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A rationale for positive online content for children

**Article (Published version)
(Refereed)**

Original citation:

Livingstone, Sonia (2008) *A rationale for positive online content for children*. [Communication research trends](#), 28 (3). pp. 12-16.

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Available in LSE Research Online: March 2013

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titasking so that they are exposed to more than 8½ hours of media content (Roberts, Foehr, et al., 2005), we must rethink the relationship between children's media exposure, their well-being, and their rights. The media children consume are as ubiquitous as the air they breathe and the water they drink. Media are arguably the most pervasive and universal environmental health influence of today. They are used by and affect children of all nations, genders, and races; unlike many health influences, neither education nor wealth are protective against the negative effects of media. Children spend more time with and give more attention to media than to school, parents, or any other influence. Children's rights to live in safety and to develop healthily are directly affected by media, often in negative ways. On the other hand, media are powerful tools with which children can access information to help them stay healthy and which they can use to learn, create, and express themselves.

The persuasiveness and power of media, now and in the future, require us to move beyond the

failed, values-based paradigms of the past. Current media rating systems and public discourse have little relationship to what scientific research has revealed to be the effects of media on young people. Given children's near-total immersion in one or more media during their waking hours, it can be argued that we should understand and respond to media as an environmental health influence that is powerful, but neutral in valence. Like the natural environment, there are some elements that can help and other elements that can harm the developing child. It is how media are understood and used that determine the effects of media on a given child. To respect and protect the rights of children, we must bring a compassionate awareness to the effects of the media tools and content that we produce and to which we expose society's youngest members. Ultimately, children have a right to their childhoods—to live in safety, to grow healthily, and to learn, create, and play their way to an understanding of what it means to be human.

A Rationale for Positive Online Content for Children

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A. Maximizing online opportunities is a matter of children's rights

The child/media relationship is an entry point into the wide and multifaceted world of children and their rights—to education, freedom of expression, play, identity, health, dignity and self-respect, protection . . . in every aspect of child rights, in every element of the life of a child, the relationship between children and the media plays a role.

Issued on the 10th anniversary of the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), this statement from UNICEF's Oslo Challenge indeed challenged nations to take forward the media and communication element of the Convention, now ratified by nearly all countries. These elements include children's rights to express their views freely in all matters affecting them (Art. 12), freedom of expression (i.e. to seek, receive, and impart information of all kinds) through any medium of the child's choice (Art. 13), freedom of association and peaceful assembly (Art. 15), protection of privacy (Art. 16), and to mass media that disseminate information and material of social and cultural

benefit to the child, with particular regard to the linguistic needs of minority/indigenous groups and to protection from material injurious to the child's well-being (Art. 17).

Within the broader framework of the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Hamelink (2008) collects under the heading of "communication rights" all those rights (participation and freedom of expression, the egalitarian exchange of ideas, inclusion, and diversity) that relate to information and communication, significantly including children in this communication rights framework. Thus a communication rights framework deliberately counters the assumption that media and communications remain somehow incidental, rather than increasingly central to the infrastructure of a networked, global information society. Even if the mass media were, historically, just an optional part of the leisure sphere, this could not be argued of today's mediated communication, for without this, many forms of political, social, cultural, and educational participation are now all but impossible.

For children, as for adults, a rights framework can point the way ahead without pitting adult (or com-

mercial) freedoms against child protection. Instead, it is more productive to balance children's freedoms against children's protection, for both are encompassed by a children's rights framework. Moreover, as Berlin (1969) argued, freedoms should be understood positively as well as negatively, for "empowerment" is not just free access to any information, but rather means enabling children to do what they can do best—a matter of positive regulation as well as limiting restrictions. So, how can this framework be applied to the Internet, and what could it offer children?

B. A Children's Internet Charter?

The internationally-endorsed though rarely enacted Children's Television Charter, formulated in 1995 (Livingstone, 2007a), proposes a series of principles for television that can, by substitution of terms, be readily extended to the Internet, indeed to media generally. Rephrasing these principles instead as a Children's Internet Charter reads as follows:

(1) Children should have online contents and services of high quality, which are made specifically for them, and which do not exploit them. In addition to entertaining them, these should allow children to develop physically, mentally, and socially to their fullest potential;

(2) Children should hear, see, and express themselves, their culture, their languages, and their life experiences, through online contents and services that affirm their sense of self, community, and place;

(3) Children's online contents and services should promote an awareness and appreciation of other cultures in parallel with the child's own cultural background;

(4) Children's online contents and services should be wide-ranging in genre and content, but should not include gratuitous scenes of violence and sex;

(5) Children's online contents and services should be accessible when and where children are available to engage, and/or distributed via other widely accessible media or technologies;

(6) Sufficient funds must be made available to make these online contents and services to the highest possible standards;

(7) Governments, production, distribution, and funding organizations should recognise both the importance and vulnerability of indigenous online contents and services, and take steps to support and protect it.

