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Designing a European project on child internet safety: reflections on comparative research in practice.

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Designing a European project on children and the internet:**Reflections on comparative research in theory and practice**

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All media and communications research is comparative

Although arguably, ‘*all* social science research is comparative’ (Beniger (1992: 35), comparative media research remains a minority exercise (Hallin and Mancini, 2004: 1), notwithstanding the conduct of several well known comparative studies. However, though most scholarship in our field examines its ‘own’ national media system and media culture, through the committed efforts of key figures in our field, of whom Ulla Carlsson is one, comparative media research is becoming more central. Moreover, scholars increasingly work on an international basis, influenced by the international ambition of states, policy makers, funding agencies, universities - and scholars themselves. We all seek to keep up with the latest ideas, the newest findings and the coming challenges, from wherever they originate - hence the energy evident in meetings of international associations. But, to interpret the ideas and findings of others, one must judge their relevance to work from other contexts, recognising that media phenomena, and media analyses, are simultaneously embedded within and significant beyond national contexts.

For media and communications research, the impetus to embrace comparative methods is also driven by the distinctive nature of our object of study. Media and communications travel across borders, with flows and counter-flows connecting cultures worldwide in diverse ways – communicative, even cosmopolitan, but also dominating and exploitative (Appadurai, 1996; Rantanen, 2008). Elements of the media and communications environment are systemically interrelated: just as newer media remediate older media, generating new meanings and practices for older media (Bolter and Grusin, 1999), so too do transnational media remediate national media, these latter becoming altered, often more specialised, perhaps engaged with in new ways. On the one hand, globalisation means we must all become comparativists in our study of media, and on the other,

‘without media and modern information communication technologies, the globalisation we speak of would not be possible’ (Carlsson, 2005/6: 9).

What are the consequences for how we focus our research questions, select our unit of analysis, determine the feasibility of methods, balance breadth and depth, and recognise the complexity of contextualisation while retaining comparability of concepts and measures? Though these challenges apply across our field, we are pleased to focus on a domain which Ulla Carlsson has especially made her own, that of children and the changing media environment. Nordicom’s *International Clearinghouse on Children, Youth and Media*, directed by Ulla Carlsson, has set the scene for scholars worldwide. Through her pioneering series of themed yearbooks, children’s experiences with media across all parts of the globe have been rendered visible, and the insights and agendas of their equally-multinational researchers have been brought into mutual dialogue. In what follows, we outline the workings of the multinational comparative ‘EU Kids Online’ project in the spirit of promoting comparative research and furthering this dialogue.

Why undertake comparative media research?

The ‘EU Kids Online’ project, funded by the EC’s Safer Internet Programme, brought together findings regarding children’s online opportunities and risks from 21 European countries, in order to understand the meanings and practices of the changing media environment for families and, relatedly, to inform policy makers concerned to optimise the balance between children’s empowerment and protection (Livingstone and Haddon, 2009). Building on the earlier European project, *Children and their Changing Media Environment* (Livingstone and Bovill, 2001), and now providing the groundwork for a new project, EU Kids Online II (see www.eukidsonline.net), the 70+ researchers in the network have faced a series of conceptual, methodological and normative challenges. Not all centrally concerned the comparative dimension but, as Øyen (1990: 1) observes,

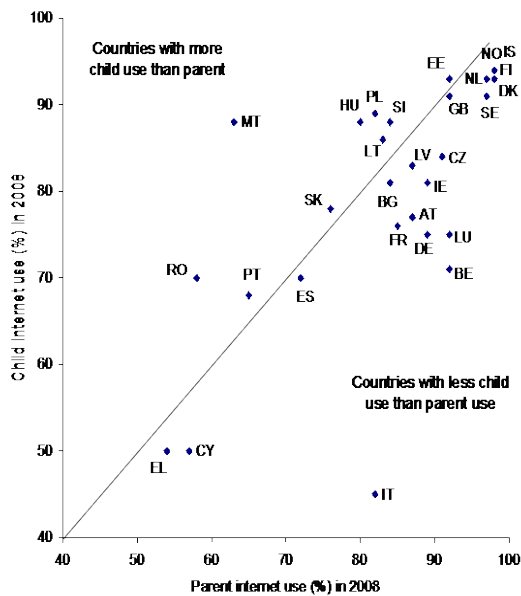
‘None of the methodological and theoretical difficulties we have learned to live with can be ignored when we examine critically such questions as what is comparative research, how we go about doing comparative work, and how we interpret similarities and differences in countries compared.’

