

Bojana Lobe, [Sonia Livingstone](#), Kjartan Olafsson, and José Alberto Simões

## Best practice research guide: how to research children and online technologies in comparative perspective

### Report

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POLITICAL SCIENCE

# EU Kids Online

## Best Practice Research Guide: How to research children and online technologies in comparative perspective

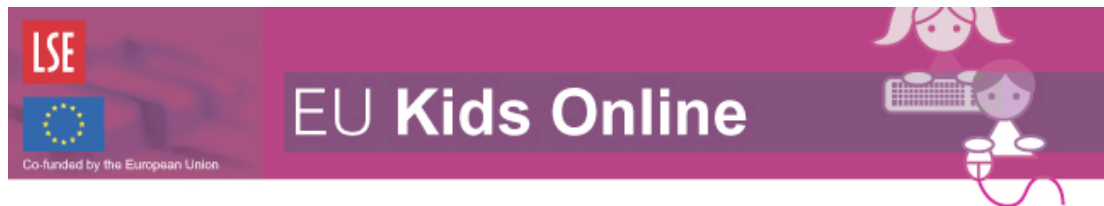


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in Children's Safe Use of the Internet and New Media (2006-2009)**

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# Best Practice Research Guide: How to research children and online technologies in comparative perspective

## Editors

Bojana Lobe, Sonia Livingstone, Kjartan Olafsson  
and José Alberto Simões

## Contributors

Elena Aristodemou, Joke Bauwens, Cátia Candeias, Verónica Donoso, Cédric Fluckiger, Maialen Garmendia, Leslie Haddon, Veronika Kalmus, Lucyna Kirwil, Claudia Lampert, Sofia Leitão, Bojana Lobe, Sonia Livingstone, Kjartan Olafsson, Ingrid Paus-Hasebrink, Cristina Ponte, José Alberto Simões, Elisabeth Staksrud, Panayiota Tsatsou, Bieke Zaman

This is a report from the *EU Kids Online* network, June 2008  
For a complete list of participants, see Annex B

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*European Research on Cultural, Contextual and Risk Issues  
in Children's Safe Use of the Internet and New Media*

The EU Kids Online network is funded by the EC *Safer Internet plus Programme* from 2006-9 (SIP-2005-MD-038229; [http://ec.europa.eu/information\\_society/activities/sip/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/activities/sip/index_en.htm)). It examines research findings from 21 member states into how children and young people use the internet and new online technologies. This three year collaboration aims to identify comparable findings across Europe and to evaluate the social, cultural and regulatory influences affecting online opportunities and risks, along with children's and parents' responses, in order to inform policy. It is charting available data, pinpointing gaps and identifying factors that shape the research capability of European research institutions. Finally, it examines methodological issues relating to the cross-cultural study of children's online experience. See [www.eukidsonline.net](http://www.eukidsonline.net).

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# Introduction

Across Europe and beyond, children and young people are going online in ever greater numbers and for ever more activities. The 2005/6 Eurobarometer survey shows that 50% of children (<18 years old) in the EU25 have used the internet, rising from just 9% of those under six to 1 in 3 6-7 year olds, 1 in 2 8-9 year olds and more than 4 in 5 teenagers aged 12-17 (EC, 2006). Cross-national differences remain substantial, ranging from less than a third of children using the internet in Greece and Bulgaria to over two thirds in Estonia and Denmark.

Among the many responses to this development is a burgeoning of empirical research. Policy makers, industry, child welfare experts and others are increasingly reliant on research to guide their understanding of online use, risk and issues as they affect children and families in Europe and elsewhere. Research is needed to map which children have access to what technologies, what consequences this has for the opportunities and risks they may experience, and for guiding practical interventions – identifying those most at risk, targeting safety advice, evaluating awareness programmes and anticipating new trends.

‘Evidence-based policy’ requires expertise in the design, conduct, evaluation and use of research findings. This requires combining the knowledge and experience of researchers and research users from a range of academic disciplines and policy domains. Too often, such expertise is not readily accessible when needed, partly because of the range of specialisms involved, partly because of the gap between academic knowledge and policy makers’ needs.

One theme of the work of EU Kids Online network (see Annex A) has been to enhance the understanding of methodological issues involved in studying children and online technologies across countries. In 2007, EU Kids Online produced a *Methodological Issues Review* which aimed to increase awareness of the specialised issues that arise in researching children’s use of online technologies and the criteria by which research can be critically evaluated (Lobe, Livingstone, & Haddon, 2007). Addressed to a broad audience, these issues should be of interest to all those concerned with commissioning, designing, conducting and using empirical research in this field.

The present report translates many of these issues into a positive guide to best practice for those concerned with research on children and online technologies in Europe and elsewhere. Our starting point is to note that empirical evidence regarding children’s use of the internet and online technologies in Europe relies on four specific areas of expertise:

- General research orientations, including qualitative and quantitative approaches
- Researching children, including the specific ethical and age-related issues that arise
- Researching online technologies, which may include both familiar and new methods
- Cross-national comparisons - useful strategies for researching in several countries

In practice, we have found that working with children gives rise to the greatest challenges for most researchers. This is also an area in which a considerable body of specialist literature exists. In the FAQs that follow, research techniques effective with children forms the main focus.

To be sure, many researchers and research users reading this guide will be expert in one or more of these areas, but few are expert in all. Our working assumption, therefore, is that an expert in researching new technologies may, for example, know little about researching children, while a child specialist may not be familiar with cross-national comparative methodologies; and so on. The *Best Practice Guide* thus addresses each of these areas.

# The Best Practice Research Guide

This *Best Practice Guide* has been compiled by drawing on the multi-disciplinary and multi-method expertise of the sixty plus researchers who comprise the EU Kids Online network (see Annex B). Its purpose is to distil the knowledge, experience and insights of those actively researching children's use of online technologies for the benefit of those entering this domain.

It is intended to be useful to new researchers, to experienced researchers new to this domain, to those commissioning or evaluating research on children and online technologies, and to students and interested others.

The *Best Practice Guide* is presented in the format of Frequently Asked Questions, since this how new researchers most commonly express their need for knowledge and guidance.

After brainstorming the range of questions most commonly asked, those selected were organised according to the five main sequential steps of the research process, integrating qualitative and quantitative research considerations at each step. These five steps are:

- Designing the research
- Sampling and recruitment of participants
- Data collection
- Analysis of data
- Reporting the findings.

It is important to note that this *Best Practice Guide* does not purport to offer definitive or absolute 'right' answers, for in this domain as in others, research practice is variable and often contested. Differences in research culture, academic discipline and practical experience all combine to generate real disagreements about the optimal conduct of research.

But this does not mean no guidance can be given. We put forward this guide in the collaborative spirit of passing on to others our understanding of the literature, best research insights and hard-won experiences and, at times, lessons learned from painful mistakes.

Each answer to a Frequently Asked Question is structured into several sections, including:

- What's the issue?
- Common practice
- Questions to consider
- Pitfalls to avoid
- Further resources
- Researcher's experience (or instance of good or bad practice)

The Frequently Asked Questions are also available online at [www.eukidsonline.net](http://www.eukidsonline.net), together with further resources and research materials (survey questionnaires, interview schedules, etc.) that exemplify useful qualitative and quantitative research practices. Most but not all resources are in English, the aim being to aid researchers across Europe.

EU Kids Online's *Methodological Issues Review*, freely available from the website, contains up to date critical discussion of key methodological issues and a substantial bibliography and can be an useful supplement and further reading to this guide.

# I. Designing the research

## FAQ 1: When is it better to do qualitative or quantitative research?

### *What's the issue?*

To some extent all questions may be approached either quantitatively or qualitatively. It all depends on what is our chief goal. Are we interested in a systematic approach, in order to produce comparable, generalisable data, or do we want to produce a “thick” description of a particular case/group/situation/context? Each option involves different kinds of planning, which may best be followed by a particular research design. Nevertheless, combination or mixed method approaches prove to be very useful in many situations, and seem to solve many of the problems, which arise from adopting a single methodological approach.

### *Common practice*

- Surveys are highly formal and standardised (we should be able to anticipate all pertinent questions); while field work/ethnographic methods are informal and open to unexpected data (indicating little control over events).
- Quantitative methods are best when you want to compare data in a systematic way, make generalisations to the whole population or test theories with hypothesis. This is particularly so when you want to compare or generalise information extensively within and from a specific population or between different populations (some of them configured within particular geographical or socio-spatial units – like countries, regions, etc).
- A qualitative approach is best when you are exploring a subject about which you don't know much in advance or, for the opposite reason, when you want to grasp the meanings, motives, reasons, patterns, etc, usually unnoticed in standardised approaches, like those you would get with a survey.
- In short, to find quantitative differences in children's behaviour, beliefs, attitudes, we employ quantitative methods, but to find and illuminate meanings related to these differences, we employ qualitative methods.

### *Questions to consider*

What kinds of questions should be translated into which research strategy? Are all problems quantifiable? Or should some be presented only qualitatively? Do we want to generalise our findings to the whole population? Are we after deep meanings rather than numbers?

### *Pitfalls to avoid*

- We need to try to avoid going after quantitative methods just because they provide generalisable results, which many consider as more appropriate and valid.
- Try not to use a particular method just because it seems like a part of your ‘research tradition’.
- Think carefully about what the research problem is and go for the method that particular research question ‘dictate’ to use.

### *Further resources*

Creswell, J. W. (2008). *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*. Thousand Oaks: Sage

Bryman, A. (2004). *Social research methods* (2nd ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.



### **Example of good practice: Special Eurobarometer 250**

First of all, let's consider quantitative strategies independently.

In 2005 a special Eurobarometer Survey on issues related to "Safer Internet" was conducted in 29 countries (25 EU member states, two candidate states - Bulgaria, Romania, and two accession countries - Croatia, Turkey). Respondents were adults who had a child under 18 living in their household for whom they were responsible (- for this reason, respondents were not necessarily the child's parents but could be older siblings or other carers). They were asked several questions regarding child internet uses. Although this didn't provide access to the children's actual behaviour but to others' perception of their behaviour, we might say that the research strategy chosen had the same general implications as it would have had with a different population: to produce comparable data about internet uses. This aim was achieved through a questionnaire, delivered to a representative sample from each country involved in that study.

Not all quantitative studies mobilise these kinds of resources; nonetheless their objectives remain identical: to obtain large amounts of information, under the same standardised conditions, in order that they can be treated, analysed and interpreted statistically. One of the main advantages of quantitative methods is precisely the possibility of making comparisons and enabling generalisations. This explains the popularity of surveys. But they also present some limitations. The number of questions is always limited, not to mention their scope. Some subjects may be difficult to translate into "closed questions", especially if we are dealing with sensitive subjects or when we are searching for meaning and understanding.

### **A researcher's experience: qualitative research on youth and the internet**

For some researchers, the benefits of using a qualitative research strategy exclusively are considerable, depending on the purpose of the research. If you don't have a pre-defined theoretical model or if you want to capture "freely" (that is, with minimum intervention) what is on your subject's mind, qualitative methodologies may be most helpful to attain that goal. This seemed to be the view of two researchers from the SAFT project, referring to their experience with a qualitative approach:

*We chose to relate to the subject with as much openness and inquisitiveness as possible without formulating any clear theses until we were in contact with the field. We found that qualitative methodology was best suited to such an approach. In this way, we hoped to capture, as far as possible, the themes that were important to the youngsters whom we interviewed, and about whom this study is based, rather than focusing upon subjects influenced by our own theoretical observations as to what would be relevant. However, such an approach does place great demands of openness on us as researchers. Ideally, one should be open and objective to all the factors one comes across and treat all subject matter with the same degree of interest and understanding.*

(Bjørnstad & Ellingsen, *SAFT – Onliners. A report about youth and the internet*, 2004)

### **Examples of good practices: combined approaches**

Only at an abstract (or purist) epistemological level are quantitative and qualitative approaches likely to be presented as completely incompatible. In most cases, a combination of methods may prove to be more useful. Under different research circumstances both strategies can be (and usually are) combined. In fact, quantitative and qualitative mean different things in different situations. The actual form this combination will take depends, on the one hand, on the objectives and, on the other hand, on research development.

The data resulting from the above "free" qualitative methodology (Bjørnstad & Ellingsen, 2002) were used to formulate questions for the quantitative SAFT study, and to provide explanations and insights for the interpretation of the quantitative data.

In the project *Children and their Changing Media Environment* (Livingstone, 2002; Livingstone & Bovill, 2001), a qualitative study preceded a quantitative one, which proved to be very helpful when interpreting the quantitative data (Livingstone S. & Lemish, 2001); the same happened with the *UK Children Go Online* research project. As the authors of the study noticed, "Though often insightful in suggesting themes or trends, qualitative research is best complemented by quantitative research in order to judge the scale and significance of the findings" (Livingstone & Bober, 2004).

### ***A researcher's experience: children's use of computer games***

Aiming to analyse *how* children (7-12) use computer games in their lives and *how* this activity changes over time, a researcher decided to conduct a survey with the same children at two different moments (Malheiro, 2007). A questionnaire was designed with closed and open questions, the latter oriented to capture feelings and personal evaluation (for instance, "Do you prefer computer games or other things? What kinds of things?", "Do you think you are a good player? Why?"). The questionnaire was pre-tested on ten children.

The pre-test showed that the open questions did not allow the identification of any significant trend. Different concepts were used by the children and it was impossible to estimate patterns. Some open questions were also not answered, maybe because they were focused on the processes and required them to write a lot (such as, "Did you learn quickly? How was it?", "Did you learn new things with computer games?" "What?", "Do you think games are a good way of spending your leisure time?" "Why?").

Based on these results, the researcher decided to use qualitative approaches, mixing interviews with topics (where, when, how or why they play games, what kinds of games, experiences and expectations they have experienced, what were their "unforgettable moments"...) and observations of children playing games.

As the starting point for a new topic, a qualitative approach like this proved to be more productive for the design of questions that were less difficult for children to answer.

(Cristina Ponte, Portugal)

### ***A researcher's experience: study on children's reading of animation***

Quantitative research is of better use when looking for the general features of a population. It can be particularly limiting when young respondents are involved because of literacy and social gaps between the researcher and the subjects, which make it a challenge to organise a questionnaire capable of motivating active participation. I found a combination of quantitative and qualitative techniques more useful – the first helping to determine similarities and differences in socio-economoc status, and to trace routines and practices, while the second aids the exploration of social dynamics and contextual variations. In my study on children's readings of animation ((Leitão, 2005). I used both methods, employing two research techniques – the questionnaire and the small-group interview – in a school context, working with a class of twenty-two children from the first year of primary school education and a class of twenty-four fourth year children. (Sofia Leitão, Portugal)

## FAQ 2: How do I design a project with multiple data sources?

### *What's the issue?*

Often, the research question needs to be approached from many diverse perspectives, which involves using different methods and data sources. The benefits of using multiple data sources depend on what they add to a particular piece of research. This could be related to diverse research contexts or to different information about the same subject.

### *Common practice*

- The combination may assume several forms, depending on the importance given to a specific method in the overall research and on the development of the research process itself. In what we might call a “sequential model”, you may begin with quantitative (e.g. survey) to “map” a subject and then pursue with qualitative (e.g. interview) to “get deeper” into some topics. Or you may start with the qualitative (e.g. observation, interviews) to explore a given subject and then turn to the quantitative. Alternatively, in what we might call a “concurrent model”, you may follow both approaches simultaneously, either to explore in different ways the same aspects of your subject or to cross-validate (or “triangulate”) information gathered through different methods (Lobe et al., 2007).
- Multiple data sources may also confront us with different perspectives concerning the same subject. In some cases the only choice might be to combine sources in order to get all the information we need about our research object. In any case, defining the status of different data sources is mandatory in order to articulate properly all the information available and needed.
- Unlike cases in which we deal with different methodologies, we may combine different sources of information within the same methodology, as in the case of using different questionnaires to address the same problem. In this situation one must be careful to distinguish between the criteria used in the various sources of information (e.g. how a particular variable is measured in different questionnaires). When using different samples (collected over different periods of time), or a sample obtained in several populations, one is also combining different sources of information.

### *Questions to consider*

However, one shouldn't forget that comparing different sources (containing data gathered for different purposes) is not exactly the same as comparing information from a single data frame. In the first case we are considering secondary analysis; in the second case we are actually comparing data within the same (or an equivalent) dataset. This isn't only a problem of considering different sample designs, but also of being sure if (or to what extent) data are comparable and in what way this comparison may be carried out.

Asking the same questions of different individuals also confronts us with distinct perspectives in relation to what apparently is the same activity/practice/event. For example, when you ask parents about their children's activities and compare the answers with the children's own accounts, discrepancies are common.

### *Pitfalls to avoid*

People often overlook the fact that existing data can be used. They make use of multiple sources without having a clear goal of why they do so. They underestimate the complexity of such studies (qualitative, quantitative, parents, children).

### *Further resources*

- Derbyshire, P. (2005). Multiple methods in qualitative research with children: more insight or just more? *Qualitative Research* 5(4), 417-436.
- Creswell, J. (2008). *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*. Thousand Oaks: Sage
- Creswell, J., Plano Clark, W. L. (2006). *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*. Thousand Oaks: Sage
- Greene, J. (2007). *Mixed Methods in Social Inquiry*. Jossey-Bass: San Francisco.
- Lobe, B., Livingstone, S., & Haddon, L. (Eds.). (2007). *Researching Children's Experiences Online across Countries*. EU Kids Online Network.  
<http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/EUKidsOnline/Reports/ReportD4.1MethodologicalIssuesCover.pdf>.

## FAQ 3: When is it best to use focus group, in-depth interviews or observations?

### *What's the issue?*

We have taken a decision that we will conduct a qualitative data collection, but which method do we want to choose? Do we want to observe a particular group or site for a long period in order to discover how meanings, representations, and behaviour come about? Or a group discussing where participants share and compare their experience would be better? Perhaps we are dealing with specific and sensitive issues and we would rather conduct in-depth interviews?

### *Common practice*

- Focus groups can be used to examine children's preferences in the context of their peer-related activities, thus uncovering meanings and feelings, specific topics that children of the same age talk about and, more specifically, how they communicate about their media and internet interests and experiences. Often, media use and content is selected, assigned significance and interpreted through social interaction within groups. The dynamics of children's peer groups can be at least partly captured and reproduced within focus groups.
- Since focus groups are based on social interaction, the context within which that interaction takes place is of the utmost importance. Focus groups can be conducted in informal peer group settings, and in classroom situations, as well as at home. The location of the research matters to children (and, no doubt, to adults), and should be familiar to the child. In this particular sense, focus groups are more similar to "natural groups" (that is, pre-existing social groups - such as friends, class mates, families, etc.) than to "artificial groups" (usually assembled by marketing researchers) include people who don't know each other necessarily (and actually are not supposed to).
- In-depth interviews can be used as part of a mixed method research strategy (e.g. as complementary method to a survey); the same may be assumed about focus groups. Each one, however, can be used as a research method in its own right. Either way, interviews and focus groups must follow certain basic rules. In fact, researchers have developed a range of techniques and several strategies for working with groups of children and young people.
- These include using visual retrieval aids for recall, asking 'wh' questions (who/what/when/where/why) rather than yes/no questions, and open-ended rather than closed questions, and explaining that 'I don't know' is an acceptable reply (to reduce response biases). See Lobe et al (2007).
- In a focus group design social interaction between participants is the core issue. The researcher is asked to encourage and observe discussions between individuals. Being able to collect the information you need while observing interaction among participants is an obvious benefit of conducting a focus group.
- As general rule, in-depth interviews are best when you are interested in individual information, regarding several topics of interest that can be attained only through an informal conversation alone with the child informant. On the other hand, focus groups are best when you want to consider not only children's own accounts of reality but the way they negotiate these accounts with others, therefore showing divergence or convergence between their views.
- Observation may be a part of other methods (e.g. occurring during focus groups) or be employed as an independent or alternative method. Participant observation of children's playing falls into this last category. It may also be part of an experimental design, based on systematic observation. When researching very young children, this last procedure may prove to be particularly adequate, since other methods could be rejected by children or simply be inappropriate for certain ages.

### *Questions to consider*

Any research interaction with children should allow sufficient time for 'warming-up' and developing a rapport with the children. Besides that it is important to arrange for more than one meeting in order to gain the trust of the child informant.

Furthermore, the research process should be varied as children's concentration span calls for variety in approaches (mixing methods, shifting focus, introducing varied materials).

Often, media use and content is selected, assigned significance and interpreted through social interaction within groups. The dynamics of children's peer groups can be at least partly captured and reproduced within focus groups.

Several basic strategies have been noticed by authors who have worked with children in focus groups (Morgan, Gibbs, Maxwell, & Britten, 2002): care in the recruitment and composition of the group (4-5 children is probably best, as is separating boys and girls for older children); achieving a balance of power that enables spontaneous contributions; setting the scene to encourage informality and participation, specifying ground rules, structured warm-up activities; managing space and time by breaking up the session, varying the activities, arranging the space; accessing children's meanings through appropriate prompts and probing; use of an alternative personality (e.g. a stuffed toy or cartoon character to take the place of the interviewer); pen and paper exercises, especially for drawing or for producing a shared image; role-playing scenarios with dolls, toys or the children themselves; observing the group dynamics, tensions and sensitive moments (Irwin & Johnson, 2005; Lewis, 1992).

### **Pitfalls to avoid**

As regards the role assigned to children in an interview, it is important to treat them as active participants, rather than mere respondents, giving them the opportunity to explain their responses in the interviewing process. Children must not get the feeling that they have to give the "right" answers.

Interviews, individual or collective, are the result of a given social process, which means they are not simply "neutral" conversations between two or more individuals. In this sense, all information is the result of a particular social relation between interviewer and interviewee. The context in which the interview takes place, the roles that are assigned to participants, the individual characteristics of participants (both interviewer and interviewee) – all these influence the kind of relation established and nature of the information gathered.

Although focus groups add to in-depth interviews the possibility of observing group dynamics, they could be restrictive if we intend to explore certain topics related to single individuals. This is particularly the case when one is dealing with children or young people.

Be aware of the number of participants of focus groups. Having more participants will not make the data more generalisable.

### **Further resources**

Morgan, D. & Krueger, R.A (Eds.), (1998). *The Focus Group Kit*. London: Sage.

Greene, S., & Hogan, D. (2005). *Researching children's experiences: methods and approaches*. London: Sage.

Hennessy, E., & Heary, C. (2005). Exploring Children's Views Through Focus Groups In S. Greene & D. Hogan (Eds.), *Researching children's experience* (pp. 236-252). London: Sage.

### **A researcher's experience: in-depth interviews and focus groups from a research project on children and the internet**

Focus groups or in-depth interviews seem to me the most appropriate methods for investigations with children, despite the advantages and disadvantages of each method. If the first allows us to understand how they relate to each other, it also shows who dominates the group. I can testify that, in some focus groups, there was always someone who enjoyed being the leader, answering all the questions, even the ones which hadn't been addressed to her/him. This situation can be particularly embarrassing if the rest of the group is too shy, since it can be really difficult to understand the opinions of the rest of the group. Focus groups can also be an obstacle to talking about private subjects, such as sex or any other sensitive themes. It is a fact that in-depth interviews could be a solution for this case; however, one should remember that this kind of interview is much more intimate and the researcher has to prepare her/himself much better, so that the approach can be accepted well by the children. According to my experience, I would say that in-depth interviews work better with teenagers and adults, while for younger children they can be quite embarrassing.

(Cátia Candeias, Portugal)

### ***A researcher's experience: observation of focus groups from a study on children's reading of animation***

As regards observation, I noticed that the children taking part in the group discussions were easily distracted by my activities, and even stopped talking when I stood up. This was possibly due to the classroom context where the children are usually requested to follow the teacher's instructions and to behave accordingly – i.e. not to speak unless asked to. (Sofia Leitão, Portugal)

### ***A researcher's experience: focus group on IPTV and broadband internet among teenagers and young adults***

Natural groups are one of the most appropriate methods to investigate children and their media uses. One of their main advantages is the opportunity for the researcher to observe social interaction in its natural setting and, as far as children's use of online technologies are concerned, observe how practices of use are defined, negotiated and shaped within social networks and peer relations. In contrast, focus groups organized through recruitment agencies can introduce a significant bias, since many recruitment agencies now make use of "professional focus groupers", that is people (even teenagers and younger children) who are used to joining several focus groups per year, and who also sometimes specialize in talking about certain topics (such as media consumption). So what is supposed to be a group of people who have never attended a focus group at least in the last 6 months and who have never met before, turns out to be a group of acquaintances who share this "second job". In a specific research project conducted by EU Kids Online members, both the researcher and the recorder clearly recognized one of the interviewee as being a girl who was interviewed a few months before. On each occasion the girl claimed to have different broadband providers (the main competitors on the Italian market) and when the researcher asked for further information she seemed to be confused). (Giovanna Mascheroni, Italy).

