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What does good content look like?: developing great online content for kids

Book section

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The challenge

> "The child/media relationship is an entry point into the wide and multifaceted world of children and their rights – to education, freedom of expression, play, identity, health, dignity and self-respect, protection … in every aspect of child rights, in every element of the life of a child, the relationship between children and the media plays a role."[1]

Think back twenty years to society's early hopes for mass internet access – the prospect of a world of information at your fingertips, making friends across the globe, working and learning anywhere anytime, digital opportunity overcoming socio-economic disadvantage. Ten years later, the advent of web 2.0 added more hopes – everyone able to create content and participate in online communities, exploring and tailoring their online lives to enhance life offline. Distinctively, children – among the world's poorest, the last to benefit from technological developments – were the pioneers in this exciting digital world and, for once, adults learned from them.

How, then, shall we view the top ten sites visited by UK six to fourteen year olds in 2013: 63% visited Google, 40% YouTube, 34% BBC, 27% Facebook, 21% Yahoo, 17% Disney, 17% Wikipedia, 16% Amazon, 16% MSC and 15% eBay.[2] To be sure, the list includes a 'long tail' of esoteric sites meeting specific interests, but if you talk to children about their browsing patterns, they say that Google, YouTube, Facebook, CBBC and a handful of other sites capture most, if not all, of what they do online. And they look a little blank if you ask about the kinds of sites that excite the attention of the internet geeks and entrepreneurs. Indeed, 55% of eight to fifteen year old internet users say that mostly they only visit websites they have visited before. And although most have made a social network profile, few have participated in more creative or civic activities. In short, most children don't get far up the 'ladder of online opportunities'.[3]

Is it what children themselves really want? Or what we want for them? Who are 'we' to judge what's good for children? These are difficult questions. My interest is in normative rather than descriptive judgements - in distinguishing what is positively beneficial for children's wellbeing from observations of what children actually like or choose to do. I would love there to be more and better opportunities for children online, and I would also love them to know more about the fabulous opportunities that do exist but which most haven't heard of.

Since we do not live in a perfect world, I assume more can be done to design an online environment that advances children's needs and interests. And although children are not the sole arbiter of what is good for them, I am motivated by knowing that they are only partially satisfied with the online offer.[4] I also assume that many organisations would like to provide great content for children and young people but may be uncertain how to conceive of it or to design it. Therefore I hope to stimulate public and professional debate over 'what good looks like.'

What do children need?

How can we set positive goals for children without sounding pious or elitist? Increasingly, policy makers and child welfare advocates use the concept of 'wellbeing' to articulate an open-minded, ambitious yet practical approach, based on evidence of what advantages or disadvantages children's life chances.[5] To paraphrase the 2013 *Good Childhood Report*, children and young people need:

- The right conditions to learn and develop
- A positive view of themselves and a respect for their identity
- Enough of the items and experiences that matter to them
- Positive relationships with their family, friends and school
- A safe and suitable home environment and local area
- The opportunities to take part in positive activities that help them thrive

This surely pinpoints the main purpose of provision to meet children's needs online as well as offline. It may be thought that such considerations justify dedicated resources for young children, but that teenagers are already sufficiently media-savvy, able to meet their own needs from the resources of the adult world. Without undermining efforts to extend online opportunities for ever younger children, I suggest that this should not lead to the neglect of teenagers, for their very different needs are also significant as they struggle to find autonomy, identity and support in an uncertain world. Famously, they are a demanding group, difficult for parents to support and critical in their response to much of what is designed for them. But efforts can and should be made, because of the problems that beset them and because the UNCRC defines 'the child', for the purposes of ensuring provision, protection and participation rights, as all those under eighteen years old.

