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The Relationship between Offline and Online Risks

Leslie Haddon and Sonia Livingstone

As the internet has become ever more a part of many people's lives, including children's, many interrelated issues arise about the relationship between online and offline experiences. For the researchers, policy makers, teachers and parents concerned with the question of risk online, this relationship is of particular interest. What is the overall place of the internet in our lives? To what extent have practices changed so that we do online what we used to do offline? Or, do we now do new things online because the internet somehow enables them? Indeed, is the scope of what we can achieve newly enhanced or, conversely, reduced – either for those online or, as much discussed in debates over the digital divide, for those not online (Van Dijk, 2006)? Questions of digital in- or exclusion also apply to children (Livingstone & Helsper, 2007), but more public and policy attention has focused on the nature of their activities once they are online, along with questions of how this may change the nature of parenting, education or social life. But we must also inquire into continuities, for however much they may appear the 'digital natives' (Prensky, 2001; although see Helsper's & Eynon's 2010 critique), children still live in more or less familiar world of home, school and community, albeit that this is increasingly mediated by online communication of various forms.

Our present focus on the relation between offline and online experiences is pertinent to understanding the contemporary nature of childhood and the wider society. We do not mean to compare children's lives before and since the advent of mass internet, though that too is important. Rather, we examine the relation between offline and online spheres of activity, taking two specific risks as our case studies. These, selected because of their importance in the *EU Kids Online* study on which we draw, concern children's exposure to pornography and their experiences of bullying. To understand online versions of these risks, we must inquire into the distinctiveness of virtual spaces – how different are online experiences from comparable offline experiences? For example, is online bullying more problematic than physical bullying to its victims because the bully can reach a victim 24/7, or because the act of bullying is visible to a wide audience? And, is online pornography somehow more problematic than offline because of the sheer volume online or because the nature of that sexual material is different, more extreme, compared with what can normally be accessed by a child offline?

Both academic and popular discussions are fascinated by such questions at present, it seems. Let us explore the nuances of this with a further example. Is there something about the nature of social networking sites themselves that invites children to divulge more about themselves, to a wider range of people (e.g., far more SNS 'friends' than the offline 'friends' we might have), thereby raising concerns about the misuse of that information, the privacy children are giving up

or, indeed, the potential for grooming? This example is useful for reminding us that, despite the affordances of the technology, children are still social actors making decisions about how to use the technology; thus it may be less the technology that shapes present practices than children's uses of the technology, these uses possibly reflecting their prior need or desire for greater social networking opportunities. In the *EU Kids Online* survey, 50 per cent of 9-16 year old internet users said it was a bit or very true that 'I find it easier to be myself on the internet than when I am with people face-to face' and 45 per cent said that they talk about different things on the internet than when speaking to people face-to-face. This suggests that for many children internet communication is special, perhaps giving them a means to deal with the immediacy or embarrassment of face-to-face communication, and thus we can understand why so many of them disclose more about themselves online than they would offline. Moreover, emerging social conventions distinctive to the online environment (sometimes discussed in terms of 'peer pressure' or, more positively, in terms of 'digital citizenship') remind us that social considerations, not just technological options, have a bearing upon what children do online. For even when operating in a technological environment, children remain social actors, acting within a wider social context. In relation to both positive and negative online experiences, then, it is important to ask for the internet – as for preceding media – what do children bring to this encounter, and how do they interpret and react to media, what do they find fascinating or problematic?

Relating offline and online experiences

Let us stand back from the particular discussions of risk in order to appreciate broader debates about the relationship between the offline and online worlds. Following the social shaping of technology approach (MacKenzie & Wacman, 1999; Hutchby, 2001), our focus is not intended as a simple question about the 'impact' of technology. Rather we mean to inquire into how the online environment has been shaped so as to afford possibilities that are either continuous with or distinctive from the offline environment. Let us contrast these two strong positions to make clear the analytic possibilities. When reviewing findings from the first generation of internet studies, Woolgar (2002: 14-19) argued for continuities across offline and online. Somewhat provocatively, he proposed five (then) empirically-supported 'rules' for understanding developments in what he called, with a deliberate question mark, the 'virtual society?', all of which counter the popular assumption that the online and offline are quite distinct. Thus he observed: (1) the importance of contextualization, namely that 'the uptake and use of the new technologies depend crucially on local social context'; (2) the assumption of inequality, that 'the fears and risks associated with new technologies are unevenly socially distributed'; (3) the consistent empirical evidence against displacement of the real, in other words that 'virtual technologies supplement rather than substitute for real activities'; (4) the counter-intuitive observation that 'the more virtual the more real', since the growth of online activities/spaces has unexpectedly intensified, remediated or stimulated innovation in offline activities/spaces; and (5) contra claims about the death of distance, that efforts to transcend the local and promote the global depend on specific local practices and identities – therefore, 'the more global the more local'.