### ***Example of bad practice: Natural groups on mobile phone uses and internet practices***

The main disadvantage of natural groups comes from the fact that the group observed is characterized by established relationships, certain roles and relations of power within the group that the researcher has to identify and bear in mind. Another side effect of the study of pre-existing social networks is the fact that they tend to share a common experience expressed in terms that are largely taken for granted and unfamiliar to the researcher. This aspect, though, may be peculiar with all focus groups on children, since they tend to speak their "own" language and perceive the researcher (independently of her age, in/formal look, etc) as a stranger, too odd to understand what they are speaking about. This was the case of one research project where the group was comprised of two boys and two girls all aged 14 and 15, two of whom had been boy-and girlfriend. The two kept on flirting during the interview, much to the great disappointment of the other girl who was seemingly jealous of her friend. The interview was somewhat hard to manage, especially when the group was asked to tell and show what kind of texts and MMS they used to exchange, since most of this was related to the previous "affair" between. (Giovanna Mascheroni, Italy).

## FAQ 4: How should quantitative research be evaluated?

### *What's the issue?*

Quantitative data as well as qualitative data has to be evaluated on the basis of its ability to reach the objectives of the research. Besides more complicated discussions related to epistemological value of quantitative approaches, the decision to use quantitative data should therefore be the answer to the question what kind of data is needed to analyse a particular problem. If the main aim of the study is generalizability then this is usually best achieved through quantitative methods such as surveys. This doesn't exclude however the possibility of combining, in different sorts of ways, quantitative and qualitative approaches.

### *Common practice*

The decision to use quantitative methods is usually based on the desire to achieve a certain level of generalizability. More specifically, the goal is to achieve reliable and accurate measurement for one or both of the following:

- Point estimates. This is the desire to be able to state, for example, how many children use the internet and what they do online.
- Relationship between two or more variables - for example, if girls are more likely than boys to go online or vice versa.

As the goal of quantitative studies is to get results which then can be said to apply generally, the main issue in these studies is to limit both random and systematic errors.

- Random errors are controlled by using the appropriate statistical tests and, as a rule of thumb, the bigger the sample the smaller the random error.
- Systematic errors are controlled through the research design and through strict control over the research process. One of the most effective way to limit systematic error is to use simple random sampling and achieve a high response rate.

### *Questions to consider*

The first goal of making point estimates puts strong demands on the data especially in terms of systematic errors. This means for example that if children with certain social status are more likely than others to be interviewed in a study that weakens the data as a basis for estimating how many children use the internet. However, even with systematic error present in the data it might be possible to make quite accurate estimates for relationships between variables.

Quantitative methods are popular because they allow you to make generalizations. But there are also some limitations. The number of questions is always limited, not to mention their scope. Some subjects may be difficult to translate into "closed questions", especially if dealing with sensitive subjects or when we are searching for meaning and understanding.

### *Pitfalls to avoid*

Because quantitative methods rely on comparability and generalisation, the ability to measure exactly the same thing each time is crucial. This of course poses problems of *reliability* (that is, measuring something the same way each time, without introducing any changes) and of *validity* (that is, finding a way of measuring exactly what is intended in a particular piece of research). The last problem is more difficult to solve than the first, since it depends on the ability to translate accurately in to a specific set of questions a particular research problem. In other words, the problem of validity is directly connected with how well the concept or a construct is translated into a set of indicators to measure what we want to know.

Many quantitative studies are based on questionnaires. But questionnaires can be tricky and the validity of the results depends to a large extent on the assumption that all respondents have understood the questions in the same way and in the same way as the researcher. It is especially important to evaluate critically this assumption when working with children.

### *Further resources*

Bryman, A. (2004). *Social research methods* (2nd ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

## FAQ 5: How should qualitative research be evaluated?

### What's the issue?

Qualitative research is usually differently evaluated than quantitative research, especially by ethnographers. As the data collection is often of a nature that is harder to be repeated (like surveys or experiments for instance), qualitative researchers came up with different a set of quality measures, such as credibility, dependability, transferability, confirmability (Guba & Lincoln, 1989), member checking and others.

### Common practice

- The researcher himself usually demonstrates credibility, in the form of properly used scientific methods, his or her training, experience and beliefs.
- Dependability, as a criterion of consistency, is achieved by auditing – the procedure, where the research process and researcher's work has been closely examined and evaluated by other experts in the field.
- Transferability assumes that research methods, analytic categories, and characteristics of phenomena and groups are each identified sufficiently explicitly that comparisons can be made between interviews or fieldworks, for example.
- Confirmability is also checked by auditing. Auditors (i.e. experts in the field) focus on how interpretations are grounded in the data and whether they are formulated in ways consistent with the available data.
- In member checking, the researcher checks the findings and interpretation with the original respondents. This could take place either at the end of research, providing participants with information that ensures their views have been properly captured, or during the research process – here participants can help design questionnaires or interview guidelines, thus being seen as co-researchers (Kellett, 2005).

### Questions to consider

Which data quality standard is the most sensible to approach our qualitative data with? Are children old enough to go through member checking?

### Pitfalls to avoid

A common mistake in qualitative methods is look for 'quantitatively' denoted validity and reliability as the only indication of objectivity. Qualitative methods are often semi-structured or unstructured and even informal which makes it difficult to determine in advance what we want to 'measure'. It is also literally impossible to replicate an observation, a focus groups or an interview to the extent we can replicate surveys.

Another mistake derives from the assumption that since we are dealing with participants' own accounts of social reality, or observing and participating in several social situations, we have access to social "reality itself" (easily assumed since we are looking at "natural settings" for social interaction rather than "second-hand" accounts). Yet all accounts (and observations) of social reality are mediated by participants, in one way or another and, thus, all research situations are to some extent "artificial".

### Further resources

Guba, E. G. & Lincoln, Y. S. (1989). *Fourth generation evaluation*. Newbury Park.: Sage.

Kvale, S. (1996). *Inter Views: An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing*. London: Sage.

### A researcher's experience: qualitative insight into quantitative results

Qualitative research is used either to ground a research project or explore further the insights from quantitative research. In my study of digital divides, I examined ordinary people's discourses through interviewing after I had surveyed a representative sample of the study population. Qualitative research allowed social discourses and meaning constructions to emerge in context and to be appropriately interpreted. This in turn enabled me to go beyond the quantitative measurement of individual perceptions, evaluations, attitudes and behaviours and so to depart from 'quantified' causal relationships and explore the 'quality' – the exploration of the essential character of the object of research (Kvale, 1996). Finally, I dismissed the rule of thumb that qualitative usually constitutes 'a source of ideas for quantitative testing'. In the context of my work, qualitative research aimed to give more depth and exploratory power to the quantitative findings obtained in the previous phases of the research. (Panayiota Tsatsou, UK)



## FAQ 6: How young a child can one work with?

### *What's the issue?*

In any research with children, including that relating to media and the internet, age differences are consistently amongst the most important background factors. Reporting findings by age, charting age trends, or comparing age groups is expected by most readers, and it would be the absence of age differences, not their discovery, that would be counterintuitive, if and when it occurred. A useful principle, therefore, is to assume that each child is capable of providing valid and insightful information, provided that s/he is approached appropriately and that the data are interpreted carefully.

### *Common practice*

A range of principled or commonsense rules of thumb are evident in published accounts of research. In general two major turning points can be assumed with key adjustments in methods being made for respondents older or younger than 7-8 years, and older or younger than 11-12 years. It is worth noting that these age transitions tend to mirror the transition points in Piaget's stage mode (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969).

For younger children it is common to rely on proxy respondents such as parents or teachers but it is possible to use other methods such as drawing, role play and observational methods over interviews for children under 6.

Besides these general rules, one should also consider questions related to the use of each research method with children from particular age groups and its adequacy in regard to the problem at hand:

- Interviews: Children are not used to interviews, so it is important to create a familiar and fearless atmosphere. A hand puppet can be a perfect medium to engage with the child and to adjust to her/his language. Individual and group semi-structured interviews are possible with children older than 7 years old. However, less structured methods are needed for younger children (Christensen & James, 2000). As for individual interviews with young children, even children as young as 4 and 5 years olds are effective in referential communication (i.e. describing an object to a listener). This is only true on the condition that they have to describe familiar objects in a face to face interaction in a familiar, naturalistic setting (Bukatko & Daehler, 2001).
- Participative observation: This method enables the observation of how children interact with each other while using media. Thus, emphasis can be placed on how a single child deals with the media, or on the exposure of a social system, in which children are growing up (e.g. family, nursery school, school), to the media.
- Children's drawings: The advantage of children's drawings is the possibility of revealing aspects which cannot be verbalised. They provide an insight into the visual and intellectual capabilities of children, the emotions experienced while they are drawing, as well as their level of development. But children's explanations of their drawings are needed in order to interpret them adequately.
- Experiments: Experiments are often favoured when dealing with very young children, who aren't yet able to verbalise their experiences and mindsets. However, young children, even preschoolers, have the language skills to describe what they remember. Young children remember familiar (repeated) events in terms of scripts. It is remarkable that all children recall older items better (recency effect) whereas a good recall for early items (primacy effect) is more apparent with children aged 7 years and older.

### *Questions to consider*

When researching with children, particularly in the case of very young ones, combined approaches and alternative methods should be tried, as well as different perspectives on media and internet uses. Otherwise, research could be partially compromised at best, or completely beyond reach at worst. Sometimes solutions to problems rely on methodological imagination.

A common flaw in research with children is addressing the child as more mature, or more competent, than they are – overestimating their linguistic skills, for example, or underestimating the gap between competence (what they can really do) and performance (what the researcher has been able to observe them doing).

### *Pitfalls to avoid*

- Don't assume that children under 8-9 years can give accurate time estimates.
- Focus groups with teens can be especially marked by social desirability biases.

### **Example of good practice: a study of very young children and their media use**

In a study concerning the relevance of media (especially media figures and heroes) in children's friendships, peer groups and nursery schools, I worked with children aged three and above in order to discover their own perspectives. The aim of this study was to find out which television series, and especially their heroes, are meaningful to children of preschool age in the contexts of their daily lives (including nursery school, peer groups, friends and family). The issue of how children deal with the stories and symbols carried by their favourite television series in their daily lives was addressed. Data collection took place in a nursery school in West-Germany (75 children) and one in East-Germany (43 children). The social-ecological approach used by Baacke and Bronfenbrenner (Paus-Haase, 1998: 61) was the basis for the theoretical foundation (differentiation concerning the concepts of media and education, media equipment and the equipment in the rooms, as well as the social-ecological environment). The children who formed the focus group were chosen by theoretical sampling (concerning knowledge of media products, social relationships and peer groups, cognitive and linguistic development, as well as by age and gender). (Ingrid Paus-Hasebrink, Austria)

### **Example of good practice: experimental method with very young children**

The 'this-or-that' method, which is used in experiments, is found to be useful with preschoolers between the age of 4 and 6 years old to do likeability research (Zaman & Abeele, 2007). At the beginning of this experiment, each child is asked to play with 2 objects, e.g. games (the order in which the games are presented are counterbalanced). The researcher tries to obtrude as little as possible and undirected play is supported (no tasks, since these conflicts with the explorative nature of games). After both conditions are finished, a likeability questionnaire is administered. Likeability was measured with five questions: 1) Which game did you find most fun (most fun), 2) Which game would you want to receive as a gift (wanted gift), 3) which game would you like to take home with you (take home), 4) which game would you like to play again (play again) and 5) which game did you find the most stupid (most stupid – this question was reversed in the final likeability measure)? These answers were triangulated with free play at the end of the test: as a 'reward' for participating the child could choose one of the two interfaces and play the game again. Besides quantitative measurements, qualitative material was also gathered. We video-recorded interaction styles and comments uttered by the toddler when playing the game. Only after the complete test was finalized (playing the two conditions and answering the likeability questions) did the facilitator follow up on this qualitative information and ask the toddler to explain a little more on exactly why one condition was chosen over one another according to the contextual laddering method (Zaman, 2008) (Bieke Zaman, Belgium)

### **Further resources**

#### **Studies (see Annex C)**

*UK Children Go Online, Eurobarometer 250, SAFT, Mediappro*

#### **Further reading**

Berk, L. E. (2007). Physical and Cognitive Development in Early Childhood. In *Exploring Lifespan Development*. Allyn & Bacon.

Bukatko, D., & Daehler, M. (2001). *Child Development. A thematic approach* (4th ed.). Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.

Rice, F. P. (1998). *Human Development. A life-span Approach* (3rd ed.). New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

## FAQ 7: In comparative research, how do I choose which countries to compare?

### What's the issue?

Little formal attention is paid to the question of country selection, these decisions often being somewhat *ad hoc*, convenient or serendipitous, not necessarily best meeting the research aims but depending instead on practicalities of contacts and funding. Yet, depending on the countries compared, findings will centre more on similarities or on differences.

Hence, a research project which spans continents, comparing vastly different countries, may have difficulty identifying the fine-grain differences that research on similar countries will reveal. Conversely, comparing similar countries, perhaps from the same geographic region, may miss the bigger picture of transnational differences. The lens one chooses to apply depends on the research question being asked.

### Common practice

A helpful analysis developed by Kohn (Kohn, 1989) identifies four distinct approaches to cross-national comparison within social science according to its primary purpose (see below).

### Approaches to Cross-National Comparison

Country as ...	Object of study [1]	Context of study [2]	Unit of analysis [3]	Part of larger system [4]
<b>Primary purpose</b>	Idiographic – understand each country in own terms	Test abstract hypothesis or dimension across countries	Seek relations among dimensions on which nations vary	Interpret each country as part of transnational system
<b>Country selection</b>	Compare any, all or similar countries	Maximise diversity on one dimension	Diversity within a common framework	Maximise diversity on all dimensions

Source: abridged version of "Models of Comparative Cross-National Research" from Methodological report of EU Kids Online research network (Lobe et al., 2007).

If one is treating each nation as the *object of study*, comparing fairly similar countries may prove most useful, particularly to inform regionally-based (e.g. EC) policy (Hantrais, 1999; Teune, 1990).

If one is studying the generality of a finding across nations (*country as context of study*), selecting countries so as to maximise diversity along the dimension in question allows one to explore the scope or universality of a phenomenon.

For model three, one would select countries to capture diversity within a common framework. Since the use of multiple dimensions invites a conception of their inter-relations, this should support theory-building by developing a common framework based on a pan-national conception of relations among the dimensions.

Lastly, projects which conceptualise the nations to be compared as *components of a transnational system* will select countries by seeking to maximise range and diversity globally.

### Questions to consider

While policy development, especially at a European level, provides a significant impetus towards comparison based on standardisation, with substantial funding being used to generate multi-national quantitative data sets, the academic trend is increasingly 'away from universalistic culture-free approaches to culture-boundedness, which has placed the theory and practice of contextualization at the nexus of cross-national comparative studies' (Hantrais, 1999: 93).

This is, arguably, a particular problem for qualitative research. As Mangen (1999: 110) observes, 'the strengths of qualitative approaches lie in attempts to reconcile complexity, detail and context' – all dimensions that are particularly difficult to convey when translating across languages and research cultures, and when undertaking the exercises in standardisation or data reduction that making comparisons seems to demand. Yet such concerns apply also to quantitative research, where the ease of producing neat tables of statistics may beguile the researcher into neglecting crucial differences in the meaning of terms or the contexts within which they apply.

### **Pitfalls to avoid**

Many comparative researchers address the challenge of comparison by standardising their methodology and research tools, devoting considerable attention to strict equivalence in measurement procedures through such techniques as the back-translation of survey instruments, as well as ensuring transparency by including questionnaires and coding schedules in the final publications. The difficulties of comparative research, on this view, stem from the challenging task of ensuring equivalence of terms, comparability of measures and in applying standardised forms of analysis. It must be acknowledged, however, that many (perhaps all) key concepts change their meaning on translation.

In practice, quantitative research usually makes an effort to keep the exact wording in different national surveys (although variation can still be introduced in the process of translation and in terms of whether a concept means the same thing in different countries/cultures). In qualitative interviews, the difficulties are compounded by the fact that researchers can agree on a general interview schedule, but then in 'conversations' with the participants the exact wording often varies, depending on the particular interview context, on the researcher's disciplinary training and on the cultural or national research context.

### **Example of good practice: Mediappro research project**

The Mediappro project illustrates the first approach, for it sought to identify the specific cultural contexts within which children in different countries use the internet and, in consequence, use it differently. While findings from one country were used to stimulate questions for another, with findings from each country reported side by side, few direct comparisons are drawn, possibly because these seem to violate the cultural integrity of each nation.

*About 9000 young people aged 12-18 (7400 in Europe and 1350 in Quebec), participated in the Mediappro survey. For practical reasons, each national team selected the participants from their schools with the consent of school principals and parents. In order to construct a relevant sample at the international level, schools were selected according to their geographical location and their social, economic and cultural setting. Three school grades, representing three age groups, were defined: 12-14 (beginning of secondary school), 15-16 (middle of secondary school), and 17-18 (end of secondary school). Using this method we were able to obtain a varied sample representing the diversity of young people's life contexts, reflecting national differences that exist across Europe. We collected the data through two means. The project team elaborated a common questionnaire including 63 items and distributed it to the whole sample during school time, from September to October 2005. Based on the results of this quantitative phase, 240 young people (24 in each country) were selected according to their different levels of internet usage, ages and gender, for individual interviews. [...] Aside from the statistical analysis of the questionnaires, Mediappro teams conducted each phase of the survey themselves in order to guarantee a coherent process and high quality analysis.*

(Mediappro - A European research project: the appropriation of new media by youth)

### **Example of good practice: SAFT project**

The SAFT project (Staksrud, 2005) illustrates the second approach, for it examines how differences in age, gender, parent-child relations, etc are fairly constant across (Northern) European countries, as regards children's use of the internet and their contact with its risks. In other words, SAFT treated each country as a distinct context precisely in order to test whether the same finding (such as parents underestimate risks online compared with children) applies in those different contexts; only if the similarity holds is the finding considered robust.

### **Example of good practice: Children and their Changing Media Environment project**

The *Children and their Changing Media Environment* project (Livingstone & Bovill, 2001) exemplifies the third approach, for it sought to understand how systematic differences in education, wealth, parenting, etc were associated with differences across countries in children's media use, including adoption of new media.

Thus it examined the correlations between national wealth (e.g. GDP), or degree of ICT diffusion, and the dependent variables of children's media use; this model expects to find neither similarities nor differences, simply, but rather to find a model that applies across all nations that explains the differences observed among them, as explained to us by the authors of Chapter 1 regarding the choice of research contexts for comparison:

*In what follows, we examine first the contexts for children's lives across Europe and, second, we map media environments across Europe, focusing on the electronic screen. In both cases, our aim is to identify key dimensions that discriminate among countries, or groups of countries, in order to facilitate the thematic cross-national comparisons that form the substantive chapters of this volume. We caution, however, that there's no easy way to place boundaries around "context". Our research involves countries that are broadly comparable in degree of modernization and global positioning; however, we can only provide a brief and necessarily selective overview of the key dimensions along which the 12 countries vary, and we include nation-by-nation tables only when cross-national differences are marked (Livingstone, d'Haenens, & Hasebrink, 2001).*

### **Example of good practice: Special Eurobarometer 250**

Though lacking an explicit theoretical framework, the recent Eurobarometer surveys of internet use at home illustrate the last approach, for the policy context assumes a global process of transition into the Information Society, with countries further advanced (earlier adoption, greater diffusion, more broadband, etc) showing signs of both benefits and risks for children. The implication is that all countries in the research are experiencing the same phenomenon, albeit at different points in the process (so that what is already evident in one country – regarding, for example, online risks for children - may be anticipated in the near future for the next).

*In this report we present the findings from a survey about Safer Internet that was carried out in the 25 Member States of the European Union, in the two acceding countries [Bulgaria and Romania] and the two candidate countries [Croatia and Turkey] between 7 December 2005 and 11 January 2006. The survey is part of the European Union's Safer Internet Programme. This programme has been running since 1999, and aims to equip parents and teachers with the knowledge and tools they need to ensure internet safety. (Safer Internet Report from Special Eurobarometer n°250)*

In these countries, the survey covers the national population of the respective nationalities and the population of citizens of all the European Union Member States who are residents in those countries and have a sufficient knowledge of one of the respective national language(s) to answer the questionnaire. A multi-stage random sample design was carried out in all countries, according to the distribution of the resident population of the respective nationalities in terms of metropolitan, urban and rural areas, thus being representative of all regions (According to Eurostat "administrative regional units" (NUTS II or equivalent). See Technical Note from Special Eurobarometer n°250)).

### **Rules of thumb**

If one is treating each nation as the *object of study*, comparing fairly similar countries may prove most useful, particularly to inform regionally-based (e.g. EC) policy (Hantrais, 1999; Teune, 1990).

If one is studying the generality of a finding across nations (*country as context of study*), selecting countries so as to maximise diversity along the dimension in question allows one to explore the scope or universality of a phenomenon.

For model three, one would select countries to capture diversity within a common framework: since the use of multiple dimensions invites a conception of the relations among them, this tends to support theory-building through the development of a common framework based on a pan-national conception of the dimensions themselves.

Lastly, projects which conceptualise the nations to be compared as *components of a transnational system* will select countries by seeking to maximise range and diversity globally.

### **Further resources**

Kohn, M. L. (1989). Introduction, in M. L. Kohn (Ed.), *Cross-National Research in Sociology*. Newbury Park: Sage.

Livingstone, S. (2003). On the challenges of cross-national comparative media research. *European Journal of Communication*, 18 (4), 477-500.

## FAQ 8: When is it best to use a longitudinal design?

### *What's the issue?*

The main aim of longitudinal studies is to analyse change over time. Childhood is about change; research on children is about development and socialisation processes. Therefore it seems to be necessary to use research designs which are able to describe individual changes within and beyond single life spans. In principle, cross-sectional designs are able to provide at least some evidence on changes when they ask for retrospective information. However most of them are limited to descriptions of the status quo.

### *Common practice*

True longitudinal studies rely on panel data and panel methods where the same individuals are measured on more than one occasion checking the same variables. An alternative is an omnibus panel where the information collected varies from one point in time to another. Another alternative is the cohort study where people who belong to the same cohort are measured on more than one occasion.

### *Questions to consider*

Studies relying on either true longitudinal design or repeated measures of similar groups seem to be quite rare in the field of media studies. A thorough overview of studies on children's use of online media in 18 European countries between 1999 and 2006 for example found only two examples of a longitudinal study (Staksrud, Livingstone, & Haddon, 2007). This is probably mostly due to the fact that these studies are often more complex and more expensive than cross-sectional studies.

It is recommended that research projects using repeated surveys as a method for measuring social change should aim at keeping changes in the research design between surveys to an absolute minimum. Duncan (Duncan, 1969) laid down this principle in simple terms by pointing out that "if you want to measure change, don't change the measure". This is perhaps one of the reasons why longitudinal designs are so little used for media research as it is very difficult to adhere strictly to this principle in studies where the nature of the object of study is constantly changing. This problem is especially evident when the time span of a research project stretches over several decades. Then the ideal of standardization will eventually come into conflict with the need to collect meaningful information from the respondents or participants in the study.

### *Further resources*

#### **Studies**

Swedish Media Panel project (<http://www.ssd.gu.se>)

#### **Further reading**

Bryman, A. (2004). *Social research methods* (2nd ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Peter, J., & Valkenburg, P. M. (in press). Adolescents' exposure to sexually explicit internet material and sexual preoccupation: A three-wave panel study. *Media Psychology*.

Valkenburg, P. M., & Peter, J. (in press). The effects of Instant Messaging on the quality of adolescents' existing friendships: A longitudinal study. *Journal of Communication*.

### *Example of good practice: Swedish Media Panel project*

An example of true longitudinal research is the Swedish Media Panel project (see <http://www.ssd.gu.se>). Founded by K. E. Rosengren and S. Windahl in 1975, it is a long term research programme focused on basic aspects of the use of mass media by Swedish children, adolescents and young adults, as well as on the causes, consequences and effects of that media use. Since 1995, the programme was directed by Ulla Johnsson-Smaragdi.

