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# Cultures of research and policy in Europe

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Europe is traditionally regarded as a cultural entity with shared historical roots, values, systems, and institutions. At a meta-level this provides a shared point of departure within and outside Europe. However, Kevin (2003: 2) notes that "definitions of Europe cannot logically be confined to specific political, cultural, or geographic descriptions." When considering the various levels on which Europe may be understood, one must note that the European Union is more integrated at the political and economic levels than in terms of culture and traditions. Bondebjerg and Golding discuss the elements of a perceived European common culture thus:

"All accounts perceive a common heritage, in which democracy, Enlightenment values, science, reason, and individualism are infused in a potent brew which has a unique European flavour. To this heady mix is added a strong historical sense of roots in a common Greco-Roman tradition, together with a loose association of these values with something called 'civilization'"(2004:12).

However, they too go on to point to the difficulties in grasping "this protean myth of a European culture or identity", noting that there is also "a discernible contradiction in the policy arena within Europe among the emerging panoply of European institutions and pan-national agencies" (Bondebjerg and Golding, 2004:13).

Given the juxtaposition of a common European heritage, with tendencies towards the homogenization of policy specifically with the European Union, and diverse national institutions and cultural histories, there is always the question of how much is similar or different across Europe. This applies to the research undertaken in any field, including that on children's experience of the internet. How far are research

contexts common across countries and how much is country specific? Can an understanding of these research contexts account for differences in the research conducted cross-nationally? Where it is possible to make a comparative analysis? Why are different aspects of children and the internet researched, or not, in different European countries?

The challenge is to understand the social shaping of research. Admittedly, the nature of what research is conducted, and how it is conducted, partly reflects the interests and orientations of particular researchers or research teams. But the focus here is on the wider social factors that may influence this process – and whether they vary cross-nationally. Although there is an emerging body of cross-national research, as indicated in chapters 2 and 4, questions about the shaping of research, and its implications for policy, are rarely asked in general, let alone in relation to children and the internet. Hence this chapter is conducted in the spirit captured by Jensen:

“Media studies, like their object of analysis, originate from a particular social and historical setting. Part of the relevance of media studies is that they may contribute to the social conditions under which communication will take place in the future. Like the media themselves, then, university departments and other research organizations may be understood theoretically as institutions-to-think-with, enabling (second-order) reflexivity about the role of media in society.”  
(Jensen, 2002: 273)

## **Our approach**

This chapter seeks to explain the patterns of national research already reviewed in chapter 2 (and as detailed in Staksrud, Livingstone, Haddon, and Ólafsson, 2009). For the present purposes, we have excluded multi-country studies, since our interest is in the national factors that influence research, though we do examine the role of the EC in funding research especially in countries where research funding is scarce. Master’s and PhD theses are also excluded from this discussion, though they are included in the EU Kids Online Data Repository in countries where empirical research is limited. A template for country reports was discussed within the EU Kids Online network, containing a range of questions regarding national contextual factors and histories.

National teams then completed these structured reports, seeking out the appropriate information and discussing issues with colleagues where appropriate. Then there was a further division of labour whereby individuals and groups analysed particular questions across countries.

It is not always straightforward to divide up contextual factors. However, an initial distinction can be drawn between those developments in different societies that may have some influence on whether research takes place and those factors that are due to the nature and history of the particular national research community. The former include the spread of the internet itself and well as broader societal discourses about children and the internet, and here we look in particular at media representations. On a more detailed level, we asked whether there were debates about particular themes (e.g. the commercialisation of childhood) that appeared to have led to research focused on such topics. It seemed appropriate to ask about the role of particular agents, for example NGOs, active in the field, as well as whether there was any evidence that political initiatives (widely defined) or even particular events seemed to have had some bearing upon research.

Factors related to the nature and history of the national research communities included their relative sizes, whether the timing of their earliest research was important, whether the existence of particular disciplines encouraged certain research, and whether existing data collection practices produced more or less research on children's experiences of the internet. There were questions about institutional processes, practices and tendencies, to see if they promoted or hindered research in this field. And last, but definitely not least, we examined the different sources of research funds available in the different countries.

