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## 'Knowledge enhancement': the risks and opportunities of evidence-based policy

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**'Knowledge enhancement': The risks and opportunities of evidence-based policy**

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**Abstract**

The EU Kids Online network was funded by the European Commission's (EC) Safer Internet programme since 2006 as a 'knowledge enhancement' project '*to make a better internet for children'*. This chapter discusses how the network - a multinational and multidisciplinary group of researchers approached the task of enhancing knowledge so as to underpin European policy development in this important area. It is argued that research cannot be conducted in isolation if it is to inform stakeholders but, rather, depends on researchers engaging in expert and public debates, contributing to the deliberative process by which policy unfolds while, simultaneously retaining academic values of rigour, contextualisation and independence. In the case of EU Kids Online, the chapter discusses how this proved a learning process for both the research and stakeholder communities, all complicated by the media panics and public anxieties surrounding children's online risk and safety matters.

**Enhancing knowledge**

> *Knowledge enhancement projects are projects to strengthen the [Safer Internet] programme's knowledge base on safer Internet and online technologies generally.*[1]

The EU Kids Online network has been funded by the European Commission's (EC) Safer Internet programme since 2006 as a 'knowledge enhancement' project '*to make a better internet for children.*'[2] This goal is arguably more grounded in public values than the self-avowedly neo-liberal orientation of the EC's Framework programmes (established to promote research that advances *'the goals of growth, competitiveness and employment'*[3]). But being part of the Safer Internet programme rather than a regular Framework programme means that the network is one of very few research projects funded by a small organisation for which research was, at the start at least, a curious and rather tangential activity. In this chapter, I reflect on how the network has worked out what knowledge enhancement can mean, both for ourselves as academic researchers and for our funder and its active group of stakeholders across national governments, industry, law enforcement, children's charities, educators and the public.

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[1] See http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/activities/sip/docs/call_2012/work_programme_final.pdf, accessed on 9 April 2012.

[2] As announced by EC Vice President Neelie Kroes in establishing a coalition of chief executive officers (CEOs) of major internet companies on 1 December 2011; see
http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=IP/12/445&format=HTML&aged=0&language=EN&guiLanguage=en.

[3] See http://cordis.europa.eu/fp7/understand_en.html, accessed on 9 April 2012.

One early question was, what is the prior knowledge base to be enhanced through our work? A review of the available literature 10 years ago had identified very little research on children's online opportunities and risks (Livingstone, 2003). Even when we conducted our first review of the field a few years later, it was difficult to draw reliable conclusions from the few published studies – a couple of cross-national studies (notably, the SAFT project, Staksrud, 2012; also the project, Mediappro, 2006) and a scattering of national studies, mostly from the US. These used different definitions of internet use or risk, and different methods to sample and measure online experiences. Moreover, whatever was available in the academic field was largely unknown to practitioners, being written in academic prose and published in expensive academic journals. To 'enhance' knowledge, therefore, we first scoped what research existed, entering details of some 400 studies into a public database and also identifying key gaps in the evidence base (Staksrud, *et al.*, 2007).[4]

But our task was not just one of identifying existing academic research and making it known to policymakers. As we soon realised, knowledge enhancement includes the need to explain about the nature of knowledge: we were repeatedly asked about the research process – the rationale behind sampling, the operationalisation of concepts, the problems of research ethics, the possibilities for analysis and interpretation. So for the first phase of EU Kids Online (2006-09), we also promoted best practice in terms of method (see Lobe, *et al.*, 2008), and developed a conceptual and comparative research framework (see Hasebrink, *et al.*, 2009). Moreover, we found that knowledge enhancement was a two-way street, for we too had much to learn. After all, we found ourselves working with a stakeholder community experienced in the provision, management and evaluation of a wide range of awareness-raising and safety initiatives, with a wealth of expertise among them, even if not formally expressed or theorised in academic terms. Some of our knowledge enhancement efforts therefore enabled recognition and reflexivity more than enlightenment. We offered accounts of the world that were already familiar to practitioners, and pinpointed gaps in knowledge that had already been identified, if not always articulated.