Contrast this with the argument that, by virtue of its being a network that mediates representations and communication in particular ways that differ from face to face communication, the internet affords both new opportunities and, our interest here, new risks to

children. For example, boyd (2008) claims that online communication is distinctively characterized by (1) persistence – being recorded (even permanent), thus permitting asynchronous communication with far long-term consequences than typically apply to face-to-face communication; (2) scalability – the considerable potential for visibility, rescaling simple interactions to constitute networked publics; (3) replicability – enabling multiple versions with no distinction between the original and the copy (and, further, easy and seamless editing to manipulate content); (4) searchability – permitting the easy construction of new, extended or niche relationships (including ready contact among ‘strangers’). She adds that the dynamics of communication and social networking online are driven by three dynamics, adding to the preceding points thus: (5) invisible audiences – a radical uncertainty regarding who is attending to the communication (and, one might add, who is speaking) being built into the architecture of online spaces (exacerbated by conditions of anonymity); (6) collapsed contexts – for the absence of boundaries impedes the maintenance of distinct social contexts; (7) and public/private blurring – this follows from the lack of boundaries and, when scaled up, has distinctive consequences.

As computer-mediated-communication scholars have argued, such features disembody communication from its traditional anchoring in the face-to-face situation of physical co-location, re-embedding it in more flexible, more peer-oriented relations of sociability, thereby transforming the possibilities of communication for better or for worse. Distinctively, offline conduct is socially regulated by norms of behaviour and sanctions for their transgression. While online behaviour hardly goes ungoverned by social convention, the conventions are more flexible and less enforced in the absence of clear social cues, while the blurred boundaries no longer contain private interactions, enabling greater risk and risk-taking. And all this on a scale (in terms of physical and cultural distance, number of people and sheer amount of communication) that far exceeds the traditional limits, and established protective factors, of children’s lives. On the other hand, other scholars (Slater, 2002; Orgad, 2007) sound a warning at the doom-laden implications of such claims, arguing that children (and people in general) still live in the ‘real’ world, commuting between the internet and face-to-face communication seamlessly, seeing friends on Facebook but also at school, chatting to siblings while doing homework online, as aware of their parents’ rules and values when they are online as when they are sitting at the dinner table. And to be sure, although children seem to be in touch with ever more people (‘friends’) and to be online for hours at a time, on reflection they still like to play football, go out with friends, and watch television with the family much as they ever did.

The degree and type of continuity between offline and online experiences is, in short, a fraught question for researchers, policy makers and the public. Arguably, identifying continuity helps to counter some of the moral panics associated with media, questioning how much online behaviour is really ‘new’. For example, in the *EU Kids Online* survey most children (87%) who communicate online turn out to be communicating online with people they already know face-to-face. Meanwhile, American writers on children’s experiences point to the way they ‘hang out’ online, similar to the way a previous generation used to ‘hang out’ in physical locations such as the shopping mall or street corner (Livingstone, 2009). On the other hand, familiar practices do seem altered by being played out in new electronic spaces, leading some to examine how the nature of online world can reshape what occurs offline – for example, amplifying the social dramas that teenagers often experience (Marwick & boyd, 2011).

Research questions and methods

This chapter draws on the findings of the *EU Kids Online* network, which examined the risks faced by children when using the internet in 25 European countries (see www.eukidsonline.net). The survey was funded by the European Commissions' Safer Internet Programme. Interviews were conducted during Spring/Summer 2010 in children's own homes among a random stratified sample of 25,142 children aged 9-16 who use the internet, plus one of their parents. A series of sensitive, risk-related questions were asked of the child in a private, self-completion part of the interview, so that neither the interviewer nor any parent (if present) could oversee how the child answered. Specifically, the risks asked about in the survey were pornography, cyberbullying, sexting (sending and receiving sexual messages or images) and meeting people offline who the child had first met on the internet. The interviews included questions about how offline experiences compare with online ones (e.g., bullying versus cyberbullying), whether the child experienced these as negative (or not) and, if negative, how children tried to cope with the experience. Examples of contextual data collected to help understand responses to risk included socio-demographic variables, psychological profiles of the children, the range of technologies they access and how they use them, and parental strategies to mediate their child's online experiences.