In short, a Children's Internet Charter would assert, in advancement of children's communication rights, as part of their human rights, the seven principles of quality, affirmation, diversity, protection, inclusion, support, and cultural heritage.

C. European support—Council of Europe, European Commission

Addressing the whole population, not just children, the Council of Europe (2007) made just such a call in November 2007:

The Council of Europe advances the concept of public service value of the Internet, understood as people's significant reliance on the Internet as an essential tool for their everyday activities (communication, information, knowledge, commercial transactions) and the resulting legitimate expectation that Internet services are accessible and affordable, secure, reliable, and ongoing.

More recently, the EC's Safer Internet Plus Programme also calls for positive online provision for children, a most welcome call (European Commission, 2009).

D. Classifying online opportunities

The EU Kids Online network proposed a classification of online opportunities for children, equivalent to its classification of online risks (Hasebrink, Livingstone, Haddon, & Olafsson, 2009). Table 1 on page 14 distinguishes among content opportunities which position the child as recipient, contact opportunities which position the child as participant, and conduct opportunities which position the child as actor. Crossing this with the values or motivations of online providers produces 12 cells, which scope the array of online opportunities for children, with examples of provision in each cell.

With this as a tool, it becomes possible to audit current provision to determine the extent to which it meets children's needs, interests, and desires. Such an audit poses no easy task, however.

E. Judging online content

How can one tell what online content is positive? Many different contents and services online, whether or not designed specifically for children, may meet these expectations. Children, like adults, are difficult to predict in what may benefit them, for much depends on the interpretative contexts of use, and these are as heterogeneous for children as for any other population. Thus we may place few *a priori* limits on just what online contents present opportunities for young people.

	Learning	Participation	Creativity	Identity
Content—Child as Recipient	In/formal e-learning resources	Civic global or local resources	Diverse arts/leisure resources	Lifestyle resources, health advice
Contact—Child as Participant	Online tutoring, educational games/ tests	Invited interaction with civic sites	Multiplayer games, creative production	Social networking, personal advice
Conduct—Child as Actor	Self-initiated/ collaborative Learning	Concrete forms of civic engagement	User-generated content creation	Peer forums for expression of identity

Table 1. The child and online activities.

At the same time, much online content is, one can easily recognize, uninspiring, banal, superficial, or worse—misleading, hostile, or exploitative.

We can agree in highly abstract terms: the Internet can be used to facilitate children’s education, participation, communication, and expression. We might also agree on “good” sites—Children’s BBC Online is a fantastic resource; Google Earth has excited adults and children alike with its accessible vision of everywhere and anywhere; YouTube has enabled amateur youthful creativity like nothing we’ve seen before.

But between the abstractions and the examples, everything remains contested. Having asked many people—experts, policy makers, and parents—to identify some great online resources for children, it is notable that many scratch their heads in puzzlement. One problem is that much depends on the child—children can and often do make much of apparently uninspiring content, just as they can fail to get any benefit from great content. Another problem is that much of what children enjoy occasions a certain degree of adult ambivalence or even disapproval. This includes such sites as Neopets, Habbo Hotel, Club Penguin, YouTube, MySpace, LiveJournal, Limewire, Wikipedia, multiplayer games (e.g. Simtropolis, World of Warcraft), sports-related sites, television/film-related sites, and so forth, all of which may or may not offer genuine benefit (Livingstone, 2008).