The conduct and dissemination of our 2010 survey of 1,000 children aged 9-16 in each of 25 countries marked a step-change in terms of our capacity for knowledge enhancement. Now the focus was on generating new knowledge – notably, that obtained from interviewing children directly, rather than relying on accounts of their experience provided by parents or teachers – and ensuring this knowledge reached the ears of those who needed it. Fortunately for us (and perhaps unusually in public policy domains), we had an eager audience of policymakers (and the media), keen to learn of available findings, full of questions and suggestions, and ready to translate evidence-based recommendations into practice. Our reported percentages of children doing or experiencing x, y or z were seized upon as significant additions to the evidence base and, often as

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[4] An image that captures research on children and the internet a decade or so ago is that of the Tower of Babel: when it comes to sharing knowledge across countries, language represents a serious barrier, too little recognised in our English-dominated research environment. Not only do researchers publish in national languages, but also because their research participants speak those languages, itself an especial concern in representing the experiences of children across Europe. Language differences are not eliminated by the (expensive) process of translation, for they reflect embedded cultural differences in meaning, value and distinction. This was brought home to the EU Kids Online network when we began discussing cyberbullying, a phenomenon newly being discussed in English language research but apparently unrecognised in many other languages or, at least, not named as such. The word 'bully' did not exist in some languages, and the nearest translation referred to harassment among adults in the workplace, ill-applied to children at school, although now the English word has taken hold in many languages.

the legitimation for a particular policy direction or new safety initiative. For example, the finding that 38% of internet users aged 9-12 have a profile on a social networking site (SNS) (although many networks set a minimum joining age of 13) was widely cited as evidence of the failure of industry self-regulation. For the EC, the finding that the youngest children were least satisfied with online content provision (only one in three thought provision was 'very good') provoked them to initiate a pan-European prize for content produced for (and by) children. In the UK, the finding that 54% of parents say that they block or filter websites at home – putting them at the top of the European ranking – was much cited as evidence for Britain's success in the internet safety league, although it was also used to encourage efforts to get the other half to use filtering software. Many other examples could be given, each country being most interested in instances where it ranked top or bottom within Europe.

**Engaging in debates**

Enhancing knowledge may seem a rather calm and sensible affair, notwithstanding its challenges, but not all knowledge enhancement activities are straightforward, and one of the most challenging proved to be less the provision of 'facts and figures' but the management of their interpretation and use. There is little point, we discovered, in publishing findings and placing them on a library shelf or website: findings only enhance knowledge if they are used, and research users have particular and at times conflicting interests at stake. Thus knowledge enhancement required us to address the strongly felt anxieties and misconceptions about children's internet use among not only policymakers but also the general public and the mass media. Especially in the absence of evidence, both experts and the wider public tend to endorse the popular trope of child-as-victim/internet-as-dangerous that has long characterised each new medium in the history of culture and technology (Critcher, 2008). In part, this is an effect of the moral panic framing promoted by the tabloid media (Ponte, Bauwens, & Mascheroni, 2009), but in part, the policy domain itself seemed to demand this – only problems attract attention and funding, so children's internet use had to be framed as a problem it if it was to be resourced (and as we ourselves found, when publishing our work, press releases without a sense of urgency or threat resulted in little publicity).

In effect, we found ourselves trying to change the dominant discourses regarding children's internet use. To enhance knowledge, what people already know, or think they know, or prefer to believe about the world, must itself be brought into the open, challenged and rethought. All this led us into some heavily contested terrain. If we think back to the early days of mass access to the internet, just a decade or so ago, it was widely feared that the internet represented a virtual Wild West, a realm separate from the online world in both its content (being full of pornography and paedophiles) and its structure (being mysterious to adults in its workings and evading all regulation). Public pronouncements in the media, government and everyday discourse were (and still are) supremely technologically determinist in their vision of the internet landing fully formed in our lives as if an extra-terrestrial invader, although they were (and still are) also deeply familiar in their echoing of the moral panics that have always accompanied new media, especially those favoured by children. In this discourse, the internet represents a threat to innocence, a corrupter of morals, undermining authority and damaging children's intellectual and social development. These public anxieties enter into the regulatory debates among stakeholders by creating a sense of urgency regarding the

supposedly imminent threat to children that skews the debate against cautious, complex or contingent judgements (Livingstone, 2009).