*During a long period of continuous research the MPP group has produced a data bank in which a large mass of data related to individual media use, its causes, effects and consequences are stored, covering a number of cohorts and panels of children and adolescents passing through the school system and into work or continued studies during their early adulthood. In all, the bank contains data about: some 4400 children, adolescents and young adults; their family background, activities and relations; their relations to peers and their school experiences (including school grades, etc); their media use, life styles, present occupation and activities, as well as their plans for the future. Relevant data from their parents have also been collected on several occasions.*

(Project summary, Swedish Social Sciences Data Service)  
<<http://www.ssd.gu.se/index.php?p=displayStudy&id=387>>

### ***Example of good practice: Children and Television in Iceland***

An example of a long term research project on children and media use is the Children and Television in Iceland study, in which information on media use for children aged 10-15 years has been recorded regularly since 1968, thus enabling comparison over time.

### ***A researcher's experience: Socialisation and change in research with children***

In order to really deal with socialisation processes, the dynamic character of the socialising factors, which determine how adolescents select media and acquire symbols useful for their daily lives over a long term period, has to be taken into account. Various research studies point out that children employ and assign significance to media depending on their socio-cultural conditions such as the societal stratum, the education level, the family form, the place and size of residence and the parental income (Austin, 1993; Livingstone & Bovill, 2001; Messaris, 1983; Warren, 2003). However, the media socialisation of children is influenced not only by objective, socio-economic conditions, but also by personal and interaction related processes, such as diverse family lifestyles, different forms of family, and the position of children within their peer-groups that determine the ways in which media content is acquired. All these factors are subject of change themselves. Thus, in order to get valid information on developmental changes, longitudinal designs are necessary. These designs enable us to draw a picture of the socialisation process of children and the role that media play in their lives (Paus-Hasebrink & Bichler, 2005; Paus-Hasebrink & Bichler, 2008). (Ingrid Paus-Hasebrink, Austria)

## II. Sampling and Recruitment

### FAQ 9: How do we sample children for qualitative research?

#### *What's the issue?*

Sampling for qualitative research is essentially different from sampling for quantitative research. When sampling for quantitative research, we usually have in mind the representativeness of our sample, to be able to make generalisations about the population. In qualitative research, however, our aim is not generalising but explaining the phenomena as comprehensively as possible, focusing on specific meanings and practices. It is not the purpose of our qualitative study to determine how typical a phenomenon is for the population. Usually, we do not want to make inferences beyond our sample.

#### *Common practice*

- Children for focus groups or interviews, and sites for our observation, are sampled based on researchers' decisions about what characteristics are important for our sample.
- We can draw a sample from a quantitative sample by asking children at the end of survey whether they are willing to participate in focus groups or interviews as well.
- If we only do qualitative research, we can sample children at schools, through our own or our children's social network, through parents if dealing with younger children.
- Whether doing online or offline qualitative research about peculiar or specific topics (e.g. focus groups with young IT experts), it is easier to sample at web discussion forums focused around that particular topic. This way, it is easier to sample from specific populations which are difficult to 'recognise on the street'.
- Try to be as specific as possible about the sample of children you include in the qualitative study because that allows you to be more exploratory.
- For conducting focus groups with a broader age range (e.g. 8-18), we invite children of similar age (e.g. 8-9, 10-11, 12-13, etc.) to be in the same groups.
- The size of a sample for qualitative interviews is good enough if ranging from 20-40 (if we need to compare findings, we can double it). When dealing with a very specific group of children, the sample can be even smaller. Anything beyond 50 can only mean putting in extra effort, which can be better used to be much more careful about the consistency of interpretation and analysis.

#### *Pitfalls to avoid*

One common pitfall is to insist on representativeness when sampling for qualitative research. No matter how accurately we sample to ensure a representative sample, our efforts will not pay off in qualitative research. We will never be able to do a big enough number of qualitative interviews or focus groups to ensure a sample large enough for generalisations, which we are not aiming for in the first place. Always try to bear in mind that we are not aiming for generalisations. We are not trying to tell how many people think that, but why they think as they do and what are the reasons behind that thinking. We can always follow up the qualitative part of our study by a quantitative survey to test for generalisations.

#### *Questions to consider*

How many qualitative interviews do we really need? How long should the observation of a specific site (e.g. a school yard) take? How many focus groups do we need, considering that we need a series of them if that is the main method of data collection? Based on which criteria will the focus groups be divided?



### **Further resources**

- Kuzel, A.J. (1992). Sampling in qualitative inquiry. In B.F. Crabtree & W.L. Miller (Eds.). *Doing qualitative research* (pp. 31-44). Newbury Park, CA: Sage
- Mason, J. (2002). *Qualitative researching* (2nd ed.). London: Sage.
- Lincoln Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

### **A researcher's mistake**

In a qualitative research project investigating, through interviews and observations, why only some middle class households adopted cable television, our research team contracted a recruitment company to locate 10 households with, and 10 households without, cable. We stipulated that the households should be from the London area for, though less than ideal, it was convenient for the research team since the project timeline was short. Mistakenly, as it turned out, we assumed that the agency had a database from which to draw a sample from all over London. Instead, we received a sample entirely based in Potters Bar, a small town just north of London, where a large proportion of residents commute into London each day. Worse still, we discovered later that one recruiter had gone from door to door in a particular part of Potters Bar, while the other approached people shopping on a Saturday morning, both thus producing rather homogenous samples. The lesson to learn is to ask the recruitment agency how they work, to specify in the contract that the sample should, as much as possible, reflect the diversity in the population sampled and, if concerns remain, to check with the interviewees themselves just how they were recruited. (Leslie Haddon, UK)

## FAQ 10: How do you sample children for quantitative research?

### *What's the issue?*

Sampling for quantitative research depends on whether or not we aim for a probabilistic sample from which we would like to draw inferences about the population (i.e. to what extent sample statistics reflect the population parameters). Usually, we have to consider a number of issues (choosing the population, the sampling frame, the way of sampling, and the sample size). When aiming for a representative sample, things get more complicated as we need to have a list of children to sample from. This can be pretty tough. We can sample households or sample children through schools.

### *Common practice*

- When conducting a survey with both children and parents, the household can be used as unit of analysis (Livingstone, 1999).
- If financial or time sources do not permit face-to-face surveying at home, we can decide to sample children by schools (e.g. a sample based on clusters), covering different regions of the country. Instead of individual children, we sample groups of children that occur naturally in our population. This is known as cluster sampling.
- If we wish various subgroups (e.g. age subgroups or gender subgroups of children) in the sample also to be representative, we can use stratified random sampling, which combines stratified sampling with random sampling. For example, if we wanted to a stratified random sample of boys and girls from the final year of a primary school, we would first separate the entire population of the last year of the primary school pupils into two groups, one all boys and other all girls. To complete our sampling we would then independently select a random sample from each stratum (a random sample of boys and another one of girls).
- We can also do a non-probabilistic sample of children, bearing in mind that no inferences beyond our sample are possible. However, studies with non-probabilistic samples (e.g. quota sample, purposive sample) are still valuable as they can be very informative, and also point to the children beyond our sample which most probably have very similar socio-demographic characteristics to those included in our sample. It is OK to conduct such studies as long as we are not aiming for statistical inferences from the samples to the population. We operate only within descriptive interpretations.

### *Questions to consider*

What size should our sample be? Do we need probabilistic sampling? Can we afford to sample probabilistically? What kind of natural clusters of children are available in our population? Do we also need various subgroups in our sample to be representative?

### *Further resources*

Kalton, G. (1983). *Introduction to survey sampling*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

### *A researcher's experience*

In designing a national survey for children, as it was too expensive to interview children in their households, it was decided to sample children by schools. This sample was based on clusters covering different regions of the country. After negotiation with the Portuguese Minister of Education, it was agreed that in each of five regions, four elementary schools attended by children (6-15 years) would be selected based on the criteria of urban/rural contexts, children from ethnic minorities and socio-economic status (SES). Based on lists of students in each of the 20 schools, a proportional sample of children by age would be designed and 30 students from each school were then chosen randomly. This way, the sampling would involve 600 students. After parental consent had been obtained, the sample would receive a self-completion questionnaire to be answered at school, outside the classroom. Parents would receive another self-completion questionnaire, given to them by the child in the study. These questionnaires were to be returned to the school, in closed envelopes, and the school would send them to the research project.

This initial design for a national survey proved to be too difficult and time consuming. It involved several factors, starting with the agreement of the schools randomly selected and ending with the parental consent of all the students randomly sampled.

Instead, it was decided to sample children by schools in the greater Lisbon area, which is the leading area for internet penetration in households and the area with more migrant children. The Minister of Education provided us with a list of the public elementary schools covering compulsory education in this area. From this list, 20 schools were selected based on the criteria of urban/rural contexts, children from ethnic minorities and SES. The first 11 schools that accepted the idea were our sample. Each school chose a class per year from the 4th to the 8th grade, providing an average of 90 children as a starting point. Parents were asked for informed consent. In each school, children who had parental consent were presented with the aims of the research and invited to participate, under the assurance of privacy and confidentiality. The self-completion questionnaire was answered at school, in the presence of an assistant, a member of the research team. Parents received another self-completion questionnaire, given to them by the child in the study. These questionnaires were returned to the school, in closed envelopes. In order to provide identification, children and parents' questionnaires had the same code number.

In the end, a total of 810 questionnaires answered by children at school and 630 questionnaires answered by their parents were sent to the research team, which might be considered a quite positive number. Parents who answered this questionnaire differ from the national profile - they are much more info-included and have higher levels of education. Also, parents of younger children (9-11) were overrepresented compared to the parents of older ones (12-14), and this may have different meanings, including the possibility that the older children may have resisted involving their parents. (Cristina Ponte, Portugal)

### ***A researcher's experience***

In the TIRO research project (see Annex C) we organised two panels of 20 Dutch and 20 French speaking teenagers (aged 12-18). We interviewed these, had online conversations with them on several occasions and asked them to keep a diary on their everyday life and media use. For sampling those panels we went in different sites where young people are present (schools, youth movements (e.g. scouts) and youth clubs (sport, theatre)) and we used our own social networks, although no close relatives were selected, only casual acquaintances. In order to manage the subjectivity in the sampling process (two researchers were involved and we wanted to avoid discrepancy between the Flemish and Walloon panel), we used a theoretical sampling matrix. First, the hundreds of young people we recruited were asked to provide short information about their social background, ICT use and leisure. Based on a literature review we then decided to sample both panels by means of three criteria that seemed to be distinct for explaining the diversity and heterogeneity of young people's Internet practices: gender, age (aged 12-13; 14-16; 17-18) and SES (reflecting the economic and cultural capital of the parents). Based on these three sociodemographic characteristics we drew a matrix with 18 cells and looked for young people that met the cell criteria that were preconceived (e.g. 1 boy aged 12-13 years with a low SES, 1 girl aged 14-16 years with high SES). To gain insight into future trends in ICT use, we also selected in each panel one teenager that showed an intensive pattern of ICT use. This sampling procedure (in stages and pre-structured) proved to be useful got guaranteeing the diversity of the panel. We wanted especially to avoid assembling a middle-class panel, since many qualitative studies seem to suffer from this bias. Yet, we did not succeed in involving young people with an ethnic minority background in our panel. More specific sampling methods seem to be required for including those groups. (Joke Bauwens, Belgium)

## FAQ 11: Is it OK to interview parents as informants on their children?

### *What's the issue?*

Ideally, to understand how children use the internet at home, one would interview both children and parents, so as to triangulate the two data sources, to permit parents to provide a check on responses from young children, and to permit children to report on their experiences themselves, especially since parents may not be aware of the range of their activities and perceptions. However, this is complicated in terms of both recruitment and data analysis, and thus it is a relatively expensive approach to research. Researchers are therefore often left with having to decide which one to interview when their resources are limited.

### *Common practice*

- Rules of thumb are to include both children and parents (or teachers) as respondents wherever possible.
- One cost-efficient route to combining data sources is to ask just a few, key questions of parents when recruiting children.
- If both can be included, children should be reassured that parents will not see their responses (cf FAQ on ethics).
- In reporting, care must be taken when assuming that one set of responses are more 'correct' than the other – probably, it is safest to regard the discrepancy as indicating the upper and lower bounds for a response.
- Note that, as a rule, children tend to report higher estimates of internet use and risk, and lower estimates of parental mediation and internet-related anxieties, compared with parents.

### *Pitfalls to avoid*

If only parents/adults are interviewed, care must be taken in interpreting their claim if they relate to phenomena to which their access may be limited (e.g. accounts of what children do in their bedroom, in private, on their mobile or at school).

Only interviewing children, as in the Mediappro (2006) project, has other disadvantages: most notably, it is difficult to get reliable information on socio-economic status (whether parental income, education or some combination thereof), and so findings regarding inequalities or exclusion cannot be obtained (though one solution is to sample schools in more and less advantaged neighbourhoods<sup>1</sup>).

### *A researcher's experience*

The SAFT surveys<sup>2</sup> interviewed both children and parents, using the same questions for each. Where children and parents give fairly similar answers (e.g. 31% of children and 21% of parents say the child does instant messaging), the 'truth' may be taken to lie in between. But where answers are different (e.g. 56% of children but only 8% of parents say the child downloads music), it is clear that relying on parents to provide reliable information about children is insufficient and misleading. Furthermore, significant findings emerge precisely from these discrepancies. For example, since 64% of children say their parent never sits with them when they go online, while only 11% of parents say they never sit with their child, one can conclude both that children may be 'saving face' by underreporting how often a parent sits with them, but also that parents are both relatively ignorant of their children's actual use and overconfident of their own safety practices.

### *Example of weak practice*

Less useful, by contrast, is the reliance in the Eurobarometer survey<sup>3</sup> on adults reporting about children. Although this survey has provided much useful information regarding children's and parents' internet use across Europe, it is significant that survey respondents were adults over 15 years old who were responsible for, or caretakers of, a child under 17 years old. Thus, not only does this survey of children's internet use rely on reporting by adults but these adults may not be the child's parent (but could be a child-care employee or older sibling, for example).

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<sup>1</sup> Hence the Mediappro project, which surveyed 7393 12-18 year olds in nine countries, used a stratified sample of schools in which researchers conducted a pen-and-paper survey; see <http://www.mediappro.org/>.

<sup>2</sup> These percentages come from the SAFT (Safety Awareness Facts and Tools) project's national survey of Norwegian 9-16 year olds in 2006. See <http://www.saftonline.no/PressReleases/2881>

<sup>3</sup> See [http://europa.eu.int/information\\_society/activities/sip/eurobarometer/index\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu.int/information_society/activities/sip/eurobarometer/index_en.htm)

### **Example of good practice**

The recruitment strategy used by the Youth Internet Safety Survey (Shade, 2002-2005) in the USA efficiently obtained two sources of data (asking a few questions of parents when recruiting children), got informed consent from both parents and children, and established an appropriate context for a sensitive interview, in a single telephone call as follows:<sup>4</sup>

*“When contacting a household, interviewers from a national survey research firm screened for regular use of the internet by a youth in the target age group. Interviewers then asked to speak with the parent who knew the most about the youth’s internet use, conducted a short interview assessing household rules and parental concerns about internet use, and gathered demographic characteristics. The interviewer requested permission from the parent to speak with the youth. Parents were assured of the confidentiality of the interview and were informed that the interview would include questions about “sexual material your child may have seen.” Upon achieving parental consent, interviewers described the study to the youth and obtained his or her oral consent. Youth interviews, which lasted about half an hour, were scheduled at the youth’s convenience and arranged for times when he/she could talk freely.”*

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<sup>4</sup> See page 3011 of Mitchell, K. J., Finkelhor, D. & Wolak, J. (2001). Risk factors for and impact of online sexual solicitation of youth. *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)*, 285(23), 3011-3014.

## FAQ 12: How can I recruit particular subgroups of children?

### *What's the issue?*

Sometimes, we wish to study a specific population or particular subgroups of children, which may not be easy to recognise or reach through the usual ways of recruiting. This may be the case for quantitative, and even more for qualitative, research, which is often used when there is little known about the phenomena under study.

### *Common practice*

- Internet discussion forums or mailing lists on a vast amount of topics that are available nowadays can provide a useful way of recruiting particular subgroups of older children and teenagers. We can go to a specific high school forum to recruit teenagers for a study about their use of media in everyday life.
- If we wish various subgroups (e.g. age subgroups or gender subgroups of children) in the sample, we can use stratified random sampling, which combines stratified sampling with random sampling. For example, if we wanted to a stratified random sample of boys and girls final year of primary school, we would first separate the entire population of the last year of primary school pupils into two groups, one all boys and other all girls. To complete our sampling we would then independently select a random sample from each stratum (a random sample of boys and another one of girls).

### *Questions to consider*

Particular subgroups that deserve special attention in research on the use of information and communication technologies, are socially vulnerable and under-privileged children. Recruiting young children from this background requires more efforts to gain the confidence of the parents who often are not acquainted with or suspicious of the formal and asymmetrical relationship between the (academic) researcher and themselves. Doing research with teenagers with a socially less privileged background, requires researchers to be reflective about their own social position, the type of language they use and their attitude, and how this all affects the research process.

### *Further resources*

Kalton, G. (1983). *Introduction to survey sampling*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Greene, S., & Hogan, D. (2005). *Researching children's experiences: methods and approaches*. London: Sage.

### *Researchers' experiences*

In the first attempt to conduct a survey on the uses of the mobile phone by young teenagers in Greece, I thought of using the Greek School Network (ideally, this would have meant that the designed questionnaire would electronically reach teenagers across the country, thus allowing me to have a representative sample in terms of geography, urban area, socio-economic status and so on, according to my needs). I soon discovered that the bureaucracy involved in dealing with the Greek Ministry of Education meant that it would take anything between three and six months in order to have an answer as to whether or not I would be allowed access to the GSN; providing I did receive a positive answer, I would still need another few months to select a limited number of school units which I would then have to visit physically; conducting research over the internet proved impossible. In order to circumvent this problem, I used informal networks: I approached my mathematician at my old *frontistirio* (all students in Greece are driven, sooner or later, to such institutions where they practice for their A levels at school, for a fee), now coaching a new generation of high school students. I bypassed all the bureaucratic prerequisites and other practical obstacles relating to official processes in the corridors of the *frontistirio* and managed to gain access to approximately 200 teenagers aged 15-18. I had 30 more questionnaires gathered through a Masters student of mine who used his connections at his old school and handed out the questionnaire to one classroom. Lesson learned: there are always ways to improvise and overcome the inflexibility of the system. (Lisa Tsaliki, Greece)

In the TIRO research project we wanted to include young people with a Moroccan or Turkish background (the biggest Muslim ethnic minorities in Belgium) in the qualitative research, but failed. We underestimated the reluctance of both the teenagers and their parents to participate in an academic study that represented for them the (Belgian) establishment in society. It also occurred to us that the youth movements and clubs we visited to recruit teenagers were predominantly 'white', so we had to look for other settings and intermediaries. Since we were not prepared to this and we ran out of time, we had to shelve this plan. (Joke Bauwens, Belgium)

## FAQ 13: What are the ethical issues involved in researching children?

### *What's the issue?*

With regard to research ethics when interviewing children, the most common issues raised in the introduction of interviews concern data confidentiality, the purpose of the study and of interviews, as well as the use of audio or video recording of the interviews. Less often, there are references to the voluntary character of the interviews, the right of children not to answer questions if they do not want to and the signing of consent forms. In any case, not all studies treat issues of research ethics in the same way and not all emphasise the same aspects of research ethics.

### *Common practice*

- Seeking to safeguard the interests of all affected by the research, including considering the possible consequences of the study or the misuse of the results.
- A commitment to listening to and including the perspective of children and young people in the research.
- Inviting freely given written consent from all children participating in the research, and from the parent or guardian of those under 16 years old, while ensuring that all understand that they can refuse any question or withdraw at any time.
- Informing children and parents, through discussion and the provision of age-appropriate leaflets, what the research is about, how it will be disseminated, and how their data will be stored.
- Keeping all data confidential, removing all personal identifiers and assigning pseudonyms where appropriate, plus storing the data in accordance with the Data Protection Act (UK).
- Informing participants that if they divulge information suggesting that they or others are at risk of harm, the researcher has a duty of care to report this and to ensure support for the child (and to inform the participant that this is occurring).
- Providing a debriefing after each research interview, leaving all participants with a written record of the researchers' names and contact information.
- Providing feedback on the research process to all who ask for it (e.g. sending a copy of the summary report to participating schools or homes if requested).

### *Pitfalls to avoid*

Taking care to avoid upsetting or offending participants. Avoid introducing new and sensitive information to children (e.g. introducing the idea of pornographic sites to children previously unaware of them).

### *Questions to consider*

What are the ethical guidelines that are to be followed in the country where my research will be carried out? What information should participants know before deciding to take part (or not) in my research? When is parental concern necessary in order to involve children in research?

### *Further resources*

- King, N. M. P., & Churchill, L. R. (2000). Ethical Principles Guiding Research on Child and Adolescent Subjects. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 15*(7), 710-724.
- Greene, S., & Hogan, D. (2005). *Researching children's experiences: methods and approaches*. London: Sage.
- Graue, M. E., & Walsh, D. J. (1998). *Studying Children in Context: Theories, Methods and Ethics*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

### *Researchers' experiences*

I started my visit by explaining the objective of my presence to the children. I informed them that their participation was not compulsory and that they could refuse to take part. From a total of 20 children and teenagers, only two girls refused to participate and left the room. After that, I asked if I could record the conversation, so that I could remember at home what we had been talking about and their opinions. Everyone agreed. At the beginning of each conversation, I also tried a kind approach, to find out more about their interests, intentions for the future, desires, and so on, in order to create a familiar environment and to

“break the ice”. It worked quite well, since they got much more comfortable and, when the interview started, they weren’t constrained. (Cátia Candeias, Portugal)

In relation to consent, my first concern was to capture the teachers’ interest and obtain approval to approach the children. Then it was explained to the children that their participation was not compulsory and that they could simply say no. None of the children refused to take part. In fact they were keen to participate. The parents were not directly asked for consent. The classroom in Portugal is the teachers’ domain, and they are trusted to decide what activities happen inside it. The only situations in which parents are usually consulted are those when the activities involve children leaving the school. Their consent was, nonetheless, implicitly given by answering the questionnaires addressed to them. In fact, some parents took the opportunity to praise the research and to call for more projects assessing the provision of children’s television. The children were asked if they agreed to the use of a tape recorder so that I could remember what they said afterwards. No one disagreed and they were all interested in listening to the recordings of their voices at the end. (Sofia Leitão, Portugal)

### **Examples of good practice**

The ‘UK Children Go Online’ project set out to interview and survey children aged 9-19 about their internet use, including their experience of various risks (pornography, bullying, race hate sites , etc). This involved asking sensitive questions; in a face-to-face interview, children may feel pressured to reply; in a written survey, the researcher may not know how children respond to the questions asked. In addition to careful pilot research to check the phrasing of all questions, informed consent from respondents is crucial. The research team first read the guidelines provided professional associations (in the UK, these are produced by the major children’s charities, by the professional associations for academic psychology and sociology, by the Market Research Society and, internationally, by the Association of Internet Researchers). A set of ethical principles for the project were drawn up, applying and adapting those produced by these associations (this was submitted to the researchers’ university ethics committee, and posted on the project website; [www.children-go-online.net](http://www.children-go-online.net)). (Sonia Livingstone, UK)

Example from Children, Young People and New Media (Shade, 2002-2005). Obtaining verbal consent:

*“This research is being done to learn about the ways in which the internet, specifically internet services (like shopping, downloading music, and using internet chat) is being integrated into your everyday life. For this specific project, I’m interested in how children and kids are using the internet. You’ve got a copy of the information sheet about the project. My main goal is……. Participating in this project is entirely voluntary. If you would rather not, you don’t have to go through this interview. If you don’t mind talking to me, I’d like to either tape-record or video record this just to make sure I have an accurate report of what our conversation is like. If I videotape the interview, I will be recording you as well as some of things you do on the internet screen. If you feel uncomfortable with this I can instead take notes by hand. And if I you agree to tape and then change your mind, or realise you said something that makes you uncomfortable, just reach out and turn it off, or wave at me and I will, and then we can erase the tape. In other words, I want you to be as comfortable as possible with this. Is it ok to go ahead with a few questions? As we go through, if you don’t want to answer a question, that’s fine, or if you aren’t sure what I’m getting at, please ask. This is not a test. There are no right or wrong answers. We just want to learn what using the internet means to you.”*

Example from Cyberbullying Report to Anti-Bullying Alliance (Smith, Mahdavi, Carvalho, & Tippett, 2006), regarding confidentiality and anonymity of answers for children aged 11-16 who participated in the survey:

*“Our names are \_\_\_\_\_ and we are researchers at Goldsmiths College which is part of the University of London. We are interested in how children and adolescents get on with each other in and out of school. You do not have to answer this questionnaire, but we would be grateful if you did. Anything that you write will be treated as most confidential. You do not have to put your names on the questionnaire. Your teachers, the head teacher and your classmates will not be shown your answers. No one in the school will know what you write, so please answer truthfully. Please only turn over each page when you are told to do so.”*

Good Practice Example of Youth Consent from Finkelhor Survey (Child interview) (Finkelhor, 2006):

*“I would like to ask you some questions that are part of a study about young people using the internet. When I say “use the internet,” I mean going “online.” The interview will last about half an hour. To thank you for your help, we will send you a check for \$10. The questions have to do with things that have happened to you on the internet, including whether you have come across people or pictures that made you uncomfortable or upset, along with some questions about safety in other areas of your life.*



*"This is part of a national survey of 2000 young people, ages 10 to 17. You were chosen completely at random to represent the ideas and experiences of young people. You don't have to talk to us if you don't want to, but your help will make a big difference. Everything you say will be completely confidential. We are not allowed to tell your parents, your school or anyone else anything you tell us.*

*"We would like you to try to answer every question that you can, but if there is any question that you don't want to answer, that will be OK. You can stop the interview at any time. Also, if there is any question that you don't understand, please say so. If there are too many people around for you to talk freely, just let me know and I can call back later.*

Parental consent:

*"Thank you for answering our questions... It will help our study a lot if we can talk to your [age] year old also. We want to find out what kinds of situations young people come across on the internet, what they've learned about internet safety, and what kinds of life experiences make young people more or less protected when they are online.*

*"To thank your [son/daughter] for [his/her] help with this survey, we will send [him/her] a check for ten dollars. The interview would take about half an hour, and we can schedule it at [her/his] convenience. Some of the questions will be about sexual material your child may have seen. [Her/his] answers will be completely confidential. Your child's participation is voluntary, and we can skip over any questions that [s/he] doesn't want to answer. (Once again, you can call our toll free number (1-877-.....) to confirm information about this study. We would also be happy to send you a letter explaining more about who we are and what this survey is about before the interview, if you would like that.) "Would it be possible to interview [him/her] now, or would another time be better?"*

(Panayiota Tsatsou and Sonia Livingstone, UK)

An appropriate ethical framework is especially important when researching children and young people. Children's views are to be respected ((Morrow & Richards, 1996) as well as their freedom to take (or not take) part in a research project. In our research we followed the ethical guidelines required in Chile for research carried out at schools. These include the obtaining of informed consent from each school and from the children participating in both school-based surveys and interviews. During our first encounter with each group of respondents they were told that they were not obliged to participate in our study and that if they wanted to they could drop out at any stage of the data collection. At the beginning of each interview we also emphasised that they could avoid answering any questions that made them feel uncomfortable. Moreover, the anonymity of our respondents was guaranteed and upheld throughout the whole research process and consequently all the names used are, obviously, fictitious. (Verónica Donoso, Belgium)

## FAQ 14: Should I provide incentives for children to take part in the research?

### *What's the issue?*

Researchers are of different opinions when it comes to rewarding children for taking part in research. Some report that it is useful to motivate them, others claim that children should take part voluntarily.