The network has also proposed some hypotheses, two of which are relevant for this chapter. The *risk migration hypothesis* recognises that some children encounter a range of risks in their everyday lives, whether because they are disadvantaged or because they are risk taker, and thus risks encountered offline are now extended online. The *vulnerability hypothesis* recognises that, while not all those who encounter risk online find it at all harmful, for those who are in some ways vulnerable offline (e.g., for psychological, social or other reasons), the more likely online risk will result in harm.

How can these kinds of questions be asked of children in a survey? Although the term 'bullying' has a distinct and familiar meaning in some countries, this is not universal, making the term difficult to translate. So, the term 'bully' was not used in the children's questionnaire. Instead, it was defined thus: 'Sometimes children or teenagers say or do hurtful or nasty things to someone and this can often be quite a few times on different days over a period of time, for example. This can include: teasing someone in a way this person does not like; hitting, kicking or pushing someone around; leaving someone out of things.' Similarly, for both ethical reasons and because of the uncertainties of translation, the term 'pornography' was also not used in the interview with children. Instead, questions about seeing sexual images were introduced as follows: 'In the past year, you will have seen lots of different images – pictures, photos, videos. Sometimes, these might be obviously sexual – for example, showing people naked or people having sex.' The children were then asked 'Have you seen anything of this kind in the past 12 months?', together with some questions about where they had seen such images in general before moving on to questions about the images seen online. Then, for children who had been bullied, or had seen sexual images online, we also asked about harm: again, the specific word 'harm' was not presented to children; rather we asked children if a specific experience had bothered them, defining 'bothered' thus: 'for example, [something that] made you feel uncomfortable, upset, or feel that you shouldn't have seen it.'

In what follows, we ask whether and to what extent children's online experience or bullying and encountering sexual images now exceed their offline equivalents. Note that since we asked about online and offline behaviour, if children admit to offline experiences of sexual images and bullying there seems little reason to believe that they would then conceal the equivalent online experiences. Our ability to address the issue of the distinctiveness of the internet is limited insofar as the *EU Kids Online* survey concentrated its data collection on children's online more

than offline experiences. However, data on the background of those who said they were ‘bothered’ or ‘upset’ by the online experiences can be used to demonstrate how and which social factors make a difference. Finally, we examine the degree of continuity between offline and online experiences by asking how much offline bullying and seeing sexual images carries over into the online world, and by asking whether offline experiences have a bearing upon how the online equivalents are evaluated.

Offline and online risks compared

As Figure 1 shows, the most common form of bullying is still in person, face-to-face: 13 per cent say that someone has acted in a hurtful or nasty way towards them in person face-to-face in the past 12 months compared with 6 per cent who say that this happened on the internet and 3 per cent who say that this happened by mobile phone calls or messages. This is the case in all countries, although the nature of bullying may differ by country. Clearly, the virtual world has not eclipsed the physical one on this respect, although future trends are hard to predict. It would also appear that bullying online appears more common in countries where bullying in general is more common (rather than, say, in countries where the internet is more established). This suggests that online bullying represents a new form of a long-established childhood problem rather than, simply, the consequence of a new technology.

--- Figure 1 about here ---

As regards sexual images (Figure 2), 14 per cent of 9-16 year old internet users overall have seen these on the internet in the past 12 months, followed by 12 per cent on television, films of video, 7 per cent in magazines and books, and 3 per cent on mobile phones. Hence while the internet is now the main source of encounters with sexual images, offline forms still remain important. Overall, in countries where more children have seen sexual images in general (especially, on television, film or video/DVD), they are also more likely to have encountered it online. However, the country comparisons reveal some variation in that, in some countries, the internet represents a proportionately less important source of exposure to pornography (e.g., Germany, Ireland, Portugal, Greece and the U.K.), implying that if children do see sexual images in these countries it is often on other media. By comparison, in some other countries it seems that the internet has become as or more common than any other source of pornography (e.g., Estonia, Finland, Turkey, Spain).

