



THE LONDON SCHOOL
OF ECONOMICS AND
POLITICAL SCIENCE ■



Global Kids Online: Children's rights in the digital age

Inception report

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1. Introduction

[Global Kids Online](#) is an international research project that has been launched by the [London School of Economics and Political Science \(LSE\)](#), [UNICEF Office of Research Innocenti \(OoR\)](#) and [EU Kids Online](#) to develop a global research toolkit, building on [the one developed](#) by EU Kids Online, as a flexible new resource for researchers around the world in gathering evidence on children's online risks, opportunities and rights. This inception report contains a short description of the background, purpose and scope of the project, as well as information about the planned activities, outputs, participating members and delivery dates.

Across truly diverse domestic, cultural and geographic contexts, many children now use information and communication technologies (ICT)¹ as part of their everyday lives. Indeed, in high- and middle-income countries, and increasingly also in low-income countries, many children's activities are underpinned by internet and mobile phone access in one way or another to the point where drawing the line between offline and online is becoming close to impossible.

While digital engagement is rapidly spreading throughout the world, this fast-paced, widespread growth often occurs far ahead of any understanding of what constitutes safe and positive use in digital contexts, and technology use is consistently outpacing legislation and regulation. This environment presents challenges for safeguarding children as their use of digital devices often precedes an effective rights framework or challenges existing laws when applied to the digital environment.

An important issue highlighted by those who argue for better provision for children's rights on the internet is that the internet is blind to the age of its users, which results in children being treated in the same manner as adult users. The United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child recognises both that children have some rights over and above those of adults, and that even when child and adult rights are the same, ensuring children enjoy their rights may take additional efforts. Consequently, more and more stakeholders are charged with implementing children's rights in the digital environment.

The relevance of the internet to both the risks of harm that children face and the opportunities to benefit them has been documented in recent international evidence reviews.² As this evidence shows, use of the internet on a mass scale by individuals and institutions is reconfiguring the routes or pathways by and through which children engage with their worlds. The risks and opportunities of internet use are impacting on children's wellbeing, and therefore on their rights. How this occurs, as the evidence further documents, depends on the child, their life circumstances and the wider context, and these factors interact with the specific features of the internet – transnational, networked, interactive, ubiquitous, persistent, mobile, heavily commercial, and so forth.

¹ Defined as any communication device or application, encompassing radio, television, cellular phones, satellite systems and computer and network hardware and software, as well as associated services, contents and applications ([UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre](#), 2012). Within this broad definition, we focus on children's experiences of the internet and mobile technology, although it is also important to consider the ways in which children's lives are affected by others' uses of online databases and services even if children themselves lack personal access to the internet.

² For recent international reports, see [UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre](#) (2012), [International Telecommunications Union](#) (2013) and [Family Online Safety Institute](#) (2011).

For states, internet industry and governance organisations, child welfare organisations and other stakeholders, it is imperative that the conditions under which child users actually live are recognised when designing and distributing online technologies, networks and services.

However, thus far, most of the available research has been conducted in the global North rather than the global South, although nearly all future growth in the young population of internet users will occur in the global South. Moreover, most studies are conducted independently of the others and thus use different samples, methods and measures. As a result it is difficult to compare findings across countries or contexts, or to extend lessons learned in one context to another.

The pressing challenge is to understand, on a national and cross-nationally comparable basis:

- When and how the internet is problematic in children's lives – amplifying the risk of harm that undermines their wellbeing if they are unprotected.
- When and how the internet could contribute positively to children's lives – providing opportunities to benefit in diverse ways that contribute to their wellbeing.

It is therefore imperative to generate and sustain a rigorous cross-national evidence base in order to understand whether and how children's rights are being enhanced or undermined in the digital age, and to inform policy-makers and stakeholders nationally and internationally. The scale of such a task is beyond the capacity of any single research institution, and nor would it be appropriate for one institution to conduct research across such diverse contexts. For this reason, what is needed is the construction of a research toolkit that encompasses both common elements and allows for local and participatory adaptation or development.

2. Project outline and objectives

Global Kids Online is an international research project that aims to contribute to gathering rigorous cross-national evidence on children's online risks, opportunities and rights. With principal investigators [Professor Sonia Livingstone \(LSE\)](#) and [Jasmina Byrne \(UNICEF\)](#), the project involves research in four pilot countries (Argentina, the Philippines, Serbia and South Africa), and aims to advance understanding of whether and how the internet amplifies the risks of harm to children and how to optimise digital opportunities that contribute to children's wellbeing. The project will do this by stimulating and guiding rigorous multi-method investigations of how children around the globe use new digital, networked and mobile technologies.