The contrary position is almost as problematic, however. As critics became concerned that public fears about child online safety would stimulate ill-judged legislation to restrict both users and producers online – and both, it is true, occurred during the 1990s[5] – an oppositional view emerged, claiming that children have all the digital skills they need to cope online, that parents, not industry, should be held responsible for their safety, and that regulatory efforts to improve safety represent covert or even overt moves towards censorship (according to speech rights advocates) and/or bureaucratic restrictions on market freedoms (according to the neo-liberals). As two critical scholars commented of the 2008 Internet Governance Forum, *'the push for online child protection was perceived to be a threat to privacy and freedom of expression rights'* (Raboy & Shtern, 2010, p. 219). Szoka and Thierer (2009, p. 1) put it even more starkly, *'Online privacy, child safety, free speech and anonymity are on a collision course.'* Yet on reflection, at least the advocates of children's safety and of adult freedom of speech – if they must be pitched one against the other – are generally ready to argue the merits of their cases in public, and each side can and does respect the evidence (Livingstone, 2011; Powell & Hills, 2010). More difficult is addressing children's safety insofar as it seems to call for more public intervention in the market, for here the opposition is not expressed in terms of values or evidence but rather in terms of feasibility (child safety proposals are judged impractical in a fast-paced, globalised market with a long and ill-coordinated value chain from provider to end-user). To penetrate the weaknesses in this position demands considerable insider knowledge of the technological, legal and business issues at stake.[6]

In the context of hotly contested multi-stakeholder debates, finding space for calm voices, non-aligned positions and complex perspectives can be difficult (Hintz, 2007). Certainly the contestation surrounding children's internet safety made for a heady context in which to report, for example, that children encounter more or less risk, have more or fewer digital skills, or benefit from more or less attentive parenting. Any report, it seemed, had the potential to position us, perhaps misunderstand us, as being aligned with one or another group of stakeholders in an oppositional debate.[7] The nature of the knowledge we produced, its relation to the contested debates that contextualised it and the ways in which we communicated it were all important in ensuring that EU Kids Online supported evidence-based policymaking rather than what has been cynically termed 'policy-based evidence making'.

**What knowledge?**

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[5] Examples include the US 1996 Communications Decency Act (struck down in 1997) and the Child Online Protection Act (passed in 1998 to restrict children's access to online pornography, and struck down as unconstitutional in 2009), as well as the Dot-Kids Implementation and Efficiency Act (passed in 2002 but never implemented and thus effectively defunct) (Livingstone, 2011).

[6] Although EU Kids Online as a network lacked sufficient expertise in this regard, along with many working from a child rights and child protection perspective, the wider policy field here has addressed this by building multi-stakeholder coalitions, most notably, the CEO coalition instigated by EC Vice President Neelie Kroes in 2011-12; in the UK, the UK Council for Child Internet Safety plays a similar role in ensuring informed collaboration across different interests.

[7] For notwithstanding the oft-stated claim that this is a multi-stakeholder debate, in practice, participants found themselves aligned on one or other of two sides – industry versus non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

*As anyone working in the field of research use knows, a central irony is the only limited extent to which evidence advocates can themselves draw on a robust evidence base to support their convictions that greater evidence use will ultimately be beneficial to public services.* (Nutley, Walter, & Davies, 2007, p. 271)

At the end of the first phase of our work, EU Kids Online had identified not only the range of crucial evidence gaps but also the array of methodological flaws that characterised them, further undermining the potential for grounding policymaking in evidence. Our bluff was called, however, when the EC Safer Internet programme funded our second phase of work precisely to fill those gaps using methods of our own design. The result was the conduct of a survey that combined both breadth and depth, hugely adding to the evidence base although greatly taxing the energies and expertise of the network. Nonetheless, as we became painfully aware, our 'ideal project' faced its own limitations, some more serious than others, and one of which was that its findings would go out of date sooner than we had managed to analyse and report them. Still, this represented the most comprehensive, robust and complex dataset produced to date, and we were determined to mine its value for all its worth.

What knowledge did we have to communicate? When we began our work in 2006, these challenges – of the pace of change, of cultural differences, of being misunderstood or co-opted by the hotly contested rhetoric of moral anxieties versus deregulation (of markets, of speech) – seemed to impede the investigation of how children were using the internet and with what risk of harm. But in retrospect, it seems that the hazards that threatened to trip us up also proved useful in shaping our eventual direction. In other words, the very task of identifying, anticipating, contending with and/or avoiding these hazards provided a series of correctives that guided EU Kids Online towards working out, constructively, what knowledge was needed, what misconceptions could valuably be corrected and what argumentation would be most eagerly adopted.

Thus knowledge enhancement, we discovered, is best managed through a dialogic process of engagement between researchers and research users (widely defined to include all stakeholders from funders and experts to the public and the media). The framing and presentation of research findings is never purely descriptive – most obviously the headline of the press release, but also the terminology selected for the body of a report, the priorities embedded in the executive summary, each decision taken regarding what to include, highlight or omit, even the smallest words used to describe findings (as in, 'only' 17% of children experienced this or that) – all reveal the values of the researchers and their expectations of the policy process, and each is open to contestation. The same is true, of course, in designing and conducting a project in the first place.