--- Figure 2 about here ---

Offline factors shape online risk and harm

When moving beyond descriptive statistics to logistic regressions, the strongest predictor of both online bullying and seeing sexual images online is the equivalent experience offline (Laurinavičius et al., 2012). In fact, the offline risk is a much larger influence than socio-demographic and psychological factors. Being bullied offline increases the odds of being bullied online by a factor of 10. Seeing sexual materials offline increases the odds of seeing

sexual content online by a factor of 15. Other offline risks (e.g., drinking alcohol, missing school or getting into trouble with the police) also predict our two selected online risks (see SÁgvári & Galács, 2012). Thus the *EU Kids Online* findings confirm the risk migration hypothesis.

However, further analysis of the *EU Kids Online* data shows the relationship emerging between online and offline bullying to be complex, indicating a vicious circle in which the more of one is associated with more of the other – for both bullies and for victims (Lampert & Donoso, 2012; Goerzig, 2011). In other words, the domains of offline and online do not mark separate spheres but, rather, experiences of bullying intersect both. Over half (55%) of online victims said they have also been bullied face-to-face¹ – and, also, over half (56%) of online bullies said they had also bullied people face-to-face. As with bullying, exposure to pornography also crosses the online/offline boundary. Over half (59%) of those viewing online sexual images had seen them offline.

As *EU Kids Online* has both argued and demonstrated, risk does not necessarily result in harm (Livingstone, 2009). By entering a set of social and psychological factors into logistical regressions to predict harm, the findings reveal a common picture across the risks of being bullied online and seeing sexual image online, despite their differences as experiences. For example, as predicted by the vulnerability hypothesis, girls and children who report more psychological difficulties are more likely to say they are bothered by each² (Laurinavičius et al., 2012; see also Lampert & Donoso, 2012; Rovolis & Tsaliki, 2012). On the other hand, there are also differences: those with lower levels of sensation seeking are more upset by online bullying, but this was not a factor in reactions to online sexual images.

Interestingly, for both being bullied online and seeing sexual images online, experiencing the offline risk seems to result in children being less bothered by the online equivalent. This may be explained by habituation: i.e., those children who are bullied offline may become less sensitive to being bullied online; those children who have seen sexual images elsewhere may be less affected by seeing similar images online (Laurinavičius et al., 2012). Or, to interpret this relationship more positively, we may be witnessing children's building of resilience through experience (Masten & Powell, 2003); given the focus of the present chapter, the interesting point here is that offline experiences may support online resilience (just as offline vulnerabilities can render a child vulnerable online also).

Socio-demographic and psychological variables also have a bearing upon the types of coping response employed by those who have been bothered or upset by online risk (Vandoninck et al., 2012). For example, having been bullied online or having been upset by sexual images online, children with higher self-efficacy appear more willing to take a proactive approach and try to fix the problem (rather than, say, simply stopping using the internet). Deleting messages and blocking senders of upsetting messages is also a more common response the more children are active online. In the case of online bullying, low sensation seekers and children with no peer problems prefer a communicative response, such as talking to other about the problem with others. Meanwhile, when faced with upsetting sexual images, a communicative approach is preferred by girls, younger children and those with higher self-efficacy. So, in relation to coping with risk as well as in relation to its incidence, offline factors can make a difference.

Conclusions

The findings reported in this chapter reveal that, in the age of mass internet use, offline bullying remains consistently more prevalent across countries than its online counterpart, although for exposure to sexual images country differences are notable, this remaining to be better understood by future research. Several noteworthy conclusions regarding the relationship between offline and online risk emerge from *EU Kids Online* findings examined here. First, risks do appear to have migrated online, and at both the individual and the country level there is a strong connection between offline and online risks, as reflected in the figures showing just how much the former experience predicts the latter.

But, in keeping with Woolgar's analysis, the 'virtual' has not displaced the 'real': children still are bullied face-to-face, whether verbally or physically, and they are exposed to pornography through a range of media including but far from limited to the internet. What determines the balance of offline and online is clearly complex, depending on the interrelations between children's cultural contexts, on the specific risks involved (of which bullying and pornography are but two), and on the nature of the online environment in different countries (which, in turn, depends on the market, technological infrastructure, national regulation, etc; Lobe & Ólafsson, 2012).