To apply such purposes to the internet, we need some more specific guiding principles. A few years ago, I adapted the principles laid down in the internationally-endorsed though rarely enacted Children's Television Charter[6] to propose a Children's Internet Charter[7] which asserts the importance of quality, affirmation, diversity, protection, inclusion, cultural heritage and support. Again I paraphrase:

1. Children should have online contents and services of high **quality** which are made specifically for them, and which do not take advantage of them or exploit them. In addition to entertaining, these should allow children to develop physically, mentally and socially to their fullest potential.

2. Children should be able to hear, see and express themselves, their culture, their languages and their life experiences, through online contents and services which **affirm** their sense of self, community and place.

3. Children's online contents and services should promote an awareness and appreciation of **diverse** other cultures in parallel with the child's own cultural background.

4. Children's online contents and services should be wide-ranging in genre and content, but should **protect** them from exposure to gratuitous violence or pornography inappropriate to their age or maturity.

5. Children's online contents and services should be **inclusive** and accessible to all, building on knowledge of when and where children are available to engage, and capitalising on widely accessible media or technologies.

6. Governments, production, distribution and funding organisations should recognise and protect the importance of children's indigenous cultural and linguistic **heritage** through provision of sufficient online contents and services.

7. Funds must be made available to **support** the production and availability of these online contents and services to the highest possible standards.

These principles are not as straightforward in practice as they may seem stated in the abstract. Questions of standards, quality and diversity are particularly difficult. For instance, supporting children and young people as they develop their identities, especially their sexuality, gives rise to lively cultural contestation regarding the appropriate forms of information and guidance. Then, many sites are very 'sticky', keeping users on the site rather than encouraging children to explore. There are two main reasons for this. One concerns the promotion of the brand such that indicators of effectiveness prioritise time spent on the site: this is certainly true for commercial sites but even for many public and third sector sites. The other concerns safety: since it is expensive if not impossible to guarantee that links to other sites will not lead a child user towards risk, the most risk-averse strategy is to avoid any links. But the resulting walled gardens risk closing down children's opportunities rather than structuring positive pathways of exploration across multiple sites and resources.

Further, one must acknowledge that demanding dedicated, age-appropriate content poses severe funding challenges, especially in smaller language communities and especially if a commercial underpinning is to be restricted or eliminated. Last, children and – especially - teenagers, have a positive desire to find contents that are precisely disapproved of by adults: many games sites fall into this category, especially multiplayer online worlds, and among researchers the jury is still out on benefits, partly because much depends on the content, the child and how the content is used by children in particular contexts.

Practical suggestions

As jury chair of the European Commission's Award for Best Content for Kids, I and an expert group of content producers, child welfare experts and youth representatives reviewed the 67 shortlisted entries, selected from 1130 submissions in 26 countries, to choose the European winners in four content categories – those created by adult non-professionals, adult professionals, individual young people (under eighteen years old) and school/youth groups.[8] There was much to applaud among the submissions but also room for improvement. To guide our judgements, we focused on three broad criteria: anticipated benefit, attractiveness and

usability, drawing on the European POSCON project for its practical thinking about creating online content to benefit children.[9]

Rather than restating these as normative demands on content developers, I will conclude by formulating some key questions to bear in mind when planning, producing and evaluating content. While the principle of support applies to all, these questions operationalise the earlier-mentioned principles, recognising that the overall purpose will only be achieved if content provision is clear-sighted in its anticipated benefits, attractive to children and readily usable by them.

Anticipated benefit (cf. the principles of quality, affirmation and protection)

- Does the content aim to stimulate and support children's imagination, understanding or self-expression?
- Does the content enable children to recognise themselves as agents in the world, even opening up pathways for action?
- Is the content designed to be age-appropriate, including supporting resources for parents or teachers?
- Have potentially harmful features been identified and either eliminated or effectively addressed?[10]

Attractiveness (cf. the principles of diversity and cultural heritage)

- Does the content meet high production standards and is it appealing to children – creative, enriching and without boring or stereotyped features?
- Is the content genuinely informed by children's own voices, respecting and reflecting their diverse experiences and life contexts, rather than imposing adult expectations or norms upon them?[11]

Usability (cf. the principle of inclusion)

- Is the navigation structure user-friendly, so that young and novice users neither get lost within the site nor find themselves unexpectedly outside it?
- Is the content usable on multiple devices – especially those used by children - and in languages appropriate to the anticipated user group?
- Is the design of available resources transparent in terms of production, aims and funding?