Work on this project seeks to critically evaluate the nature and degree of risk associated with children's internet use, maintaining a critical awareness that 'risk' is both an objective reality and a social construct ([Livingstone and Haddon, 2009](#)). We seek to identify groups of children more exposed to risk or less able to respond to hazardous situations, but rather than an over-simplified labelling of certain groups as 'at risk', the aim is to distinguish the factors that may put children in vulnerable circumstances and assess the risk situation. We also aim for a balanced approach that focuses not only on the hazards, but also on the new opportunities for children's social connectedness, entertainment, learning, participation, creativity and the expression of identity ([Livingstone and Haddon, 2009](#)). To do so, we adopt a bottom-up research approach that focuses on children's experiences.

[Global Kids Online](#) draws on and expands the achievements of the [EU Kids Online](#) network – an innovative cross-national initiative funded by the European Commission’s Better Internet for Kids (originally, the Safer Internet) Programme. The EU Kids Online network pioneered a cross-national research strategy encompassing: (1) a comprehensive conceptual model; (2) a modular survey questionnaire; (3) accompanying qualitative research tools and instruments; and (4) a sustained dialogue with stakeholders that has ensured the successful exploitation of project results. Most of this work has been conducted within Europe, although already extending beyond the EU28 to include Russia, Turkey and several other countries. Additionally, the research strategy and tools have been applied in Australia and Brazil, and are currently under consideration in Chile, Argentina, Japan and other countries.

However, simply extending a model developed in Europe to understanding the burgeoning access and use of the internet among children in the global South is methodologically insufficient and problematic in ethical and political terms. It is therefore the aim of [Global Kids Online](#) to implement a partnership approach in which the benefits of central coordination of resources, expertise and tools can be united with a distributed approach to evidence-gathering, contributing to the development of evidence-based policy and practice – locally and globally.

Following from our recent report for the UNICEF OoR on [A global agenda for children’s rights in the digital age: Recommendations for developing UNICEF’s research strategy](#), a multi-stakeholder, multi-national [research seminar](#) was held with the [UNICEF OoR](#) and the [EU Kids Online](#) network at the LSE in February 2015. This identified several key challenges for such an ambitious research agenda:

- Identifying the opportunities and barriers to children’s rights in a digital, global age.
- Developing standards for rigorous methods of cross-national comparison.
- Recognising the priorities, characteristics and demands of particular research contexts.
- Managing the relation between research, policy-makers and other stakeholders so as to embed evidence in policy and practice.

One valuable outcome of the meeting was to identify the core features of the research toolkit required to support such an agenda. Equally important are the best practices by which it could be employed – practical knowledge-sharing strategies, platforms, dissemination, ownership/authorship (for example, Creative Commons licensing), quality control, maximum and minimum scenarios for research implementation, necessary expertise and training.

Following from this initial work, the specific **objectives** of [Global Kids Online](#) are to:

- a) Develop a global research toolkit consisting of a modular survey, qualitative research protocols and a survey administration toolkit that would include methodological guides and expert reports.
- b) Pilot the research toolkit in four countries in diverse national contexts and produce national reports.
- b) Produce a research synthesis of the national reports from the four pilot countries.
- c) Develop a website (portal) for hosting the toolkit, national reports and a synthesis report.

3. Four national contexts

[Global Kids Online](#) aims to generate a rigorous cross-national evidence base on how children’s rights are being enhanced or undermined in the digital age that looks beyond the context of the global North. Hence, the project involves primary research in four different national contexts – Argentina, the Philippines, Serbia and South Africa. These are all middle-income countries from diverse continents, keen on generating a new evidence base on children’s experiences of digital risks and opportunities.³ It is expected that through the research process these national institutions will strengthen their research capacities and technical know-how on this specific topic so that they can act as knowledge hubs in their regions or sub-regions.