### *Common practice*

The researcher can, at the end, offer a small gift as a token of gratitude. However, this should only happen at the end of the interview.

### *Pitfalls to avoid*

It is best to avoid promising children valuable incentives which can over-stimulate their participation and therefore put in danger the quality of the findings.

### *Example of good practice*

I did not provide any incentives and the children were free not to participate, but I did choose to give each child, after the research was completed, a symbolic token of their participation (a diploma of participation and a candy bag for each), though the ideal gift would have been to actually give them the opportunity to put their contributions into practice (I was asked several times whether their stories would indeed be adapted for television). I suppose that, as with adults, it is important to pass on the idea that their contribution is really going to matter. (Sofia Leitão, Portugal)

### *Researchers' experiences*

Marks obviously cannot be given. A strategy I used to motivate pupils to write substantial political essays was to give "pluses" or "small marks" (which were summed into real marks at the end of the term by the teacher) for the length and quality of argumentation, regardless of the content and direction of statements. The strategy justified itself: I received several solid essays representing a wide variety of opinions on sensitive political issues. (Veronika Kalmus, Estonia)

I encountered a problem regarding the seriousness with which young teenagers dealt with the questions. There were a number of instances where responses given were anecdotal, rude, even 'spicy' to the extent that they had to be disregarded. Although the respondents filled in the questionnaire in the classroom (rather than at home), it appears that some of them did not take it seriously enough all of the time. Solution: I'm not sure there is one. It's not as if they can be relied upon to give sincere and articulate answers in exchange for something (a gift, a prize) because, even in this case, there is no guarantee they will 'behave'. (Lisa Tsaliki, Greece)

This is a question on which custom and practice varies considerably, by country, by academic discipline, and by the age of the child. Psychologists are more used to providing incentives than are sociologists, for example, Teenagers expect them more than do young children. There can be no hard and fast rules, therefore. In the 'UK Children Go Online' project, children who participated in the focus groups, individual interviews or the survey were given an incentive – typically a voucher that can be spent in high street shop (for clothing, music or books). The amounts varied depending on time commitment but were around 15-35 Euros. This is, clearly, an expense that must be built into the project budget in advance. For reasons of taxation, it may need to be termed an incentive to cover time and expenses, rather than a payment. Usefully, since a signature to acknowledge receipt will be needed, this can be requested at the same time that the ethical consent form is signed. Incidentally, for family interviews I observe that, although the voucher has been offered to the family, generally it is handed to the child. (Sonia Livingstone, UK)

# III. Methods of data collection

## FAQ 15: What are the best ways to interview children?

### *What's the issue?*

In general, good practice in interviewing children applies to everyone, including adults. But since children are generally interviewed by adults, and since they may not find it so easy to express themselves, researchers have developed a range of strategies for interviewing children. Particularly, a standard, lengthy series of questions and answers may not work as well for children as for adults.

### *Common practice*

- Researchers try to break up the interview into meaningful subsections, each with their own short introduction, mixing one-to-one interviews with other kinds of tasks such as asking children to draw a picture relevant to the topic, or using puppets or dolls in role play games for very young children, or using various pen-and-paper exercises.
- Some children may feel uneasy or afraid of making a mistake. The researcher should encourage the child and make him/her feel comfortable in answering whatever the answer may be.
- Use cards with images or words on them (e.g. pictures of media) and ask the child to sort them into meaningful groups (e.g. Which are cool? Or which could you not live without?) and ask them to explain their classification. Include some blank cards in case they want to add something.
- Ask them to draw a picture related to an event or topic and then to tell a story to go with this. Interviewer and researcher may play turn-taking games, switching roles of teller and told.
- In group interviews, children may talk about the topic in pairs, and then each pair can tell another what they discussed.
- The researcher may construct a mind map, using a large piece of paper, and invite the children to call out ideas or examples linked to the central topic.
- Researchers recognise that children may find it hard to sit still, and so try to give them reasons to move about if the interview is lengthy.
- If asking them about something nearby or in the room, it can be useful to ask them to show you (e.g. Can I see your favourite website? Show me how your phone does that? I'd like to see a story you wrote?).
- Towards the end of the interview, it is good practice to feed back to the child(ren) the understanding you have gained and ask them if it's right or if they wish to correct or add anything.

### *Pitfalls to avoid*

- Never give a child the impression there is a right answer, nor laugh at them if they make a mistake. Avoid leading questions at all times (not – Why do you like the internet; but – Do you like the internet? Why do you say that?).
- Take care that your response options are not implicitly leading: if you ask, do you spend one, two or three hours a day online, neither the child who never goes online nor the child who spends five hours online will tell you this.
- Think about the order of the questions you ask – begin with a warm up of easy questions rather than diving straight in to the revealing ones.
- Try not to assume you know what a website, or story, or image means – ask them to show you, and then ask them to describe it (Why do you like that? What's good about it? etc).

### Further resources

- Graue, M. E., & Walsh, D. J. (1998). *Studying Children in Context: Theories, Methods and Ethics*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Livingstone, S., and Lemish, D. (2001). Doing comparative research with children and young people. In S. Livingstone & M. Bovill (Eds.), *Children and Their Changing Media Environment: A European Comparative Study* (pp. 31-50). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Paus-Haase, I., Süss, D., & Lampert, C. (2001). Kinder als prägende Akteure neuer Kommunikationskulturen. Reflexion adäquater methodischer Zugriffe (Children as Main Players of New Communication Cultures. Reflections of an Adequate Methodologically Approach). In U. L. Maier-Rabler, Michael (Ed.), *Kommunikationskulturen zwischen Kontinuität und Wandel. Universelle Netzwerke für die Zivilgesellschaft (Communication Cultures Between Continuity and Change. Universal Networks of Civil Society)*. (pp. 317-332). Konstanz: UVK-Medien.

### Good practice

In focus groups with 9-11 year olds, we got the children talking about the internet by telling them a story thus: "an Alien from another world has been watching people here on the planet Earth very carefully. It has been able to see everything but meeting you is the first opportunity it has had to ask questions about things it has seen. It wants to know what the internet is, and you have to explain...." The researcher placed a large sheet of paper (flip chart) on the table and gave each child a coloured felt pen. In the middle is a picture of a little green alien with speech bubbles around it: the children were asked to fill out the speech bubbles in answer to questions like, what is the internet, where do you use it, what is the best or worst thing about the internet, what is fun or boring about it? Later in the discussion, they were also asked if there were rules for using it. (Sonia Livingstone, UK)

### A researcher's mistake

When interviewing people about their use of the internet, I have often found it helpful to give examples of particular search terms or sites that they might visit, to encourage interviewees to go beyond generalities and respond in more detail. Once when interviewing a group of young teenagers about their use of the internet for music, I gave examples of the kinds of music or bands they might search for (e.g. 'Suppose you wanted to find some music by Boyzone, how would you go about it?'). My interest lay in their internet literacy (did they search for leisure content with more competence than when they searched for schoolwork?). But my examples of bands were a couple of years out of date, and so in one simple question, I lost all the rapport I had carefully built up with the group, reminding them that I was an adult, quite unlike them, and so occasioning great hilarity and scorn among the group. (Sonia Livingstone, UK)

## FAQ 16: What are the best ways to construct a survey questionnaire?

### *What's the issue?*

Writing a survey questionnaire requires care and attention to the design and wording, as well as to the means of administering the survey and recording responses, especially when the respondents are children. The answers should be reliable (i.e. they provide consistent measures in comparable situations) and valid (i.e. they correspond to what they are intended to measure). In that sense, a good questionnaire maximises the relationship between the answers given with respect to a particular question and what the research wants to measure through that question (facts, perceptions, experiences, etc).

### *Common practice*

- Once survey objectives are stated explicitly, the questions to be asked should be clear.
- Almost all questions in a questionnaire should be asked using a standardised format for both question and answer, in order to produce answers that can be readily compared and that the child can produce answers reliably.
- For each section, state whether single or multiple answers are permitted. Try to convey the same type of information in the same way throughout the questionnaire (Dillman, 2000) and use answer spaces consistently.
- Questions may be asked using either closed questions (i.e. a list of acceptable responses is provided) or open questions (i.e. no list of acceptable questions is provided). Although open questions permit the researcher to obtain unanticipated answers or answers in the respondent's own words, they take a long time to complete. Moreover, the closed questions produce more analytically useful and reliable data.
- Standard response options include agree/disagree questions (these are generally preferable to yes/no questions), and a scale is often used. A five point scale suffices for most purposes, and it is useful to code the negative pole as '1' and the positive pole as '5': for example - 'strongly disagree', 'disagree', 'partly agree and partly disagree', 'agree', 'strongly agree'.

### *Pitfalls to avoid*

- Format and wording pitfalls must be avoided especially when the self-completion questionnaire is employed (common in research with children). In self-completion surveys, the formatting is even more important than in other data collection procedures, as in this case there are no trained interviewers to guide and encourage the respondents.
- It works best if a self-completion questionnaire is self-explanatory (no further instructions required), if only closed questions are included, and if there are few question formats (to reduce confusion). It is important that the question is interpreted in the same way by all respondents, so avoid words that are ambiguous or may be understood in different ways.
- A questionnaire will be poorly designed if it is cluttered, gives too many instructions, or does not leave enough space between questions. The layout should clearly differentiate instructions, questions and response options.
- Complex skip patterns (i.e. occasions where the question flow varies depending on the responses given) are a common fault and should be kept to a minimum (if necessary, use arrows and boxes that communicate skips without verbal instructions).
- If a researcher fails to establish a conversational style in the sequence of questions, children in particular may feel distant from the context and subject matter of the research. However, the tone should be fairly neutral, not judgemental or patronising.
- For each question, any ambiguous words and concepts need to be clarified. Yet at the same time, questions need to be short and simple. Long complex questions are best broken down into a series of short simple questions. Yet at the same time, a "multi question approach" lengthens the questionnaire which can lead to non-response, so consider what counts as the right amount of questions.

- In order to ensure good measurement, unless measuring the knowledge is the goal of the question, all respondents should have access to the information needed to answer the question from their experience. What constitutes an adequate answer should be consistently communicated.
- Try to avoid strong negative words (forbid, ban, restrain, oppose).
- Try to avoid long list of response choices in order not to confuse respondents.
- Overall, lengthy questionnaires should also be avoided when children are participants. It can be tiring and lower the response rates or even affect the accuracy of the answers.

### Questions to consider

After a pilot test, why are some questions not answered? Are all response options used appropriately? Do some answers suggest response biases that could be corrected? How long does the questionnaire take to complete? Did all respondents understand what they were meant to do? Are all the questions really needed? What exactly is being measured with each question and how will the data be analysed?

### Further resources

- Fowler, F. J. (1993). *Survey Research Methods* (2nd ed.). Newbury Park; London; New Delhi: Sage Publications
- Frey, J. H. (1989). *Survey Research by Telephone* (2nd ed.). Newbury Park; London; New Delhi: Sage Publications
- The SAFT (Safety Awareness Facts and Tools) Project. *SAFT 2006 Parent and Children survey, 2004-2006*. Norwegian Action Plan for Children, Youth and the Internet and the European Commission Safer Internet Action Plan: Norwegian Media Authority.
- UK Children Go Online Project. *UK Children Go Online: Emerging Opportunities and Dangers*. London: London School of Economics and Political Science. Project website: <http://www.children-go-online.net>

### Good practice

A golden rule, when constructing a survey questionnaire, is to ask yourself three questions: A) Can the respondent understand the questions? B) Is the respondent able to answer the questions? C) Is the respondent willing to answer the questions? We need to be cautious of using common words/expressions. To the question: *“What proportion of your evening viewing time do you spend watching news programmes?”*, Belson (1981) found in his research that only  $\frac{1}{4}$  of respondents interpreted “proportion” as a “part”, “fraction”, “percentage”. About  $\frac{1}{3}$  saw it as quantitative such as “how long”, “how many hours”, “how often”. A larger group tapped other dimensions entirely such as “when they watch”, “which programmes”, “which channels”. Therefore, try to avoid such common words or try to be as specific as possible about what we mean to ask.

(Bojana Lobe, Slovenia)

### Researchers' experience

Mainly because of budget and time constraints our questionnaire was designed and piloted in the country of residence of the researcher (Belgium) instead of in the country where the data collection had to take place (Chile). Moreover, the questionnaire was piloted with 1<sup>st</sup> year bachelor students instead of with school children (the actual sample population). As a consequence, the English pilot questionnaire was not really useful in revealing essential problems such as language issues present in the Spanish version. Moreover, and probably due to the fact that the questionnaire was piloted with an older university population, we were not able to detect on time that our questionnaire was too lengthy for a secondary school population.

(Verónica Donoso, Belgium)

## FAQ 17: How do I order the questions in a survey or interview?

### *What's the issue?*

The questions to be addressed to respondents have to be structured in a way that will enable smooth communication between interviewers and respondents, retaining the neutral character of the interviews and facilitating the response task.

### *Common practice*

- The questionnaire should be structured into sections that address particular issues or topics, and that follow one from the other. The first questions should be particularly interesting/easy to answer.
- It should begin with a brief introductory text, continue through a number of easy warm-up questions, and only ask the more difficult to answer questions afterwards. Finally, close with the routine demographic questions.
- Provide transitional statements in moving from one set of questions to the next, to give a conversational tone to the interview and to help the respondents to follow the shift from one topic to the next. This contributes to the perception of the questionnaire as a 'coherent whole'.
- The introduction is of critical importance for establishing rapport with child respondents in particular.
- In each set of questions, the movement should be from general to specific questions.
- The question order has some effect on response error. Thus, a researcher needs to decide which questions will come first in the questionnaire, the question sequencing and the use of transition statements.

### *Pitfalls to avoid*

One can make children uncomfortable by asking from the very beginning questions that require them to use a lot of effort to answer. Also problematic is the inclusion of topics and issues which are addressed by one question only (i.e. without follow ups), diminishing the reliability of the collected data.

### *Further resources*

Fowler, F. J. (1993). *Survey Research Methods*. (2nd edn.). Newbury Park; London; New Delhi: Sage Publications.

### *A researcher's experience*

In semi-structured interviews it often happens that the children/adolescents are inspired to talk about something (by association during the interview topics and comments from others) and my experience is that it is important to pursue these directions and then make sure to get back on track. Even if the new direction regards something the interviewer planned to discuss at a later point it is best to follow the inspiration of the interviewees – then the interviewer may always follow up at the planned point. This is an exhausting strategy as the interviewer has to be really alert and good at keeping the overview. But it pays (Gitte Stald, Denmark).

## FAQ 18: What are some good tips for phrasing questions in a survey to children?

### Common practice

Researchers recognise the value of the following suggestions:

- Keep questions as short as possible. Ask one question at a time.
- Pilot questions before finalising the questionnaire to ensure children understand what you are asking and that the response options fit their answers.
- Ask children to respond to affirmative not negative statements (disagreeing with a negatively phrased statement is a cognitively complex task).
- Always balance the number of positive (e.g. agree, agree a lot) and negative response options (e.g. disagree, disagree a lot).
- It can put children at their ease if you preface a statement with an introduction that says, “Some children agree with this, and others do not. What do you think?”.
- Always separate out the scale midpoint (e.g. ‘partly agree, partly disagree’) from the ‘don’t know’ response, and ensure the latter is always recorded.
- For attitudinal questions, think carefully if you wish children to answer on behalf of children in general or themselves in particular.
- Reverse the direction of some questions to reduce response bias: for example, if saying ‘yes’ to some questions means you like the internet and saying ‘yes’ to others means you don’t like it, one may minimise the effect of children’s tendency to agree with statements presented to them.
- If item lists are provided as response options (e.g. lists of media used, lists of activities) then always end with an ‘other’ option. If you have the resources to hand code these, then ask the child to specify what the ‘other’ is.

### Pitfalls to avoid

The pitfalls are implicit in the above advice, and in essence are the same for children as for adults. If a survey questionnaire is too complex or confusing, uses difficult words, has inappropriate response options, doesn’t provide a ‘don’t know’, ‘other’, or ‘I don’t want to say’ response option where needed, asks leading questions etc, you may not know this from the survey administration until you come to analyse the answers. A ‘don’t know’, ‘other’, or ‘I don’t want to say’ response option may increase the data quality, as it will reduce the amount of default (or misleading) selections. If the survey is administered as a pen-and-paper survey, children will write rude answers if they don’t like or don’t understand the questions! Large amounts of missing data also provide a clue that you’ve got something wrong.

### Questions to consider

Is this a topic that can be well addressed using a survey? Do you know the kinds of answers that children are likely to provide? Have you piloted the survey and do you know how long it takes? For young children, will there be someone present to help them or answer their questions? Should this topic instead be addressed using qualitative methods? If you ask open-ended questions, are you sure you have the resources to code their responses?

### Further information

Fowler, F. J. (1993). *Survey Research Methods* (2nd ed.). Newbury Park; London; New Delhi: Sage Publications.

Frey, J. H. (1989). *Survey Research by Telephone* (2nd ed.). Newbury Park; London; New Delhi: Sage Publications.



### *Examples of good attitudinal questions*

- From 'UK Children Go Online', questions to low or non-users included: "How much do you agree or disagree" that - "I'm missing out by not using the internet and email (more)"; "I can find out all I need from books"; "The internet helps people get ahead in life"; "I sometimes feel left out when my friends talk about the internet"; "The internet makes it easier to keep in touch with people"; "I would like to use the internet more in the future". Response options: Agree a lot/Agree a little/Neither agree or disagree/Disagree a little/Disagree a lot/Don't know.
- From Internet 'Parents & Teens 2004 Survey': Do you agree or disagree or don't know (NB no scale midpoint provided) that "If a child isn't using the internet by the time they start school, they will fall behind their peers"; "Most teens are not careful enough about the information they give out about themselves online"; "Teens who use the internet to stay in touch with their friends have better social lives than teens who don't use the internet to do this"; "Teens waste a lot of time online, when they could be doing more important things"; "The internet helps teens do better in school"; "Too many teens today use the internet to cheat on their schoolwork"; "Most teens do things online that they wouldn't want their parents to know about".
- The 2005 National Center for Missing and Exploited Children survey (Finkelhor, 2006) asked a simple question: "How important is the internet in your life, on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being not at all important and 5 being extremely important?". (Range 1-5) Don't know/Not sure/Refused/Not ascertainable/Not applicable.

(Sonia Livingstone and Panayiota Tsatsou, UK)

### *A researcher's mistake*

In my 'mobile phone' questionnaire, I realised that it is not a good idea to have too many sub-questions under the same question as this confuses respondents. For example, a question about 'use of camera on the mobile' was subdivided to no less than 14 subsequent questions which sometimes confused the respondents. The lesson to be learned is to have fewer questions, and not too many sub-questions. Each sub-question has to be worded so as not to leave any space for misinterpretations or variable answers.

(Liza Tsaliki, Greece)

## FAQ 19: How should I refer to children's media/activities?

### *What's the issue?*

In order to secure validity in research with children regarding their online lives, one has to make sure that they understand and give the same meaning to the terms used in questions.

### *Common practice*

Before beginning any research, pilot research (typically using qualitative methods such as a few interviews or focus groups) is vital to discover both the range of media technologies and activities in which children engage, and also what they call them. When asking questions of children, one has to be especially careful to explain the terms one uses, and also to check carefully what the children mean by the words they use. This issue is especially important with the youngest children. For example, in a question like: "Have you ever met in real life with strangers that you first met on the net?", one has to explain what one means by "stranger", in order to make sure that the children respond in valid ways.

### *Pitfalls to avoid*

To expect that children will understand and interpret everyday language, like "stranger" or "new media", in the research questions.

To fail to provide an 'other' option in a survey, or a 'what are you thinking of' question in an interview, to follow up on children's own preferred terms.

### *Further resources*

SAFT (Safety Awareness Facts and Tools) Project. *SAFT 2006 Parent and Children survey. 2004-2006: Norwegian Action Plan for Children, Youth and the Internet and the European Commission Safer Internet Action Plan: Norwegian Media Authority.*

See Save the Children Norway (Redd Barna) reports. <http://www.reddbarna.no/default.asp>

### *A researcher's mistake*

In the representative cross-national SAFT survey, we had over 100 research questions for the children to answer in a self-completion questionnaire form. Filters were included in the questionnaire, one of which was to single out those who used chat services in order to ask them more in-depth questions regarding uses and experiences. Children who did not answer "yes" to the question "Have you ever chatted on the internet" were asked to skip the following 12 questions. When analysing the results it became clear that the numbers for children claiming to use chat services were substantially lower than expected based on other user reports and traffic data from the industry. Why? Many children did not label their use of MSN messenger - the most popular tool for peer-to-peer communication in 2006 - as "chat", but simply as "messenger", which led them not answer the follow up questions regarding communication online. It is not just semantics.

(Elisabeth Staksrud, Norway)

### *Examples of good practice*

- In the SAFT Children's Survey, the questionnaire included a wide range of activities for which children might use the internet, phrasing these in everyday language, using non-overlapping terms, including an 'other' option (some researchers invited respondents to write in what this was), and permitting multiple response options as needed:

"What kind of things do you do on the internet?" MORE THAN ONE ANSWER

Response options: Chatting in chat rooms/Using Instant Messaging/Sending and receiving e-mail/Doing homework/Getting information other than for school work/Playing games on the internet/Surfing for fun/Shopping or making a purchase/Downloading music/Making personal web-site/blogging/Publishing pictures or information/Downloading software/Watching pornography/Visiting fan sites/Visiting sites for hobbies (knitting, cats, model airplanes, etc)/Visiting news sites (newspapers, online news services, etc)/Other things/Do not know.

- The Pew Internet survey 'Parents, Kids and the Internet 2001' tries to avoid social desirability biases by saying, "Now I have a few questions about the kinds of things YOU do when you go online. Not everyone has done these things. Please just tell me whether you ever do each one, or not."