With these cautions in mind, let us review the main knowledge contribution offered by EU Kids Online.[8] The many findings of the 25-country survey have been amply detailed in other chapters in this volume and, even more so, in our recent book of research findings (Livingstone, Haddon & Görzig, 2012), itself drawing on a series of reports and journal publications (see www.eukidsonline.net). Although these amount to hundreds of pages, with many tables and figures,

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[8] Of course we are not the only researchers producing knowledge in this field, and our work to develop communicable and useful findings has been conducted sometimes explicitly and sometimes tacitly in tandem with those in cognate fields or countries (e.g. Palfrey, *et al.*, 2008; Smith, Mahdavi, & Carvalho, 2008; Ybarra, *et al.*, 2007).

we are often given just 10-15 minutes to distil the main findings into a short presentation, whether for academic or policy audiences; journalists, of course, reduce this further to a mere sound bite. So although each talk or report is differently tailored to its topic and audience, Table 1 distils our contribution into five points which have emerged through a dialogic and dialectic process of trial and error – trying out ideas in policy presentations, discovering the assumptions of others or the misunderstanding of our own work and then refining our presentation and re-analysing data until a stable synthesis could be reached that appears, over time, to have hit its mark with some success.

- - - Table 1 about here - - -

**(Mis)communicating knowledge**

> *Young exposed to pornography.* (*The Daily Telegraph*, 10 January 2011)
> *Net censors use UK's kid-safety frenzy to justify clampdown.* (*The Register*, 10 February 2011)

Some messages are particularly difficult to communicate, and framing their dissemination illustrates the wider challenge of (mis)communicating knowledge. For example, our finding that efforts to improve digital skills appear to increase not only the opportunities but also the risks can easily be (mis)read as undermining efforts to promote digital literacy. Problematic for EC and national governments promoting a self-regulatory approach is the finding that end-user filters do not seem to reduce children's incidence of online risk. Another finding – this time not what industry wished to learn – is that 38% of 9- to 12-year-olds have SNS profiles that supposedly restrict such services to those aged 13+. These latter instances suggest that regulation – if its intent is to filter inappropriate content or enforce age-verification – is not really working and this, in turn, caused some concern within the EU Kids Online network; those endorsing a child rights perspective may not wish, even by implication, to support the rationale for further top-down, state-led regulation.[9]

When the research topic is of widespread public as well as policy interest, the task of communicating knowledge is yet more difficult. Indeed, the considerable public anxiety surrounding children and online risk, amplified by tabloid media reporting, puts pressure on both researchers and policymakers to manage public scrutiny of their mutual negotiation as well as scrutiny of the evidence base and its use in policymaking. In an effort to present empirical findings in a politically independent and scientifically rigorous manner, EU Kids Online has learned to pay particular attention to the process and genres of dissemination (the executive summary, press release, media report, YouTube interview or myth-busting blog post) as well as, of course, the academic journal article. The traditional academic view that knowledge is best enhanced by publishing new ideas and findings in peer-reviewed journals is far from that recognised by

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[9] Our findings on parental mediation also threatened to undermine children's right to enjoy the opportunities offered by the internet, since it turned out that children not only encounter fewer risks online if their parents restrict their internet use but they also reduce children's online opportunities. So rather than promote the evidence-based policy recommendation that parents should restrict children's internet use, we instead investigated whether any parental strategy effectively both reduces risks and increases opportunities. This proved a more complex question; our eventual answer – that if parents actively mediate their children's internet use, they may reduce their child's experience of harm without reducing their opportunities and digital skills – matched both the empirical findings and our child rights values (Duerager & Livingstone, 2012).

stakeholders; for the latter, by contrast, the purpose is to enhance the practical knowledge of those working 'on the ground' – the awareness-raisers, teachers, child protection workforce and those charged with customer care in industry. Moreover, while academics tend to begin with a simple problem statement and identify a complex, qualified and contingent answer, policymakers, by contrast, being faced with the messy realities of everyday life, listen out for simple, straightforward and actionable recommendations (notwithstanding their constant refrain that there is no 'one-size-fits-all' or 'silver bullet' solution). Hence they tend to filter our lengthy and detailed presentations in order to locate a single magic finding that may give them what they need. Retaining some control over this key bullet point or recommendation is crucial for the researcher.

