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by Professor Sonia Livingstone

Maximising opportunities and minimising risks for children online

From evidence to policy

EU Kids Online: Developing evidence-based policy

With 75% of European children using the Internet¹, some celebrate their youthful expertise while others worry that they are vulnerable to new forms of harm. Policies to balance the goals of maximising opportunities and minimising risks require an evidence-based approach. Funded by the European Commission's Safer Internet plus Programme, *EU Kids Online* (2006-9) has been a thematic network that aimed to identify, compare and draw conclusions from existing and ongoing research on children and online technologies conducted in Europe.²

A central purpose of *EU Kids Online's* work has been to draw out the implications of the evidence base for policy-making. To focus these, the network first scoped six distinct though intersecting policy domains in consultation with diverse stakeholders, national advisory boards and the Safer Internet Programme. These are: e-inclusion, education and the role of schools, awareness-raising, parental mediation, media literacy, and self- and co-regulation. Then, after reviewing the available findings in comparative perspective, and noting methodological limitations and research gaps, the network identified a series of evidence-based policy recommendations designed to maximise children's online opportunities and to minimise their online risks, as follows.³

E-inclusion – at home and/or at school

Access precedes any kinds of opportunities, and thus it matters that 25% of 6-17 year old children are still not online in Europe. Particularly low access persists in certain countries (notably Italy, Greece, Cyprus) and among certain population segments (especially less well-off and/or rural households) – as well, of course, among younger children. However, e-inclusion policies largely focus on

adults and surveys of use generally exclude children. When they address children, the focus is usually on schools, though many children lack sufficiently flexible access at school to explore the potential of the Internet; to really grasp the benefits, home access is vital. Moreover, the evidence suggests that children's Internet use is encouraged by their parents' Internet use, so parents not yet online should be encouraged to use the Internet.⁴

At the same time, educational investment in ICT remains vital. Generally, greater Internet use is associated with higher levels of education at both country and individual levels. So, improving educational achievement in general may be expected to increase the extent and sophistication of Internet use. Beyond this, it is evident that there are many gaps in provision or insufficient or outdated provision of ICT in schools. This creates difficulties in ensuring that digital literacy in general, and Internet safety in particular, is addressed as it arises across the curriculum (not simply in ICT classes) by teachers who have been recently and appropriately trained, and with adequate resources at their disposal.

Further, to embed the wider take up of online opportunities, media education should be recognised and resourced as a core element of school curricula and infrastructure. And schools must overcome the tendency to regard children's use of the Internet at home as beyond their remit. For crucially, the resources of the school outstrip those of many parents, making schools the most efficient, effective and fair way of advising all children.

A matter of children's rights

Online opportunities, whether provided at home or at school, are not only a matter of inclusion or the national skills base but also one of rights. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child asserts children's rights to express their views freely in all matters affecting them, through any medium of the child's choice, plus freedom of association

and peaceful assembly, protection of privacy and access 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.

Here is an agenda that can and should occupy all of us, especially since the evidence suggests that while each child begins climbing a 'ladder of online opportunities' with enthusiasm, not so very many are, in practice, creative, productive, critical or civically engaged. Ensuring that all children get the opportunity to advance from simple to more complex activities requires encouragement, resources and support.

Balancing opportunities and risks

Problematically, the growing evidence of online risks leads some to recommend all means of keeping children safe, even though this will restrict their opportunities. Clearly, balancing empowerment and protection is a crucial task. On the one hand, genuine and unacceptable risks should be addressed and where possible prevented. But on the other hand, children learn to cope with the world through testing their capacities, adjusting their actions in the light of lessons learned, and so gaining resilience and independence – in short, some degree of risk is necessary. It seems that increasing online access, use and opportunities tends also, if inadvertently, to increase online risks. Similarly, strategies to decrease risks can restrict children's Internet use or opportunities more broadly, even at times contravening children's rights to communicate.

EU Kids Online has found that this association between use or opportunities and risks holds not only for individuals but also across countries – in other words, going online for beneficial reasons (however defined) also increases risky encounters. This can be redressed partly through awareness-raising and media literacy and partly through interface design and support services. It also raises questions of coping – how children do cope when they encounter online risks, and how they could be better advised and supported. Interestingly, although there is some evidence about children's coping strategies there has been little evaluation of what works. Notably, most children do not report problems to adults for fear of losing Internet access or being punished, and realistic advice on what to do is in short supply.