- The Ofcom Media Literacy survey (Ofcom, 2006) has a different list of response options, and also seeks to discover children's main activities, asking: "Thinking about what you do when you use the internet, which of these do you use the internet for?" READ OUT – MULTICODE OK. "And which would you say are your main uses?" CODE UP TO THREE RESPONSES.

Response options: e-mails/Chat rooms/Instant Messaging (MSN Messenger, AOL Messenger, etc)/Reading or writing web-logs/blogging/Creating/updating websites/School work/Homework/Sports news/Finding out things for someone else/Celebrity/showbiz news/Playing games/eBay/QXL/Auction sites/Downloading music/Looking at national or international news/Listening to radio/TV programme websites/Other (WRITE IN).

- In the USA, the 2005 national survey conducted by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (Finkelhor, 2006) put these activities in the context of the last year, stating: "Most of these questions ask about things that happened in the past year. First, I have some questions about what you do when you use the internet. In the past year, have you used the internet to" (Read list) [1=Yes, 2=No, 97=Don't know/not sure, 98=Refused/Not ascertainable, 99=Not applicable]: Go to web sites/Use e-mail/Use Instant Messages/Go to chat rooms/Play games?/For school assignments/To download music, pictures or videos from file sharing programmes like Kazaa or Bear Share/To keep an online journal or blog/To use an online dating or romance site.

(Panayiota Tsatsou, UK)

## FAQ 20: How do you adjust data collection methods for different age groups?

### *What's the issue?*

It is important to separate what you want to ask children from how you ask it. How you ask it must depend on how old they are – on their competence to understand what you are asking, and to express themselves in their reply.

If children think a question is too old for them, they will still try to give an answer, but the answer may be meaningless. If they think a question is too young for them, they will become bored or may give a silly answer deliberately.

This issue is important in ensuring your data are reliable and valid. But it is also important to ensure that child participants are treated with respect.

### *Common practice*

- Researchers working with children generally conduct a pilot study, putting their questions to the age group they wish to research. Only with careful piloting of questions (for a survey or interview) can you be sure that the children understand your question and can express their answer.
- If qualitative methods are used, the language and approach can be adjusted in the research situation, provided the researcher is experienced in working with children.
- For surveys, younger children will require a simpler version of the questions and a shorter questionnaire – 20 minutes is a long time to sit still for a seven year old. Most researchers don't ask questions about time use to children younger than about nine years old.
- Many researchers would use the age categories used by schools as a guide to maturity (elementary children, primary children, secondary/high school, etc), as these categories inform social norms of in/dependence.
- Straightforward questioning may be supplemented with prompts and stimulus material (Bragg, 2007). Some examples include:
  - controversial or representative statements to initiate reactions: e.g. McCallum et al used four 'statements cards' about learning as prompts with children aged 6 and 11 (McCallum, Hargreaves, & Gipps, 2000).
  - focus groups may use colour cards to access feelings where (Bragg, 2007) different colours evoke different emotions, and can be interesting as a way to talk about positive and negative aspects of, for instance, a project (De Bono, 2000).
  - timelines – children draw or get a timeline and mark on it the ups and downs of a project, a period of time, their own lives, etc. These could take the form of 'confidence lines' that show how a person's confidence has changed over the course of a project, or what they can do afterwards that they could not do before (Bragg, 2007).
  - ranking exercises: children may be given a set of cards or photographs of activities or issues to rank in order of importance (ibid).

### *Pitfalls to avoid*

- It is tempting to treat children of different ages in the same group – for example, conducting a focus group with children aged 7-10. But this is an inappropriate group – the younger children will be intimidated and the older ones may feel insulted.
- The cognitive capacity of younger and older children must be considered carefully – don't ask younger children questions containing double negatives (e.g. 'do you agree or disagree that it is a problem that some children can't access the internet?'); ethically, it is important not to introduce 'adult' ideas (e.g. of images of sexual violence) to children who have not already experienced these in their daily lives.
- Remember that, while teenagers will probably understand your questions easily, they are very sensitive to the presence of peers – it may be better to interview them alone.

### **Further resources**

Bragg, S. (2007). *Consulting Young People: A Review of the Literature Creative Partnerships*. London. <http://www.creative-partnerships.com/content/gdocs/cyp.pdf>.

The Methodological Issues Report D4.1 contains an extended discussion of when methods developed for adults can be adapted for children and when distinct methods should be developed (Lobe et al., 2007).

See the Portuguese (Ponte & Malho, 2008) questionnaire on the EU Kids Online website for an example of a child-friendly questionnaire with pictures.

### **Examples of good practice**

In my research, prior meetings with teachers indicated that questionnaires for the younger children should be very simple and not include open questions, since at this stage they were able to read but still struggled with their writing skills. For the questionnaires for the younger children, each page included one question visually aided by drawings. Open questions included on the 4th year questionnaires were excluded from the 1st year's. In the case of 1st year children, the teacher explained the task and read the questions out loud, waiting for everyone to answer. It was difficult to keep them from shouting their answers and making side comments, but overall they seemed to be concerned that their answers were not copied – they warned each other not to do that. For group interviews, the children, particularly the younger ones, were very enthusiastic and keen to talk about cartoons, but some fourth-grade groups were slightly reluctant and made clear attempts to distance themselves from a genre they said was for younger children - stressing that they did not see cartoons, and that they watched other programmes like sports or soap-operas; or even refusing to comment at all on the clips shown, like the afternoon group of girls. From these reactions it seemed that to ask them to expose themselves in front of an adult and their peers by displaying any knowledge of, and thus admitting watching, the genre raised questions of status. Thus, I opted to use different task-oriented research techniques that would allow different ways of contributing. By asking the children to create and criticise a cartoon the emphasis was not on their viewing habits but on their creative competencies. (Sofia Leitão, Portugal)

While for young children, we asked simple questions about the importance of the internet in their lives (what do you like or not like about it? would you miss it?), older children should not be underestimated. In focus groups with 15-19 year olds, the UK Children Go Online project asked questions such as, "Now that the internet is here and part of your life, what difference would it make if you no longer had access yourself?", "What difference would it make if the internet disappeared altogether? Would things be better or worse?", "Do you think we pay too much attention to computers in our society? Do we overrate the internet and how it can change things?", "What about those left out, those people who don't have internet access? Why might they not have or not want to have internet access?, Do you think they're missing out on something? What consequences does it have for them?"

(Sonia Livingstone, UK)

### **A researcher's mistake**

A common mistake in research where children are involved is to take something which is designed for adults and use it, sometimes in a modified way, sometimes unchanged, to research children. An example of how this can lead to serious errors comes from the long-term research project, 'Children and Television in Iceland' (Broddason, 2003). To measure TV viewing, the research used a diary listing the programmes of the three biggest TV stations in Iceland from Monday to Sunday in the week before the survey. Respondents could indicate whether they had watched a particular programme. Beforehand, the researchers' main concern was whether the kids would have difficulties in remembering what they had watched and understand the format of the diary. As it turned out though, this set-up proved itself very well. An unexpected problem turned up, however, in the form of a painful mistake. The diary was modelled on a diary intended for adults, and so the children's programme (starting at 09:00 on the two biggest channels) on Saturday and Sunday mornings was simply omitted and the diary started at 12:00 noon. Despite countless preparatory meetings where at least a dozen individuals looked at the diary and a small pilot study with young children, this problem was not discovered until after the data had been collected.

(Kjartan Olafsson, Iceland)

## FAQ 21: Who should interview children – what difference does it make?

### *What's the issue?*

The asymmetry in power between adults and children can create distortions when adults interview children. Children may become anxious, they try too hard to please, their privacy may be easily invaded, and so forth. The risk is that the researcher will obtain misleading information containing social desirability biases.

### *Common practice*

- One strategy is to assign the child interviewee an 'expert role' – for example, let them know that they are the expert on their own media use, and explain that the researcher would like to understand better what the child already knows.
- Another strategy is to pay careful attention to the dynamics of the situation, including such practicalities as making sure the researcher sits at the same height as the child.
- Some researchers train one child to interview others, perhaps asking an older child to talk to younger children while the researcher listens in.
- If the researcher is visiting the home, parents and children may feel more comfortable if the interviewer is female.

### *Pitfalls to avoid*

- Try to let the child, not the adult interviewer, set the tone and pace of the interaction.
- Don't stand over a child.
- Try not to surprise them but to explain what is coming next.
- Dress informally not formally.
- Don't underestimate the child's awareness of the power relations in an interview.
- Try to use their language, glossary and expressions.

### *Examples of good practice*

Even though one researcher can be sufficient in research with adolescents, two researchers may occasionally be needed with younger children. In a normal usability lab situation, the researcher takes both the roles of observer and facilitator. Zaman (2005) explains that, because of the need to make younger children feel comfortable during the usability tests, speaking through an intercom system (from the observing room) is too impersonal for children who are sitting alone in the living room (the testing room). In this special case, to prevent children from feeling left to their own devices, a second researcher, who sits next to them and guides them through the test, is needed. The quality of the information gained by the user's answers can thus be improved

(Veronica Donoso, Belgium)

In the TIRO research project the qualitative studies were conducted by a male researcher (in the Dutch speaking part of Belgium) and a female researcher (in the French speaking part of Belgium). Both researchers were in their early twenties and this definitely helped to create a confident and open atmosphere in which the teenagers were willing to share their practices. Although parents were ready discuss their experiences, it seemed they had less confidence in the young researchers asking them questions about their parenthood without being themselves (young) parents. Furthermore, on several occasions, the male researcher encountered parents who scrutinized him when he interviewed their teenage daughter or who only hesitantly gave the permission to let their daughter show her bedroom (in order to get thick descriptions of their private life world and how ICT are part of it).

(Joke Bauwens, Belgium)

## FAQ 22: How do I ask children questions about time use?

### *What's the issue?*

Estimating the time spent on an activity is notoriously difficult even for adults, because (1) people do not usually time their routine activities, (2) media activities are not discrete but rather they overlap with others, (3) measures rely on memory, a problem compounded by the request not just to report on time spent yesterday but to report on 'average' time spent.

### *Common practice*

- Every strategy has been tried, at one time or another – asking people about the proportion of their evening spent on television, or the amount of time spent online yesterday, or how long they spend reading the newspaper on a typical day, etc.
- One rule of thumb is to provide a reference period when asking about time use, asking for example: “how often in the last week [or month]” or, “thinking of your average school day, how many hours per day do you use internet?”
- Care is needed also with the response options. One can offer approximate ranges (e. g. more than once a day, almost every day, a few times a week, about once a week, two or three times a month, about once a month, and less than once a month) or vague quantifiers (e.g. often, sometimes, rarely, never) or exact hours (less than one hour per day, 1-2 hours, 2-3 hours, etc). Beware: one's person 'sometimes' is another's 'often'.
- Asking about actual hours (or minutes) is often preferred, but then pilot research is vital to discover the relevant range of response options (time spent texting may be measured in minutes; if many children spend 4-6 hours per day online, then a scale whose upper limit is 4+ hours will lack sensitivity).
- In one comparison of different methods (using different samples; Olafsson (forthcoming), television time use estimated via a diary (ticking programmes viewed in the past week) produced higher estimates than general survey questions (how long do you spend...) when the reference time was weekly use. However by asking children to answer based on daily use single survey questions come close to diary results.
- However, a comparison of multiple methods using the same sample (Livingstone & Bovill, 1999), found that children underreport time using a diary method (ticking activities for each hour of the day) compared with general survey answers (the same study found that parents and their 9-17 year old children made similar time estimates of the child's media use, though parental responses were a little lower). Other researchers (van der Voort & Vooijs, 1990) found the same underreporting for diary studies, and so recommend the use of direct time estimates.
- Even if single survey questions have proven to give very accurate results for measuring time use, diary methods give more detailed information on the use itself and the time spent on individual activities. Diary methods however are quite demanding for young people and therefore can lead to higher non-response.

### *Pitfalls to avoid*

- Take care in reporting findings not to create a misleading impression of exactness in responses. While it may be reasonably reliable to compare responses to the same question across subgroups (e.g. boys spend longer online than girls), the absolute values may be less reliable: e.g. the claim that children spend 2.34 hours online per day may have been calculated from wide response options, e.g. less than two hours, 2-4 hours, more than 4 hours per day).
- Days of the week differ: if you interview children on a Monday, then 'yesterday' was a weekend, reflecting different media use from interviews done on a Tuesday. Some researchers therefore avoid interviewing on Mondays. Others ask about Monday to Thursday as 'typical days' and may separately ask about the weekend. For the internet, one may need to distinguish 'hours spent in your leisure time' or 'hours after school' from time spent during school (or work) time. Be sure that your reporting of time use relates directly to the question asked (e.g. children go online on average several times a week; or, on a day when they use the internet, children go online for around 2 hours per day).

- Care is needed in relating findings to the pertinent sample: if only 50% of children surveyed actually use the internet, the average time spent online per day may be 1 hour for 'internet users' but only 30 minutes for 'all children'. A similar problem applies for activities that are not daily: if the child spends one hour every other day.
- Note that maximising accuracy in time use measurements can occupy many questions in a survey, so determine in advance how the measure will be used and whether subtle discriminations are required.

### *Examples of good practice*

- The UK Children Go Online survey asked: "Overall, how often do you use the internet THESE DAYS (anywhere)? Several times per day/About once a day/A couple of times a week/About once a week/A couple of times a month/About once a month/Less often/Never/Don't know". Those who used the internet at least once each week were then asked: "On a typical school/college or work day, how much of your leisure time do you spend ... playing computer/electronic games? None/About 10 minutes or less/About half an hour/About 1 hour/About 1 to 2 hours/About 2 to 3 hours/About 3 to 4 hours/About 4 to 5 hours/About 5 hours or more/Don't know". This was repeated for "at the weekend, or in the holidays". An average figure was then calculated as (weekday x 5 + weekend x 2)/7.
- Ofcom's Media Literacy survey estimated time use in several steps:
  1. ASK IF USE INTERNET AT HOME: Please think about the time you spend using the internet at home. How many hours would you say you spend using the internet at home on a typical school day? And how many hours would you say you spend using the internet at home on a day at the weekend?
  2. ASK IF USE INTERNET AT SCHOOL: Please think about the time you spend using the internet at school. How many hours would you say you spend using the internet at school on a typical school day?
  3. ASK IF USE INTERNET ELSEWHERE: Please think about the time you spend using the internet elsewhere (so not at home and not at school) in one week. How many hours would you say you spend using the internet elsewhere on a typical school day? And how many hours would you say you spend using the internet elsewhere on a day at the weekend?
 The interviewer then calculated total weekly hours by adding the answers above using the formula – 5 x typical school day plus 2 x day at the weekend.
- Taking a simpler approach, the Pew Internet survey, 'Parents, Kids and the Internet 2001', asked, "How often do you go online, use email, or instant messaging — every day, a couple times a week, about once a week, or less often?" Their 2004 Teen survey asked "Overall, how often do you go online — several times a day, about once a day, 3-5 days a week, 1-2 days a week, every few weeks, or less often?"
- An equally simple approach, focused on hours rather than days, was taken by the 2005 national survey conducted by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (Finkelhor, 2006): "How many hours are you online on a usual day when you use the internet?" 1 hour or less 1/More than 1 hour to 2 hours/More than 2 hours to 3 hours/More than 3 hours to 4 hours/More than 4 hours to 5 hours/More than 5 hours to 6 hours/More than 6 hours to 7 hours/More than 7 hours to 8 hours/More than 8 hours to 9 hours/More than 9 hours to 10 hours/More than 10 hours/Don't know/not sure/Refused/not ascertainable/Not applicable
- Last, the Kaiser Family Foundation Kids Media @ The New Millennium (Roberts, Foehr, Rideout, & Brodie, 1999) approached the problem thus: "Thinking only about yesterday/this past Friday/this past Saturday, about how much time did you spend using the computer for the following activities?" Visiting chat rooms/Looking at Web sites/E-mail. Response options (for each of these three activities) were: None/5 minutes/15 minutes/30 minutes/45 minutes/1 hour/1 1/2 hours/more than 1 1/2 hours (WRITE IN ANSWER).

(Sonia Livingstone and Panayiota Tsatsou, UK)



## FAQ 23: What's the best way of asking children sensitive questions?

### *What's the issue?*

With any research method, one has to work on gaining children's trust in order to ask about sensitive issues, like unpleasant chat experiences, dangerous situations, bullying, or sexual harassment. This is important both to ensure valid answers and to meet ethical requirements. Hence, judging whether (or how) certain questions can be asked of children at a certain age is crucial.

### *Common practice*

- The more sensitive the issue, the more important it is for the researcher to gain the trust of the children informants, in order for them to open up and talk about their experiences.
- The research questions should not use emotive language, and the terms used should be as close as possible to the everyday terms children use.
- The range of response options provided, if a closed-ended question, is vital, as the responses suggest to the child what kind of answers you are expecting, and the kinds of answers that other children might give.

### *Pitfalls to avoid*

Be careful not to put problematic ideas into children's minds. One qualitative study asked primary school children whether they ever use the internet for hacking, downloading music or movies, disabling filters on the home computer, or using someone else's e-mail without their permission? Balancing these twin pitfalls is difficult – one must neither assume that children are only victims and never perpetrators of online risks, nor give them ideas for bad behaviour that they did not have before.

### *Questions to consider*

Did the child give consent to these questions? Does the child realise they can refuse to answer any particular question? Can anyone overhear the child's answers? Does the child understand that their answers will be kept anonymous? Are you asking about something that is part of, or new to, the child's experience? (If unsure, open-ended piloting is necessary first.) Do you really need to ask this question?

### *Further resources*

- Irwin, L. G., & Johnson, J. (2005). Interviewing Young Children: Explicating Our Practices and Dilemmas. *Qualitative Health Research*, 15(7), 821 - 831.
- Rogers, A. G., Casey, M., Ekert, J., & Holland, J. (2005). Interviewing Children using an Interpretive Poetics. In S. Greene & D. Hogan (Eds.), *Researching children's experiences: methods and approaches*. London: Sage.
- Tang, C. M. (2006). Developmentally Sensitive Forensic Interviewing of Preschool Children: Some Guidelines Drawn From Basic Psychological Research. *Criminal Justice Review*, 31(2), 132-145.
- Tourangeau, R., & Smith, T. W. (1996). Asking Sensitive Questions: The Impact of Data Collection Mode, Question Format, and Question Context. *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 60(2), 275- 304.

### *Example of good practice in qualitative research*

Eurobarometer (EC, 2007) conducted focus groups with 9-11 and 12-14 year olds across Europe, stimulating discussion on sensitive or risky issues thus: "Besides it being something useful and pleasant, are there also problems or risks in using the internet or mobile phones – I mean things that you don't like or find scary?" Spontaneous reactions were then probed to discover types of problems/risks mentioned, problems/risks related to internet usage/to mobile phone usage, how are the children aware of these problems/risks (Personal experience? Being warned about them? By whom? Another child? Adults – which adults? An institution/authority?), how serious do they feel these problems/risks are?

Sometimes it works to give children a statement to discuss, stating this neutrally so they can agree with or react against it. The UK Children Go Online project asked teenage focus groups, "Some say the internet is all porn and spam – how do you see it? Is that your own personal experience? Can you give examples? Or just what you heard from others?", and this was effective in stimulating a lively discussion.

To stimulate discussion, the qualitative Eurobarometer project attributed concerns to adults, and then asked groups of children to respond, saying, “Another problem that worries adults is the risk of being sent or coming across images or other contents that can be deeply shocking – that can include scenes of violence, brutal scenes, racism or pornography. How do you feel about it?”

If children claim these experiences are unfamiliar to them, it could be unethical to follow up. But, if they recognise these experiences, then one may follow up by asking (as in the Eurobarometer study), “Has it happened to you? What was it about? What did you do? Talk to someone about it? Who? What would you do if it happened to you, or what would you advise a friend to do if it happened to him/her? Talk to someone about it? Who? What practical advice would you give?” By using probes such as these, the researcher avoids the mistake of putting words into the children’s mouths.

To ask children about meeting strangers online, bearing in mind that children may not consider online friends to be ‘strangers’ in the same sense that adults do (- this term is best avoided), the Eurobarometer focus group guide gave children an example to discuss:

“X/Y is a child of your age. He/she likes to play games or post his/her profile on the internet, and he/she starts talking online with someone to whom he/she gradually gives personal information like his/her MSN address, his/her mobile phone number, his/her name, or where he/she lives, or starts sending pictures of him/her. He/she thinks this person is a child of his/her age and someone really nice, but it may turn out to be someone quite different, who might encourage him/her to do things he/she should not do, or even an adult with bad intentions.” (Moderator: For boys group, use a typical masculine first name of your country (X); for girls groups, use a typical feminine first name (Y)).

The UK Children Go Online focus groups recognised that children may enjoy meeting new people online, even though this can be risky, asking open questions like: “Do you meet new people through the internet? How many people are you in touch with online, and where did you meet? How do you mix on and offline communication? Is it important to you that the people you email/IM with are local or in the UK or perhaps overseas?”

(Panayiota Tsatsou, UK)

### **Examples of good survey questions about online risk**

- *From UK Children Go Online, questions about risky disclosure of personal information were phrased as follows:*

“While on the internet what information have you ever given to another person that you have not met face-to-face?” SELECT ALL THE INFORMATION YOU HAVE GIVEN

Response options: Personal e-mail address/Full name/Age and date of birth/Phone number/Your interests or hobbies/A photograph of you/Parent’s name/School/I have never given out information about myself/I don’t want to answer/Don’t know

- *From Pew Internet ‘Parents, Kids and the Internet 2001’, questions about children’s active role in risky activities:*

“Here are some other things some people do online. What about you?” “Have you ever...” (READ; ROTATE)? (a) Had someone give you fake information about themselves in an email or instant message, (b) Used email or instant message to talk to someone you had never met before, (c) Given your password to a friend or someone you know, (d) Pretended to be a different person when you were emailing or instant messaging someone, (e) Sent a prank email or an email “bomb”.

- *From SAFT (Children Norway, 2005/6), question about bullying and distress:*

“In the past 6 months, have you ever been harassed, upset, bothered, threatened or embarrassed by anyone chatting online?” Yes/No/Don’t know.

- *From Pew Internet’s Parents & Teens 2006 Survey (12-17 years old):*

“Have you, personally, ever experienced any of the following things online? You can just tell me yes or no.”

(a) Someone spreading a rumor about you online, (b) Someone posting an embarrassing picture of you online without your permission, (c) Someone sending you a threatening or aggressive email, instant message or text message, (d) Someone taking a private email, IM or text message you sent them and forwarding it to someone else or posting it where others could see it.

- *From UK Children Go Online, questions about children's concerns:*

"Which of these things, if any, do you worry about when you use the internet?" SHOW LIST. PROBE: WHICH OTHERS?

Response options: Being contacted by dangerous people/People finding things out about you that are personal or private/Seeing things that might bother or upset you/Spending too much time on the internet/Possibility of getting a computer virus/Don't know/None of these.

- *From the 2005 National Center for Missing and Exploited Children survey (Finkelhor, 2006), questions about sexual risks:*

"Now I have some questions about things that happen to some young people on the internet. In the past year, did you ever feel worried or threatened because someone was bothering or harassing you online?" Yes/No/Don't know/not sure/Refused/not ascertainable/Not applicable.

"In the past year, did anyone ever use the internet to threaten or embarrass you by posting or sending messages about you for other people to see?" (response options as above).

"In the past year when you were doing an online search or surfing the web, did you ever find yourself in a web site that showed pictures of naked people or of people having sex when you did not want to be in that kind of site?"

"In the past year, how many times have you made rude or nasty comments to someone on the internet?" Would you say... Never/1 time/2 times/3 to 5 times/6 or more times/Don't know/not sure/Refused/not ascertainable/Not applicable".

This survey included several follow up questions. For example:

"You mentioned more than one (other) thing happening to you. Thinking only of the things that happened in the past year, which of these situations bothered you the most?" And: "Why do you think this person was bothering or harassing you?" (write in below).

It asked several questions about meeting strangers online, as follows:

"I have some more questions about being on the internet with people you don't know in person. In the past year, have you met someone on the internet who you have chatted with or exchanged e-mail or Instant Messages with more than once?"

"Sometimes when people get to know each other online, they want to meet in person. Did this person (any of these people) want to meet you in person?" (I mean people who were [R's age + 5] or older.)

"Did you actually meet this person (any of these people) face to face?" (I mean people who were [R's age + 5] or older.)

"In the past year, have you had a romantic online relationship with someone you met on the internet? I mean someone who felt like a boyfriend or girlfriend."