So why do comparative research? In recent articles, the first author has examined several rationales for comparative research, often left implicit in cross-national reports, together with their consequences for research design (Livingstone, in press; 2003); she argues that these are usefully distinguished by Kohn’s (1989) four models of comparative cross-national research.

First, and most commonly employed, are projects that treat the nation as an ‘object of study’. Here the purpose is to see one’s own and others’ countries better by putting contrasting cases side by side. The analysis is idiographic, presenting national phenomena in their own right, locating them in their specific historical, economic and social contexts. Consequently, no rationale for country selection is required, as comparative insights may be derived from comparing both similar and different

countries. The results are often presented in multinational tabulations of statistics (typified by Eurobarometer surveys – see Figure 1) and by edited volumes which allocate each country in its own chapter.

Figure 1: Parents and children under 18 online in Europe (source: Hasebrink et al, 2009a, based on data from 2008 Eurobarometer survey)



In practice, all cross-national projects must start with national accounts of the phenomenon in question. So, although EU Kids Online researchers were critical of the Eurobarometer surveys (for they rely on parents’ not children’s accounts and they provide no contextualisation, something our network had to work to reconstruct), such findings provided a useful starting point and a basis for generating hypotheses and proposing regional groupings. Intriguingly too, such nation-by-nation findings force recognition of what might be called the comparative imperative: for example, once shown Figure 1, social researchers first check out the position of their own country and then they begin to speculate – why are these countries ‘high’ and others ‘low’, close or distant, on the scale? Unsatisfactorily, idiographic research leaves this task to be undertaken by the reader rather than the author. But the impetus to explain cross-national similarities and differences is, surely, what pushes researchers to take on a more demanding model of comparative analysis.

Kohn’s second model treats the nation as ‘context of study’. Here the purpose is the opposite of the idiographic. Rather, it tests the (often implicit) universalism of our concepts and hypotheses by critically examining their applicability in diverse national contexts. Although a strongly contextualist position may seem to cast doubt on all

universalist claims (as in Chisholm's (1995: 22) assertion that 'societies and cultures are fundamentally non-comparable and certainly cannot be evaluated against each other'), many important claims framed at the individual level of analysis are not unreasonably couched in universalist terms. In the EU Kids Online project, for instance, hypotheses concerning age, gender and socioeconomic inequalities in internet access, while certainly not pointing to 'natural' inequalities, were framed in general terms; and the value of testing these hypotheses across diverse national contexts is precisely to discover (and delimit) their scope.

To ensure the test is a good one, then, the selection of countries for this model should be as diverse as possible, for 'we learn something about the importance or lack of importance of the nation-state by discovering which processes transcend national boundaries and which processes are idiosyncratic to particular nations or to particular types of nations' (Kohn, 1989: 94). For those concerned with the international agenda of children's communication rights (see Carlsson, 2005/6), this model permits examination of when and where universal phenomena (rights, equalities, opportunities) are limited or undermined and why. For example, the data in Figure 1 both falsifies the universalistic 'digital native' hypothesis (that more children are online than their parents) and usefully pinpoints where additional efforts may be required to encourage either parents or children or both to gain internet access.