Contextual material can appear in the form of numbers (about the rate of internet adoption) or in a form that lends itself to clustering countries (e.g. dates when certain research commenced). However, much of this material, for example, about the nature of media coverage or the processes at work within an institution, can be relatively more discursive, more qualitative. Even this material can sometimes be ordered into typologies, and then one can look for systematic differences between groups of countries differentiated by some criteria. But this is not always possible.

Sometimes the contributors to country reports added so many caveats that to neatly cluster countries would be unjustified. Sometimes only a few national teams could provide evidence while others thought that certain processes might occur but it was difficult to provide examples.

For these reasons, two different logics were used related to two of Kohn's (1989) ways of conducting cross-national analysis (see also Livingstone, 2003). The idiographic approach treating nations as objects of study in their own right was adopted, this allowing for some country clustering to examine differences among (groups of) nations. Additionally, nations were, in effect, treated as contexts for study, meaning that feedback from different countries was pooled in order to investigate common factors at work across Europe that potentially shape the research process, while recognising that this might take slightly different guises in the different countries.

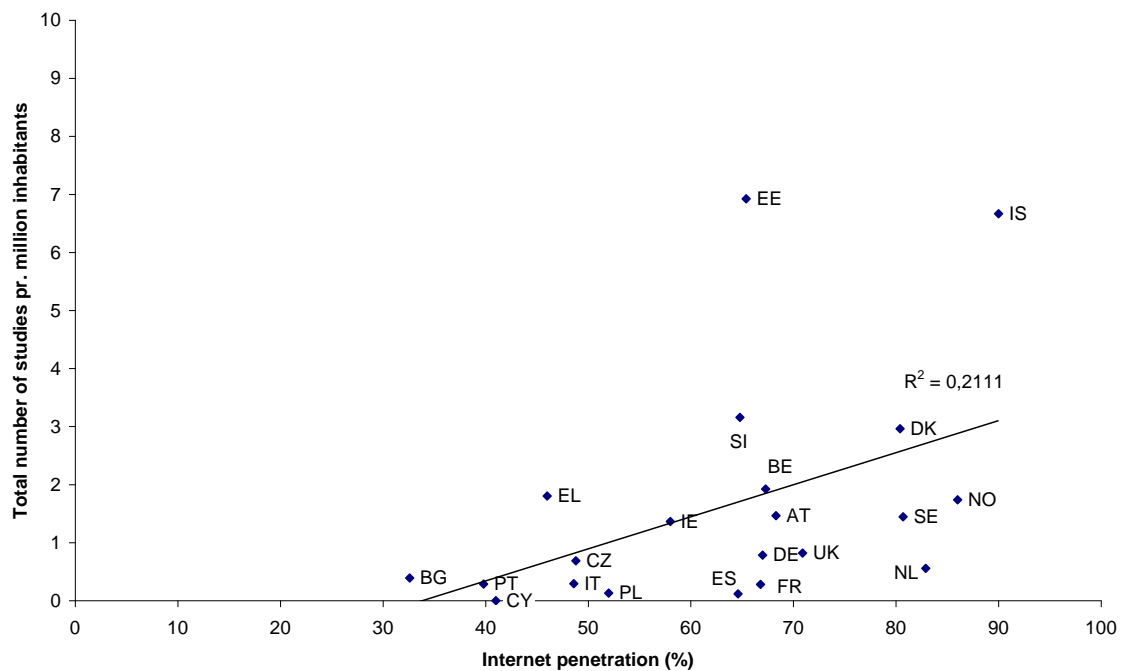
### **Societal influences on research**

There is a fair correlation between internet adoption rates and the number of studies, but there far more studies in the UK and Germany than the level of adoption would suggest. This reflects the fact that several processes influence the figures and one is the size of population, and with it the number of universities conducting research (see below). Hence Figure 1 controls for population size, although that does place countries like Iceland and Estonia as outliers partly because of their fewer inhabitants. However, it is clear that internet penetration does correlate with the amount of research on children and the internet.