Where sufficient cross-country comparative data is missing, classifications tend to be based on the percentage of individuals (children, if data available) in different countries who use the internet daily, and who have encountered one or more risks, as well as on the ways in which parents mediate or regulate their children’s internet use ([Helsper et al, 2013](#)). Internet use in the selected pilot countries is as follows:

	Internet Users	Mobile Phones	Households with a PC	Households with Internet	Fixed Internet	Mobile internet	Use of Social Networks
Argentina	59.9	162.5	59.2	53.9	14.4	19.8	5.8
Philippines	37.0	104.5	18.7	22.9	9.1	27.2	6.0
Serbia	51.5	119.4	62.7	48.0	14.2	55.7	4.2
South Africa	48.9	145.6	23.6	39.4	3.1	28.7	5.3

1) Percentage of individuals using the Internet, 2013¹;
 2) Mobile telephone subscriptions per 100 population, 2013²;
 3) Percentage of households equipped with a personal computer, 2013¹;
 4) Percentage of households with internet access at home, 2013¹;
 5) Fixed broadband Internet subscriptions per 100 population, 2013²;
 6) Wireless broadband Internet subscriptions per 100 population, 2013¹;
 7) Average use of virtual social networks in personal or professional life³;

Sources:
¹ITU (2013); ²ITU (2014); ³Livingstone and Bulger (2013: pp 65-66)

As a result of the gathering of new data in the four national contexts, we aim to get a deeper understanding of cross-national differences among the countries surveyed in Global Kids Online and the relative differences within countries in comparison to differences between countries. For example, previous European Union-based research demonstrated that clusters of countries are most clearly distinguished in terms of sexual content risks, but differences within countries are often greater than those between countries ([Helsper et al, 2013](#)).

4. Project activities and outputs

[Global Kids Online](#) has the following planned activities:

³ Argentina has recently been classified as a high-income country by the [World Bank \(2015\)](#)

- Developing a detailed research plan represented in this inception report with concrete dates and deliverables.
- Setting up an International Advisory Group and methods of consultation with its members and UNICEF country offices of the pilot countries.
- Supporting the development and modification of research tools (both quantitative and qualitative) to be piloted in four countries.⁴
- Producing expert reports and methodological guides on the administration of the survey to feed into the research toolkit.
- Providing technical support to the national researchers regarding design, sampling and ethics, as well as guidance on the drafts of national reports.
- Based on the results from the national reports, developing a synthesis report on the results of the pilot study.
- Organising an inception workshop in September 2015 in Florence with national researchers to agree on the modalities of joint working: (1) to present an outline of the toolkit and discuss with advisers and pilot countries the best approach in terms of scope, content, form, accessibility and development of the toolkit; and (2) positioning emerging research findings within the wider context of national, regional and international policy and the ongoing UNICEF research on child sexual exploitation.
- Organising a meeting in London with national partners and UNICEF (approximately March 2016) in order to share the preliminary results of national pilot research⁵ and to finalise the toolkit.
- Developing an open access web platform to house a number of project outputs, including the research toolkit, the national research reports, the synthesis report and other material produced during the research period (videos, meeting reports and presentations).
- Broadly sharing and disseminating the research toolkit and reports.

The principal investigator, Professor Sonia Livingstone and UNICEF will finalise the list of specialist topics to be covered by the **expert reports** after a discussion with the Advisory Board members. A list of topics agreed at this stage is included in Appendix 4. The expert reports are expected to be globally and culturally sensitive, but also accessible, clear and practical, yet remaining flexible and adaptable. They need not contain basic methodological information that is readily accessible elsewhere. Instead, they should focus on the specific challenges of researching children’s online experiences and risk of harm especially (although not only) in the global South. It is expected that they will reflect the ongoing dialogue between the experts and

⁴ Both the qualitative and quantitative (modular) survey will be based on the EU Kids Online methodology; see the [Research Toolkit](#). This includes reaching a consensus with the pilot counties on (1) which modules of the current EU Kids Online survey are compulsory, (2) which of the optional modules countries have chosen to include, and (3) the rules any new modules the design should follow.

⁵ National datasets will stay with UNICEF country offices. Country reports will be produced and hosted on the project website.

other participants of the project, and will include relevant insights from the pilot countries. Instructions on structure, format (section headings), address (readership) and use of resources (open access/online where feasible) will be provided accordingly.

The research teams in each pilot study country will produce the national reports. They will be focused on findings, with sufficient methodological information and contextualisation, which will feed into the **synthesis report** produced at the end of the project.