Positive online content provision

There appears to be growing policy support for the positive online provision of accessible and high quality contents and services for children, however defined, that help them develop to their fullest potential, affirm their sense of self, community and place, promote an awareness and appreciation of other cultures, and extend their capacities to be creative, to learn and to participate. Currently not all children benefit from such opportunities, for reasons of socio-demographic inequalities or national provision (e.g., in small language communities), while good online resources can be difficult to locate (by children) and difficult to sustain (by providers).

However, there are growing indications that positive online provision (provided it is valued and enjoyed by children), both directly benefits their development and, significantly for our present discussions, also reduces online risks by encouraging valuable and valued activities.⁵ This provides added justification for devoting more attention and resources to the development of online opportunities for children, especially as part of public rather than commercial provision.

Awareness-raising priorities

Described by the EC's Safer Internet Programme as "actions that can contribute to the trust and confidence of parents and teachers in safer use of the Internet by children", awareness-raising is clearly a central focus of its Safer Internet Action Plan, implemented across Europe through the Insafe network of national awareness-raising nodes. *EU Kids Online's* review of changing patterns of Internet use and users provides evidence for the following priorities for future awareness-raising at the country level:

(i) countries identified by research as high risk (especially, Estonia, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Slovenia, the UK)

(ii) countries which have rapidly and recently adopted the Internet, where access appears to exceed skills and cultural adjustment (notably, Bulgaria, Estonia, Greece, Poland, Portugal), and

(iii) countries where children's use exceeds parents' use (Hungary, Malta, Poland, Romania).

At the individual level, the priority now must be awareness-raising among younger children (and their parents and teachers) as they (rather than teenagers) are the fastest growing user group and little is known of their activities, skills or risks

online. It seems that the Internet is already a normal tool for children at the age of ten years and is increasingly becoming an attractive tool for many between 6 and 10 years old.⁶ It is likely that even younger children are getting online, but this has barely been researched.⁷ This emphasises the need to research younger children and to develop measures supporting safer Internet use for all age groups.

Additionally, research finds that, although girls and boys use the Internet to a similar degree, strong differences in patterns of use and, therefore, patterns of risks persist, suggesting that awareness-raising and strategies to encourage coping and resilience should address girls and boys differently.

Further, since it seems that online risks are disproportionately experienced by children from lower socioeconomic status households, where parents may be less resourced to support them, there is value in specifically targeting less privileged families, schools and neighbourhoods.

'Vulnerable' children

Much research and most policy making talks of children and young people in general, with too little grasp of what makes some children vulnerable to online risk, beyond demographic factors, and so a tendency to recommend blanket policies for all children which are too restrictive for many and yet still insufficient for some. But not all children live in happy families, and as Tolstoy long ago observed, unhappy families are all unhappy in their own way.

To address the risks faced by a vulnerable minority in a proportionate manner without extending undue surveillance and restrictions to the occasionally naïve, sometimes risk-taking majority is a difficult problem for public policy. In this context, it is worth noting American research showing not only that those vulnerable online are likely to be those vulnerable offline (rendering appeals to parental responsibility possibly ineffective or worse) but that online victims may also be perpetrators.⁸ That evidence suggests that:

- (i) some children perpetrate online risks, whether from malice, playfulness or mere accident;
- (ii) those who tend to experience online risks may then generate further risks, whether to those who hurt them or to new victims; and
- (iii) those who are vulnerable online are likely to lack adequate social and parental support offline.

As yet, little parallel research on vulnerability exists in Europe, though this is the focus of a

2009 call for research by the EC Safer Internet Programme.

Parental responsibilities

No-one doubts that parents are responsible for their children's safety, online as offline, and this is a responsibility they accept. For television and other familiar media, they are used to doing it. But for the Internet, it's still a struggle, resulting in a 'regulation gap' between parental willingness and parental competence.

Analysis of the 2008 Eurobarometer survey showed that parental anxiety over children's Internet use is reduced if parents are Internet users, and that parents who use the Internet mediate their children's use more. So, there are grounds to encourage all parents to get online.