To support the analysis of the role of media, the EU Kids Online team conducted a 14-country study involving a content analysis of press coverage, as reported in chapter 13. One key point to draw from this are that media coverage varies by country, and more specifically the balance of media coverage of the risks discussed in this book also varies by country – with content, contact and conduct risks being emphasised to different degrees in different countries. The implication is that not only may the general public be sensitised to different risks in different countries - with

implications for how they answer surveys – but so too might the different research communities (or their funders, or those instigating political activities in this field).

**Figure 5.1 Total number of single country studies per million inhabitants (excluding MA/PhD theses) by internet penetration in late 2008**



Base: 289 studies

In addition, national teams in Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Italy, Ireland, the Netherlands and the UK reported detailed examples of academic research in general, as well as specific projects, being influenced by media coverage. For example, in the UK: “The media picked up on the phenomenon of happy-slapping. Some NGO commissioned research probably followed from this. Certainly one cyberbullying study was commissioned by an NGO”. In the case of Germany: “It seems that in the case of Happy Slapping and Cyber Bullying, research was influenced by the media coverage, because this phenomenon was firstly raised up by the media (by presenting isolated cases from other countries, e.g. Great Britain).” And in the Netherlands: “If at all, public discourse has only indirectly influenced research in the Netherlands”. Discussions in newspapers and on television on especially online grooming and on internet addiction have contributed to the rise of the Safer internet programme in the

Netherlands and policy attention to these matters. As a result of this more research has been done.

These examples suggest that media representations – including moral panics – might sometimes play some role in setting the research agenda or, at least, in stimulating the instigation of research. This in turn can contribute to producing different types of research in different countries (or sometimes contribute to producing similar research, as in the German case above). More specific public discourses, such as debate about the commercialisation of childhood and children's rights, also vary by country. In the case of the commercialisation of childhood, there was some indication that in certain countries the debates, or lack of them, did relate to the amount of research on that issue. But this was less clear as regards children's rights, which appeared in general to attract less media attention.

Do national political initiatives, for example attempts to introduce the internet into schools or initiatives to train teachers in internet use promoting internet awareness, lead to research evaluating these schemes, and hence introduce variation between countries? Certainly it became clear that national governments are the most central actors in creating the climate for research into the area of children and the internet. Of the countries included in our analysis, about half reported such government-initiated research studies. Moreover, such government initiatives could also lead to an expansion of the data already collected as regards children's use of the internet. Related examples of agencies producing such initiatives included, occasionally, regional governments and regulators. Another important observation was that EC initiatives are pivotal to the conduct, financing and proliferation of funding research and played a major role in shaping the internationally comparative data that were available.

Various national teams also reported the activities of NGOs in keeping issues alive in the media and sensitising politicians – which may have indirectly influenced research. For example, in the case of Belgium: “It is clear that they play an active role in keeping the issue of Internet safety of the children and safety awareness of children and parents in the public debate. For instance, the Bond (Flanders)/Ligue des Families (Wallonia), an organisation of family matters, frequently draws attention to this issue

in their magazines, on their website and in their education initiatives for parents. As such, this NGO keeps the public and political world sensitive to this issue.”

There were some examples where NGOs even added to the national body of research themselves. For instance, in the UK: “Apart from lobbying, a range of NGOs also conduct research. The children’s charities are active in this area and regularly commission new research to draw attention to key challenges to children’s safety from internet/mobile technologies – examples include the recent bullying survey, the activities of Childnet International, Barnardo’s research on child victims of online grooming, etc.”

Meanwhile, when asked whether any events had led to particular national studies, two types of event were identified as influencing research: particular one-off events and the cumulative or ‘drip’ effect of seeing the same type of event repeated over time. But, as with political initiatives, in the case of both NGOs and events, it proved difficult to develop the comparative analysis further beyond demonstrating that, and sometimes how, such factors could play a role in the shaping of research.