(Panayiota Tsatsou, UK)

## FAQ 24: What's the best way to ask about parental mediation?

### *What's the issue?*

Various types of mediation activity are practised by many parents. Developed originally for parental mediation of television, these are now being extended to parental mediation of the internet, games and online technologies (Livingstone & Helsper, in press; Nathanson, 1999; Valkenburg, Krcmar, Peeters, & Marseille, 1999). Since parental activities in the home are subtle and complex, it can be difficult to ask about them in surveys or interviews.

### *Common practice*

A consensus has developed that three main kinds of mediation are practiced:

- Restrictive (setting rules about time, location or content, limiting time or other activities, banning certain activities or websites);
- Active (discussing media content, guiding choices, instructing interpretation, critiquing media content, making evaluative comments);
- Co-use (co-viewing, sharing the activity, being present but not commenting).

These are all social forms of mediation. Additionally, for the internet, one may ask about the use of filtering, monitoring or other technical forms of mediation.

### *Pitfalls to avoid*

- In designing a survey or interview schedule, one cannot ask about just one type of parental mediation (e.g. do you have rules for your child?). Answers to these different types of mediation are not generally highly correlated; indeed, subtypes emerge from factor analyses conducted on answers to multiple separate items in a survey.
- It is also clear from research that children and parents answer these questions differently – generally, parents claim more mediation and children claim less mediation. Ideally, both parents and children should be interviewed.
- A rule of thumb would be to take parent and child estimates as specifying the likely upper and lower bounds of parental mediation. If only parents, or only children, are asked, the interpretation of the data must recognise that the source questioned is likely to under or overestimate actual practice.

### *Examples of good practice*

- The SAFT and the UK Children Go Online surveys asked parents and children the same questions. For example, to ask about active and co-use forms of mediation, the questions to parents (with equivalent questions to children) were:

*Do you (or your spouse/partner) do any of these things nowadays? (tick all that apply):*

Make sure you stay in the same room or nearby when your child is online

Sit with your child and go online together

Help your child when he/she is on the internet

Ask/talk to your child about what he/she is doing or did on the internet

Keep an eye on what's on the screen while your child is online

- The SAFT survey (Norway, 2006) asked children: "When you go on the internet at home, do any of your parents often, sometimes or never do each of the following?" (Response options – often, sometimes, never, don't know):

When I am on the internet at home, my parents sit with me while I surf

When I am on the internet at home, my parents check in on me

When I am on the internet at home, my parents use filters to block sites they do not want me to go to

When I am on the internet at home, my parents check to see which sites I have visited

- It isn't easy to ask about parental control tools, as neither parents nor children may be clear about what exactly these are. The 2005 National Center for Missing and Exploited Children survey (Finkelhor, 2006) asked children this way: "Is there any software on this computer that blocks pop-up ads or SPAM e-mail?" Yes/No/Don't know/not sure/Refused/not ascertainable/Not applicable. Also: "Is there any software on this computer that filters, blocks, or monitors how you use the internet (besides software that blocks pop-ups or SPAM)?" Yes/No/Don't know/not sure/Refused/not ascertainable/Not applicable.

Their questions to parents were more explicit: "At any time in the past year, has there been software on the computer your child uses at home that filters, blocks, or monitors what your child does or sees online?" Yes/No/Don't know/not sure/Refused/not ascertainable/Not applicable. And: "I have some questions about what types of blocking, filtering or monitoring software have been on the computer your child uses at home, including software you may have stopped using. In the past 12 months, has there been software that..." (READ.) [1=Yes, 2=No, 97=Don't know/not sure, 98=Not ascertainable/refused, 99=Not applicable]

Blocks SPAM e-mail?

Blocks pop-up ads?

Filters sexually explicit images or web sites?

Blocks or controls your child's use of chat rooms, e-mail, newsgroups or instant messaging?

Monitors your child's online activities?

Limits the amount of time your child can spend online?

Blocks personal information from being posted or e-mailed?

Uses a browser or search engine just for kids?

- In qualitative work, parental mediation is easier to ask about, because you can follow up to be sure you know just what children mean. The Eurobarometer qualitative study asked, in focus groups, "Can you use the internet as you wish and as often as you wish, or do you have any limits, rules or recommendations given by your parents – or anything you think your parents would like you to do or not to do although they may not really have told you?" The UK Children Go Online project asked older teenagers, "Are there rules for using the internet at college? What do they say? What about at home? Do you stick to all of the rules or do you try to get round some of them?".

(Sonia Livingstone, UK)

## FAQ 25: Is it better to research children at home, at school or elsewhere?

### *What's the issue?*

Children can be more relaxed at home, and interviewing children at home permits direct observation of their interaction with siblings and parents, as well as evidence of the arrangement of media goods around the home; but it may restrict the child's freedom to report on parental rules or values regarding media, and they may feel much freer to discuss this at school. At school, on the other hand, the gaze of teachers and peers is considerable, constituting another kind of social pressure. A child may be shy at school but open up to the researcher at home. Children surveyed in the classroom may worry that teachers will see their answers but be confident that parents will not. Research in school settings involves other difficulties such as obtaining consent from the individuals who will be asked to provide data in the study, the school system itself, which rarely allows researchers to take all student participants and randomly assign them to conditions, access may be difficult to obtain and further complications may hinder the research process as it is ideally conceived (Mertens, 1998).

### *Common practice*

Rule of thumb: One should interview children in settings where they feel comfortable and where they feel at ease enough to open up.

### *Pitfalls to avoid*

To interview children in a setting (like school) where they feel that they should try to be clever and provide the "right answers". To interview or observe children in a place which, though they may be relaxed there, is inappropriate for the questions to be asked or the activities to be observed by the researcher.

### *Questions to consider*

Which is the location where children will feel most relaxed? Are the questions you'll ask sensitive or embarrassing? Are the answers fairly factual or could they be influenced by the presence of peers? How long do you need for the research? Will you also interview either teachers or parents? What are the issues involved in gaining permission to work with children in schools, and/or at home, in your country? Where can you obtain a quiet room for recording a conversation? What are the implications for interviewers' (or interviewees') travel time and expenses at one site over another? Especially care is required if approaching children outside either home or school; indeed, this may be excluded altogether for ethical reasons.

### *Examples of good practice*

- Non-formal environments (like internet cafés) are, in my opinion, the most appropriate places to interview children. During my investigation, I had the chance to interview them in a park, during their summer holidays. However, this is a hard period not only to find children to be interviewed, but also to get them to concentrate. The presence of adults can also constrain the interview. When I interviewed children, some of them asked if the conversation was only with me or if there would be any other adult. I also noticed that they were more open to tell me - a stranger who wouldn't come back - some confidences, than their own teachers. (Cátia Candeias, Portugal)
- In the UK Children Go Online survey, conducted in the home face-to-face, the section on sensitive questions (about seeing pornography, race hate, violence, etc) was conducted using a self-completion questionnaire on the computer. Neither the interviewer nor the parent could see the screen. Specific instructions were:  
"For the next few questions I'd like you to use the laptop yourself as you may find that you'd like to answer some questions by yourself. You don't have to answer any questions you don't want to. To show you how to use the computer, I'll do a few practice questions with you. If at any time you have any problems, just ask me."

- In both the UKCGO survey, and in Ofcom's Media Literacy survey, parents were gently requested not to be present for the entire interview. The interviewer recorded also whether the parent complied, thus permitting responses to be filtered according to parental presence after, if desired. The questionnaire instructions thus stated:

"SAY TO PARENT – Thank you very much for answering those questions. I'd now like to ask (CHILD TO BE INTERVIEWED) some questions on their own if that's OK?"

WAS THE CHILD TO BE INTERVIEWED PRESENT DURING THIS INTERVIEW WITH THEIR PARENT? SINGLE CODE

Yes, and child conferred with parent as the interview was taking place

Yes, but they did not comment during the interview

No, they were not present

INTERVIEWER – OK FOR PARENT TO STAY, BUT WOULD PREFER TO INTERVIEW CHILD ALONE, IN CASE PARENT BEING THERE ALTERS THE CHILD'S RESPONSES."

(Sonia Livingstone, UK)

- Research for my PhD dissertation (Donoso, 2007) was carried out in school. All participants were first surveyed by the researcher in their classrooms during school time. During the administration of the survey most teachers left the room. If they did not we asked them not to interfere with the survey administration and explained to them that this responded to the need to assure the reliability of children's responses as, in some cases, the teacher's presence might trigger socially or academically desirable responses from students. In all cases teachers were understanding and willing to cooperate. For the second phase of our data collection we requested each school to provide a place where no teachers or other school authorities were present so as to favour a more relaxing atmosphere for the interviews. Finally, by establishing a rapport and an open and relaxed attitude with the adolescents interviewed, many of the inconveniences associated with school settings were certainly diminished and, consequently, a proper interview environment could be created.

(Veronica Donoso, Belgium)

- Where users' tests are carried out and (usability) laboratories are employed, it is not always easy to provide a "natural" atmosphere. By arranging the labs as a more familiar environment and by trying to create a rapport with the subjects being tested, it is possible to minimise the tension and bias associated with being the subject of an "experiment". At the Centre of Usability Research at the Catholic University of Leuven much research is carried out within a usability lab. However, the stationary usability lab employed is arranged like a living room (with armchairs, a side table, a television set, a desk, etc) so that test-users may experience new applications in a situation that is close to a real life experience. Moreover, the usability lab at the CUO is arranged in a cosy, homelike manner to give subjects the impression that they are not in a lab nor in a workplace, but rather in someone's living room.

(Veronica Donoso, Belgium)

- In our research, questionnaires were given to the teachers. I had a prior conversation to explain that these were not meant to assess the children's knowledge about television but to get their opinion about children's programming. Therefore, there was no 'correct' answer, and the children should not be pressured to give any answer. The teachers told the children that only their opinion mattered so they should not make comments or ask their colleagues' views. Given that the task took place in an educational context, I took into consideration the roles that both children and teachers are expected to play, and the fact that the tasks normally performed are 'assessment' driven. Still, the children did not seem to have considered this as an assessment exercise. They were quite at ease and enjoying the exercise; they laughed and showed eagerness to talk about the programmes. The only concern was to get the spelling of the cartoon titles right. The younger children might have been a bit uncomfortable with the researcher's presence in the class, also tending to look for confirmation on the correctness of certain answers. The older children were very comfortable with my presence from the moment we were introduced; they were curious about the nature of the task and asked questions about its purpose.

(Sofia Leitão, Portugal)

## FAQ 26: How can I measure children's socio-economic background?

### *What's the issue?*

The socio-economic and socio-ecological backgrounds of children and their families are very complex: they are constituted by an interaction of the different aspects and settings of the families' daily life (e.g. neighbourhood, family styles like single parent families, interrelation between family members, family income, and so on) (Paus-Hasebrink & Bichler, 2008).

It is clear that children's access to, and use of, the internet and online technologies differs according to their socio-economic status (SES). Yet this is difficult to measure and, as so often, varies by country, academic discipline, and research method (especially, whether one is interviewing parents or children). Since inequalities are crucial to internet research, it is important that researchers undertake this task and do not omit measuring SES in their research design. Qualitative and quantitative methods may approach this issue differently.

### *Common practice*

Several approaches are possible:

- Sample children according to schools. It is generally possible to identify schools in poor, average, and well-off neighbourhoods on the basis of official statistics. It is accepted practice to assume that children from these schools will differ systematically by SES (although this assumption should not be made for individual children).
- Ask children for information that will indicate, approximately, their SES. Teenagers may be expected to know how much education their parents received (below high school, finished high school, further education, university) although younger children may know if they went to university or not. This provides a fair proxy for SES.
- Use proxy measures. The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) survey developed two measures to estimate SES in their 2003 survey, namely: "About how many books/cars are there in your parents' or caretakers' home?" (Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald, & Schulz, 2001). These questions provide fair proxies for educational and economic resources, respectively, and the answers are sufficient to sub-divide children by SES, though the measures are inexact.
- Ask parents directly for information that will indicate SES. In some countries, terminal age of education is asked; or one may ask household income (by income brackets centred on the national average income and with more categories below the average than above). Or one may ask questions about occupation, etc according to a standard system of classification. This means either interviewing the parents, or sending a questionnaire to parents when interviewing their child (most efficiently, this can accompany the parental consent form, which must in any case be returned signed to the researcher).

### *Pitfalls to avoid*

Don't ask children what their parents do for a living: first, one must hand code the answers, which is very time-consuming; second, the answers will be ambiguous (does an 'engineer' service the central heating or design bridges?, what does 'works in an office' mean?); third, many children do not know the answer. These questions may also result in social desirability biases, as children may feel uncomfortable saying their parents have low education or no car.

### *Examples of good practice*

- In our research, questions like age and place of birth, and questions regarding SES (such characterisation can consider the parents' level of education, type of job, economic sector and position, income, etc) were complemented with a questionnaire to the parents, which also included one open question regarding their opinion on the provision of public television for children. Both questionnaires were given a code number so that they could be matched in order to characterise the family unit. (Sofia Leitão, Portugal)
- In the UK, market researchers ask a standard series of questions in order to classify people. Socio-economic status is strongly correlated with measures of parental occupation, education and income. In the UK Children Go Online research, parents were asked a series of these questions at the point of when recruiting children. (Sonia Livingstone, UK)



## FAQ 27: How do we maximise the reliability and validity of children's answers?

### *What's the issue?*

It is commonly supposed that children are unreliable informants. While designing and conducting research with children takes care, so does research with adults. Parents, for example, are subject to considerable biases (social desirability, third person bias, etc) when reporting on their children's media use; teachers also may provide a partial and overly positive account of children's activities in class.

Every effort must be made to address the possible circumstances that might undermine children's responses in research (as reiterated throughout this guide). But the notion of children as unreliable must be traded against the benefits of direct questions to children. Who else can report on what a child does with media when alone, or in their bedroom, or how they feel about violent content, or what pressure they feel from their friends? A useful principle, therefore, is to assume that each child is capable of providing valid and insightful information, provided that s/he is approached appropriately and that the data are interpreted carefully.

### *Common practice*

In qualitative interviews, one has the chance to address inconsistencies and contradictions in what children might say. Thus one should check for misunderstandings, verify interpretations and explore contradictions in what children say, to check if this indicates experienced ambiguities and ambivalences.

In surveys, piloting the questionnaire is vital to ensure reliability, as is taking care to understand the reasons for lots of missing values on a question, or comments scribbled or muttered during the interview, or peculiar results that suggest a misunderstanding has arisen.

There are four main problems survey respondents face – s/he doesn't understand the question, s/he doesn't know the answer, s/he cannot recall it, and s/he doesn't want to report the answer. Therefore, good research practice should anticipate and seek to eliminate these problems to increase validity:

- *Understanding the question:* if the question includes difficult or complex terminology and is not well understood, then we have to simplify complex terms and give definitions of those terms if needed, especially when it comes to very young children. Also, children have to be given the chance to write in more detail about their experiences regarding the questions asked (i.e. the question needs to include a category of answer where the respondent can give his/her own answer in detail).
- *Lack of knowledge:* If the child doesn't know the answer, a researcher can either change the questions so as to ask for information that is less detailed and easier to recall, or help the child to estimate the answer or, finally, change or drop the questions.
- *Can't recall:* to increase recall, a researcher needs to have in mind that small events of less impact are more likely to be forgotten than more important events, while recent events can be recalled relatively easily. It may help to use words that provide a clear time frame.
- *Unwillingness/social desirability:* this is mostly in cases where questions on sensitive personal data are asked. In this case, we need to put a lot of effort into minimising the sense of judgment and maximising the importance of accuracy (vocabulary and introduction need particular attention in this respect).

To increase the validity of more subjective questions, the researcher could rephrase questions to ensure that they will mean the same thing to all respondents, or ask multiple questions with different question forms that measure the same subjective state.

Since even trivial changes in the questionnaire design (e.g. wording, number of alternatives/ordinal scales, and position of a question) can make an important difference in how children answer, for subjective questions, answers often cannot be interpreted directly. In other words, it may not be meaningful to report that 73% of children like the internet; but it would be meaningful to interpret the same answers comparatively (e.g. more boys than girls reported liking the internet; or, parents of users report more positive attitudes to the internet compared with parents of non-users).

### *Pitfalls to avoid*

Forgetting to pilot all research materials. Failing to use the interview situation to clarify possible interpretations of what children say, or to clarify whether inconsistencies and contradictions are the result of methodological confusions or the genuine ambiguities and ambivalences in their lifeworlds.

### **Further resources**

Section in D4.1 (Lobe et al., 2007) on reliability.

### **Examples of good practice**

Zaman (Zaman, 2005) combines observations of children playing electronic games in natural environments with observations in controlled settings (in the usability lab), allowing her to get a more accurate picture of children's actual gaming behaviour. She argues that children must not only be observed while exploring and playing a game, but they must also be given the chance to express their opinions and perceptions. In order to fulfil these two objectives, Zaman employs different techniques that allow her to evaluate the usability of the game being tested. These include (1) the "think aloud" method, in which children are asked to provide a running commentary as they play a game (taking into account non-verbal responses also, if possible); (2) the "active intervention" method, in which the researcher 'actively intervenes' by asking relevant questions during the task performance (but only after children have explored the game at their own pace first); and (3) the "laddering" method, in which the researcher asks users why they like or dislike something; when the user answers, the researcher asks 'why' again; this process results in a list of connected elements: 'a ladder', at the end of which the personal value(s) of the user will be revealed.

(Veronica Donoso, Belgium)

In our research, asking children to write an essay proved to be reliable – as evidenced by the wide range of viewpoints on sensitive political issues, instances of political incorrectness and the use of slang, all of which can be interpreted as a sign of pupils' frankness. What children produce may provide answers to questions not foreseen by researchers at the beginning of the study. The same strengths, and even greater possibilities, obviously characterise what children produce online as a data source.

(Veronika Kalmus, Estonia)

## FAQ 28: What shall I do if a child respondent seems to be at risk?

### *What's the issue?*

When working with children researchers should anticipate the possibility that they will meet children who seem to be at risk. This can happen both in qualitative and quantitative studies. In qualitative studies researchers often visit children's homes where they might see signs of neglect or even violence. In quantitative studies researchers might find written comments in a questionnaire or a pattern of answers indicating that a child is at risk.

### *Common practice*

It is not possible to provide definite answers to what should be done under any circumstances but most researchers would agree that it should be the best interests of the child that should be the guiding light in all decisions; whether it is to take action or not to take action. It is also worth noting that the law in some countries demands that the relevant authorities are notified if there is any suspicion that a child is at risk. An example of the enhanced protection of children in law is the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

### *Questions to consider*

It is always advisable for researchers who work with children to consider how they are going to deal with the possible situation of discovering that a child is potentially at risk. This involves, amongst other things, being familiar with the relevant legal framework in the respective country and the relevant institutions which deal with child protection. In studies which focus directly on sensitive issues such as pornography or violence it is worth considering whether to give information to all the participants in a study about where they can go to seek further information or assistance.

### *Further resources*

UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. See <http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu2/6/crc/treaties/crc.htm>)

### *Researchers' experiences*

During various research projects I have found that (in some cases) it can be necessary to have a look at children who seem to be at risk. In one case I thought that there might be sexual abuse in the family. I could not talk to the child or to their mother (I had interviews with a child aged eight and their mother), so I looked for an institution of trust to contact. I learned that it could be helpful to contact a priest in the community; thus I told him my suspicion and he started to take care of the child concerning that matter. It is the ethical responsibility of a researcher to actively react, when he or she entertains a suspicion on such sensitive issues. (Ingrid Paus-Hasebrink, Austria)

In the UK Children Go Online survey, I was concerned about the child who answered 'yes' to the following sequence of (approximate) questions: have you met someone offline that you first met online, did you go on your own, did the meeting go badly (or well)? In the event, this was a rare occurrence. In writing the consent forms for children, it was made explicit that their answers would be kept confidential and anonymous unless the interviewer had real grounds for concern, in which case she would inform the child that she could not keep this confidential. I also discussed this eventuality with the market research company who were contracted to conduct the interviews with children, so that they could brief their interviewers on appropriate ways to respond. Last, in case after the interview was over, children or their parents became concerned about something that had happened, we left all families with a leaflet with helpline and advice contacts. (Sonia Livingstone, UK)

The 2005 National Center for Missing and Exploited Children survey (Finkelhor, 2006) included a check for the interviewer to be completed after the interview. It relies on both the interviewer's observations and on the child's answers recorded on the computer. If the computer algorithm flags the respondent as possibly in danger, or the interviewer has concerns based on comments or observations during the interview, the interviewer then says:

*"There is someone else connected with our study who may need to call you again. Is there a time that would be convenient?" [Get time and check telephone number]. "I would also like to give you the address of a web site with good information for young people about internet safety. The address is: [www.safeteens.com](http://www.safeteens.com) or [www.safekids.com](http://www.safekids.com)".*

## FAQ 29: What do I need to know to do research with children online?

### *What's the issue?*

Online methods have become increasingly popular in the last few years, challenging traditional data collection methods and raising new methodological issues in media research. In part, online methods may be used to compensate for the difficulties of offline methods, capitalising on the infrastructure provided by the internet (e.g. in recruiting internet users). In part, online methods are used specifically to research online phenomena (e.g. what do people do in chat rooms?). Online methods raise some new challenges regarding access, consent and ethics, especially but not only when researching children. They also permit research on new phenomena (e.g. blogs, profiles, social interaction online, etc).

### *Common practice*

- Online quantitative methods are generally used for researching the demographics and attitudes of internet users (e.g. via an online survey). Online qualitative methods are more suitable for in-depth study of online cultural and social contexts (e.g. virtual ethnography).
- Beyond the role of the facilitator of traditional methods, online applications have offered space for the development of new methods for automated data collection, such as logging and metrics of online visits/usage statistics.
- Online (as offline), research questions should be addressed differently in diverse modalities of communication (chat rooms, forums, blogs, etc), taking into account the different features and practicalities of each. For example, everyone can read messages in a forum, regardless of who's the author, precisely because they are public and intended to be read by everyone. You can browse through a guest book from a blog without leaving any trace of your presence, but the same cannot be said when you enter a chat room. Real-time communication makes it awkward to observe without interacting, while asynchronous communication makes it possible.
- It is not easy to ensure that all ethical imperatives are met and, at the same time, manage to carry out fieldwork without influencing what is being observed or actually making online research possible. Researchers are at present evolving common practice on some of these issues, and many are discussed in a helpful manner on the electronic discussion list of the Association of Internet Researchers.
- Online interviews save time and money, but they have to be prepared properly. Researchers have to know how to use appropriate software, how to conduct the interview online (how to ask questions, etc), and be able to follow (written) cues left by interviewees (which means being able to read between the lines), etc.
- MSN and other instant messaging programmes can be used as tools for research. Keeping a record of MSN conversations, with the interviewee's permission for this, is a good way of using the internet as a research tool and information resource.
- There are no easy answers to the question of authenticity – whether your interviewees online really are who they say they are.
- Considerable value may be drawn from online content itself. Besides specific content produced by online users (like web pages or blogs), most online use leaves visible traces (messages in guest books, forums, etc). Content analysis poses some practical problems, as this abundant material can be hard to manage. One option is to draw a sample (e.g. sampling messages posted in a specific time period or in particular forums).

### *Pitfalls to avoid*

- Although online methods provide advantages with regard to access to remote populations and automated data collection, which reduce research time, cost and effort, a researcher should think carefully about disadvantages that may affect the quality of the data collected, such as inaccurate sampling frames, irregular response rates, response duplication and participant deception.
- For researchers who aim to conduct an online survey, there are clear difficulties in drawing a random representative sample online. In online surveys, the respondents are self-selected and there is a lack of a central registry of web users that would allow the researcher to follow consistent sampling procedures.

- When conducting real-time online qualitative interviews or online focus groups, ask respondents to use the typing progress indicator (a small pen, keyboard or a small icon to indicate which person in a conversation is typing) in order to limit the typing to one person at a time. This prevents fast, furious and blurred interaction where we are unable to tell who is replying and who just sending a message.

### Questions to consider

Are you using online methods to compensate for the limits of offline methods, or as a matter of convenience? Or because the internet is specifically of interest to the research question? How can you define the population from which you draw your sample? Are you studying individuals' activities online, or online practices or representations (whose relation to offline individuals is less relevant?). Is it important to know, in your research, that the respondents are of the age or gender that they claim? How will you relate what people do offline and online?

### Further resources

- Lobe, B. (2008). *Integration of Online Research Methods. Information Technology/Social Informatics collection*. Faculty of Social Sciences Press.
- Wright, K. B. (2005). Researching internet-based populations: Advantages and disadvantages of online survey research, online questionnaire authoring software packages, and web survey services. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 10(3), article 11. Retrieved from <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol10/issue3/wright.html>.
- Hine, C. (2000). *Virtual Ethnography*. London: Sage.
- Hine, C. (Ed.). (2005). *Virtual Methods: Issues in Social Research on the Internet*, Oxford: Berg.