As observed earlier, although producing the evidence base was crucial to our knowledge enhancement task, so, too, was negotiating the significance of that evidence base with stakeholders. Misconceptions about methodology turn out to be rife among policymakers and wider industry and civil society stakeholders with a smattering of social science knowledge: quick online polls that 'contradicted' our representative survey results were preferred over our findings; some were frustrated that we hadn't asked children what we saw as unethical questions; and there were many confusions about sampling, about average differences not being absolute differences (a statistically significant difference can be small in terms of its effect size) and about whether correlation implies causation. Most worrying for the network was the tendency in public reporting to lose vital statistical information – for example, '72% of internet-using children aged 9-16' quickly became '72% of children' while 'boys claim higher digital skills than girls' turned into 'girls lack digital skills'. Worst was the transformation of a complex finding ('12% of internet-using 9- to 16-year-olds have seen sexual images online' and of those, 'one third were upset by the experience') into a simple and incorrect one ('one in three kids upset by online porn'!).

Merely publishing and publicising reports turned out to be insufficient – network members should ideally be personally present at any and all opportunities to disseminate, clarifying and contextualising the interpretation of findings and contesting misreadings as they occur among key policy actors. For example, we have to 'be there' to contest the (common) interpretation that reporting that some children are upset by online pornography is somehow a coded call for internet censorship. Or that showing that some parents can and do install filters is insufficient justification for the industry to consider regulation unnecessary. Similarly, as we have found ourselves repeating over and over, reporting the percentage of children who encounter online *risk* is not the same as saying that that percentage of children is *harmed* by internet use. This last point has been the hardest to communicate, and the EU Kids Online network has become adept at putting over each point with great care, stating that risk refers to the statistical probability, not the inevitability of harm and, as the evidence suggests, a rather low probability at that; judging the probability of an event is different from calling it 'probable'. Further, we emphasise that to talk of *some* children does not imply *all* children, that content is not in and of itself harmful (although it may be potentially harmful), as harm depends on the circumstances, that evidence of harm need not imply a severe or debilitating degree of harm, and also crucial, that talk of online risk does not mean we have forgotten that the internet has many benefits.

We have learned, therefore, to frame the presentation of our findings in ways that ensure the main points – concepts, findings and recommendations – are not only clear but that they are presented in

such a way as to positively refute undesirable misreadings. As the five core conclusions in Table 1 illustrate, we now try not only to say what we want to say but also to counter particular claims that others have, until that point, explicitly or implicitly endorsed. In short, we have adapted our *style of presentation* to the discursive norms of policymakers (no jargon or statistics, short sentences and no circumlocution, start rather than end with the main point, etc.) the better to support the *independence of our content* (directly state and counter key claims, maintain integrity with your theoretical stance, stay close to your data, report contrary and unclear as well as supporting findings). Interestingly then, communicating knowledge demands attention to the argumentation unfolding among stakeholders, and this is fraught both because of the divergent (and often opaque) interests at stake and also because of the relentless timetable of policymaking and policy actions. But figuring out this timetable, learning to anticipate the policy windows of opportunity and dropping ongoing university commitments to 'be there' is demanding for academics used to longer-term planning cycles.[10]

**Reflections on evidence-based policy**

> *There is nothing a Government hates more than to be well-informed; for it makes the process of arriving at decisions much more complicated and difficult.* (John Maynard Keynes, *The Times*, 11 March 1937)

Notwithstanding Keynes' insight, the adoption of an evidence-based approach to policy represents a broad response among Western democracies to the pressing challenge of how to regulate increasingly globalised industries operating in a highly specialised domain; it also meets the increasingly popular demand for a participatory rather than a top-down, command-and-control style of regulation. Thus we have seen across diverse regulatory domains the formation of multi-stakeholder alliances at supra- and sub-national as well as national levels that use research evidence on the one hand, to exploit expertise so as to be targeted and flexible and on the other hand, to draw 'ordinary voices' into complex and more inclusive processes of deliberation (Lunt & Livingstone, 2012). Evidence, it is often held, provides a rational basis upon which policymakers can identify the problems requiring public policy intervention, inform the objectives that public policy can reasonably be expected to deliver, evaluate the effectiveness of policies once implemented and guide the process of policy adjustment and improvement (Sanderson, 2002).