This is not to say that people cannot make some excellent suggestions, although not everyone will agree on “good” (or “bad”) examples.¹ These include, somewhat *ad hoc*, a French children’s search engine,

Takatrouver, designed for 7-12 year olds with pre-moderated content (www.takatrouver.net; see also German and Dutch children’s search engines at www.blindkuh.de and www.davindi.nl); a Greek portal for children by the Hellenic World Foundation, a privately funded, not for profit foundation founded in 1993 by an act of Parliament (www.fhw.gr/imeakia), which provides virtual reality projects (e.g., the life and history of the olive tree, the chronicle of an excavation, the ancient Agora); a Slovenian storytelling site for young children that mixes educational content with games and entertaining activities, including a publicly funded children’s portal (www.prazniki.net/default.aspx; also, www.otroci.org/ and the children’s portal, www.zupca.net/). The main responsibility for online content for children lies with the Ministry of Education, though the Ministry of Culture also funds some projects, especially those supporting the Slovenian language. There is little available for Slovenian teenagers, however, apart from social networking sites.); an Australian resource for indigenous populations, *Digital Songlines*, to support “the collection, education, and sharing of indigenous cultural heritage knowledge” in forms accessible to children and others (<http://songlines.interactiondesign.com.au/>; see also the Australian Government’s Indigenous Portal at <http://www.indigenous.gov.au/>); and a California project, *Digital Underground Storytelling for Youth*, which supports local communities and educators in children’s creation of digital stories to express and explore their identities using multimedia tools (<http://gse.berkeley.edu/research/dusty.html>). One might also point to the often substantial sites produced by European and U.S. public service broadcasters (for example, VRT in Belgium, ZDF in Germany, NRK in Norway, RTE in Ireland, and CBBC/BBC Education in UK, www.hetklokhuis.nl/sketchstudio in The Netherlands, www.sesameworkshop.org and pbskids.org in the USA, and National

¹ I thank colleagues in the EU Kids Online network (see www.eukidsonline.net) for these and other suggestions, and also Alain Bossard (Takatrouver), Jo Bryce (UCLAN), Andrew Burn (Institute of Education, London), Stephen Carrick-Davies (Childnet International), Joshua Fincher, Lelia Green (Edith Cowan University), Karl Hopwood (Semley Primary School), Mimi Ito (USC), Dale Kunkel (University of Arizona), Ben Livingstone, Rodney Livingstone, Rachel Lunt, and Rebecca Shallcross (CBBC).

Danish Television, www.dr.dk/boern/?oversigt), or other public bodies (e.g. NASA), to civic sites for youth participation (in the USA, www.rockthevote.com, www.kidsvotingusa.org, and www.vote-smart.org; in the UK, www.ukyouthparliament.org.uk), to children's helplines and advice services (for example, in Spain, www.portaldelmenor.es [bullying, other problems]; in the UK, www.talktofrank.com [drugs] and www.childline.org.uk [child abuse]), and to online fanzines (for example, Mugglenet.com, the unofficial site for Harry Potter fans; <http://community.livejournal.com/insanebuffyfans>, Buffy the Vampire Slayer fan site; and <http://www.beavisandbutthead.net/>, Beavis and Butthead fans).

Unfortunately, as yet there are few publicly reported evaluations of even public sector sites and resources, so we know little about whether, why, and which children use them, or whether they prefer them to other online or, indeed, offline resources. Moreover, many initiatives fail. One such was the attempt to establish a Dot Kids domain (under the US domain—i.e. .kids.us). In 2002, this children's "walled garden" appeared successful, when President Bush signed the Dot-Kids Implementation and Efficiency Act in the USA, saying, "This bill is a wise and necessary step to safeguard our children while they use computers and discover the great possibilities of the Internet. Every site designated [.kids](http://.kids.us) will be a safe zone for children" (The White House Office of the Press Secretary, 2002). However, since [dot.kids](http://dot.kids.us) sites could not connect to any sites outside the domain (NeuStar Inc., 2003), this was so restrictive that few organizations invested in populating the domain and the initiative is effectively inactive.

Wartella and Jennings (2000, p. 40, Box 1) propose a set of evaluation criteria, which usefully echo several of the seven principles of children's communication rights noted earlier. They frame these in terms of questions "to consider when creating new media content for children," as paraphrased below:

- Diversity (and affirmation)—is the content relevant to diverse social groups, by ethnicity, gender, or class, and does it either reinforce stereotypes or provide positive role models of marginalized groups?
- Accessibility (or inclusion and support)—is the technology and content accessible to children with different resources and needs, so as to be universally available?
- Interactivity—does the content use the interactive potential of the medium to best effect, enabling children to be creative, including creating a com-

munity of young people, and providing real choices with real consequences?