### Researchers' experiences

In my research on hip-hop cultural production and consumption, I found that most hip-hop artists (and fans) that I came across (and who were interviewed) were teenagers and young adults (Simões, 2006). Since I wanted to study hip-hop both offline and online, I chose a field research strategy based on multiple methods, namely participant observation, interviewing, gathering data of different natures (visual, audio, textual documents – photographs, video recordings, audio recordings, and other visual documents, like flyers, stickers, posters, etc). Even though online observation followed, basically, the same principles as offline observation, some specific questions may be raised. In this project, the internet was thus both a research object and a research instrument. (José Alberto Simões, Portugal)

In my online interviews with teenagers (aged 15-18), I noticed that it is of particular importance to find a strategy to reduce the ongoing possibility of distractions and interruptions that might prevent an interviewee from being fully engaged in the interview. I practised three tactics to deal with interruptions and disturbance issues. First, it is crucial to provide participants with flexibility in choosing the time suitable for an interview. Second, we have to inform them in advance about the approximate length of the interviews and ask them to suggest the time which suited them best. Next, it is useful to ask the participants to acknowledge the importance of not suspending the interview once started. When the interviewee requests an interruption (break), to accept it is particularly recommended when the interviewee asks for a shorter break (up to 20 minutes). However, if the interviewee decides to take a longer break, there is a high possibility that the interview would remain uncompleted, so it is best to try to keep them in the interview. There were also cases when interviewees did not announce their breaks but just disappeared. In such instances, I would recommend being patient and tactical at the same time to see the positive side of breaks. I looked at them as an opportunity to read the transcription in order to check what had been discussed already, what still needed to be examined and how to continue the interview. It also gave space for reflection by either party. To sum up, being a good online interviewer means being patient. (Bojana Lobe, Slovenia)

## FAQ 30: What are the key issues when collecting data in more than one country?

### What's the issue?

Potentially, any and all dimensions of a research project may take on a different meaning when conducted in a different country – including the questions asked, the terms used, the population studied and the position of the researcher. There is a persistent tension between the attempt to standardise the research conducted in different countries (e.g. using exactly the same sampling technique, questionnaire survey, approach to analysis) and the attempt to recognise and reflect cultural or social differences across research contexts.

### Common practice

- It is often asserted that the standardisation of methodological tools and conceptual frameworks is more easily achieved in quantitative research. Conversely, qualitative methods are arguably better at reflecting and responding to specific cultural contexts.
- However, both approaches can be adjusted to comparative research, and both require considerable effort in both research design and data interpretation, so as to understand where the data are, or are not, directly comparable.
- While efforts in comparative research are often concentrated on the construction of samples, the recruitment of respondents, the design of survey questionnaires or interview schedules and so forth, researchers must also attend to the challenges of data interpretation and analysis. Comparing questionnaire responses across countries (and languages) is easier than comparing interview transcripts, but ensuring that the questionnaire means the same thing in different languages is not easy. Ideally, questionnaires and interview schedules should be translated and then back translated to check the back translation against the original.

### Pitfalls to avoid

There are very many of these, and they arise mainly from either the fact that the researcher will be more familiar with one country than another, or from the fact that researchers from different countries must collaborate together. Typically, one takes one's own context for granted, not perceiving its distinctive features, and sees the other context as unusual, not understanding how it makes sense to those who live there. While the major differences between countries are obvious (e.g. language), more subtle differences can easily be overlooked (e.g. expectations regarding parenting). Too often, it is convenience rather than the research rationale that directs the project (e.g. having access to researchers, or respondents, in another country, even though that country may not provide the optimal point of comparison).

### Questions to consider

Why are you undertaking cross-national research? For instance, do you expect to find similarities or differences, and why might these be interesting? Which countries do you want to compare and why (what are their interesting and relevant points of similarity and difference)? What are the practical issues to be addressed in comparing across countries? These might include the means of contacting children or obtaining their consent. Are there significant differences also within countries (e.g. the two language communities within Belgium, or the north/south divide that characterises many countries)? Even if words can be translated, do they have a different meaning in a different cultural context? Are findings typically disseminated differently in the countries you are working in?

### Further resources

- Hammersley, M., & Atkinson, P. (1983). *Ethnography: Principles in Practice*. London: Tavistock.
- Livingstone, S. (2003). On the challenges of cross-national comparative media research. *European Journal of Communication*, 18(4), 477-500.
- Mante-Meijer, E., & Haddon, L. (2005). Working in International Research Groups. In L. Haddon (Ed.), *International Collaborative Research. Cross-cultural Differences and Cultures of Research*. Brussels: COST.
- Stald, G. (2004). International Co-operation in Research: Children and their Changing Media Environments'. In M. Grosse-Loheide & U. Hasebrink (Eds.), *Netzwerke für die Informationsgesellschaft*. Bielefeld: GMK.

### *A researcher's experience*

In our research, we translated questionnaires used in the 'Young People, New Media' (Livingstone & Bovill, 1999) and SAFT (SAFT (Safety Awareness Facts and Tools) Project, 2004-2006) projects, to be answered in a self-completion survey by Portuguese children aged 9-14. We found that expressions such as "stepmother" or "stepfather" are sensitive for Portuguese children, as the Portuguese words ("madrasta", "padrasto") have a derogatory meaning, associated with "unkind people", so we found alternative words. Also, questions about media use in children's bedrooms (or 'own rooms') did not fit the reality of children of very low SES. Last, the designation of the place where the child lives and play outdoors may also be ambiguous in different cultures. In Portugal, a large number of children live in flats and don't have access to private gardens. The experience of playing outdoors is mostly associated with public spaces. Houses with private gardens are mostly associated with high SES, and they are called "vivendas". However, a child who lives in an illegal house self-made by their parents (in a slum, for instance) may use the word "vivenda" to describe the place where he/she lives. In a survey that named different kinds of places to live, children's answers showed that their naming of those places is appropriated in their own socio-cultural terms.

(José Alberto Simões, Portugal)

# IV. Approaches to data analysis

## FAQ 31: What are some good approaches to analysing qualitative data?

### *What's the issue?*

A vital element in successful qualitative data analysis is to respect the difference between qualitative and quantitative research. The difference between qualitative and quantitative research is, as Strauss (Strauss, 1987) puts it, not the least in how data are treated analytically.

### *Common practice*

A common way to approach qualitative data analysis is the construction of themes. Sometimes these themes have already been decided when designing the study or if the data collection is structured around these predefined themes. In other cases the themes are constructed afterwards.

When themes are not constructed beforehand it is however usual that the data analysis actually starts before the data collection is over and often data collection and data analysis are conducted in parallel, the preliminary analysis being used to decide which areas should be examined in more detail.

Coding is an important part of the qualitative data analysis and is the process of grouping interviewees' responses into categories that bring together the similar ideas, concepts, or themes that have been discovered.

The analysis of qualitative data usually involves the selection of quotes to support the presentation of the findings. Frequently such quotes are anonymous but, if the interviewee is identified, it is common practice to let him or her see the quote and the context (the surrounding text).

### *Pitfalls to avoid*

- The issue of confidentiality: It is important to respect the privacy of the interviewees and make sure that whatever information they give to you as a researcher does not backfire on them in any way. This is extremely important when working with data from children. Therefore you should have the data under good control.
  - Do not leave transcripts, pictures, videotapes or whatever you are working with lying about in public.
  - Do not make unnecessary copies and keep good track of the location of all copies (in both electronic and other formats).
  - Do not hand your material to anyone without going over the handling procedures.
- The status issue: Despite the fact that qualitative research has a long history within the social sciences, it is still quite common to see a tendency to impose the ideas of quantitative analysis on qualitative data. An example of this is when increasing the number of interviews or focus groups is thought to improve the generalisability of the findings. If generalisability is what you want, use quantitative methods.
- The issue of qualitative data analysis as common sense: Everyone engages in some form of qualitative analysis in daily life. This leads some people to the erroneous conclusion that no special training is needed to analyse qualitative data except good common sense. Hopefully, though, the vastly increased use of qualitative techniques in marketing research in recent years has done much to correct these misunderstandings.
- The issue of condensation: Invariably, qualitative data analysis is a process of condensation in which a vast amount of data has to be condensed in a meaningful way both theoretically and generally. This relates to at least three different problems:
  - Drifting, which means that the results are poorly rooted in the original data.
  - Dumping, which means that the results are simply not based on the data and at best present an oversimplified picture.
  - Data drowning, which means that too much data has been collected and the researcher fails to get any meaningful grip on the data.



### **Questions to consider**

When designing a qualitative study it is worthwhile to think thoroughly about how the data is to be analysed. Good planning can save a lot of time and energy and, as a rule of thumb, the looser the structure is at the data collection stage, the more time one can expect to spend on the data analysis.

The use of software for qualitative data analysis has increased rapidly over the past years. Researchers are however not quite agreed on whether it improves the quality of the analysis.

### **Further resources**

Grbich, C. (2007). *Qualitative Data Analysis: In Introduction*. London: Sage.

Silverman, D. (2006). *Interpreting Qualitative Data: Methods for Analysing Talk, Text and Interaction* (3rd ed.). London: Sage.

Tesch, R. (1990). *Qualitative research: analysis types and software tools*. London: Falmer.

### **Good practice**

In a study on Chilean adolescents the method of parallel data collection and data analysis was used. During the interviewing phase and after completing each interview (and then again after finishing a larger group of interviews) the data was scrutinised to decide which areas should be examined in more detail. This preliminary analysis was useful to redesign the subsequent interviews and to focus on central themes such as the importance and popularity of instant messaging.

(Veronica Donoso, Belgium)

## FAQ 32: What are some good approaches to analysing quantitative data?

### *What's the issue?*

The same general principles apply to the analysis of quantitative data in all studies no matter whether they include children or adults. Basically the aim of any data analysis is to discover patterns and themes in the data and when the data is of a quantitative nature certain skills are required. With the development of computer programmes for statistical analysis it has become quite easy to perform very complicated analysis, which has opened up a lot of opportunities for researchers. This, however, creates at least two potential problems. The first is that computers do not question whether it is sensible at all to perform the calculations which they are used for – one simply gets results. The second potential problem is that not many people understand complicated statistical analysis. Based on this it is possible to give the following crude but simple advice. First, make sure you know what you are doing and second, aim for analysis which your audience will understand.

### *Common practice*

Based on discussion from Newton and Rudestam (Newton & Rudestam, 1999), it is possible to set the following ten rules for successful analysis of quantitative data.

- Get comfortable with your data. As the data is the raw material on which the results are to be built the data files have to be handled with care.
- Thoroughly explore your data, twice. It is easy to make errors when handling the data (recoding or computing) and doing the analysis.
- Use graphics to display your results. A visual representation of data can reveal the meaning and implications of your study in a way that abstract numbers might conceal.
- Replicate research with new samples and in new settings to ensure the validity of the results.
- Remember the distinction between statistical significance and substantive significance.
- Remember the distinction between statistical significance and effect size.
- Do not expect statistics to speak for themselves. It is not enough to fill endless pages with tables and graphs. The goal of data analysis is to present an organised argument that supports or does not support a particular position.
- Keep it simple when possible. Complex statistics can lead to confusion.
- Consult with other researchers. No one is an expert in all areas and discussing your findings with colleagues is likely to sharpen your arguments and help detect errors.
- Do not expect your research to be perfect. Research is often more complicated and more difficult than expected, while effects tend to be weaker and the results more controversial.

### *Pitfalls to avoid*

Do not conduct analysis under time pressure as this is one of the worst enemies of good data analysis. Handling quantitative data requires care and attention.

Resist the temptation to present too much raw data, try to make a focused analysis of all the questions from a survey.

Do not ignore the concept of statistical power when analysing quantitative data.

Do not speak above the level of your audience. If percentages and crosstabulation is what the audience is looking for it should not be presented with structural equations models.

Do not oversimplify things.

Do not make claims which are outside the scope of your data.

### **Questions to consider**

As with qualitative data some of the most important questions to consider regarding the data analysis have to be dealt with already when designing the study. A focused data collection will usually make life a lot easier when it comes to the data analysis stage.

### **Further resources**

Hartwig, F., & Dearing, B. E. (1979). *Exploratory Data Analysis, Sage University Paper series on Quantitative Applications in the Social Sciences* (Vol. Series no. 07-016).

Pallant, J. (2005). *SPSS Survival Manual*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

### **A researcher's mistake**

Sometimes research is conducted under time pressure and that increases significantly the possibility of errors in the findings. One example of how time pressure and undue caution can lead to mistakes is when I was working on a database which included amongst other things, information on children's leisure activities. When making a variable that was supposed to classify the kids into two groups those active in sports and those who were not active I failed to remember that many children engage in more than one sport and thus classified those who participated in two or three sports activities as being not active in stead of active. This error was then discovered two years later when the data was looked at again in another study.

(Kjartan Olafsson, Iceland)

## FAQ 33: How do I bring qualitative and quantitative data together?

### *What's the issue?*

Qualitative and quantitative methods have different strengths and different weaknesses. The qualitative part (if it is exploratory) can be seen as the phase to generate the hypotheses and theory, which could be verified later on in a quantitative (confirmatory) section of the study. The quantitative part could be used for generalisation of qualitative findings (Lobe, 2008). For example, the strength of quantitative data lies in answering questions like how many kids use the internet and are kids who use the internet a more or less likely to read a lot of books. Whereas the strength of qualitative methods lies in answering questions like what does internet mean for kids. As Patton (1990: 132) suggested, 'qualitative data can put flesh on the bones of quantitative results, bringing results to life through in-depth case elaboration'.

### *Common practice*

Researchers often use qualitative and quantitative material to complement each other. Sometimes a qualitative study is conducted to follow up on findings from quantitative data and help us to understand what the figures actually mean. Sometimes a quantitative study is conducted to follow up on findings from qualitative data. A third way is to design a study where qualitative and quantitative data are collected and analysed at the same time.

Results from one method can be extended or triangulated by using another method. The prevalent use of quantitative data is to focus inquiry on a discrete set of variables to test specific hypothesis or research question. In contrast, the prevalent use of qualitative data is to open the study through presenting the large, interconnected complexities of a situation. Thus, each type of data has advantages and can extend, in certain ways, our understanding of a researchable problem. This occurs when the researcher sequences the two types of methods, either qualitative first as exploratory, followed by quantitative as explanatory, or vice versa.

Furthermore, many researchers begin the qualitative part first if the problem has not been explored much in the literature. In this case, the researcher develops quantitative measures from a qualitative data because measures are not currently available, existing measures do not represent populations being studied, or the topic has not been explored much by others (Creswell, 1999: 460). However, if the mere goal of combined use of qualitative and quantitative data is the mutual validation and convergence of the result arising from different methods, that imposes the independent and concurrent employment of measurement operations throughout the study, aimed at testing the same hypothesis or answering the same part of a research question (Lobe, 2008).

### *Pitfalls to avoid*

- It is necessary to stress that using both types of data is not ultimately preferred to any other form of research, such as solely quantitative or solely qualitative. Including more methods does not necessarily lead to better or more valid data. It usually involves more than twice as much work, particularly if the researcher's goal is not just to use each separate method effectively but also combine them effectively. Each researcher should consider the purposes of their study (Lobe et al., 2007).
- A common pitfall is when researchers base their choice of research method not on the research subject and the nature of the questions they wish to answer but just use whatever method they are most used to or whatever method their research tradition dictates them to use (e.g. positivism – surveys, constructivism – in-depth interviews).
- The concept of triangulations is often misguidedly used as a synonym for the concept of mixed methods research. It is useful to bear in mind that triangulation is only one of the possible designs and reasons for combining qualitative and quantitative methods and data.
- Data should never be regarded as 'true' and 'false' since differences between various sets of data might be as significant and revealing as similarities.

### Questions to consider

- Does the research question require being answered by both types of data?
- What is the rationale for combining both types of data?
- Do we want to enhance and elaborate results from one method with results from the other? Or is it our aim to increase the validity of our study by using more than one set of data in order to get convergent findings?
- What kind of mixed methods design will we use? Will we start first with a qualitative or a quantitative part?
- Which part will be a dominant one in the study? Are both given equal emphasis?
- How do we want to present our findings?

### Further resources

Lobe, B. (2008). *Integration of Online Research Methods. Information Technology/Social Informatics collection*. Faculty of Social Sciences Press.

Fielding, N. G. & Fielding, J. L. (1986). *Linking data*. Beverly Hills: Sage.

Creswell, J. W. (2008). *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

## FAQ 34: How do I compare data from parents and children?

### *What's the issue?*

Many studies have shown that there is not always coherence in answers from parents and children when asked about the same issues. For example parents might say that they monitor closely what their children do online, while the children might say that they are not closely monitored by their parents.

### *Common practice*

To collect data from both parents (or adults, such as teachers) and children is not uncommon in studies where the focus is on children's behaviour. It is possible to combine information from parents and children in various ways but these might be seen as the main alternatives:

- Parent as only informant (proxy)
- Parent as main informant and child as supplementary informant
- Parent as main informant and child as main informant
- Child as main informant and parent as supplementary informant
- Child as only informant

All these approaches have their advantages as well as shortcomings. There is a twofold advantage of comparing data from parents and children. Firstly it enables cross validation of information on children's behaviour as adults are often more precise when it comes to measuring time use (especially for younger children). Secondly the difference in answers from parents and children is an interesting concept of study in itself.

### *Pitfalls to avoid*

There are some issues linked to this kind of data. The comparison between the groups can of course be made on the aggregate level (looking at children as a group and the parents as a group). It is however not safe to assume directly that differences or similarities on the aggregate level hold true on the individual level. If for example a study reveals that a certain proportion of children do certain things on the internet and at the same time a considerably lower proportion of parents think that their children do these particular things this does not allow us to assume that parents do not know what their children do on the internet.

An example of the difficulty in generalizing from the aggregate level to the individual level is that if a proportion of teenagers in 34 countries who have had sexual intercourse is compared to the proportion of teenagers who have been drunk at least twice a very weak relationship is found between the use of alcohol and the likelihood of having had sexual intercourse. In line with that Icelandic children hold the sixth place for likelihood of having had sexual intercourse and 22<sup>nd</sup> place for the proportion of 15 year olds who have been drunk at least twice. When the same question is analysed on the individual level, however, for children in Iceland 14% of teenagers who have never been drunk have had sexual intercourse compared to 83% of those who have been drunk 20 times or more.

### *Questions to consider*

Ideally, data from parents and children should be linked on the individual level. This however complicates the research design and (depending on countries) calls for informed consent to be obtained from both the parents and the children which in turn is likely to lower the response rate considerably.

As a general rule the younger the children the more common it is to rely on parents or other adults as informants. This of course calls for some considerations on the validity and reliability of the information obtained. As a rule of thumb it is easier to obtain accurate information on behaviour (if they use the internet for example and for how long) but attitudes are more difficult to assess.

When children are asked to give information on their parents it is sometimes possible to cross validate their information with comparison to other studies. An example of this is parent's occupation or educational level or parent's use of the internet.

### ***Further resources***

The SAFT (Safety Awareness Facts and Tools) Project. *SAFT 2006 Parent and Children survey. 2004-2006*. Norwegian Action Plan for Children, Youth and the Internet and the European Commission Safer Internet Action Plan: Norwegian Media Authority.

UK Children Go Online Project. *UK Children Go Online: Emerging Opportunities and Dangers*. London: London School of Economics and Political Science. Project website: <http://www.children-go-online.net>

### ***Example of good practice***

Examples of comparison on the aggregate level are some of the studies conducted as a part of the SAFT project. In these studies, parents as a group and children as a group have been surveyed separately.

An example of a study where comparison is made on the individual level is UK Children go Online which, for example (Livingstone & Helsper, in press), examined parental regulation of children and teenagers' online activities with answers matched on the individual level.

# V. Reporting the findings

## FAQ 35: How do I report my qualitative data?

### *What's the issue?*

In the end there is not all that much difference between reporting quantitative and qualitative data – the main issue is to present the findings of a study in such a way that those who wish to use them can understand what has been done and what the results are.

### *Common practice*

Qualitative data analysis is often constructed around themes and so is the reporting. To support the analysis it is common to include direct quotes from for example interviews.

By the final stages of qualitative data analysis it is advisable to organise the data so that general themes can be formulated. It is also important to refine concepts, and link them together in order to create a clear description or explanation of your main theme under study. The individual concepts and themes that you may have found should be put together to build an integrated explanation, which should then be interpreted in the light of the literature and the theories presented in your theoretical framework. This process will allow you to emerge with some over-arching themes that can be helpful in tying the individual pieces of your data together (Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

Keep in mind that representing qualitative findings as comprehensively as they deserve is challenging. In particular, in searching for the most economical examples to present, one can easily be tempted to choose the most vivid, striking, noticeable examples but which do not necessarily represent the typicality of the phenomenon being examined. Practical limitations may also result in the presentation of de-contextualised, fragmented data, rather than an integral part of the presentation (Livingstone & Lemish, 2001).

Finally, invite your readers to critically judge your work by cross-examining your interpretations. After all, texts are not only “freely interpreted but [are] also cooperatively generated by the addressee” (Eco, 1995: 3).

### *Pitfalls to avoid*

Kvale (1996: 253-268) gives some general points to improving qualitative reports.

- Avoid boring reports. Research should always carry a story which someone might care about.
- Tiresome findings (quoting interviewees at great lengths)
- Method as a black box (insufficient information given about the research design and the methods used).
- Focusing the research and the analysis towards the final report
- Writing for the readers – a research report should contain all the necessary information.
- Think thoroughly about possible ethical issues
- Avoid too long reports. Quantity seems to be a persistent problem for qualitative researchers who seem to feel that the sheer number of pages will justify their studies not having quantitative data.

### *Questions to consider*

Common questions which readers want qualitative reports to cover include the following:

- Design: How were subjects selected?
- Research situation: What information was given to the participants beforehand, for example?
- Transcription: How thorough was the transcription and what instructions were given to the transcribers?
- Analysis: How was the analysis constructed, was it based on a personal intuitive interpretation or were some formal procedures applied?
- Verification: Which measures were taken to ensure the validity of the findings?



### **Further resources**

- Silverman, D. (2006). *Interpreting Qualitative Data: Methods for Analysing Talk, Text and Interaction* (3rd ed.). London: Sage.
- Eco, U. (1995). *The Role of the Reader. Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Lindlof, T. R. (1995). *Qualitative Communication Research Methods*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Livingstone, S. and Lemish, D. (2001). Comparative Research with Children. *Children and Their Changing Media Environment. A European comparative study*. NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.
- Rubin, H., & Rubin, I. (1995). *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of hearing Data*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

## FAQ 36: How do I report my quantitative data?

### *What's the issue?*

As Abelson (1995: 2) put it, quantitative data analysis should “make an interesting claim; it should tell a story that an informed audience will care about and it should do so by intelligent interpretation of appropriate evidence”. No matter how appropriate the research design, how thorough the interviews, how proper the statistical analysis, how representative the sample, how carefully crafted the questionnaire or the questions, how stringent the quality control on the data collection process, in the end the real value of a research project depends on how it manages to communicate the results to those that can use them.

### *Common practice*

- A research report should give a thorough overview of how the research was conducted and what the results are.
- Use graphics to display your results. A visual representation of data can reveal the meaning and implications of your study in a way that abstract numbers might conceal.
- Remember the distinction between statistical significance and substantive significance.
- Remember the distinction between statistical significance and effect size.
- Do not expect statistics to speak for themselves. It is not enough to fill endless pages with tables and graphs.
- Keep it simple when possible. Complex statistics can lead to confusion.
- Resist the temptation to present too much raw data, try to make a focused analysis – even if a question was put into a questionnaire it does not necessarily have to appear in the report.

### *Pitfalls to avoid*

Many will undoubtedly have heard the phrase (quoted from Disraeli) that there are three kind of lies: Lies, damned lies and statistics; used in the meaning that statistics can be used to confuse, distract and even change the truth. This is of course true up to a point. But it is also necessary to keep in mind that it is not the statistics that lie but rather it is the researchers who consciously or unconsciously provide statistical information which is confusing, misleading or even wrong.

### *Questions to consider*

As a rule of thumb any argument based on quantitative data has to contain information on five important dimensions (Abelson, 1995: 11-13):

- Magnitude, how big is the difference and how strong is the correlation?
- Articulation, what precisely is it that we have found?
- Generality, to what extent are the findings applicable to other people in other situations?
- Interestingness, how relevant are the findings and should anybody be interested?
- Credibility, are the findings methodologically and theoretically sound?

