Natálie Terčová   Sonia Livingstone   March 14th, 2025

RightsCon 2025: Spotlight on children's rights in the digital age

The world's leading summit on human rights in the digital age, RightsCon, was held in Taipei, Taiwan, and online from February 24 to 27, 2025. Two researchers linked to the Digital Futures for Children centre at LSE joint with 5Rights – Natálie Terčová and Sonia Livingstone – participated in the conference and offer their reflections on the sessions focused on children's rights in the digital age.

Bringing together human rights defenders, policymakers, technologists, journalists and civil society, this year's RightsCon summit fostered critical conversations at the intersection of technology, rights and governance. Faced with troubling geopolitical developments simultaneously undermining transnational cooperation and emboldening Big Tech to push back on rights-based governance, these conversations were often intense and, at times, pessimistic.

Children and young people have much to gain from an increasingly connected world but are also among the most vulnerable in the digital ecosystem. Since they are frequently overlooked by policymakers, practitioners and businesses actively shaping the digital world, it was noteworthy that RightsCon 2025 featured key sessions dedicated to children's rights in the digital environment – from digital marketing to commercial exploitation, from online safety to digital literacy, from showcasing young human rights defenders to debates on data regulation and privacy, AI governance and platform accountability.

Here are some highlights:

Upholding Rights in the Digital Age: Unpacking the Best Interests of the Child Principle

Speakers: Sonia Livingstone, Fabio Senne, Steven Vosloo

Evidence of children's online risks and opportunities and the difficulties of addressing each are often discussed with reference to the "best interests of the child." However, this panel explored the fact that while being a fundamental principle in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the concept is nonetheless sometimes misunderstood, misused or even abused.

Sonia Livingstone highlighted four problems with common digital policy discourses:

1. 'Best interests' displaces or is used to substitute for mention of children's rights

2. Stakeholders may refer to 'best interests' to legitimise cherry-picking children's rights

3. Businesses may proclaim themselves arbiters of children's 'best interests'

4. Decisions about children's best interests are not taken transparently or with child consultation.

Usefully, UNICEF is currently consulting children on their views. In the meantime, the panel considered how the concept of best interests is valuable for civil society organisations, on the one hand, to resolve possible tensions in the realisation of children's rights and, on the other hand, to assert that children's best interests should trump commercial interests in digital policy and design.

Breaking the Silence: Youth and Survivor Insights into Child Sexual Abuse in the Digital Age

Speakers: Natálie Terčová, Emilia Zalewska-Czajczyńska

This session spotlighted the voices of youth and survivors in the fight against child sexual abuse and the circulation of child sexual abuse material (CSAM) online. By centring lived experiences and expert perspectives, it explored how policy, platform governance, and emerging technologies can either protect or endanger children and young people. The input presented was drafted from a report co-authored by Terčová, *From Data to Dialogue: Youth Perspectives on Child Sexual Abuse in the Digital Sphere*. Emilia Zalewska-Czajczyńska, Senior Policy Analyst at NASK, highlighted:

"Fighting CSAM is a complex challenge from the technical and legal perspective. As detection tools evolve, so do techniques used by offenders who quickly deploy the newest technological developments to go below the radar of law enforcement, for example, using AI to outsmart image hashing detectors."

One key issue to consider is the responsibility of online platforms to ensure proper content moderation, reporting systems, and removal mechanisms. The Digital Services Act (DSA) in the European Union sets legal requirements to help reduce illegal content, including CSAM, on digital platforms and services. However, since the enforcement of this regulation is still in its early stages, it remains uncertain how effective it will be in achieving this goal over time.

Protecting Children: Data Governance Innovations and Opportunities

Speakers: Sonia Livingstone, Emma Day, Aki Enkenberg, Christopher Wilson, Dixon Siu, Thobekile Matimbe

RightsCon included much discussion about the importance of data protection regulation to protect privacy, important both in itself and as a mediator of other rights. Acknowledging considerable concern that regulations are insufficiently implemented or enforced, especially when it comes to cross-border data transfers or AI, this panel sought to pursue an even greater challenge: can there be rights-respecting ways of sharing children's data in ways that can benefit children and the public?