Still, many lack the skills, knowledge or motivation to mediate their children's use. It seems likely that different styles of parental mediation may be more effective in different cultural contexts, depending on cultural values and preferred styles of parenting, important to note when targeting parental awareness-raising messages.⁹

Further, though many parents do use filtering technology, it is unclear whether it is being used effectively or appropriately, or whether, as often claimed, children can and do 'get around' this. Indeed, since many parents find it difficult to know where to obtain guidance on, say, choosing a filter, assessing a website, reporting a problem, or setting rules, a well-promoted, reputable, easy-to-use, publicly-funded 'one-stop shop' or parent portal in each country – as, for instance, promised by the UK Council for Child Internet Safety, would seem an excellent idea.¹⁰

Parents act within a broader social, economic and technological context that is shaped by factors not of their making. Thus the limits of policies that rely on parents should be recognised, and other stakeholders must play a central role to support and complement the activities of parents. This is particularly the case since, although some research is suggestive on this point, it has not been clearly established that parental mediation is effective in reducing children's exposure to risk or increasing their resilience to cope.

So, while policy should empower parents to improve their use of all the available solutions, it should not rely on them, nor expect them to provide the stop gap solution where other regulatory strategies are insufficient.¹¹

Media literacy

If one cannot rely on parents, can one instead hope to empower and thus rely on children themselves? Policies to promote media literacy are increasingly prominent on the European agenda, recognising that technologically convergent and complex, highly commercialised and globalised online environments place considerable demands on individuals, here children, to manage competently and benefit from optimally, even sufficiently.

There are many reasons to welcome the growing efforts to promote media literacy at national and international levels, as this must surely aid efforts to maximise opportunities and minimise risks. But some express reservations that media literacy and safety awareness agendas are getting confused,¹² even though the former has the wide ambition of overcoming the participation gap,¹³ supporting critical and creative literacies, and harnessing the benefits of the Internet for all; while the latter is more instrumental, narrowly focused on a particular agenda of child safety to complement to self- and co-regulatory initiatives.

Since research shows that children, like adults, vary considerably in their ability to access, judge and navigate among the range of media contents and services, and that they often have a weak understanding of how contents are produced, disseminated, financed or regulated, promoting media literacy can only help children's necessary decisions about trustworthiness, authenticity and risk online.¹⁴ On the other hand, media literacy, as with parental mediation and other forms of knowledge transfer, is generally under-resourced and uneven in its provision, and unequal and inconsistent in its adoption and application by individuals. Nor yet does research establish that media literacy brings real benefits in terms of protection against harm, take up for communication rights, enhancing active citizenship or creative and cultural expression and learning.

Regulation

Across Europe, all kinds of self- and co-regulatory initiatives are underway, including the EC's Safer Internet Programme's support for hotlines and awareness-raising, the Council of Europe's call for 'public service value' in online provision, the 2009 Safer Social Networking Principles for the EU,¹⁵ and the endorsement of the importance of media literacy in the EC's Audiovisual Media Services Directive. Since *EU Kids Online* has found that substantial proportions of children are encountering, often accidentally, pornographic,

violent, hostile or racist content.¹⁶ Since many lack the tools and skills by which they (or their parents) can prevent such exposure, such initiatives are important: potentially, age-verification, take-down, opt-in and opt-out, safe search procedures, moderation, filtering preferences, kitemarks, user-defaults, privacy settings, report abuse buttons etc. will make a real difference.

In the spirit of self- or co-regulation favoured by European stakeholders, although some of these initiatives are encouraged top-down, some are initiated and many rely on the active cooperation of media and communications organisations, established and new, as well as on national regulatory agencies. At the present time, there is especially much to be done in certain countries where effective regulation (self- or co-) is largely lacking, awareness-raising is still in the early stages, NGOs are not yet very engaged,¹⁷ and Internet access is racing ahead of regulatory frameworks, commercial practice and public knowledge of how to manage it. Moreover, such regulatory initiatives are still to be evaluated independently,¹⁸ and the processes underpinning self-regulation are not always transparent. Nonetheless, such initiatives are much to be welcomed. As each is developed, it must be researched to match anticipated with actual user behaviour. It must be evaluated for its usability, its risk reduction outcomes and, also important, any trade-off in restricting freedoms. Then it must be translated into guidance for users, for Internet literacy depends on online 'legibility' – namely a transparent, interpretable, conventionalised environment for users.

An analogy is sometimes drawn between Internet safety and road safety – as children must learn to navigate both.¹⁹ Teaching children how to cross roads – a task for schools, parents and communities – is well understood and widely supported. The same applies to learning to swim, as Tanya Byron argued in her influential review.²⁰ But society teaches children to cross roads safely (and adults to drive safely) only in an environment in which roads have been designed with safety as well as freedom in mind – they have traffic lights, width restrictions, road bumps, marked crossing points, and more.