- Education—does the content offer age-appropriate, context-appropriate educational, informational, or cultural opportunities? (cf. cultural heritage also)
- Value (or quality)—is it fun, engaging to children, so they will want to explore further? "Does the content have something to tell, instead of just something to sell?"
- Artistry—is the content of high quality, with excellence in design elements, and an understandable, easily navigable interface?
- Safety (or protection)—are the links carefully chosen, the requirements for disclosing personal information appropriately managed, and does the content exclude inappropriate violent or sexual content?

An audit of online opportunities for children and young people would surely be timely, evaluating them using criteria such as these in order systematically to map current provision and, taking into account the needs of children by country, gender, age, and so forth, to identify key gaps and prioritize the development of future online resources.

As the principles of inclusion and support require, such an audit should include a determination of which bodies are, and should be, tasked with the responsibility for providing and funding children's online resources; a promotional strategy for ensuring that children, parents, and teachers become aware of positive provision for children online, both current and future; and a network for providers, with a forum in which to meet/communicate, to ensure that experiences are shared, lessons learned, and best practices disseminated.

F. Online provision may aid risk reduction

It appears increasingly likely that one good way of avoiding the negative dimensions of Internet use is to direct children towards the positive, thereby avoiding harm and empowering children in terms of learning, participation, creativity, and identity. Indeed, a recent qualitative comparative analysis from EU Kids Online showed exactly this: in some European countries where factors point towards the likelihood of a relatively high degree of online risk for children, such risk levels appear reduced if there is sufficient positive online content for children; the converse also applies—the absence of such content, typical especially of small language communities, appears associated with higher levels of online risk experienced by children in those countries (Bauwens, Lobe, Segers, Tsaliki, forthcoming).

Thus, positive online provision may also be expected to aid the strategy for online risk reduction. But opportunities and risks must be balanced. If children and young people are to engage freely and creatively with the online environment, issues of trust, legibility, safety, and accountability must also be addressed. These are partly a matter of Internet literacy (searching, navigation, evaluation) and partly a matter of design (ensuring that indicators of reliability and quality are clearly marked). Also crucial are answers to such questions as, if youth has its say online, who will reply, who will take action, and will youth be informed of the consequences? Only if the Internet appears a trustworthy and accountable route to participation, embodying principles of respect and connecting structures of decision making—for which the Internet could be admirably suited if only it were so used—might it contribute to the great expectations held out for children.

Trust and accountability also depend on effectively balancing opportunities and risks. To give a simple but telling example, in the *UK Children Go Online* civic participation interviews (Livingstone, 2007b), two teenage girls were observed to respond to the invitation of Mykindaplace, a site for teenage girls, containing celebrity, music, fashion and entertainment news, and chat (<http://www.mykindaplace.com/hi.aspx>), which announced, “we want your real life stories.” Mia noted, “you can send a photo as well,” but Natasha’s rejection of this opportunity was immediate—“why would you send in a photo, that’s just stupid. . . . I’d give out my name, I wouldn’t give out my phone number or my address or anything like that.” In short, if it is not reasonably safe, it will not be perceived as trustworthy, and children will not participate.

G. Practical challenges

Online resources for children vary considerably in scale and scope, and they are far more plentiful in some countries (or languages) than others. Small scale projects are often dependent on one or a handful of enthusiastic individuals, reliant on temporary project funding, and so difficult to sustain and update. They often struggle to reach a wide audience, for both promotion and navigation are difficult to achieve in an age of information abundance. Those sites adequately resourced by government organizations must meet official objectives and so may be seen by children as irrelevant and dull.

The best resourced are the commercial sites, able to employ high production values, sophisticated games, updated content, desirable freebies, and expensive

downloads. Yet even these must decide between targeting a general population (e.g. Google Images, Wikipedia) or, if specifically dedicated to (and safe for) children, they must employ a commercial strategy equally specifically directed towards children, with advertising/sponsorship prominent in the online offer and with little reason to reach out to the digitally or socially disadvantaged. As safety considerations make interactivity particularly expensive (e.g., requiring pre-moderated content and age-tailored interactive services), sites for younger children especially are often non-interactive or, to pay their way, highly commercialized.