The comparative imperative takes us further, for Figure 1 surely also suggests national groupings that invite explanation. Why, are the Nordic countries most online than in Southern Europe? Is it only in Eastern Europe that children use the internet more than their parents? For such questions, Kohn's third model is required. In this, the nation is treated as 'unit of analysis', and the researcher's task is widened to encompass the potentially explanatory, even causal factors that may account for observed differences among countries or regions. To quote Blumler et al (1992: 7), comparison 'is not just a matter of discretely and descriptively comparing isolated bits and pieces of empirical phenomena situated in two or more locales. Rather, it reflects a concern to understand how the systemic context may have shaped such phenomena'.

The research task, therefore, is first to observe the pattern of similarities and differences across countries and then to test the predictive power of external indicators that may explain how and why nations vary systematically. Researchers faced with the patterns hinted at by Figure 1 might wish to examine whether national patterns of higher/lower internet use are accounted for by measures of Gross Domestic Product or, less easy to measure, differences in national 'information society' policies. As Hallin and Mancini (2004) note, if using this model, one should select countries for which potential explanatory measures are both relevant and available. Even then, 'it is easy to posit functional relationships but difficult to establish their causal force relative to other factors' (Hall, 2003: 379), comparative research being generally both cross-sectional and multi-factorial.

Each of the above three models assumes that comparative research is not only necessary, even if difficult, but that the nation-state is the appropriate unit of analysis. Kohn's fourth

model prioritises the first of these assumptions over the second, for it treats the nation only as a component of a transnational system. Insofar as nations bear similarities to each other, this is to be explained in terms of their common and systematic relation to an underlying transnational process – for example, the diffusion of innovations, processes of cultural imperialism, globalisation or the promotion of information society policies by international organisations.

This model invites us to read Figure 1 not merely as a cross-sectional account of internet use in different countries but also as a moment in time. It reveals an underlying process whereby all countries begin in the bottom left of the diagram (low internet use) and move steadily towards the top right (and, eventually, internet saturation) as the diffusion process comes to an end, at which point policies to promote an information (or, now, digital) society may shift their focus from internet use to, say, digital inclusion and citizenship, necessitating a new set of measures on which to array countries. This fourth model does not, however, entirely transcend the nation-state; it is retained as a unit of analysis but downplayed as an explanatory cause of social change.

