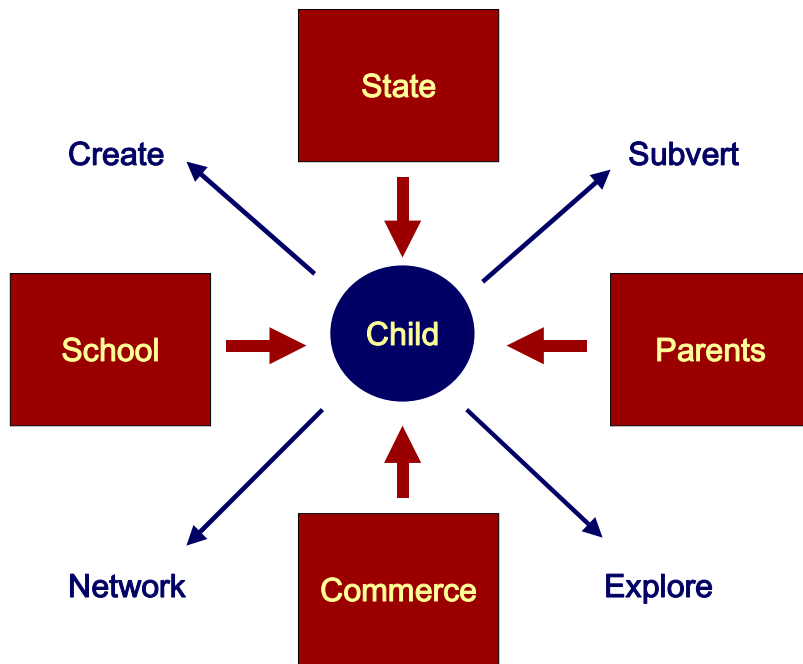
- give out personal information (86%)
- buy anything (77%)
- use chat (62%)
- fill out forms or quizzes (57%)
- download things (24%)
- use instant messaging (24%)
- use email (11%)
- play games (10%)

Unsurprisingly, these restrictions are strongly age-dependent and, perhaps also unsurprisingly, they are not always recognized as rules in force by children (Livingstone & Bober, 2004b, in press). This partly reflects a communication gap between parents and children, but it also points to the ‘games’ of control and evasion that parents and children routinely ‘play’, more or less seriously, in managing the shifting and often contentious balance of autonomy and dependence that characterizes family relationships. The internet enters into this balance in particular ways, often serving to promote children’s independence and enable their evasion of parental power. This is evident in the delight with which children exercise their often-greater expertise online and in their strongly expressed (and generally justified) expectations of privacy when communicating, seeking advice or even being naughty (‘childish’) online. These various miscommunications and evasions add up to a significant undermining of parental control. Analysis of the UKCGO survey findings shows no straightforward relation between parental regulation (amount or type) and children’s use (in terms of risks encountered): for example, parents who insist their child should not give out personal information online are no more likely – according to those same parents - to have children who desist from doing this (Livingstone, Bober, & Helsper, 2005). However, since there is little one can do online without divulging some personal information, the consequences of imposing such a rule – sanctioned by official government advice though it is – are draconian in terms of online opportunities. Given this, it is unsurprising also that the UKCGO survey found a positive association between children and young people’s take up of online opportunities and their encountering of online risks, contrary to the supposition implicit in much official advice that becoming a skilled internet user means taking up opportunities while knowing how to avoid risks.

CONCLUSIONS

In a different domain – that of audience reception of television genres – there has been lively contestation over whether audiences are ‘active’ – meaning creative, agentic, resistant, or whether this claim exaggerates, and unduly celebrates, such small signs of resistance as research evidence has amassed (Allor, 1988; Seaman, 1992). My present argument is that research on young people’s internet use is tempted to celebrate similar evidence, thus risking an overstatement of the position that youthful uses of the internet are agentic, creative, even subversive. Without wishing to deny such evidence as exists in support of this position, I have argued instead for a dialectic between agency and structure, identifying the strategic attempts of institutions – state, commerce, education and family – to shape young people’s online activities, this constituting the ‘opportunity structure’ within which children and young people either accede to or, alternatively, attempt various tactical maneuvers to avoid or evade such shaping (see Figure 1). I have suggested, further, that for the present at least, there is more reason to be concerned at the degree to which this opportunity structure is closed rather than open (Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996), directing more than enabling young people’s online activities in ways that research has yet to chart thoroughly.