Lastly, there can also be a transfer from offline to online especially: As seen in the data above, if a child learns resilience offline, this may benefit them online; but if they are vulnerable offline, this may also be exacerbated online. Moreover, the online does not merely extend or replicate the offline, for we have seen that it has its own distinct affordances – in some ways more intimate yet also more anonymous, permitting delayed reactions and invisible consequences of one's actions yet in key ways beyond one's control too, with confusing interfaces and unanticipated content or opaque communications resulting in unpredictable or difficult to manage experiences. In the emerging interplay between the online and offline, the communication that occurs in both domains may often be intensified, for better or for worse. Whether in the future, children's use practices, or the design of the online environment, can be modified so as to break any vicious circles that occur, remains to be seen.

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Notes

¹ But only 24% of those who are bullied face-to-face are then bullied online – so for most victims of physical bullying, the experience does not migrate to the internet. The equivalent figure for seeing sexual images is (also) 59%.

² In the case of bullying, we made the assumption that this is a negative experience, so the finding here relates to who was more bothered, in terms of intensity.

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Figure 1: Child has been bullied online or offline in past 12 months, by country

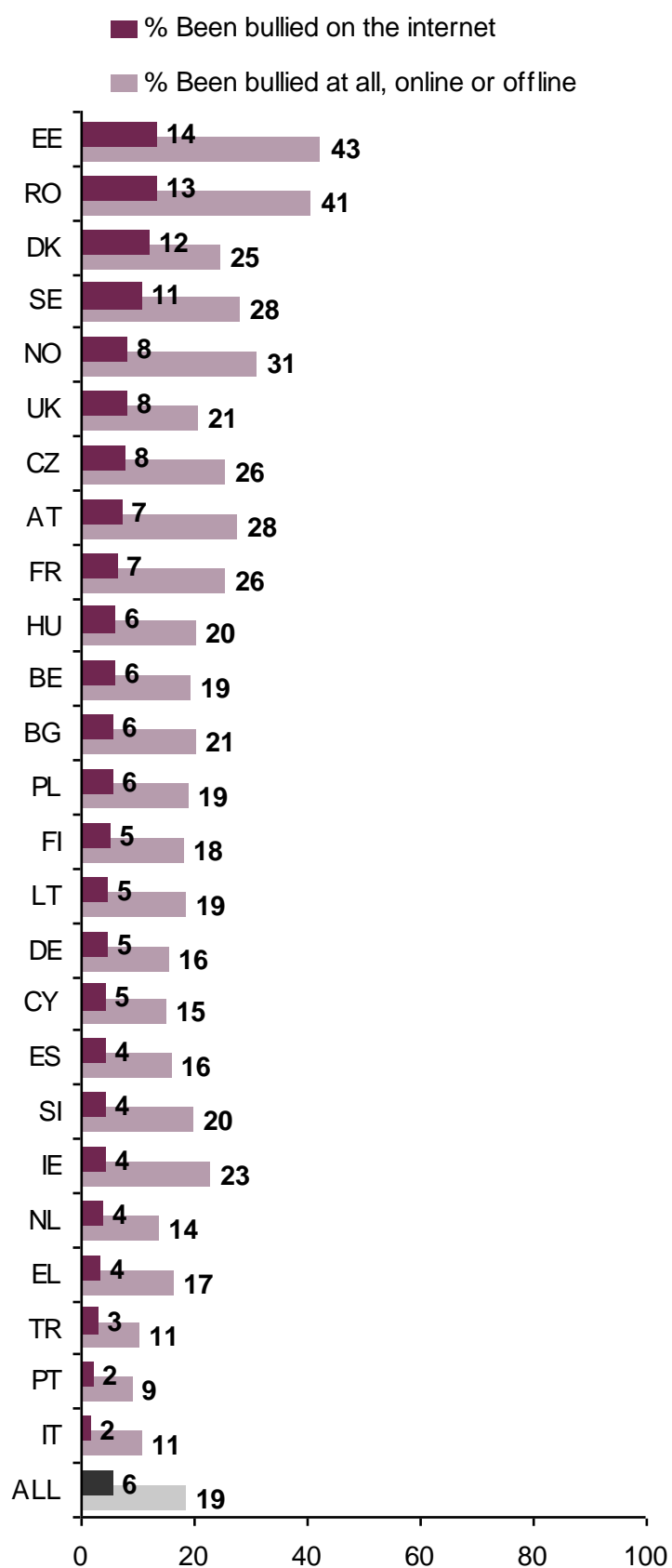


Figure 2: Child has seen sexual images online or offline in past 12 months, by country