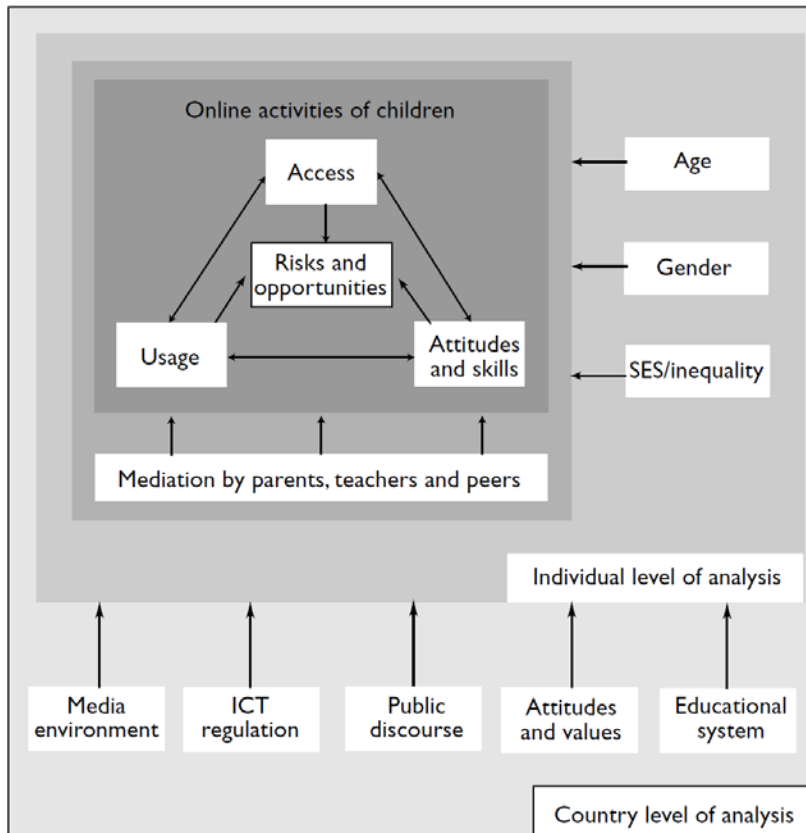
Designing a comparative media project

How can these models be put into practice? In what follows, we explain how the EU Kids Online project draw on the first three models (though the fourth is also relevant). This project asked, descriptively, what are the opportunities and risks afforded to European children by the internet? It also asked, normatively, what can we learn from empirical research that could and should inform national and European policy makers as they seek to maximise online opportunities and minimise online risks for children? Third, it asked, comparatively, to what extent is children's online experience similar across Europe and, insofar as differences are observed, to what extent can these be explained by cross-national differences in wealth, information society policy, educational technology provision, parenting values, and so forth. As anyone who has engaged in a multi-national, multi-method, multi-researcher project will know, these latter two questions especially give rise to interesting challenges. Having found surprisingly little in the published literature to guide the design and conduct of comparative research, we formulated as an additional goal the development and elucidation of our working methods (Lobe et al, 2007; Hasebrink et al, 2009).

The very nature of our project pulled us in different directions: 'kids' (or better, children and young people) commonly invoke universalist analyses, on the assumption (correct or otherwise) that their development, needs and socialisation (by parents, school, community) are broadly similar everywhere; 'online' invokes a transnational focus – whether a country is regarded as 'ahead' or 'behind', the process of digital diffusion and appropriation is seen to bring with it a common set of experiences, barriers and benefits; 'EU' specifies a regional focus possibly more significant than national differences so that, for instance, best practice in one country can valuably be exported to another. Further, our central concepts of 'opportunities' and 'risks' are highly subject to cultural interpretation, even contestation, making it (rightly) difficult to assess children's online experiences, especially using standardised measures. Crucially, this comparative project –

like all others - demanded extended thoughtful discussion, negotiation and criticism among the researchers involved.

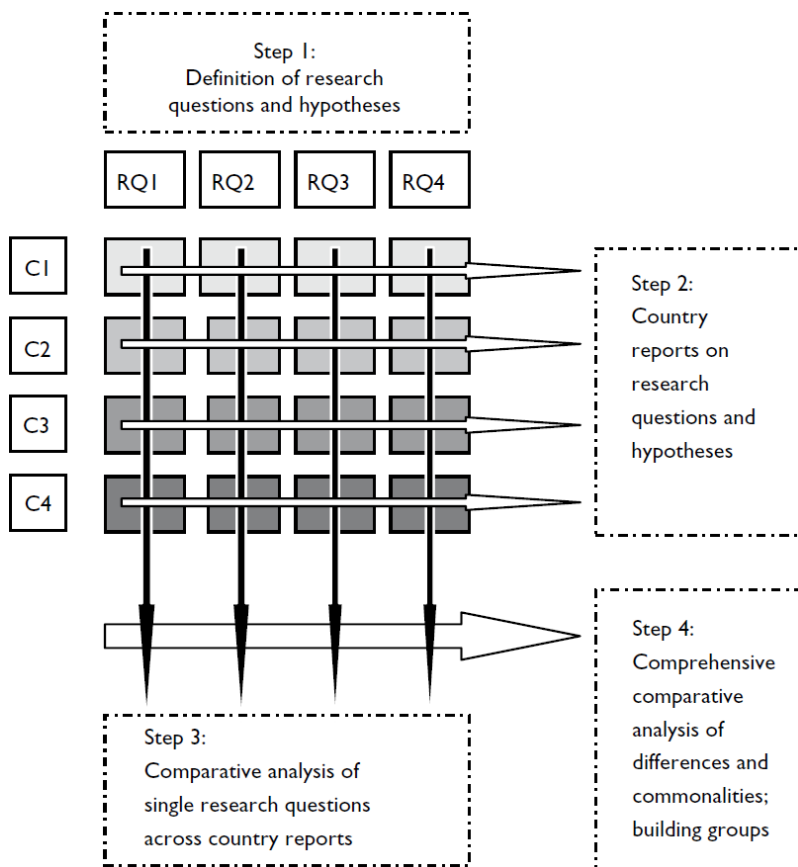
Figure 2: A comparative model for EU Kids Online, showing individual and country levels of analysis (source: Hasebrink et al, 2009a)