Figure 1: Balancing agency and structure in mapping children’s online activities



There are resonances here with critical analyses of the ways in which state or commercial logics are infusing activities in everyday life. In Livingstone (2005), I analyzed this process in terms of Habermas’ (1981/7) critique of the inter-penetration of the lifeworld (by which he means, informal ways of life, whether in the public sphere or the intimate realm of the family; Outhwaite, 1996) by the system world (dominated by administrative and market logics). In parallel, Habermas – along with many others – critiques the inter-penetration of the public sphere by the private sphere, this resulting in the privatization of both state and public sphere. Following Fraser’s (1990) account of Habermas, this critical position is summarized in Figure 2, showing two parallel processes of interpenetration of spheres that ‘should’, in Habermas’ normative account, remain distinct. Following this, several of the struggles regarding children’s use of the internet that I have noted in this article can, I suggest, now be understood as part of these much broader struggles over power in late modernity.

Figure 2: A Habermasian account of the interpenetration of societal spheres

	↕	Public	↔	Private
System		The state		The economy
Lifeworld		The public sphere		The personal or intimate sphere

For example, the challenge that official website producers face in seeking to encourage youthful civic participation stems in part from the administrative logics that drive participatory initiatives, for these are evaluated in terms of reaching target audiences, maximizing take-up, achieving stakeholder ‘ownership’, and so forth, rather than in terms of changes in policy, provision or practice resulting from young people’s contributions, interests or agency. The problems, theoretically, lie in the privatization of state initiatives (hence the discussions of branding, franchising or marketing government and civic websites), and, simultaneously, in the official (system world) management of activities more properly located in,

and necessarily sustained by, the public sphere. Similarly, as regards the relation of youth to the commercial internet, the critical concern is less with private sector initiatives online, nor even with young people's enthusiasm regarding these; rather, the concern is with the interpenetration of the commercial sphere into the lifeworld (and, as argued above, the state). This is manifest through such diverse problems as the pressure parents feel under to devote scarce resources to the latest updates or newest brands available on- (and off-)line, such commercial logics also, in part, driving the process of individualization whereby young people differentiate themselves ever more narrowly through the consumption of media goods and the expression of media-related tastes (Bauman, 2001).

Consider also the pressure schools feel under when pupils judge the school equipment harshly by comparison with provision at home and, more importantly, the impact of private enterprise on educational resources and curricula: 'technology is frequently presented both to teachers and to parents as the solution to a whole range of social and educational problems; and yet it is a solution that, under present circumstances, is provided largely by the commercial market. ... What counts as a valid educational use of technology is, it would seem, inextricable from what sells' (Buckingham, Scanlon, & Sefton-Green, 2001: 38-9). While the privatization of education is one process indicative of late modern society, the curricularisation of leisure and domestic life is another, illustrating the interpenetration of the lifeworld by the system world (as in Figure 2). The considerable efforts made by parents to both facilitate and regulate the internet at home – following sustained official advice and expectation (for parents are now also stakeholders in their children's success) – is yet another case of this interpenetration, one felt painfully by many parents who, for educational reasons, obtain the internet at home and then, to ensure safety and avoid risk, find themselves struggling to protect their children against the very same technology. Children, as we have seen, draw on the resources available in their lifeworld to keep their intimate sphere intimate, but with only partial success.

These spheres – state, economy, public and family – are not themselves immutable. Rather, each is changing, partly as a result of their mutual interpenetration, as outlined above, partly because of counter-flows in the reverse direction. Thus, there examples – often genuinely motivated by children's welfare – of how both state and commercial providers are creating stimulating online resources for children. There are also some valiant efforts by those in corporate social responsibility to take on 'public' concerns, especially regarding children's safety and privacy online. Similarly, there are lively debates among educators regarding the degree to which pupils may learn through informal, alternative, playful and creative approaches to education, even if this challenges established pedagogy. And, as Giddens (1993) has argued, families are actively seeking ways of transforming intimate relations from the authority structure traditionally defining parent-child relations towards more egalitarian or 'democratic' structures founded on trust and negotiation rather than the hierarchical imposition of rules. To be sure, one can make a critical, even cynical reading of these counter-trends, but my intention is rather to identify – and invite a careful mapping of - the complex and dynamic tensions that shape children and young people's opportunities online.

Last, I have worked with the concept of internet 'literacy', for this seems usefully positioned at the interface between structure and agency, system and life world and, more prosaically, technology and user. Thus it invites questions not only about actual or desirable kinds of competences among diverse users in different contexts, but also about the anticipated competences of imagined users as designed into the systems and institutions they may engage with. Literacy may be normative or critical, it includes basic skills and sophisticated understanding, it may be mainstream or alternative (Livingstone et al., in press). But, however defined, literacy is required for the diverse roles of citizen, consumer, creator and client. Last, while in some ways, it is technology-specific, for the most part it refers to knowledge and understanding that extends both on and offline, inviting an integrated analysis of people's activities, and contexts of action, across different spheres of life.

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