The difficulty of ensuring that children and young people find positive online content and so have even the opportunity of engaging with it is a significant one. Helen McQuillan, EU Kids Online network member for Ireland, emphasizes the importance of linking online content to offline community or school level provision, reporting on her direct involvement in a “buddy” mentoring project

where third level students mentor 12 and 13 year olds in an after school club in movie making, digital photography, and film sound recordings. The emphasis is on encouraging young people to seek out open source software, and on working in teams. Although the team work in a community ICT setting, they are brought to the university production facilities also to encourage them to consider third level study in new media. All the media produced by the different groups in the Digihub is showcased to parents at the end of the year. Linked into this are family learning sessions where young people bring their parents to teach them how to use the Internet, or teach them more creative applications. (personal communication)

Livingstone & Helpser (2007) analyzed the range of activities undertaken online by children aged 9–19 in the *UK Children Go Online* project, finding that the breadth and sophistication of such activities varies considerably. Based on the specific patterning of usage identified, they proposed that each child climbs a “ladder of online opportunities,” typically beginning with information-seeking (of any kind), progressing through games and communication, taking on more interactive forms of communication and culminating in creative and civic activities. One implication is that communication and games playing may not be “time-wasting” but, instead, can provide a moti-

vational step on the way to “approved” activities. Another is that online resources should be designed so as to encourage children to progress from simpler to more complex and diverse activities. The evidence is that while many children communicate, search, and

play online, not so very many are, in practice, creative, productive, critical, or civically engaged. In sum, ensuring that all children get the opportunity to advance from simple to more complex activities needs encouragement, resources and support.

Television as a “Safe Space” for Children: The Views of Producers around the World¹

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The study of children, young people, and the media can be viewed as a microcosm of our entire field of media studies, as it is occupied with concerns for the three main realms of research: audiences, texts, and institutions. Childhood is understood to be socially constructed and culturally and historically situated, and children are perceived as a special, evolving, and dynamic group of people—characterized by unique developmental stages, who are gradually accumulating life experiences and developing knowledge as well as critical skills. All these processes characterize children and young people as different from adult audiences and more vulnerable to the influences of media. Hence the concern that some form of protection and supervision be required in guarding young people’s most basic of human rights—for healthy social, physical, and mental development and well being.

For two decades now, I have been researching the ideology embedded in media texts (most specifically gender stereotyping), teaching critical analysis skills, and working at consciousness-raising in students, media producers, and the public at large. I have learned that much of what children are watching on television around the world does not necessarily have their best interest in mind: A lot of it is violent; imbalanced in terms of gender and human diversity (class, religion, ethnicity, race, disability); commercialized; hyper-sexualized; and just plain uninspiring. At the same time, I found out that some television fare does offer better alternatives for children and is sensitive to their needs and well being. It has been my experience that such content is mostly produced in educational, public, and small specializing organizations around the world, but also occasionally, in some of the big commercial corporations (Lemish, 2007).

Furthermore, through the years I have come to the conclusion that we cannot remain content to study

only questions of privilege, as interesting and important as they are to us (e.g., whether baby-videos may or may not accelerate language development; or whether exposure to the hit trilogy of Disney’s *High School Musical* contributes to the construction of romantic love among tween girls). My recent work with producers of children’s TV around the globe and experiences encountered through organizations such as the *Prix Jeunesse*² and UNICEF³ brought home to me the existential issues that media for children are recruited to address: promoting schooling for girls; educating for sexual safety and rape-prevention in HIV/AIDS-struck regions of the globe; providing alternative masculine role models in societies driven by domestic and general violence; reaffirming the value and self-image of diverse appearances in the face of the Anglo-European “Beauty Myth”; involving young generations in participatory democracy—the list is as long as the issues facing children growing up in the world today. In a global society in which children’s basic survival is still a major issue for humanity, I felt that privileged researchers of media, like me, need to roll up their sleeves and pitch in to link their research to social change efforts. Indeed, I submit that in the spirit of action research, the study of children and media needs a renewed commitment to obtaining, disseminating, and integrating knowledge; as well as to creating the conditions that assist in liberating and empowering children and young people through media, particularly

¹ This article is based on Lemish, D. (forthcoming 2010). I am grateful to Dr. Maya Götz, Head of IZI for providing support for this research, and to the many producers who took the time and effort to talk to me and share their opinions, experiences, and dreams.

² *Prix Jeunesse International Festival* takes place every two years in Munich, Germany and is dedicated to quality television programming for children. See www.prixjeunesse.de

³ UNICEF (United Nations Children’s Fund) provides long-term humanitarian and developmental assistance to children and mothers in developing countries..