A first and vital outcome of this dialogue was a model of the field (see Figure 2). This mapped the structured relationships among the key variables within the research literature, as interpreted by the EU Kids Online network. Influenced by Bronfenbrenner's (1979) conception of the concentric circles of social influence surrounding the child, the central variables of interest (online risks and opportunities) are framed first by the mutually intersecting factors of access, usage, attitudes towards the internet and associated skills, second, by demographic factors (primarily age, gender and socioeconomic status) and, third, by parental, teacher and peer mediation processes. This individual level of analysis was hypothesised to be broadly common across Europe. However, insofar as exceptions could be anticipated, and even hypotheses regarding cross-national differences could be formulated, it was theorised that these differences would be explained at a country (or system) level of analysis. Key factors identified here concerned the national media environment, information and communication technology regulation, public discourses, cultural attitudes and values, and educational system.

This model permitted the generation of a rich series of research questions at the individual level (for example, what gender differences exist in children’s access, use, opportunities and risks?) and country level (for example, how do policies and practices of ICT regulation vary across Europe?). The steps of the comparative analysis are summarised in Figure 3, beginning with this first step of discussing and defining the research questions and hypotheses. In Step 2, each national team wrote a country report in which the available evidence in that country (and language) was interrogated systematically so as to answer each question; where evidence contradicted a hypothesis or, as often, was unavailable, this too was recorded. The resulting country reports can be recognised as fitting Kohn’s first model, for they treat the nation as object of study. While each could, surely, be written only by those familiar with that country, the discussion within the network that accompanied their production permitted each national team to ‘see its own country better’, while the very act of posting them alphabetically on the project website invites the comparative reader to draw out similarities and differences.

Figure 3: Steps in the comparative analysis (source: Hasebrink et al 2009)



A formal identification of similarities and differences across countries formed the focus of Step 3. Network members each selected one research question or hypothesis and compared all country reports for relevant findings, if available, noting both supporting and contrary evidence. This step may be recognised as Kohn’s second model of

comparative analysis, for it treats the nation as a context of study. To the extent that this comparative task revealed similarities across diverse countries, the analysis could legitimately end here, having established the pan-European relevance of the findings. Age and gender differences among European children's internet use illustrated the strength of this approach for, broadly speaking, similar age and gender differences in internet use were revealed across very different contexts of both childhood and internet diffusion although, to be sure, the analysis also revealed some exceptions and differences (McQuillan and D'Haenens, 2009).

In other instances, however, this third step revealed cross-national differences that preclude pan-European generalisations and indicate the necessity of moving beyond the individual level to the country level of analysis. Once countries are found to differ in key respects, two analytic directions can be pursued: one seeks meaningful country groupings; the second seeks to explain country differences or groupings using country level factors. Thus in Step 4 (Figure 3), EU Kids Online researchers examined the patterns of similarities and differences across countries to identify country groupings as well as the explanation of their differences. In Kohn's terms, this shifts the analysis to the third model, treating the nation as a unit of analysis.

