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A new ITU publication on digital skills in the lives of children and young people

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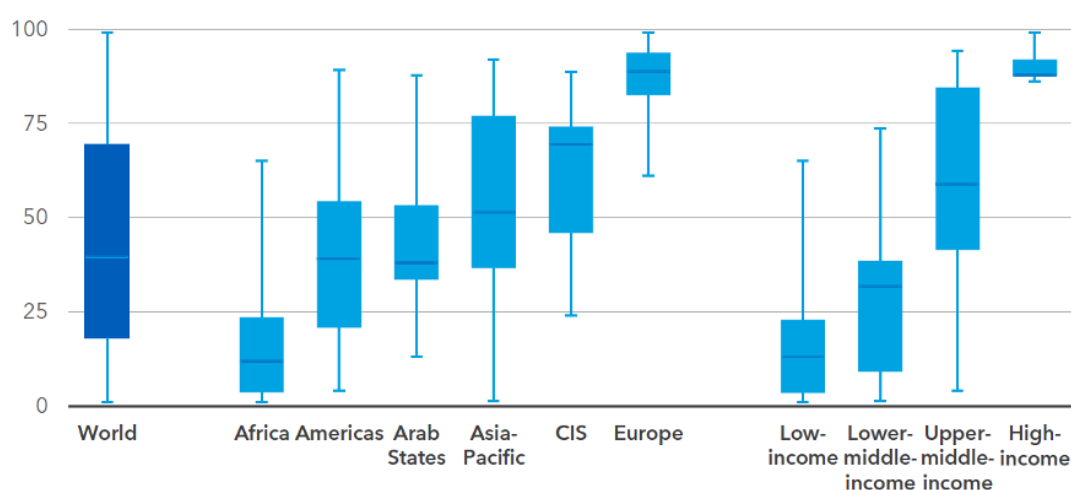
*The **International***

Telecommunications Union World Telecommunication Development Conference drew to a close earlier this month. Convened in Kigali, Rwanda, the event called upon key stakeholders to harness digital technology to drive global development. The conference saw the launch of the **Global Connectivity Report 2022**. **Professor Sonia Livingstone, Professor Ellen Helsper and Dr. Miriam Rahali** contributed to Chapter 9, which looks at the evolution of connectivity amongst children and young people, and offers in-depth analysis of issues that need to be resolved to achieve full digital inclusion.

The digital environment is transformed by the rise of new technologies, such as artificial intelligence, virtual reality and smart environments. Today's children and youth are the most connected generation – 71% of youth (15 to 24 years of age) use the internet, far more than any other age group – and hopes are high that they will reap the benefits.

But to ensure positive long-term change, society must address the digital divide at multiple levels. Only 40% of school-age children have access to the internet at home, with stark disparities across and within regions.

Percentage of school-aged children with Internet access at home, by region and income group, latest year available

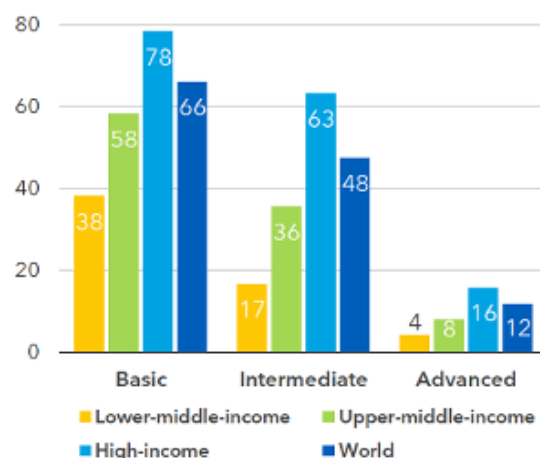


Notes: Data covering 72 countries are based on data from UNICEF on Internet access at home for children 3-17 years of age, complemented with ITU data on Internet use from home for children younger than 15 years of age. The coloured bars indicate the 25th, median and 75th percentile of all country values. The bottom and top lines indicate the minimum and maximum values. CIS = Commonwealth of Independent States.

Crucially, the more societies become connected, the more a lack of connection presents a problem for those who are excluded.

Further, it is now clear that access alone does not ensure that children and youth benefit from the digital age. Even if the gap in access were closed, how the access is *used* may further **reproduce existing socio-economic inequalities**. The second level of the digital divide emphasizes the importance of digital skills in mediating the opportunities and risks of digital engagement. As shown below, there are huge differences in youth skills (basic, intermediate, advanced) by country income group.

Youth ICT skills (Source: ITU)




Notes: Data covering 62 countries. Low-income countries are not shown because of lack of recent data. The percentages shown are unweighted averages. Data collection for the skills comprising the category Critical literacy only began in 2020. Since only a few middle-income countries have reported on these skills, averages by income group are not yet possible.

