Protecting and empowering children in digital environments

LSE research informed national, European and international initiatives aimed at helping kids use the internet safely, creatively and skillfully

What was the problem?

In 2014 84% of UK homes had access to the internet. This extraordinarily rapid rise – from less than 1% in the 1990s – has offered astounding access to learning tools and global communication. However, it has also introduced new threats to personal safety from identity thieves, pornographers, predators and bullies, with particular risks for children who are the least equipped to protect themselves.

In the early days of the internet, policymakers were split between those who sought to maximise availability to this new resource and those who worried about potential risks. Government bodies have spent the last fifteen years addressing this balance and in particular attempting to establish a policy framework for the protection of under 18s.

What did we do?

Professor of Social Psychology Sonia Livingstone has led LSE's research into online child protection since 1995 and has published widely in the field.

Children and their Changing Media Environment (1995-99, with Moira Bovill) was a comparative study of children's new media usage across 12 European countries. Eleven thousand children aged 6-16 years were interviewed to assess the similarities and differences in media environments for children and young people within and between European countries.

UK Children Go Online (2003-5, with Magdalene Bober) was based on research involving internet users, non-users and parents. It identified the need for a policy that balanced giving children maximum opportunity to access the internet with minimising their risk of exposure to sexual imagery and messaging, bullying, hate sites and anorexia sites.

EU Kids Online (2006-2014, with Leslie Haddon, Anke Gorzig and Kjartan Olafsson) was based on a survey of over 25,000 9-16 year olds. It developed a classification of online risk factors and outlined a 'ladder of opportunity' demonstrating an ideal pathway that children might follow to access the internet creatively, safely and with skill.

Children, Risk and Safety on the Internet: Research and policy challenges in comparative perspective (2012, with Leslie Haddon and Anke Gorzig) distinguished between 'risk' (exposure to inappropriate material) and 'harm' (negative effects of exposure) and identified

the socio-economic and psychological factors that make children vulnerable. It established that parental mediation is helpful and that offline bullying (as perpetrator or victim) is a strong indicator of higher risk of cyberbullying.

What happened?

UK Children Go Online suggested that internet access resulted in significant educational benefits to children in disadvantaged families. The UK Department for Education used this evidence to introduce its Home Access Programme (2007-2011), which offered reduced-cost safe computer access to the country's poorest children.

> 'Livingstone's research on parental struggles with internet safety informed the Internet Service Providers' first Parental Controls Code of Practice, endorsed by Prime Minister David Cameron…'

The *Byron* review of internet safety (2008), commissioned by Prime Minister Gordon Brown, classified online risks according to the EU Kids Online model and led to the creation of the *UK Council for Child Internet Safety* (UKCCIS), a group of more than 200 organisations from the government, industry, academia and charity sectors. Livingstone was an Executive Board Member and its Evidence Champion and helped the Council to produce the UK's first *Child Online Safety Strategy* (2011), which led to the inclusion of e-safety in the national computing curriculum and in Ofsted's school inspection regime.

UKCCIS also updated the *Home Secretary's Taskforce for Child Protection on the Internet*, a 2008 report in which Livingstone had participated, which resulted in multiple safety improvements in industry provision and practice. In *Advice on Child Internet Safety 1.0: Universal guidelines of providers* (2011), UKCCIS relied on the *UK Children Go Online* final report for definitions of risk and harm. Content providers, schools and non-governmental organisations now promote these definitions as the most useful in the field.

Livingstone's research on parental struggles with internet safety informed the Internet Service Providers' first *Parental Controls Code of Practice*, endorsed by Prime Minister David Cameron, which legislated for the automatic enabling of domestic filters unless the homeowner opts out.

Livingstone's research has been reported in national and international media over 1,800 times. She has been interviewed by, amongst others, the Daily Mail, Times and Guardian, and has appeared on Panorama, Channel 4 News and Newsnight. Since 2010, over 20,000 people have downloaded reports from the EU Kids Online website and 200,000 people have visited the site.

Livingstone contributed to Safer Internet Day, which is organised by a children's charity, the UK Safer Internet Centre, every February to promote the safe use of digital technology for young people. It is heard by an estimated 10% of the UK population and 14% of teenagers, with two-thirds of the audience stating that they intend to amend their online behaviour as a result.

The *Safer Social Networking Principles for the European Union* (2009) was also informed by the EU Kids Online research and has resulted in higher safety standards across the EU. In 2012 Livingstone presented research findings to European Commission Vice President Neelie Kroes' *Coalition of Industry Chief Executive Officers*, which used these findings to establish higher standards for making the internet a better place for children, including more stringent privacy settings and the elimination of child abuse images.

The European Commission also relied on Livingstone's research to establish the first *European Strategy for a Better Internet for Children*, which guided the European Union on suitable content for children's programmes and established *The European Award for Best Children's Online Content*, with Livingstone as Jury Chair. In the European Commission's *'benchmarking of safer internet policies'* (2013), Livingstone's research was identified as a major source of information across member countries and the sole source of evidence in six of them.

Livingstone's research was cited in Harvard University's report to the Attorney Generals of the United States, *Enhancing Safety and Online Technologies* (2008), and by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The EU Kids Online survey has been replicated in Brazil, Russia and Australia and adapted by, amongst others, UNICEF, Ofcom and the NSPCC.

Professor Sonia Livingstone is a professor in the Department of Media and Communications at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Her work examines the opportunities and risks afforded to children and young people by digital and online technologies. She is author or editor of eighteen academic books, and she directs the 33-country network, EU Kids Online, funded by the EC's Safer Internet Programme. She serves on the Executive Board of the UK's Council for Child Internet Safety (UKCCIS), for which she is the Evidence Champion. Sonia was awarded the title of Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) in 2014 'for services to children and child internet safety.'

Email: s.livingstone@lse.ac.uk
Webpage: http://www.lse.ac.uk/media%40lse/WhosWho/AcademicStaff/SoniaLivingstone.aspx

---

Leverhulme Trust
British Telecom (BT)
European Commission (EC)
Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)

http://www.lse.ac.uk/researchImpact