Emma Day outlined UNICEF's work-in-progress examining policy innovations such as certification schemes, children's codes, regulatory sandboxes, risk assessments and so forth. These were critically examined by speakers from SE Asia and Africa, recognising that the European model of data governance may be inappropriate for and challenged by the global majority.

Lots of questions remain – what will it take for the public to trust forms of data sharing, especially when it comes to children's data? Do different trust issues arise in different parts of the world where, for instance, the circle of trust around children may vary? Although public models for data sharing are hard to find, it cannot be right that the private sector sells access to children's data in the data ecosystem while public bodies cannot access data for the public good.

Teaching Dangerous Technologies to Keep Us All Safe

Speakers: Natálie Terčová, Kseniia Gnitko, Euginia Russkikh, Cat Easdon

How to balance innovation with regulation while ensuring both safety and progress? This session looked at whether schools and universities should teach students about potentially risky and dual-use technologies, encompassing deepfakes and AI—and if so, how to do it safely. Panellists from research, education, and cybersecurity shared their experiences and perspectives on the challenges of helping children and young people use emerging technologies responsibly.

Despite different viewpoints, all panellists agreed on one crucial takeaway: the ability to critically assess content generated by these technologies is an essential skill in today's world. Natálie Terčová shared her perspective as the European representative on the At-Large Advisory Committee (ALAC), where she advocates for the interests of internet end users:

"It is essential for end users, especially those from vulnerable groups—such as individuals with disabilities, children, adolescents, seniors, and those facing intersecting vulnerabilities—to understand the risks posed by emerging technologies. In the past, we advised people to look for telltale signs like spelling mistakes in phishing emails or inconsistencies in manipulated images. But as technology advances, the reality has shifted—human errors are now more common, while AI-generated content is increasingly seamless and convincing. The key to mitigating these risks lies in developing the ability to critically assess and navigate the evolving digital landscape."

Looking forward

At a global level, critical next steps include implementing the Global Digital Compact and establishing two new UN bodies for AI – the scientific panel and global dialogue. Despite growing fears that neither governments nor the UN are up to governing emerging tech innovations, especially when it comes to AI, RightsCon delegates expressed some optimism and certainly a renewed determination to centre civil society actions working in solidarity across sectors and countries.

Although child rights and digital rights actors have not always seen eye to eye, this conference also provided a robust opportunity for lively discussion that recognised the shared commitment to building a more rights-respecting world. Speaking as academic researchers, we hope our recent reports, including Guiding principles for addressing technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, The best interests of the child in the digital environment, From Data to Dialogue: Youth Perspectives on Child Sexual Abuse in the Digital Sphere, Tech & Teens, contribute helpfully to informing these efforts.

Looking to the future, we suggest that if only society would improve its provision for children's digital needs, vulnerabilities, data and remedy, this could improve matters for the wider public also.

Children's rights are human rights, and it is surely possible that, instead of being the canaries in the coal mine of our digital age, children could be prioritised in ways that benefit them and the wider society in which we all must live together.

This post gives the views of the authors and not the position of the Media@LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.

About the author

Natálie Terčová

Natálie Terčová is a Ph.D. Candidate in Media Studies at Masaryk University and a Visiting Research Student at Media@LSE. Her research focuses on the digital skills of adolescents and their association with online opportunities and risks. She has also contributed to projects on online privacy, artificial intelligence, child sexual abuse materials (CSAM), and online safety. Natálie serves as the European representative on ICANN's At-Large Advisory Committee (ALAC) and is the Chair of the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) Czechia.

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 audiences, media literacy and media regulation, with a particular focus on the opportunities and risks of digital media use in the everyday lives of children and young people.

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