Risks and Harms

As the digital environment becomes more complex, children and young people need to critically understand the digital world in which they are increasingly immersed. Opportunities and risks tend to be correlated: more access and higher digital skill levels are associated with more exposure to online risks, making it challenging to increase the former without increasing the latter.

Because the digital landscape can change quickly, it presents new risks when children and youth have access *before* they are media literate or have acquired online resilience, and/or in the absence of legal, regulatory and policy frameworks and protection mechanisms.

The 4 C's of Online Risk to Children (Source: CO:RE)

	Content Child engages with or is exposed to potentially harmful content	Contact Child experiences or is targeted by potentially harmful <i>adult</i> contact	Conduct Child witnesses, participates in or is a victim of potentially harmful <i>peer</i> conduct	Contract Child is party to or exploited by potentially harmful contract
Aggressive	Violent, gory, graphic, racist, hateful or extremist information and communication	Harassment, stalking, hateful behaviour, unwanted or excessive surveillance	Bullying, hateful or hostile communication or peer activity e.g. trolling, exclusion, shaming	Identity theft, fraud, phishing, scams, hacking, blackmail, security risks
Sexual	Pornography (harmful or illegal), sexualization of culture, oppressive body image norms	Sexual harassment, sexual grooming, sextortion, the generation and sharing of child sexual abuse material	Sexual harassment, non-consensual sexual messaging, adverse sexual pressures	Trafficking for purposes of sexual exploitation, streaming (paid-for) child sexual abuse
Values	Mis/disinformation, age-inappropriate marketing or user-generated content	Ideological persuasion or manipulation, radicalisation and extremist recruitment	Potentially harmful user communities e.g. self-harm, anti-vaccine, adverse peer pressures	Gambling, filter bubbles, micro-targeting, dark patterns shaping persuasion or purchase
Cross-cutting	Privacy violations (interpersonal, institutional, commercial) Physical and mental health risks (e.g., sedentary lifestyle, excessive screen use, isolation, anxiety) Inequalities and discrimination (in/exclusion, exploiting vulnerability, algorithmic bias/predictive analytics)			

The risks for children and vulnerable youth navigating a digital environment are now the focus of growing concern among parents and caregivers, educators, clinicians, civil society, policy-makers and industry. Access and digital skills are key to ensure that children and young people enhance their prospects. However, stakeholders must collaborate effectively to protect them from online risks and harm.

Good measures are vital for children's and youth rights in a digital world

Many initiatives and policies seek to close the digital divide and improve outcomes, including preventing or mitigating the risk of harm for children and youth in the digital age.

While household access to the internet is most often measured, individual opportunities for children and youth are less well documented, especially when disaggregated by gender, disability, income or other factors indicating vulnerability or disadvantage. Even less is known of the *quality* of **digital experiences and outcomes** – and this lack of knowledge extends to the benefits that may be realized from online opportunities as well as to the risks of exclusion or harm.

Efforts to foster digital inclusion would be improved with better standardized metrics for measuring and monitoring access, digital skills and outcomes within and across in all countries. For children, **Global Kids Online developed key indicators** for access, activities, risks and safety which is now adopted by

the ITU. The ySKILLS project has developed **an index for measuring youth digital skills**.

Improving evidence on access, use, skills and outcomes of children and young people will require international cooperation to ensure comparable definitions and measures and establish benchmarks enabling the measurement of progress, the examination of problems and the identification of good practice. Robust disaggregated data and evidence is vital for the realization of **children's rights in relation to the digital environment**.

Notes

*This blog post draws on Chapter 9 of the **Global Connectivity Report 2022**. The text was **originally published** on the Media@LSE blog and has been re-posted with permission.*

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Featured image: photo by Max Fischer on Pexels

Inside the Digital Society:
Digital (in)equality

Digital inequalities in Europe
are underpinned by divides in
children's access, interest and
confidence

A missed opportunity: the
new national media literacy
strategy of DCMS

About the author



Sonia Livingstone

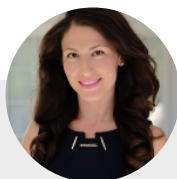
Sonia Livingstone OBE is Professor of Social Psychology in the Department of Media and Communications at LSE. Taking a comparative, critical and contextual approach, her research examines how the changing conditions of mediation are reshaping everyday practices and possibilities for action. She has published twenty books on media

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Ellen Helsper

Ellen Helsper is Professor of Digital Inequalities in the Department of Media and Communications at LSE, where she also serves as Programme Director for the MSc Media and Communications (Research). Her current research interests include the links between social and digital inequalities; mediated interpersonal communication; participatory immersive digital spaces (VR, ER); and quantitative and qualitative methodological developments in media and communications research.



Miriam Rahali

Dr. Miriam Rahali is a Visiting Researcher at the Department of Media and Communications, LSE. In addition to media, her interests include children, gender, and consumer behavior. Miriam holds an undergraduate degree from Columbia University, New York, a Master's degree in Special Education, and a PhD from LSE. She has worked on inclusive education in various roles within academia and the third sector.

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