But producing evidence to underpin evidence-based policy is far from straightforward. For the EU Kids Online network, this has required, on the one hand, building interest and capacity among an initially disparate group of researchers across different countries and, on the other, building understanding among the Commission, national and international stakeholders and researchers, about what evidence is, how it should be interpreted and valued and how it may or may not guide practical policy initiatives. Both tasks are demanding, but at least the former – building research

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[10] The question of timing is crucial – EU Kids Online cannot be the only research enterprise to have discovered that findings released when they become available (and certainly if one waits for the academic publication) easily miss their mark, whereas findings produced to fit a particular 'policy window' can reach a wide and relevant audience. A practical compromise, we have found, may be achieved by timing the release of findings according to the policy calendar of stakeholder events, speeches and conferences (a calendar that is not written down anywhere in advance and takes effort as well as insider knowledge to construct).

networks expert in a particular domain, often drawing on and debating diverse expertise and disciplinary perspectives, and working to create and sustain capacity – is already familiar to researchers. Yes, it makes their mutual differences salient, but the benefits of cooperating and complementing each other and of scaling-up the impact of their work are self-evident. The latter task is less familiar to many on both sides, not because academics live in ivory towers – on the contrary, they are fascinated by the complex reality of people's lives and are often highly motivated to find solutions to real-world problems (Nyre, 2009) – but because direct policy engagement is rarely what academics are trained or rewarded for, and because academia is littered with cautionary tales of policy efforts gone wrong. Indeed, the possibility that their ideas will be ignored, misunderstood, unwelcome and/or misused is enough to keep many academics from taking even a step outside the university, even though there is, as we have also discovered, much to learn and much to gain from such direct engagement.

Academics conducting research to inform policy are faced with a paradox that requires careful and reflexive navigation. On the one hand, we know that research is value-laden, always conducted from a particular standpoint, preferably aware of its possible consequences – in short, an intervention in the policy space in its own right. Yet on the other hand, policymakers value research only insofar as it sustains the claim to objectivity and independence. In other words, it is precisely our disinterestedness that gives us the right to contribute and comment in a policy debate where interests conflict. In relation to the politics of knowledge, this point has been much discussed: Sanderson (2002, p. 6) observes, following the constructivist position (e.g. Guba & Lincoln, 1994), *'that scientific knowledge can have no unique claim to objectivity, and that research does not simply inform policy development in an instrumental way but rather plays an important role in promoting broader "enlightenment" of policy makers'* by engaging in a deliberative process with them. While this captures, in practice, the spirit of the process that EU Kids Online has engaged with, it is the claim of objective knowledge that has rhetorical power beyond the academy, leaving the paradox unresolved.

The inevitability of a standpoint, I suggest, need not undermine the value of our evidence or arguments; rather, policy and public audiences should be in receipt of knowledge about us and our work to evaluate them fairly. It is important that EU Kids Online works independently of governmental, charitable and industry interests and that it strives to meet the exacting standards of the academic community, which it does by making its methodology transparent, its data available and its analyses open to critical peer review.[11] Nonetheless, our particular politics and values inevitably direct the choices made in our research, and these have been the subject of much discussion within the network. A major priority, early agreed upon, was to frame the work of EU Kids Online within the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Hamelink, 2008). This has meant foregrounding children's experiences and perceptions, adopting a child-centred

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[11] Specifically, the EU Kids Online network has deliberately pursued a strategy of, first, making public as much as possible of the data (publishing the cross-tabulations immediately, lodging the full dataset in a public archive within a year of the fieldwork, producing a detailed report of findings as swiftly as possible); second, presenting the findings in themed short reports and presentations tailored to particular policy debates; and third, submitting its work to peer-reviewed academic journals and book publishers where, it may surprise policymakers to learn, the work faces a different set of critiques (regarding our theoretical framework, the supposedly excessive size of our sample and, especially, the selection and operationalisation of concepts – for example, digital skills – in terms of particular items and scales).

methodology insofar as possible and advocating for children's rights when these need re-affirming – they are easily lost, for instance, in the struggle between child protectionists and the free (adult) speech lobby (Livingstone, 2011).[12] But more dialogically, given that we are always addressing a particular audience (industry, child protection, government, parents, and so forth), we found it a good rule of thumb to question the assumptions and conclusions of each particular audience: for example, industry can be challenged if it hopes to rely on parents for child protection, but parents can be challenged to step up when they expect governments to manage the internet for their children. Since our findings provide qualified support for the safety contributions of each of a range of stakeholders, this strategy is consistent with both the evidence and our independence from the audience being addressed.

