



Young lives online

The increasing importance of the internet for work, education, community, politics, family life and social relationships raises new questions for social scientists, policy makers and the public – particularly in relation to how children use the internet. **Sonia Livingstone** reports on a major EU project to chart this change.

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The internet and new online technologies are becoming an integral part of everyday life, with many countries under pressure to get online to stimulate innovation, education, participation and commerce. Although everybody is affected, children and young people are often in the vanguard of new media adoption. The widespread speculation, both hopeful and fearful, that surrounds children's online experiences requires an especially critical stance from the academy to steer a path, guided by empirical evidence, between the celebration of youthful experts supposedly pioneering new forms of social life online and the attendant anxiety that children are thereby particularly vulnerable to new forms of harm.

In the early years of internet diffusion, children were gaining access to the internet well ahead of a mature programme of empirical research. But recent years have seen an explosion of studies, challenging researchers and policy makers to review and learn from the emerging findings. Achieving such

an overview is vital because policy should be evidence based and also because technological, economic, political and cultural factors shape the processes of internet use differently in different countries. Not only is a comparative lens needed to understand whether, how and why children's online experiences differ but, without this, one risks the twin fallacies of assuming one's own country is distinctive when it is not and of assuming one's own country is the same as others when it is not.

Even within Europe, differences in internet access and use are substantial. A recent Eurobarometer survey, conducted in December 2008, found that, as reported by their parents, 75 per cent of six to 17 year olds were online across the European Union, ranging from a striking 42 per cent of six year olds, over half of seven and eight year olds, jumping to 72 per cent of nine year olds, 84 per cent of 14 and 15 year olds and 87 per cent of 17 year olds. However, fewer than half of children were online in Italy (45 per cent), about half in Greece and Cyprus (both 50 per cent), rising to 91 per cent in the UK and Sweden, 93 per cent in the Netherlands and Denmark, and 94 per cent in Finland.

Striking differences can also be seen between different parts of Europe with respect to cultural, infrastructural, socio-economic and political parameters influencing children's experiences with the

internet and new media in general. The European context differs significantly from that of America, whose research receives most prominence worldwide: in Europe, for example, the social and religious traditions of childhood and parenting vary from the Scandinavian North to the Latin South; the gradual harmonisation of economic and educational policies instigated by the European Union creates new tensions; and the incorporation of post-Communist countries has seen rapid market developments disrupting established cultural norms in those countries.

How, then, should we approach these intersecting patterns of similarity and difference, in seeking to understand European children's experiences of the internet? 'EU Kids Online' is a network of researchers from diverse social science and humanistic disciplines in 21 countries, funded by the EC Safer Internet Plus programme. Since 2006, it has been working to identify, examine and compare empirical research that addresses the cultural, contextual and risk issues arising from the intersection of the three key terms – children, internet, Europe. Employing an approach to understanding children's online experiences defined by four C's – comparative, contextual, child-centred and critical – the purpose is to inform both research and policy agendas.

For researchers and research funders, the task is to identify what is known, what pressing research gaps remain, what new research areas emerge and what best practice research methods are available to address these. For policy makers and the public, the task is to translate research findings into constructive, evidence based policy recommendations which can guide regulatory practices, media literacy programmes, education and awareness raising about risk and safety issues and parental approaches to mediating the internet. EU Kids Online reports are produced collaboratively, informed by frequent deliberative discussion of research approaches and findings within the network, and are made public at www.eukidsonline.net

In undertaking this work, it has been important to recognise that, while policies rightly seek to maximise opportunities and minimise risks, this line is not easy to draw. Children and adults categorise online activities differently – with children taking a very different view of the value of making new friends or pretending to be someone else online. And adults themselves do not always agree – with educators and child welfare workers having different views on the value of unconstrained information searches. Further, child development theory argues that some degree of risk is itself potentially an opportunity, for children must move beyond their safe and familiar surroundings if they are to become resilient in the wider world. At the national and cross-national level, interpretations and attitudes to risks and opportunities vary. In practice, the very design of the online interface intertwines risks and opportunities – even the Children's BBC website requires a child to disclose personal information to receive the benefits on offer.

The EU Kids Online network has sought to systematise the various opportunities and risks on

the research and policy agendas and proposed a classification of countries as shown in the table:

Online risk	Children's internet use		
	Below EU average (< 65%)	Average (65-85%)	Above EU average (> 85%)
Low	Cyprus Italy	France Germany	
Medium	Greece	Austria Belgium Ireland Portugal Spain	Denmark Sweden
High		Bulgaria Czech Republic	Estonia Iceland Netherlands Norway Poland Slovenia UK

On this basis, it appears that high use of the internet is rarely if ever associated with low risk, although low use of the internet may be associated with high risk. Clearly, high use, high risk countries are, for the most part, wealthy Northern European countries, while medium use and high risk are characteristic of new entrants to the EC. Last, Southern European countries tend to be lower in risk, though there are differences among them. Putting this another way around, the network proposes that, as a broad generality: Northern European countries tend to be 'high use, high risk'; Southern European countries tend to be 'low use, variable risk'; and Eastern European countries can be characterised as 'new use, new risk'.

Why this should be the case is far from straightforward, as there are competing explanations to

take into account. After reviewing a considerable body of information, the EU Kids Online network concluded that, over and above the importance of the trajectory of internet use across countries, national internet regulation appears lower (or less interventionist) in countries where internet use is lower (or more recently introduced to a mass market), resulting in turn in greater risk to children in these countries. It also observed that higher use countries had higher levels of general education, and higher risk countries often had low NGO engagement in awareness raising and, interestingly, less investment in positive online content for children.

The network is now developing recommendations for six key areas of policy formation at national and international levels. These will cover children's rights and opportunities (including issues of digital inclusion and equality), to positive content provision, better guidance for parents, recommendations for schools and child protection, with implications for law enforcement.

The network will hold its final conference at LSE in June 2009, bringing together researchers and policy makers from across Europe and beyond to participate in the launch of the final report and an original edited book of key findings, entitled *Kids Online: opportunities and risks for children* (Policy Press).

And finally, it is preparing to undertake a major new EC-funded project, EU Kids Online II, in which parents and children across Europe will be interviewed to investigate new and emerging issues regarding internet use and risks in order to inform future policy developments in this field. ■



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