The **website** will include blogging functionality and a digital-first publishing platform (designed to optimise the onscreen reading of long-form, complex and content-rich documents on a range of digital devices) to present the toolkit. This optimisation is achieved using a variety of features that enhance the onscreen reading experience, including:

1. A clickable structured list of contents that the reader can use to navigate easily within and between sections of the document.
2. Two-way, anchor-linked references.
3. Collapsible and expandable content (e.g., for figures, case studies or comments).
4. Embedded video and other media (including dynamic or interactive maps, data visualisations and other infographics).
5. Social media sharing for content selected by the user.

The front end of the platform will have a customised design to achieve equal co-branding from LSE, UNICEF and EU Kids Online, the lead stakeholders for the project, along with the display of other partners' logos as appropriate. All toolkit elements (online and downloadable) will have a design consistent with the website, to create a common look-and-feel.

A formal request to host this microsite has now been made to LSE and we expect to commission a company to design and develop the site during October 2015.

The **toolkit** will be a series of documents that can be downloaded separately or as one file. Its content and format will be finalised after consultations with members of the International Advisory Group and teams from the pilot countries. The toolkit will include the following elements, as a minimum:

- (1) An integrative research framework setting out the aims, research agenda and approach.
- (2) Research design and research administration toolkit comprising:
 - methodological guides developed by the experts on specific methodological challenges;
 - modular survey questionnaire comprising: (a) compulsory modules; (b) optional modules; (c) guidance for construction of additional modules;
 - a short version of the questionnaire ('essential indicators') that can be incorporated into other surveys;

- qualitative research guides and tools.
- (3) Related research resources and useful links.
 - (4) The national pilot reports and synthesis report.
 - (5) An open access website to serve as a knowledge-sharing platform to host all of the above.

Significant parts of the above will draw on the [EU Kids Online](#) research, adapted and extended as appropriate. Further elements will be developed as required, and the above may be added to in response to suggestions from the advisory panel and/or lessons learned from the pilot studies.

Kick Off meeting

A project Kick Off meeting was held at LSE on 3 and 4 August 2015 with Sonia Livingstone, Jasmina Byrne, Ellen Helsper, Lucinda Platt (3 August only), Kjartan Ólafsson and Alexandra Chernyavskaya. The meeting addressed the following topics: review of the project objectives; review of the project deliverables; requirements for the inception report and synthesis report; mapping and knowledge management; discussion of relation with participating ‘pilot’ countries; requirements for the communication platform (within the project); Steering Group (members and role); International Advisory Group (members and role); Expert Group (members and role); website specification; elements of the toolkit; research ethics; and external dissemination. Minutes from the meeting were produced and circulated to the Steering Group.

Staffing

The project involves three members of staff based at LSE – a principal investigator (Professor Sonia Livingstone), a post-doctoral research officer (Dr Mariya Stoilova) and a research assistant (currently Alexandra Chernyavskaya).⁶

[Professor Sonia Livingstone](#), who is working 0.5 FTE on the project, is a full professor in the Department of Media and Communications at LSE and a visiting professor at the University of Oslo and the University of Pennsylvania. She has previously been a visiting professor at the Universities of Bergen, Copenhagen, Harvard, Illinois, Milan, Oslo, Paris II and Stockholm. Professor Livingstone has a track record of innovative research on the opportunities and risks afforded by digital and online technologies including for children and young people, for which she was awarded the title of Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) in 2014 ‘for services to children and child internet safety.’ Among the most recent projects that Professor Livingstone has been leading and directing are [Preparing for a Digital Future](#) and the 33-country network [EU Kids Online](#). Sonia Livingstone has published widely on a number of topics including children and new media; internet use; media audiences; media literacy; mediated participation; online risks and safety; and public engagement with communication regulation.

[Dr Mariya Stoilova](#) was appointed as the post-doctoral research officer on the project after this full-time position was publicly advertised by the LSE and there was a formal recruitment process. Dr Stoilova has a strong interest in multi-method analyses, psychosocial research methods, and

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policy and practice development. She has considerable experience of sustained, high-quality research activity and publications in the areas of digital technologies, wellbeing and family support; social change and transformations of intimate life; and citizenship and social inequalities.

Alexandra Chernyavskaya currently works 0.4 FTE on the project as an interim appointment. The research assistant position is going to be advertised at some point in the autumn.

Office space for the project at LSE is arranged but pending building development works.