As I noted at the outset, we are still at an early stage in designing the internet we want for children – certainly by comparison with the longer history of books, film, music, television or games. In relation to more established media, there are high profile competitions, celebrity advocates and high status rewards for producing and distributing great content for children. In the UK, the most prominent are probably the BAFTA awards – which include children's feature films, animation, learning resources, video games and, now, websites and other digital/interactive contents. Internationally, the Prix Jeunesse Foundation celebrates the best in children's television, and there are many prizes for the best children's books.

But we need more for the internet, both to promote what is being achieved and to build capacity in this new domain. My hope is that we will not be complacent about the quantity of online content available for children while forgetting to ask about its quality. That children spontaneously spend many hours online does not necessarily mean that all is well. Rather, I hope we can open up debate over the criteria and expectations by which society can provide for children's communication needs and rights in the digital age. Let's see what good we can do, if we really put our minds to it.

Endnotes

1   UNICEF's Oslo Challenge. This was issued on the tenth anniversary of the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). It challenged nations to recognise the role of media and communications in advancing children's rights in the digital age: http://www.unicef.org/magic/briefing/oslo.html.

2   Adapted from COMSCORE data in the annex to Ofcom (2013). *Children and parents: Media use and attitudes report.* London: Office of Communications. Available at http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/research/media-literacy/october-2013/research07Oct2013.pdf

3   See Livingstone and Helsper (2007) on gradations in youthful digital inclusion at http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/2768/ This shows the low engagement of most children and young people and the fact that those who engage more are often more privileged in socio-economic terms. These findings were updated in Livingstone, et al (2011) EU Kids Online II: Final Report, at http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/39351/

4   In 2010, four in ten UK 9-16 year olds said it is only 'a bit true' that there are lots of good things for them to do online. See the UK findings from the pan-European survey conducted by the EU Kids Online network at http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/33730/ Further, there was no improvement in a 2013 update of this survey. See Mascheroni, G. & Ólafsson, K. (2014). *Net Children Go Mobile: risks and opportunities*. Milano: Educatt. Available at http://www.netchildrengomobile.eu/

5   For example, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/183197/Child-Wellbeing-Brief.pdf and http://www.unicef.org.uk/UNICEFs-Work/What-we-do/Issues-we-work-on/Child-well-being/ For a review of the evidence relevant to the media, see http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130401151715/https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/00669-2009DOM-EN.pdf

6   The Children's Television Charter, proposed by Anna Home in 1995, is here: http://www.wsmcf.com/charters/charter.htm

7   A children's internet charter, drawing on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and articulating a rationale for positive online content for children, is here: http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/48922/

8   See http://www.bestcontentaward.eu/home

9   See their work and guidance here: http://www.positivecontent.eu/about-poscon-1/

10   BBC guidelines on youth contributors are helpful here: http://www.bbc.co.uk/editorialguidelines/page/guidelines-children-introduction/ So too are UKKCIS' moderation guidelines: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/251457/industry_guidance_moderation.pdf. For e-safety, see the Safer Internet Centre: http://www.saferinternet.org.uk/advice-and-resources. On advertising to children online, see guidance from the ASA: http://www.asa.org.uk/News-resources/Hot-Topics/Children-and-advertising.aspx and the OFT: http://www.oft.gov.uk/shared_oft/consumer-enforcement/oft1519.pdf

11   In a recent study, I contrasted producers' and teenagers' interpretations of websites to show how the former fail to anticipate the latter: http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/2769/