This design is not only physical but also social: the rules of the road are known, accepted and enforced; their very existence enables children to take care of themselves and to make sensible judgements about the behaviour of others. Children are also taught what to do, how to complain, report or get help if needed – this takes institutional provision. In short, children can only be

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In short, children can only be taught effectively how to manage the internet if the online environment is to some degree regulated, by a combination of law enforcement, interface and website design, search processes, content and service providers, provision of online safety resources, and more. Only in such a context can those of us who research children's online understandings and practices see the way ahead to conducting research and developing policy recommendations in a way that is feasible and realistic.

Endnotes

¹ See Eurobarometer. (2008). *Towards a Safer Use of the Internet for Children in the EU: A Parents' Perspective*. Luxembourg: European Commission.

² The network adopted an analytical framework which divided the research field into individual (child-centred) and country (macro-societal) levels of analysis. This was operationalized by the construction and testing of policy-relevant research questions and hypotheses. Both individual and country level comparisons were contextualised in relation to the wider structures of children's lives. The work was conducted by research teams from 21 European countries. For the final report, see Livingstone, S., and Haddon, L. (2009) *EU Kids Online: Final Report*, at <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/24372/>. For project information, see www.eukidsonline.net.

³ For a more detailed account, see de Haan, J., and Livingstone, S. (2009) *Policy and research recommendations*, at <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/24387/>

⁴ For a detailed account of many of the findings summarised here, see Hasebrink, U., Livingstone, S., and Haddon, L. (2008) *Comparing children's online opportunities and risks across Europe: Cross-national comparisons for EU Kids Online*, at <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/21656/>

⁵ Bauwens, J., Lobe, B., Segers, K., & Tsaliki, L. (in press) A shared responsibility: similarities and differences in the factors that shape online risk assessment for children in Europe. *Journal of Children and Media*.

⁶ Eurobarometer (2008), *op cit*.

⁷ Staksrud, E., Livingstone, S., Haddon, L., and Olafsson, K. (2009) *What Do We Know About Children's Use of Online Technologies? A Report on Data Availability and Research Gaps in Europe*, at <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/24367/>

⁸ For example, see Ybarra, M. L., Mitchell, K. J., Wolak, J., & Finkelhor, D. (2006). Examining Characteristics and Associated Distress Related to Internet Harassment: Findings From the Second Youth Internet Safety Survey. *Pediatrics*, 118(4), e1169-1177.

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¹⁰ The UK Council for Child Internet Safety was established by the UK government in 2008, following the Tanya Byron's (2008) report, *Safer Children in a Digital World: The Report of the Byron Review*. London: Department for Children, Schools and Families, and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport.

¹¹ See Livingstone, S., and Helsper, E. J. (2008) Parental mediation of children's internet use. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 52(4), 581-599.

¹² Bachmair, B., & Bazalgette, C. (2007). The European Charter for Media Literacy: Meaning and potential. *Research in Comparative and International Education*, 2(1), 80-87.

¹³ See Jenkins, H. (2006). An Occasional Paper on Digital Media and Learning. Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century. Chicago: The John D and Catherine T Macarthur Foundation, at http://digitalllearning.macfound.org/atf/cf/%7B7E45C7E0-A3E0-4B89-AC9C-E807E1B0AE4E%7D/JENKINS_WHITE_PAPER.PDF

¹⁴ Livingstone, S. (2008) Internet literacy: Young people's negotiation of new online opportunities. In T. McPherson (Ed.), *Unexpected outcomes and innovative uses of digital media by youth* (101-121). MacArthur Foundation Series on Digital Media and Learning, at <http://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/pdf/10.1162/dmal.9780262633598.101?cookieSet=1>

¹⁵ See http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/activities/social_networking/docs/sn_principles.pdf

¹⁶ Hasebrink et al (2009), *op cit*.

¹⁷ Although the efforts of Insafe (www.saferinternet.org) and eNacso (<http://www.redbarnet.dk/enacso>) should be recognised here.

¹⁸ As for filters, for example, in Deloitte Enterprise Risk Services (2008). *Safer Internet: Protecting Our Children on the Net Using Content Filtering and Parental Control Techniques*. A report prepared for the Safer Internet Plus Programme, European Commission. See <http://www.sip-bench.eu/sipbench.php?page=results2008&lang=en>

¹⁹ Criddle, L. (2006). *Look Both Ways: Help Protect Your Family on the Internet*. Redmond, Washington: Microsoft Press.

²⁰ Byron (2008), *op cit*.