## **The influence of national research communities on research**

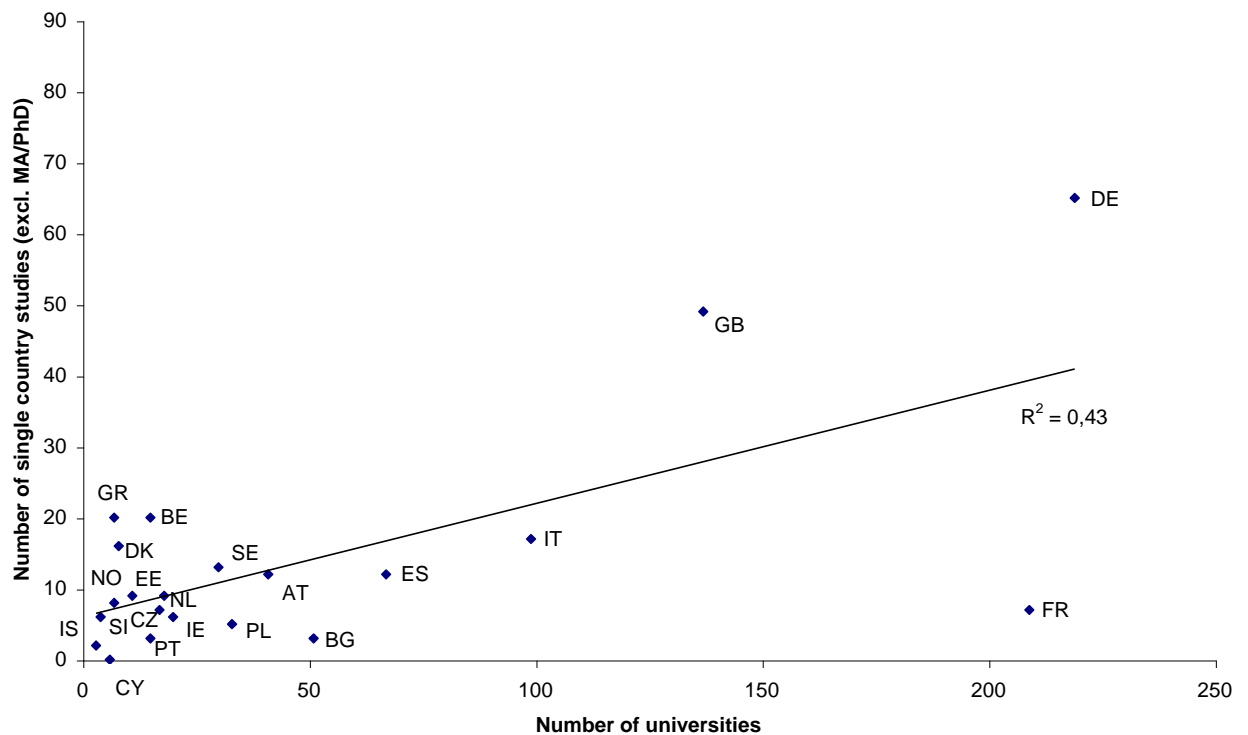
Does the overall amount of research there is in a country have any bearing on the amount of research specifically on children and the internet? The most easily available data available in all the countries that could act as a proxy for research volume was the number of universities. But even counting this institutional ‘academic base’ proved to be by no means a straightforward task. In France, for example, the ‘Grandes Écoles’ and ‘Grands Établissements’ are universities except in name, while in the UK London University is actually an umbrella organisation for several universities. Based partly on explanations from the EU Kids Online team, various adjustments of this kind were made to take into account the circumstances of particular countries.

As noted earlier, the academic base in European countries proved to be highly correlated to the population, though there were some notable exceptions even amongst the EU Kids Online countries e.g. Estonia, Ireland and Bulgaria have a larger academic base relative to small populations, with Greece and Italy a slightly lower



one. Of interest in this chapter, Figure 5.2 shows that the academic base is a fair but not a strong predictor of the number of studies on children's internet use in that country.

**Figure 5.2: Number of single country studies by number of universities**



Base: 289 studies

To investigate the effects of timing of research, the dates of the first national studies about the internet were assembled (as well as dates of the first studies of mass communications and mediated interpersonal communications – i.e. telephony). As happened to a large extent with mass communications research, internet research followed the spread of the internet itself. Hence, in most European countries, internet studies originated in the 1990s with the emergence and burgeoning popularity of the internet. Many of the countries where research has only begun more recently – the Czech Republic, Cyprus, Belgium and Greece - have lower internet penetration rates, reflecting the fact that the market had developed later. Thus there appears some, understandable, connection between the spread of the internet and the academic awareness of this as being an important and interesting area for research.