In practice, we undertook this in several complementary ways, partly because the available evidence base (of already-published findings rather than newly-collected data) was uneven in its consistency and quality. For example, Lobe et al (2009) employed qualitative comparative analysis, a statistical means of identifying particular configurations within a multivariate dataset to examine the parental mediation of children's internet use. Using country level factors (educational policy, online content provision and general risk sensitivity) and individual level factors (parental mediation strategies – social and technical), the analysis sought to predict national variation in online risks encountered by children. It was found that, in countries where parental mediation strategies are less practiced, children are more likely to have risky experiences online (for example, Slovenia, Czech Republic, Estonia). Further, in some countries social forms of mediation (parents talking to their children about the internet, favoured in Austria and Ireland) seem more effective than, say, using filtering software or instituting bans on certain online activities, while the reverse holds in other countries (for example, in Belgium and France, technical mediation was associated with lower risk). The possible reasons for this variation were examined by Kirwil (2009), who correlated Eurobarometer findings (on children's online risk and parental mediation) with the European Values Survey to reveal how national value cultures shape parental strategies of mediation, this in turn having consequences for the effectiveness of such mediation.

Future directions for comparative media research

As globalisation transforms, to greater or lesser degree, our object of study, our methods of research and the scope of our concepts and claims, many researchers are simultaneously excited and daunted. As media and communications contents, services and technologies – from Pop Idol to Facebook to 3G mobile phones – become ever more transnational, comparative research must surely be on the ascendance. In practical terms,

this means researchers will increasingly need to share and compare their methods, as we have sought to do here, thus building up a tool kit of approaches tailored to our field of study. This generates a parallel demand for opportunities to publicise and discuss findings from different countries and from multi-country studies – as Nordicom’s Clearing House has done so effectively for the domain of children and media. A valuable next step would be for all researchers to become reflexively and self-critically aware of the ways in which their research is culturally particular or nationally delimited in its scope, questioning rather than implicitly reproducing universalistic assumptions about their work. Only then can we develop theoretically informed frameworks which hypothesise dimensions or factors which may account for similarities and differences – in the work of EU Kids Online, it surprised us that such work was still needed and that so few factors had been already developed.

It will be observed that in the EU Kids Online project we worked with the first three of Kohn’s models more than the transnational fourth model, leaving more implicit than explicit the ways in which Europe as a whole may be subject to a transnational process of internet diffusion and appropriation. This was partly because the importance of national contexts – of childhood, media culture, educational policy and so forth – appeared to us more decisive than the spread (possibly from Northern to Southern Europe, or from Old to New Europe) of internet access and use. But it was also because this was significantly a normative project (Nyre, 2009), instigated by a key powerful institution, the European Commission, and designed so that evidence-based recommendations could be produced of value to national and supranational policy makers. In such a project, the theoretical, empirical and political aims require careful negotiation and alignment. Thus we explored the value of advancing a normative as well as an intellectual agenda (in our case, that equality of opportunity and outcome across gender, class and region is important; that parents have a responsibility but that industry too must ensure safety tools are available else parents will be over-burdened; that efforts simply to reduce risk may also restrict opportunity so more subtle strategies are needed; that children have communication rights and their online opportunities should be enhanced while their privacy is protected).

Paradoxically, the same conditions that demand a cross-national comparative approach also undermine the legitimacy of the nation-state as unit of analysis. For Blumler et al (1992: 7), media phenomena are still systematically ‘embedded in a set of interrelations that are relatively coherent, patterned, comprehensive, distinct, and bounded’, hence the continued importance of the nation-state. By contrast, Robins (2008: 85) argues that ‘the nation can never actually exist in the form of its ideal image of itself. It is always bound to be compromised by disorderly realities’. Different again, Beck and Sznaider (2006: 13) call for ‘methodological cosmopolitanism’, arguing that we must become ‘sensitive and open to the many universalisms, the conflicting contextual universalisms.’ On the question of the validity of the nation state as unit of analysis for comparative research, it is important that more scholars join this debate. On the one hand, although much research (especially that produced by large nations and large language communities) remains insensitive to such contextualisms, one would hardly wish all research to limit its validity only to one nation. On the other hand, despite the growth of transnational phenomena, at times resulting in greater heterogeneity within than across nations as well as in new

objects of study for which a national analysis is inappropriate (such as diasporic flows, minority media, global cities), the nation remains a meaningful level of social, economic and political organisation. The conditions under which academic research is conducted continue to change in manifold ways, of course. We must wait to see what the next generation of comparative media research will bring.

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