### *Further resources*

Byrne, D. (2002). *Interpreting Quantitative Data*. London: Sage

### **Example of good practice**

The Pew Internet and American Life Project has conducted a series of surveys of American teens on different aspects of their internet use. In each case, they provide a clear and succinct statement of the exact sampling frame used, in order that percentages reported can be accurately interpreted. For example, on the first main page of their 2007 report on teens' use of social networking sites, and in addition to a detailed appendix on methodology, they state:

*"This Pew Internet & American Life Project report is based on the findings of a nationally representative telephone survey of American teens and a parent or guardian. All numerical data were gathered through telephone interviews conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates between October 23, and November 19, 2006 among a sample of 935 teens ages 12-17 and a parent or guardian. For results based on the total sample, one can say with 95% confidence that the error attributable to sampling and other random effects is +/- 3%. For results based [on] teen internet users (n=886), the margin of sampling error is +/- 4%."*

Through this statement, they seek to minimise the likelihood of some common misunderstandings made when interpreting survey findings. Pew strives for further clarity by adding the following subscript to every reported table in the findings: "Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project Parents and Teens Survey, October-November 2006. Based on online teens who use the internet from home. Margin of error for the overall sample is  $\pm 4\%$ ." Although it can be difficult to ensure that such information is also reported in a press release and, especially, in press reports of research findings, researchers should strive to ensure that their findings are accurately reported.

(Sonia Livingstone, UK)

## FAQ 37: How shall I compare my findings with research by others?

### *What's the issue?*

It is indeed very important to compare individual findings with research done by others. Replication is a key element when it comes to generalisation and the claim that certain research findings are applicable in other populations than those sampled for a particular research.

### *Common practice*

Research findings are always interpreted in the context of some prior knowledge or assumptions which sometimes is based on research and sometimes not. A single study is never so influential that it eliminates all argument. Therefore replication is crucial. After all, if the result of a study is contrary to prior beliefs there will most likely be strong holders of those prior beliefs who will defend their position.

To facilitate comparison between studies many researchers strive for compatibility in methods and research design. This applies, for example, to sampling and measurement.

### *Pitfalls to avoid*

Not noting what others have done leads to confusion in concepts, using different questions from one survey to another, asking about similar things in different manners etc.

The research world is much too full of isolated studies which yielded significant results with idiosyncratic samples under particular circumstances.

### *Questions to consider*

In the field of media studies there is a long tradition of focusing on new media and a notorious lack of longitudinal or long term research. A thorough overview of studies on children's use of online media in 18 European countries between 1999 and 2006 for example found only two examples of a longitudinal study (Staksrud et al., 2007)

## FAQ 38: How can I ensure my findings are not misunderstood?

### *What's the issue?*

It is of course very difficult to ensure that findings are not misunderstood. The danger of this happening is however not so much when communicating with other researchers as the scientific community has standard procedures for evaluation of research findings. The aim of scientific reporting is to inform other researchers and the general public of the research findings and also of their trustworthiness. It is first and foremost when communicating results to the general public that things can go wrong.

### *Common practice*

It has perhaps never been so easy to publish material both in print or electronic but at the same time it is increasingly difficult to be heard, so to say, in the ever growing chorus calling for attention in the public sphere (McNair, 2006). It is however possible to take various steps that can improve the likelihood that your messages are heard and also that it is not misinterpreted. If a report is made some basic rules of thumb apply:

- Try to be clear and concise when presenting results – do not leave it to the readers of a report to draw their own conclusions
- Remember that numbers do not speak for themselves. Try to put things into perspective as much as possible
- Try to avoid technical terms when writing summaries and main conclusions.
- Use graphics if possible.

### *Pitfalls to avoid*

When giving interviews to media try to focus on main points and remember that the journalist needs a headline so try to provide one (otherwise the journalists will have to find one themselves).

Often a distinction is made between pure and applied research. This distinction is in many ways misleading and particularly in the case of research whose focus is on children and their experiences on the internet. Researchers are thus advised that their research results, no matter how theoretically pure they are intended to be, might be used as a basis for decision making or policy development.

### *Questions to consider*

When communicating with the news media the following should also be kept in mind:

- What is the audience of the report? Academic, researchers, NGOs, children, parents... Depending on the target audience, the idiom will differ.
- Ask yourself what is newsworthy about the findings and how it is possible to connect the findings to the wider social context. By sharpening the focus of the story before contacting the media you increase the likelihood that it will be reported at all and also that it will be reported in the way you want it to be.
- Ask yourself who is likely to be interested in the findings and why. This will enable you to focus the findings more directly at the target group.
- Choose the appropriate media for the findings you wish to present. Once it has been established what the message is and to whom it should be directed the next issue is who should deliver it. Television is different from a broadsheet paper, which in turn is different from a tabloid paper and so on.
- Consider the practices at the media outlet and plan when to contact the reporters or editors so that they will have time to get to know your story without being under too much pressure from their next deadline.
- Provide reporters with a written memo or press release containing the most important information. Such a memo needs to clarify the main points and begin with the most outstanding ones.
- Provide the media with access to a contact person who can give further information or participate in an interview. Also provide a quotation in the memo so that the reporter does not need to gather everything from scratch.

### ***Further resources***

See: <http://www.eukidsonline.net/> for examples of newsletters

### ***Example of good practice***

The University of New Hampshire findings on children's exposure to online risk have been sufficiently misrepresented for them to issue a statement to the press outlining both good reporting of complex statistics and poor reporting, following a 'Do say' and 'Don't say' format. Headed 'Internet Safety Education for Teens: Getting It Right', they note that 'A growing number of people are promoting Internet safety education in an effort to help keep youngsters safe from Internet sex offenders. But some of the information in their lectures, pamphlets, videos, and web sites does not reflect what researchers have learned about the important features of these crimes. Here are suggestions of how to make Internet safety education materials more consistent with current research.'

See [http://www.unh.edu/ccrc/internet-crimes/Internet%20Factsheet\\_portrait%20version\\_2-6-08\\_khf.pdf](http://www.unh.edu/ccrc/internet-crimes/Internet%20Factsheet_portrait%20version_2-6-08_khf.pdf) for their specific recommendations regarding research reporting.

## FAQ 39: Should I give feedback on the findings to my interviewees?

### *What's the issue?*

It is essential to show respect for those who participate in research projects. This applies not only to interviewees but also to people who participate indirectly like parents and teachers. In all cases it is important to show all individuals who participate in a research project that their contribution is valued. Feedback on the findings is one part of this.

### *Common practice*

When a study has been conducted and the results are ready it is good practice to let those who contributed in some way know that the results are out and where they can be found. For example if a school has provided access to its students the headmaster would receive a letter of gratitude and a copy of the research report.

As a general rule, the more you ask of the participant the more you have to show him or her that you value the contribution. In line with that it is more common to see researchers seek feedback or approval from interviewees in qualitative research but relatively uncommon in quantitative research.

In qualitative studies it is good practice to ask for feedback from individuals that are quoted directly in a research report and individuals should not be quoted by name unless they have given their permission.

### *Pitfalls to avoid*

When asking for feedback from interviewees it is important to think that process through so that it is done within a clear frame.

- What kind of feedback is wanted?
- What is to be done with the feedback?
- Will the research results be changed if interviewees think the interpretation is misleading or incorrect?
- If an interviewee is unhappy with an anonymous quote from him and her and wants it to be dropped even if it is exactly what he or she said?

### *Questions to consider*

A special issue when conducting research on children is that research findings inevitably are adult interpretations of the reality of children. In that respect it can be very relevant to seek feedback from children on the research findings but then again scientific work often uses language and concepts which might be difficult for children to understand.

If it is decided to seek feedback from interviewees it is worth to think carefully about the process as it would sometimes be difficult to get feedback without letting others (parents or teachers) see their answers. A letter addressed to a teenager might for example be opened by a parent.

### *Further resources*

See: <http://www.hbsc.org/> as an example of a website which gives access to survey findings. Also <http://www.hbsc.is/> as an example on the national level where schools could get access to reports tailored to the interests of teachers and headmasters.

### *Researchers' experiences*

In Iceland schools have in recent years become increasingly resistant to surveys. The reason is that due to the relatively small population it has become customary to survey whole cohorts as there are only about 3.500 children in each cohort. But it requires a lot of work on behalf of the schools to administer the questionnaires and therefore it is important that the teachers and headmasters can see that their efforts lead to meaningful results. This has encouraged some researchers to send the schools summary reports of findings.

Another example of this kind is the TIRO research project in Belgium where the same reluctance of schools (in particular in the bigger cities) to participate in surveys has been encountered. The schools that agreed to cooperate were invited to the Safer Internet Day Happenings and received an executive summary of the findings.

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# Annex A: EU Kids Online

## European Research on Children's Safe Use of the Internet and New Media. See [www.eukidsonline.net](http://www.eukidsonline.net)

EU Kids Online is a thematic network examining European research on cultural, contextual and risk issues in children's safe use of the internet and new media between 2006 and 2009. It focuses on the intersection of three domains:

- Children (mainly up to 18 years old), their families, domestic users
- Online technologies, especially the internet; focussing on use and risk issues
- European, cross-national, empirical research and policy

This network is not funded to conduct new empirical research but rather to identify, compare and draw conclusions from existing and ongoing research across Europe.

It is funded by the European Commission's *Safer Internet plus Programme* (see [http://europa.eu.int/information\\_society/activities/sip/index\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu.int/information_society/activities/sip/index_en.htm)) and coordinated by the Department of Media and Communications at the London School of Economics, guided by an International Advisory Board and liaison with national policy/NGO advisors.

EU Kids Online includes research teams in 21 member states, selected to span diversity in countries, academic disciplines and expertise: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, The Netherlands and The United Kingdom.

The objectives, to be achieved via seven work packages, are:

- To identify and evaluate available data on children's and families' use of the internet and new online technologies, noting gaps in the evidence base (WP1)
- To understand the research in context and inform the research agenda (WP2)
- To compare findings across diverse European countries, so as to identify risks and safety concerns, their distribution, significance and consequences (WP3)
- To understand these risks in the context of the changing media environment, cultural contexts of childhood and family, and regulatory/policy contexts (WP2&3)
- To enhance the understanding of methodological issues and challenges involved in studying children, online technologies, and cross-national comparisons (WP4)
- To develop evidence-based policy recommendations for awareness-raising, media literacy and other actions to promote safer use of the internet/online technologies (WP5)
- To network researchers across Europe to share and compare data, findings, theory, disciplines and methodological approaches (WP1-7)

Main outputs are available or planned as follows:

- *Data Repository*: a public, searchable resource for empirical research (now online)
- *Report on Data Availability*: a mapping of what is known and not known (Sept 2007)
- *Preliminary Report Comparing Three Countries* (Sept 2007)
- *Methodological Issues Review* (Sept 2007)
- *Report on Cross-National Comparisons over 18 Countries* (Sept 2008)
- *Best Practice Research Guide* (Sept 2008)
- *Report: Cross-Cultural Contexts of Research* (March 2009)
- *Final Conference* (June 2009)
- *Report: Summary and Recommendations* (June 2009)
- *Final Report and Book* (Sept 2009)

## Annex B: EU Kids Online members

Country	Institution	Researchers
Austria	University of Salzburg	Ingrid Paus-Hasebrink
		Christina Ortner
		Manfred Rathmoser
		Christine Wijnen
Belgium	Catholic University of Leuven	Leen D'Haenens
		Verónica Donoso
		Bieke Zaman
	Free University of Brussels	Nico Carpentier
		Katia Segers
		Joke Bauwens
Bulgaria	GERT	Jivka Marinova
		Mariya Gencheva
		Maria Dimitrova
		Iliana Dimitrova
	Internet Rights Bulgaria Foundation	Christina Haralanova
Cyprus	Cyprus Neuroscience and Technology Institute	Yiannis Laouris
		Tatjana Taraszow
		Elena Aristodemou
Czech Republic	Masaryk University, Brno	Vaclav Stetka
		Jan Miessler
Denmark	IT University, Copenhagen	Gitte Stald
		Jeppe Jensen
Estonia	University of Tartu	Veronika Kalmus
		Pille Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt
		Andra Siibak
		Pille Runnel
		Kadri Ugur
France	France Telecom	Benoit LeLong
		Cédric Fluckiger
Germany	Hans Bredow Institute For Media Research	Uwe Hasebrink
		Claudia Lampert
Greece	London School of Economics	Liza Tsaliki
		Despina Chronaki
		Valia Papadimitraki
Iceland	University of Iceland	Thorbjorn Broddason
		Gudberg K. Jonsson
	University of Akureyri Research Institute	Kjartan Olafsson
Ireland	Dublin Institute of Technology	Brian O'Neill
		Helen McQuillan
	National Centre for Technology in Education	Simon Grehan
Italy	Catholic University of Milan	Fausto Colombo
		Piermarco Aroldi
		Barbara Scifo
		Giovanna Mascheroni
		Maria Francesca Murru
Norway	Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim	Ingunn Hagen
		Thomas Wold
	Norwegian Media Authority	Elisabeth Staksrud
	SINTEF, Oslo	Petter Bae Brandtzæg
Poland	Warsaw School of Social Psychology	Wiesław Godzic

		Lucyna Kirwil
		Barbara Giza
		Tomasz Łysakowski
Portugal	New University of Lisbon	Cristina Ponte
		Cátia Candeias
		Nelson Vieira
		Sofia Viseu
		Ema Sofia Leitão
		José Alberto Simões
		Lisbon University
Slovenia	University of Ljubljana	Bojana Lobe
		Alenka Zavbi
Spain	The University of the Basque Country	Carmelo Garitaonandia
		Maialen Garmendia
		Gemma Martinez
Sweden	University of Gothenburg	Cecilia von Feilitzen
The Netherlands	The Netherlands Institute of Social Research	Jos de Haan
		Marion Duimel
	University of Amsterdam	Patti Valkenburg
The UK	London School of Economics and Political Science	Sonia Livingstone
		Leslie Haddon
		Panayiota Tsatsou

## Annex C: Good practice resources

All the materials listed below have been judged of value to future researchers. They are freely available online at [www.eukidsonline](http://www.eukidsonline), having been posted ('here') with permission

Project title	Authors/Institution	Materials available
Adolescents and the Internet: implications for home, school and social life (Chile, 2007).	Donoso, Veronica / Katholieke Universiteit, Leuven, Belgium	Survey questionnaire (Spanish) available <a href="#">here</a> Interview schedule (in English) available <a href="#">here</a>
Audit of Internet Safety Practices in English Schools (2002). UK	Jocelyn Wishart, Naomi Dungworth & Debbi Smith / Becta & Loughborough University	Survey questionnaires (English) available from <a href="http://partners.becta.org.uk/index.php?section=rh&amp;catcode=re_rp_02_a&amp;rid=13607">http://partners.becta.org.uk/index.php?section=rh&amp;catcode=re_rp_02_a&amp;rid=13607</a>
Börn og sjónvarp á Íslandi 2003 [Children and television in Iceland 2003]	Þorbjörn Broddason	Survey questionnaire (Icelandic) available <a href="#">here</a>
Estudo de Recepcao dos Meos De Comunicacao Social Portugueses (Children as special audience/ Audience reception of Portuguese media (2008)	Cristina Ponte (FCSH-UNL) & Maria João Malho (IAC)/ISCTE and the Communication Regulatory Authority (ERC)	Self-administered survey questionnaire (Portuguese) for children available <a href="#">here</a> and for parents available <a href="#">here</a>
Children, Young People and New Media in the Home (2002-06). USA	Leslie Regan Shade / Concordia University	Interview schedule (English) available from <a href="http://artsandscience1.concordia.ca/comm/shade/participants2.html">http://artsandscience1.concordia.ca/comm/shade/participants2.html</a>
Children's Chat on the Net: A study of social encounters in two Norwegian chat rooms. (2003)	Vebjorg Tingstad / Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU)	Interview schedule (Norwegian) available <a href="#">here</a>
CyberEthics	Tatjana Taraszow, Elena Aristodemou, & Aysu Arsoy / Cyprus Neuroscience & Technology Institute (CNTI) / Future Worlds Center (FWC)	Survey questionnaires in English, Greek, and Turkish for young children, teenagers, parents, and educators available from <a href="http://www.cyberethics.info">http://www.cyberethics.info</a> (top links to 'children', 'teens', 'parents' and 'teachers')
Cyberbullying Report (2005). UK	Peter Smith, Jess Mahdavi, Manuel Carvalho & Neil Tippett / Anti-Bullying Alliance	Self-administered survey questionnaire (English) available from <a href="http://www.anti-bullyingalliance.org.uk/downloads/pdf/cyberbullyingreportfinal230106.pdf">www.anti-bullyingalliance.org.uk/downloads/pdf/cyberbullyingreportfinal230106.pdf</a>
Digital Beginnings: Young Children's Use of Popular Culture, Media and New Technologies (2005). UK	Jackie Marsh, Greg Brooks, Jane Hughes, Louise Ritchie, Samuel Roberts & Katy Wright / The University of Sheffield	Survey questionnaire for practitioners (English) available from <a href="http://www.digitalbeginnings.shef.ac.uk/documents/research-docs/qnaire-practitioners.pdf">www.digitalbeginnings.shef.ac.uk/documents/research-docs/qnaire-practitioners.pdf</a>
ESPAD á Íslandi 2007 [ESPAD Iceland 2007]	Thoroddur Bjarnason, University of Akureyri	Survey questionnaire (Icelandic) available <a href="#">here</a>
Eurobarometer on E-Communications Household Survey (2007)	EC Safer Internet Programme	Focus group schedule available (English) from <a href="http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb_special_en.htm">http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb_special_en.htm</a> or <a href="http://www.epractice.eu/document/3178">http://www.epractice.eu/document/3178</a> (Annex 1)
Eurobarometer on Safer Internet for Children: qualitative study 2007	EC Safer Internet Programme	Focus group schedule (English) available from <a href="http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/activities/sip/eurobarometer/index_en.htm">http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/activities/sip/eurobarometer/index_en.htm</a>
Eurobarometer on Safer Internet for Children: quantitative study 2005	EC Safer Internet Programme	Survey questionnaire (English) available from <a href="http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/activities/sip/eurobarometer/index_en.htm">http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/activities/sip/eurobarometer/index_en.htm</a>
Growing Up With a Mobile Phone – Learning from the Experiences of Some Children in the UK (2007)	Leslie Haddon & Jane Vincent / Vodafone	Interview schedule (English) available <a href="#">here</a> and focus group schedule (English) available <a href="#">here</a>
Identity construction and 'social networking': An ethnographic study of the mobile phone ownership practices & usage patterns of teenagers in Cyprus	John C. Mavris / Foxit Software Company	Interview schedule (English) available <a href="#">here</a>

(2005)		
“Jogo da Televisão” – Survey on children’s use of television (1993). Portugal	José Alberto Simões, Pedro Nunes, Ricardo Campos/ Universidade Nova de Lisboa	Survey questionnaire (Portuguese) available <a href="#">here</a>
Kids Media @ The New Millennium (1999). USA	Donald Roberts, Ulla Foehr, Victoria Rideout & Mollyann Brodie / Kaiser Family Foundation	In-home and in-school survey questionnaires (English) available from <a href="http://www.kff.org/entmedia/1535-index.cfm">http://www.kff.org/entmedia/1535-index.cfm</a>
Learning with Web 2.0 in Austrian Schools (2007). Austria	Ingrid Paus-Hasebrink, Tanja Jadin & Christine Wijnen / University of Salzburg	Online survey questionnaire (German) available <a href="#">here</a>
MoMU – Mobile Medier, Mobile Unge (Mobile Media, Mobile Youth). Denmark	University of Copenhagen, Denmark	Survey questionnaire (Danish) available <a href="#">here</a> and interview schedule (Danish) available <a href="#">here</a>
Ofcom Media Literacy Audit (2006). UK	Ofcom	Face-to-face survey questionnaire for adults and children (English) available from <a href="http://www.ofcom.org.uk/advice/media_literacy/medlitpub/medlitpubrss/children/">http://www.ofcom.org.uk/advice/media_literacy/medlitpub/medlitpubrss/children/</a> <a href="http://www.ofcom.org.uk/advice/media_literacy/medlitpub/medlitpubrss/medialit_audit/">http://www.ofcom.org.uk/advice/media_literacy/medlitpub/medlitpubrss/medialit_audit/</a>
Parents, Kids, and the Internet 2000. USA	The Pew Internet & American Life Project	Telephone survey questionnaire (English) available from <a href="http://www.pewinternet.org/">http://www.pewinternet.org/</a>
Parents, Kids and the Internet. USA 2001	The Pew Internet & American Life Project	Telephone survey questionnaire (English) available from <a href="http://www.ofcom.org.uk/advice/media_literacy/medlitpub/medlitpubrss/children/">http://www.ofcom.org.uk/advice/media_literacy/medlitpub/medlitpubrss/children/</a>
Parents & Teens 2004 Survey. USA	The Pew Internet & American Life Project	Telephone survey questionnaire (English) available at <a href="http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_Teens_04_Questionnaire.pdf">www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_Teens_04_Questionnaire.pdf</a> <a href="http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/c/6/topics.asp">http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/c/6/topics.asp</a>
Parents & Teens 2006 Survey. USA	Amanda Lenhart & Mary Madden / The Pew Internet & American Life Project	Telephone survey questionnaire (English) available at <a href="http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/225/report_display.asp">http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/225/report_display.asp</a>
SAFT Survey Norway 2006	Elisabeth Staksrud/Norwegian Media Authority and Norwegian Action Plan <i>Children, Youth and the Internet</i>	Pen and paper survey questionnaire (Norwegian) for children available <a href="#">here</a> and for parents available <a href="#">here</a> Pen and paper survey questionnaire (English) for children available <a href="#">here</a> and for parents available <a href="#">here</a>
Student Awareness of the Privacy Implications When Using Facebook	Tabreez Govani & Harriet Pashley / Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, US	Survey questionnaire available (English) from <a href="http://lorrie.cranor.org/courses/fa05/tubzhlp.pdf">http://lorrie.cranor.org/courses/fa05/tubzhlp.pdf</a> (Appendix A)
The Second Youth Internet Safety Survey (YISS) (2005-2006). USA	David Finkelhor / Crimes Against Children Research Center & National Center for Missing and Exploited Children.	Survey questionnaire (English) for parents available <a href="#">here</a> and for children available <a href="#">here</a>
Teens and ICT: Risks and Opportunities (TIRO)	Universite de NAMUR & Federaal Wefenschapsbeleid	Interview schedule available (Dutch) <a href="#">here</a> Survey questionnaires in French <a href="#">here</a> , in Dutch <a href="#">here</a>
The Internet Vocabulary Test for Children: preliminary development (2007)	Genevieve Marie Johnson / Grant MacEwan College, Edmonton, Canada	Scores, vocabulary items, and scoring criteria (English) available <a href="#">here</a>
Wie entdecken Kinder das Internet (How children learn to use the Internet). Germany	Christine Feil, Regina Decker & Christoph Gieger / German Youth Institute & Federal Ministry of Education and Research ( <a href="http://www.vs-verlag.de">www.vs-verlag.de</a> )	The interview schedules for children, parents and teachers (German) available <a href="#">here</a> ([Last section of the paper: Feil, C. & Decker, Regina (2007) <i>Wie entdecken Kinder das Internet? Beobachtungen bei 5- bis 12-jährigen</i> . Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, S. 235-254].
Youth and the Internet (2007). Estonia	Ketlin Beljajev, Veronika Kalmus, Maria Murumaa, Pille Runnel and Andra Siibak / Institute of Journalism & Communication, University of Tartu	Survey questionnaire (Estonian) available <a href="#">here</a>



Young People New Media project (YPNM) (1997). UK	Sonia Livingstone & Moira Bovill / London School of Economics and Political Science	Survey questionnaire (English) for parents available <a href="#">here</a> and for children available <a href="#">here</a>
UK Children Go Online	Sonia Livingstone & Magdalena Bober / London School of Economics and Political Science	Survey questionnaires (English) for parents available <a href="#">here</a> and for children available <a href="#">here</a> . Interview schedules (English) for children available <a href="#">here</a> , for focus groups in 2003 available <a href="#">here</a> and for focus groups in 2004 available <a href="#">here</a> .





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POLITICAL SCIENCE ■

### Contact details

Professor Sonia Livingstone and Dr Leslie Haddon  
Department of Media and Communications  
The London School of Economics and Political Science,  
Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE, UK  
f +44 (0) 20 7955 7248  
e [s.livingstone@lse.ac.uk](mailto:s.livingstone@lse.ac.uk) / [leshaddon@aol.com](mailto:leshaddon@aol.com)

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