The next question was whether traditions of national disciplines had influence on country research in this field. There were several problems here: many studies, especially more market orientated research, did not fall easily into disciplines, some studies were interdisciplinary and some were difficult to categorise. Thus, this information had not been collected in the Data Repository. Nevertheless it became clear that education, psychology and sociology were important sources of studies. The next problem was that counting these departments would not differentiate countries for comparative purposes, since most universities in most participating countries had such departments. Hence, the focus turned to disciplines likely to conduct studies on children and the internet that were relatively new and still developing in some countries: media studies and communication studies.

Unfortunately, counting these proved even more problematic than counting universities. Many media studies and sometimes communications studies departments are very practically oriented, teaching production skills or journalism, rather than conducting research. While studies into media and communication research issues may exist, they may be researched and taught within sociology and social psychology departments. Where separate media and communications studies departments exist, their orientation depend on the larger faculty within which they are located. For example, in Denmark, if they are located in the humanities they have a more philosophical, literacy and aesthetic orientation but within the social sciences they are more empirically oriented. After making many adjustments at best we could say that some of those countries where media and communication studies are well established in universities appear to produce more studies on children and the internet – such as Belgium, Sweden and the UK. But given the issues outlined above, this had to be a very weak or ‘soft’ claim.

An area where one could make a stronger argument related to the general survey data of internet use in the population. Both in terms of the official government surveys, as shown in Table 5.1, but also non-government ones, there is a considerable national variation in the range of lower age limits of these surveys in different countries. This means there are more data on (younger) children available in some countries (e.g. Nordic ones) compared to others because they are captured in these general surveys.

**Table 5.1: Lower age limits in Government surveys of internet use by the general population**

<b>Lower age limit</b>	<b>Countries</b>
16 year olds	Austria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, the UK
15 year olds	Belgium, Estonia, Ireland, Portugal, Spain
14 year olds	Germany
13 year olds	Greece
12 year olds	Bulgaria, France, The Netherlands
11 year olds	Italy
10 year olds	Slovenia
9 year olds	Norway, Sweden
7 year olds	Denmark

Turning to the practicalities of applying for research, there was some national variation in terms of whether there were stages that proposals had to go through or the degree to which they had to be checked. But ultimately the comments provided by the national teams suggested that this had little bearing on the amount of research in this field – ultimately more complicated procedures did not appear to be more restrictive. Nor did there appear to be ethical considerations that determined what could and could not be researched in countries. While there was national variation in the degree to which ethical guidelines were built into the research process, this was mainly made manifest at the level of institutional checks and rules relating, for example, to getting parental permission for child studies.

More generally, the majority of country reports mentioned growing institutional pressures to research and specifically to publish research. This relates to

the opportunities for potential academic promotion, access to further funding and publishing as a general standard for measuring levels of research in departments. Hence, potentially, this pressure may have contributed to the amount of research in this specific field as it influenced the amount of research in general. Varying by country, there is evidence of increasing demand at the political and the institutional level for cooperation between industry and academia, and variation in the degree to which these bodies approach each other, with, once again some suggestion that this can influence the amount and direction of research. Lastly, there is a tendency for research council funding to be increasingly directed towards strategic research, as exemplified below in the case of Belgium: “In Belgium, the public funding organisation Federal Science Policy has a research programme called ‘Future and Society’ which explicitly invites researchers to do research on ICT. In Flanders, the Institute for the Promotion of Innovation by Science and Technology (IWT) is a funding organisation that focuses on stimulating and supporting technological and scientific innovation. ICT is one of the main research themes on which researchers are invited to submit research proposals.”