Let me conclude by observing, with Nutley, *et al.* (2007), that there is more than one model of evidence-based policy making in circulation. The 'push' model typically favoured by academics – according to which knowledge is disseminated to policymakers in the form and at the time that suits academics – is of limited value, since academic writing is not only little understood but is easily misunderstood, and it easily misses its mark. The 'pull' model, by contrast, is often experienced as unduly onerous by academics: in this problem-solving model, policymakers seek out research findings to address a specific question or problem, but of course academics are rarely at leisure to answer the question with the urgency expected of them, and so both sides are often frustrated. Both push and pull models, although the most obvious, suffer the limitations consequent upon the typically poor relations sustained between academics and policymakers; if neither knows how the other works, of the nature of their concerns and the demands upon them, then their interactions are likely to prove frustrating.

Worse still are Nutley, *et al.*'s next two models. The political model uses research findings as ammunition when decision-making is adversarial. The tactical model treats research findings as a resource for applying or deflecting pressure, supporting or rejecting a decision, as desired (as discussed, for example, in Buckingham, 2009). Both are sufficient to make academics run back to the ivory tower, preferring not to engage at all, to keep their knowledge to themselves, than to be thus abused. But as should be clear, EU Kids Online has sought a different approach, and here Nutley, *et al.*'s last two models are useful, representing in essence minimal and maximal versions of what is surely the optimal strategy. Specifically, the interactive model envisages a sustained interaction between researchers and policymakers, while the enlightenment model goes further, transcending the instrumental use of research by recognising that research is not a pre-given but is rather developed, interpreted and used within a dynamic and constructive process of engagement and mutual learning between researchers and policymakers. It must be confessed that, although EU Kids Online does in many ways aspire to this enlightenment model, it has taken a long time to build sufficient trust on either side to enable this, and any success remains fragile.

Although the long-term interests of researchers and policymakers appear aligned (that is, to make the world 'a better place' for children), not only may their short-term interests diverge (for example,

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[12] Practically, then, we emphasise children's online 'opportunities and risks' rather than just the risks, and routinely report on the opportunities for learning, communication, sociality and fun that the internet can and should afford children before discussing the risks; moreover, we argue that some degree of exposure to some risks may even be beneficial, for only then can they become resilient and learn how to cope themselves with what they find online.

taking the time to conduct careful research versus delivering results when a policy process requires them), but more importantly, their values remain distinct. Remaining reflexive about these differences is therefore crucial. Policymakers must determine what would make the world better for children (such as more positive online content, less harm or more effective industry self-regulation). Meanwhile, academic researchers must reserve the right always to question these determinations (what is 'positive', 'better' or 'effective'?). Alliances can and should be only provisional, never comfortably established, with academics continually moving between the insider role (advising, negotiating, collaborating) and the outsider role (critiquing, doubting, rethinking) (Bohman, 1991). Nutley, *et al.* (2007, p. 266) are optimistic, asserting that *'there is real scope here for the creation and reinvigoration of a variety of partnerships aimed at fostering a growth in research-informed dialogue.'* But more often, it seems that when such partnerships occur, they tend to be instrumental (Lunt & Livingstone, 2012), lasting the duration of a project but perhaps not longer. To protect us all from complacency, and to keep us on our toes, I suggest that this is as it should be.

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**Table 1: EU Kids Online's key evidence-based contribution to policy making**

| Key contribution | Supporting evidence | Use by policymakers |
|---|---|---|
| **Children are agents living in a world largely not of their own making.** Although the internet is thoroughly embedded in their lives, with more privatised and mobile access, children are neither wholly media-savvy in their ability to deal with the digital environment nor simply victims, lacking resources to cope with whatever occurs to them online. Rather, they play a range of roles in relation to online content, contact and conduct (as recipient, participant, actor), and their prior experiences (online and offline) affect their internet use; moreover, the affordances of particular online sites as well as the support of teachers, parents and peers, all play a role. However, contra technologically determinist views, the internet may amplify, intensify or undermine benefits and harms, but should not be conceived as their sole or main cause. | - Findings on digital literacies and skills<br>- Analysis of how far different children progress up the 'ladder of opportunities'<br>- Findings on a range of coping responses to different risks<br>- The classification of risks (as both a conceptual framework and in terms of evidence for each risk)<br>- Findings on strategies and extent of mediation of internet use by teachers, parents and peers<br>- Multivariate analyses predicting children's online use, activities, risks, safety and harm | - Classification of risks widely cited to clarify the public policy agenda and to escape the tabloid agenda of internet-related fears<br>- Relative lack of digital skills cited to stimulate both increased awareness-raising and educational efforts and to urge better designed interfaces (to ease children's management of privacy, information and disclosure) |
| **Using the internet affords children both opportunities and risks and the two go hand in hand.** Efforts to manage risk can have the unintended consequence of reducing opportunities, itself problematic given how few children as yet benefit from a deep or wide engagement with the internet. It is inappropriate to promote online opportunities with no thought to the consequences for risk; nor can restrictions be implemented to reduce risk without thinking of the possible costs to children's online opportunities. Moreover, children seek out a range of 'risky opportunities'. | - Findings on the positive correlations among online activities, skills and risks as well as our typology of user types integrating these factors<br>- Analysis that restrictive parental mediation reduces skills and activities as well as risks<br>- Findings on less-than-expected satisfaction among children with the online offer<br>- Findings on risky opportunities (meeting new people, displaying personal information online or pretending to be different on than offline) | - Awareness-raisers' recognition that opportunities bring risks, and that risk management may restrict opportunities<br>- EC established a pan-European prize for positive content produced by children and adults<br>- Acknowledgement of children's experience – between risk and opportunity |
| **Risk refers to the statistical probability (not inevitability) of harm and so is not inherently bad.** The risks that upset children are not the same as those that worry adults. Risk and harm are explained differently | - Lower-than-expected findings for incidence of risk online (findings counter moral panics and reveal many children face little risk, and report | - Efforts to avoid risk-averse, over-protective strategies<br>- Recognition of complex |

