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Being heard: Shaping digital futures for and with children

Children should play a key role in shaping their digital futures, argue Laura Betancourt Basallo, Kim R. Sylwander and Sonia Livingstone of the Digital Futures for Children centre (a collaboration between LSE and 5Rights).

One in three internet users is a child. Digital technologies are shaping children's present and future, yet most digital spaces are designed by adults, for adults. Despite this disconnect, digital platforms have emerged as important spaces for children's participation in political and cultural life, partly because this is often limited in traditional spaces.

Children's access to and participation in the digital environment is not just desirable: the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child applies equally online and offline. Article 12 outlines children's right to be heard in ways that genuinely influence the decisions affecting their lives. In 2021, the Committee on the Rights of the Child published its General comment No. 25, the authoritative framework on how children's rights should be applied in relation to the digital environment—this emphasises the importance of children's right to be heard, and to participation in the digital sphere.

Core elements for meaningful participation

Creating meaningful and rights-respecting opportunities for child and youth participation in research, policymaking, and product design demands strategic planning and practical actions. As scholar Laura Lundy explains, these opportunities should guarantee to children:

- **SPACE**: Children must be allowed to express their views.

- **VOICE**: Children must be facilitated to express their views.

- **AUDIENCE**: Their views must be listened to.

- **INFLUENCE**: Their views must be acted upon as appropriate.

This rights-based approach emphasises the importance of not just collecting children's views but actively listening to them and ensuring that their input is meaningfully acted upon, while avoiding the pitfalls of tokenism, manipulation or unsafe practices. Implementing such engagement requires careful consideration of safeguards regarding privacy, freedom of thought, and inclusive access for children with limited digital skills or access.

Here we provide a curated list of resources to conduct consultations with children, *using* digital technologies and then *about* the digital environment.

Consulting children by USING digital technologies

Especially since the COVID-19 pandemic, digital technologies have been employed to facilitate consultations with children. They provide practical and accessible tools for contacting children and marginalised groups that would otherwise be hard to reach and therefore seldom heard. But what does good look like?

- UNICEF's tips on adolescent and youth participation in different settings (2022) provide clear, actionable guidance for adults and youth. Their advice on effectively engaging children online encompasses important privacy and safety recommendations. Their complementary ENGAGED AND HEARD! Guidelines on Adolescent Participation and Civic Engagement (2021) take a closer look at the strategic framework needed to make participation sustainable.

- Child and Youth Councils offer young people a chance to discuss issues that matter to them and advocate for changes in their nations. Some notable examples include the Scottish Youth Parliament (SYP), the UK Youth Parliament, and the European Youth Parliament. These initiatives have embraced digital tools, creating spaces for children and young people to understand their rights and run online campaigns to ensure that local and national governments respect those rights.

- The Child and Youth Friendly Governance Project supports child-friendly governance and child participation by designing, delivering and facilitating tailored consultations with children and young people. Using online questionnaires and focus group interviews they have engaged large numbers of children and youth, including consulting 9000 children in preparation for the 2024 European Parliament elections and 10000 children globally to inform recommendations to the UN, governments, civil society, parents and businesses on children's right to play.

- Opportunities for young people to advocate for their digital rights are diverse. For example, the 5Rights Youth Ambassadors programme engages directly with children and young people so that decision-makers can listen to their perspectives on their digital lives and their priorities for change, and co-create child-friendly resources that support their vision for a better digital world. Recently, the Digital Future for Children (DFC) centre collaborated with the ambassadors to design a child-friendly toolkit, *Your Rights Online.*

Consulting children ABOUT the digital environment

At the DFC, a joint LSE and 5Rights Foundation centre, we facilitate research for a rights-respecting digital world for children. Our commitment to amplifying children's voices is central to our work to support an evidence base for advocacy and facilitate dialogue between academics and policymakers. Again, we ask, what does good look like?

• Global consultations were held with children to inform the drafting of General comment No. 25. Through virtual workshops, an online survey, and e-consultations, 709 children were consulted in 27 countries worldwide to develop the international framework for ensuring children's rights in the digital environment. These consultations identified that children prioritise safety and inclusion in digital spaces, and call on adults to consider their needs, interests and perspectives without burdening them to cope alone.

• Children's Rights through Children's Eyes (2022) describes the methodology used by the DFC's precursor, the Digital Futures Commission. Recognising children's evolving capacities, playful nature, and storytelling tendencies, the DFC developed a range of engaging activities. When consulted, children and youth provided insightful input on their digital experiences and how the design of digital products and services should be improved.

• Youth Participation in a Digital World: Designing and Implementing Spaces, Programs, and Methodologies (2021). Harvard University and the International Telecommunication Union's global youth consultation outlines four tested models: youth labs, co-design spaces, youth boards, and participatory research. Each comes with practical implementation steps and real-world success stories, so that organisations can develop the optimal approach for their context.

• The recent establishment of the Office for the Youth Envoy by the African Union marks a significant step toward incorporating youth perspectives into high-level policymaking. One notable initiative is the Youth Reference Committee at the 37th AU Summit, which presented the AU Youth Manifesto on Education. Additionally, the Make Africa Digital campaign equipped over 4000 youth with digital skills through collaboration with stakeholders, including governments, Afreximbank and Google.

The path forward

The digital environment provides children with crucial opportunities to participate in cultural life and to make their voices heard. Yet, they need to be supported and protected to effectively advocate for their rights online (as they do offline). This means creating opportunities for children to freely express their views, receive diverse information, and participate in social and political activities. It requires multiple decisions concerning digital policy, product design, standards and regulations. In

turn, this tasks providers, designers, and policymakers to design their products and services to empower children to shape their digital spaces actively.

Whether the aim is to consult children by using digital technologies, or to consult children about the digital environment, or both, meaningful participation must adhere to nine essential requirements outlined by the UNCRC's General comment 12 (Article 134):

1. **Transparent and informative** – children should receive clear and age-appropriate information about the participation process and its potential impact.

2. **Voluntary** – participation must always be a choice; children should never feel compelled and can withdraw at any time.

3. **Respectful** – children's opinions should be taken seriously, with adults acknowledging their contributions and considering their backgrounds.

4. **Relevant** – participation should focus on issues meaningful to children, allowing them to highlight topics that matter to them.

5. **Child-friendly** methods should suit children's ages and abilities and provide the necessary support and resources for meaningful involvement.

6. **Inclusive** participation must ensure equal opportunities for all children, address discrimination, and respect cultural differences.

7. **Supported by training** – adults need skills to engage with children effectively, while children should receive support to participate actively.

8. **Safe and sensitive to risk** – protection measures and clear child protection strategies must be in place to shield children from harm.

9. **Accountable** – children should receive feedback on how their views are used and be informed about outcomes, with opportunities for follow-up involvement.

As we face increasingly complex digital challenges—from AI ethics to online trust and safety—it's crucial to recognise children not as passive users but as active digital citizens. Their voices must be heard and their rights factored into the design of the digital products and services they use and that impact them.

This post represents 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

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Laura Betancourt is a Research Associate at the Digital Futures for Children centre. She focuses on how digital technology policy, data, and society intersect. Her research uses interdisciplinary and mixed-method approaches, emphasisisng futures thinking and foresight, to assess emerging technologies and wicked problems in the digital enviroment. Laura holds an MPA in Digital Technologies and Policy from UCL, an MSc in Media and Communication Governance from LSE, and a BA in Government and International Relations from Universidad Externado de Colombia.

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