Please share (because we care): privacy issues in social networking

Is it risky to 'be yourself' online, sharing intimacies you wouldn't face-to-face? Elisabeth Staksrud and Sonia Livingstone explore the current issues and opportunities facing today's children and young people in Europe. Elisabeth is an Associate Professor in the Department of Media and Communication at the University of Oslo and is part of the Norwegian team of the EU Kids Online project. Her work focusses on children, the internet, risks and opportunities, regulation and rights. Sonia is Professor of Social Psychology at LSE's Department of Media and Communications and has more than 25 years of experience in media research with a particular focus on children and young people. She directs the EU Kids Online project and is the lead investigator of the Parenting for a Digital Future research project. [Header image credit: Grant, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0]

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The enticing invitation to online intimacy is presented daily through the constant, caring enquiry of 'What's on your mind?'/ 'How do you feel?' (Facebook), and 'Share your life with friends and family' (Instagram). It represents not only an invitation to use the service, but to *share* because *'we' care.* Thus, sharing personal information, private thoughts and intimate pictures is presented and perceived as something positive. The social networking sites (SNS) want to know the *real* you, or so they say. Meanwhile, for many young people, sharing personal information through SNS holds out the hope of better control over their own narrative at this time of identity flux and uncertainty.

The 'real' or 'hoped-for' image

Using the internet to socialise with others is crucially about the performance of self: social media promise new ways to control the impression we give others, to build the relationships we wish to

have and to become the person we wish to be. For adults, it can be about pictures of smiling children on a ski trip, 'check-in' at restaurants and travels, or updates about pleasant things you have done, rather than about being tired, homes with dirty floors, an absent partner and miserable children.

For children and young people, the tension between the real' and hoped-for' self can be even more intense, as new and fast-shifting forms of peer pressure must be navigated online and offline, in often ambiguous circumstances – especially in relation to what is public, private, or something in between.

Risk or opportunity?

The EU Kids Online project researched children's online risk and opportunities in 33 European countries. In 2010, after the use of SNS had increased dramatically, children were asked to compare their online and offline experiences. We found that:

- half (50%) of those aged 11–16 across Europe say it is 'a bit' or 'very' true of them that they find it easier to be themselves on the internet than when with other people face-to-face;
- nearly half (45%) say they talk about different things on the internet than when speaking to people face-to-face;
- one-third (32%) say that they talk about private things online that they do not discuss face-to-face.

So, on the one hand, such activities may have beneficial outcomes, but they may also increase the risk of privacy violations or coercive or hostile interactions. And drawing the line between the two – both in terms of young people's activities, and for those advising them – is far from straightforward.

One dimension of contact and conduct risks that particularly challenges policy-makers is that these partly rely on children's agency and participation. Without necessarily blaming them – indeed, we usually celebrate youthful agency – this may lead children to adopt risky or even deliberately risk-taking behaviours, sharing intimate information online. In short, sharing and 'being your true self' online also makes you (more) vulnerable.

An example of bullying

This type of staging in social media interaction can be both positive and negative. So bullying, as an example, is not just about conflict between two (or more) people, or about one person repeatedly harassing another; it can also be about the audience – how others perceive 'netizens', silently observing or actively commenting on the action.

If we look to the offline world, a consistent finding in the literature on aggression and bullying is that children who morally agree that it is okay to harass others are themselves more likely to bully. A school culture where children feel that bullying is not taken seriously can be interpreted as an acceptance of such behaviour, which in turn opens the way for more people to bully.

Similarly, a digital culture where online harassment is prevalent gives tacit acceptance to such behaviour, as well as lowering the expectations that someone will (or should) intervene to make a difference.

And a digital culture where your own personal as well as intimate information is constantly under pressure, constantly encouraged as an opportunity for display, and then collected, systemised and used for commercial and/or political purposes, does not, in turn, inspire respect for others' personal information.

Some advice on becoming 'good' digital citizens

Children are increasingly engaged in a social networking environment that pays little heed to its own ethical responsibility, too readily shifting the goal posts in the rules for displaying personal information, altering privacy norms, or newly connecting people who don't know each other and feel no culpability regarding each other. At the same time, society calls ever louder for children themselves to act responsibly.

Is this fair, and is it feasible, when the adults (both individuals and companies) who are supposedly their role models so often (and now so visibly) act differently? In figuring out how best to support young people in becoming 'good' digital citizens, our EU Kids Online research provides some helpful pointers:

- Developing safety skills encourage other skills, and more skills are associated with more activities online. So teaching children to be safer need not curtail and may even encourage online opportunities rather than giving them restrictions.
- Online and offline vulnerability are interrelated. Children with more psychological problems suffer more from online as well as offline risks, which makes promoting internet access among parents and sufficient digital skills among parents and teachers crucial.
- Children who grow up in socially disadvantaged families often find it difficult to take advantage of the opportunities offered by social media or to cope adequately with the risks that they might encounter while using them. Every stakeholder in society needs to develop approaches that enable all citizens to use social media for actively participating in society.
- Bullying and online harassment has serious and long-term consequences. Supporting both those who have been bullied *and* those who have bullied others online will decrease the occurrence and therefore the consequences of online bullying.

Having cumulated research on children and online risk and opportunities in Europe for almost a decade, our key policy recommendations to industry providers are as follows. Industry providers should:

- ensure 'safety by default', and enable customisable, easy-to-use safety features, accessible to those with only basic digital literacy;
- ensure age limits are real and effective, using appropriate methods of age verification where possible, accompanied by sufficient safety information;
- implement tools so that under-18s can remove content that may be damaging to their reputation and/or personal integrity;
- ensure commercial content is clearly distinguishable, is age-appropriate, ethical and sensitive to local cultural values, gender and 'race';
- support independent evaluation and testing of all specified safety tools and features;
- develop a shared resource of standardised industry data regarding the reporting of risks.

When social media ask you to share, privacy protection should also be facilitated to show that they *care*. This includes respect for users' privacy and personal information, and ensuring that this is not misused.

More use, not less

What keeps children safe, sound and digitally resilient is not the lack of use, but more use. It is not the prevention of experiences or content, but the prevention of unethical behaviour and the encouragement of self-efficacy, respect for others, and the respect and care of precious digital goods (including personal information) that makes SNS use a positive opportunity rather than a risky activity.

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