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| and should not be confused. Offline and online risk factors make some children particularly vulnerable. Within the rise of user-generated content, some perpetrate as well as suffer online harm and these groups of children overlap. Last, a world without any risk at all is surely undesirable, as children must learn to face the unexpected, to take some degree of calculated risks and, within reason, to cope when things go wrong if children are to become resilient. | even less harm from risk encounters)<br>- Findings on relative incidence of risks (e.g. bullying versus meeting online contacts offline)<br>- Comparative analysis predicting which children report risk and harm<br>- Analyses predicting self-reported harm by range of protective and vulnerability factors<br>- Findings on cyberbullies and their victims<br>- Findings on children's coping, and on the positive link between activities, skills and risk | relation between child victims and (child or adult) perpetrators<br>- Specific focus on varieties of vulnerability, to tailor advice and support appropriately<br>- EC commissioned new research into online victims |
| **Individual, domestic and cross-cultural factors all shape children's online experiences.** At the level of the individual, age is the main factor differentiating children's experiences; next most influential is whether they have psychological difficulties or are risk-takers. Parental use of and familiarity with the internet seems to matter more than socio-economic status (SES), and parental active mediation (more than restrictive or safety-focused mediation) improves children's online experience. The incidence of online risk varies widely across countries, being greater in countries with higher GDP (because more use), while children's digital skills are higher in countries with more schooling and more computers in classrooms. We propose a four-fold country classification: 'lower use, lower risk', 'lower use, some risk', 'higher use, some risk' and 'higher use, higher risk'. | - Findings on individual differences in the incidence of online risk<br>- Findings on parental mediation, as perceived by parents and by children, and analyses of its effectiveness<br>- Cross-cultural findings on similarities and differences in children's online experiences<br>- Analyses predicting cross-cultural differences by a range of external indicators<br>- Country classification by findings for use and risk | - Focus on specific target groups shown to be more at risk (e.g. ever younger children, so more awareness-raising in primary schools, e.g. teens face more potentially harmful user-generated content, so efforts extended to new risks facing teens<br>- Each country noted where it was high on a risk measure or low on a safety measure, and focused policy to redress |
| **More and more effective multi-stakeholder interventions are needed** *'to make the internet a better place for kids,'* in the words of EC Vice President, Neelie Kroes. Although our findings do not support the moral panics that the internet is a bad place for children, they do pinpoint | - Findings on use, skills and risk related to specific platforms (social networking, instant messaging, email, etc.)<br>- Analysis of children's SNS use in terms of | - Debate over policy regarding 'under-age' SNS users<br>- Wider array of parental mediation strategies advised |

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| diverse ways in which the design of online services (e.g. SNS) and their safety features (e.g. reporting tools, parental controls) can be improved. The findings also suggest more and less successful parental mediation strategies, as well as ways in which teachers and others who work with children can provide more effective awareness-raising and support to empower youth, prevent harm and improve safety and digital citizenship. | age, anonymity, privacy, personal disclosure, etc.<br>- Analysis of the partial take-up of parental controls, reporting tools and other technical provisions | than just restriction/filters<br>- CEO coalition advised on better design of safety tools for use by children online |