All of these developments have the potential to push research on children and the internet in certain directions, or contribute to the variation in the amount and form of research within countries. However, that is the limit of what can be said here because it is difficult to get more fine grained information that might actually demonstrate the detailed interaction of these factors. The participating national teams could comment on the various considerations that influenced their own research, but they were often ‘outsiders’ when looking at the research of their compatriots.

Finally, there is the issue of funding. Table 5.2 shows the typology of funding structures used to classify countries, taking into account the range of funding and relative predominance of public, academic and commercial sources. Apart from showing the specific issue of funding, this table also illustrates the type of exploratory analysis frequently used with this contextual material.

**Table 5.2: Types of funding of research on children and the internet**

<b>Funding structure</b>	<b>Characteristics of funding</b>	<b>Countries</b>
Predominance of Public Funding	Public funding dominates funding (more than 75%). Other forms of funding (commercial, non-profit or academic) play a minor role or do not exist at all.	Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Slovenia and Sweden
Predominantly public and academic funding	Public funding is the most important form of financing but it has a more modest role. Academic funding is important. Non-profit and commercial funding is rather low or does not exist.	Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Portugal and Spain
Predominantly public and commercial funding	Besides public institutions, commercial companies and trade associations are important. Academic and non-profit funding are of little or no relevance.	Germany and Denmark
Hybrid funding structure	The percentage of public funding is at most 60%, Public, commercial and academic funding play an important role.	The UK and Italy

Our hypothesis was that funding regimes would produce national differences, but in practice there was no clear correlation between the overall structure of funding and the total amount of research. In addition, while nations with diverse funding sources (the UK, Belgium, Germany, Sweden) were shown to produce research on a relatively wide range of topics this can also occur for some countries with less diversity in funding. Perhaps surprisingly, the overall patterns of funding also seem to

have little influence on which topics are researched in the different countries. This is because the interests of specific funders of research differed between European countries. Public institutions like national or regional governments, ministries, regulation authorities or research councils in one country sometimes sought different kinds of data from their counterparts in others, while commercial companies, say, in Germany were sometimes interested in different aspects of children's online use than, say, in the UK.

However, moving the analysis away from the funding structures above to consider the role of different types of funder, several points can be made. There are a number of issues that are mainly addressed by public institutions or to a minor extent by academic funding: interpreting online content; identity play; social networking and learning online. Commercial funding is relatively important for research on concerns and frustrations, search strategies, privacy risks and online gaming. Studies on risks, which are of special interest for EU Kids Online, are most frequently financed by commercial and public institutions.

## **Conclusions**

Methodologically, this part of the EU Kids Online project always faced constraints. The national teams had locations in various disciplines and had differing background from which to approach the task of addressing questions in their national reports. The accessibility of certain information in different countries also varied (for example, depending on the size of the research community and whether that information was easily locatable). This, as noted, had a bearing upon how far some paths of analysis could be followed. Nonetheless, the exercise, often involving considerable searching and consultation, produced a wealth of information for the project to begin to address the question of how contextual factors influence research and what different logics of analysis could be employed.

At a substantive level, this chapter has shown that, and sometimes how, different studies can be instigated by different stakeholders for a range of reasons, so that the activities and interests of industry, media, public, academics, government and NGOs may all contribute to the national pool of empirical research on children and

the internet. Societal factors such as the degree of internet adoption overall played some role in influencing the variation in cross national research as did a range of characteristics of the national research community such as its size and the timing, or history, of internet studies, itself related to the development of the national internet market.

Returning to the quote by Jensen, research environments are influenced by their cultural context, including, in the case of children and the internet, different national cultural values regarding risks. Yet this chapter provides at best a snapshot since the very factors that shape research may also change over time, in a complex interaction with the changing access to and use of new media, national cultural values and social conditions as well as academic institutional practices themselves, as captured in this observation: “A study of changing media in Europe is also a study of changing Europe as societies are undergoing vital changes, as political associations and alliances, demographic structures, the worlds of work, leisure, domestic life, mobility, education, politics and communications themselves are all undergoing important transformations” (Bondebjerg and Golding, 2004:7). Hence the need for policy makers in this field to be attentive not only to the development of new media like the internet but also to the changes in this broader social context, and how these are reflected in the research environment itself.

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