

## Children's online experiences in socially disadvantaged families: European evidence and policy recommendations

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### Summary

Over the last years the EU Kids Online-Network has presented a wide range of empirical evidence on children's online use and online experiences. Within this field special attention has to be paid to socially disadvantaged children, because they are more vulnerable to different kinds of harm resulting from online risks than other children. This report summarises findings on social disadvantage from the EU Kids Online II dataset and from other studies conducted in countries belonging to the EU Kids Online network in recent years. This is complemented by results of a long term study dealing with the media socialisation of socially disadvantaged children in Austria. The conclusion provides recommendations on how to support socially disadvantaged children and adolescents in making better experiences with the internet.

Access and use are the main topics of almost all the studies covered, but for Europe we can state that a lack of access to the internet is not the key problem. This is different, however, for countries like Brazil or Russia. In Europe children and adolescents differ in the way they use the internet and they have different preferences concerning content, e.g. a stronger interest in entertainment.

The educational background of the family (which correlates highly with the economic well-being of a family) plays the major role influencing the different ways the internet is used. Children of lower educated parents are often left alone when dealing with the internet.

The results of a long term study (from 2005 ongoing) show that socially disadvantaged families are challenged to cope with many problems in their daily life. Resulting from restricted financial resources, unemployment and lower education, lack of time and leisure opportunities their life world conditions are very demanding.

Socially disadvantaged children are at risk in a double way. On the one hand they suffer from the effects of their parents' socio-structural problems, on the other hand they use media very intensively which means that their socialisation is dominated by media.

Social disadvantage must not be seen as being mono-causal, but is multi-dimensional. Socio-economic "hard facts" such as family income and parent's educational level are important but research should also emphasise socio-emotional conditions within a family, especially the youngest children, because the family remains the most important environment in which children are socialised.

Children in socially disadvantaged families as well as their parents, need support in coping with their everyday lives in general. This includes efforts to fight poverty, social exclusion, and unequal opportunities in our societies.

In particular, children who grow up in socially disadvantaged families often find it difficult to take advantage of the opportunities offered by media or to cope adequately with the risks that they might encounter while using them. Therefore every societal stakeholder needs to develop approaches that enable all citizens to use media for actively participating in society.

Although we have taken social disadvantage as one category we have to acknowledge that there are many different forms of social disadvantage. Therefore, there cannot be one single programme that covers all families and parents. A broader approach that pays attention to the particular conditions and requirements of the affected families is necessary.

## Introduction – why research on social disadvantage is relevant

Europe has been exhibiting increasing rates of poverty and social exclusion since the mid-1980s caused by rising unemployment rates, changing ways of living together and reductions in social benefits (Palentien, 2003). While countries like Portugal, Greece or Spain are still suffering a tremendous economic crisis, the economic situation seemed to be stabilising or improving in some richer countries over the last few years (e.g. Statistik Austria, 2012, p. 1). However, while Germany, for example, currently reports very low unemployment rates, these positive numbers seem to be partially a result of a rising number of so-called 'working poor' (AWO-ISS, 2012, pp. 6-7). In this respect, we may observe that the economic well-being of the state in general can co-exist with poverty and social disadvantage in large parts of that society (Equal Charity, 2013).

One central aim of the EU Kids Online network is to examine how children and adolescents can engage in a safer and more profitable use of the internet. In this regard, special attention has to be paid to socially disadvantaged children, because they are more vulnerable to any harm resulting from online risks than other children. Furthermore, their parents use more restrictive measures to influence their children's internet use instead of trying to actively support and facilitate a safe and profitable way of dealing with media (Paus-Hasebrink, Ponte, Dürager & Bauwens, 2012, p. 267). In order to face this challenge, we will discuss in this report what social disadvantage in Europe actually means and how it is related to online practices and experiences.

In the next two sections we will outline the findings on social disadvantage from the EU Kids Online II dataset and from other studies conducted in countries belonging to the EU Kids Online network in recent years. This is followed by the results of a long term study dealing with the media socialisation of socially disadvantaged children in Austria. The conclusion will outline recommendations as to how socially disadvantaged children and adolescents should be supported in order to foster their use of online media.

## The family as a key social context

While it has to be stressed that the family remains the most important environment in which children are socialised, especially for the youngest children (Paus-Hasebrink, Kulterer, Šmahel & Kontríková, 2013), we are facing a fundamental change in what 'family' is: "The traditional, nuclear European family consisted of a married father and mother with a few children. In modern times, this 'classical' family has become just one of many options. The number of singles, one-parent families, same-sex parent families, compound and joint families has increased as a result of declining marriage rates, an increasing number of divorces, the wide acceptance of cohabitation, the legalization of same-sex marriage, and dropping fertility rates." (Halman, Sieben & van Zundert, 2012, p. 35) Hence, the family does not exist solely through the birth of a child, but rather through the act of caring (Lenz, 2013, p. 122). Therefore, the family is based on a personal and emotional parent-child-relationship. The majority of Europeans nevertheless continue to believe in the classical family as the best way of living together and as the best solution for raising children. However, things are changing gradually, as the rising acceptance of single-parents or working mothers exemplifies (Halman, Sieben & van Zundert, 2012, p. 35). Family is still of great importance to most Europeans: 85% regard the family as being "very important", while an additional 13% acknowledge that it is "quite important". Only 3% regard it as not or not at all important (ibid., p. 16).

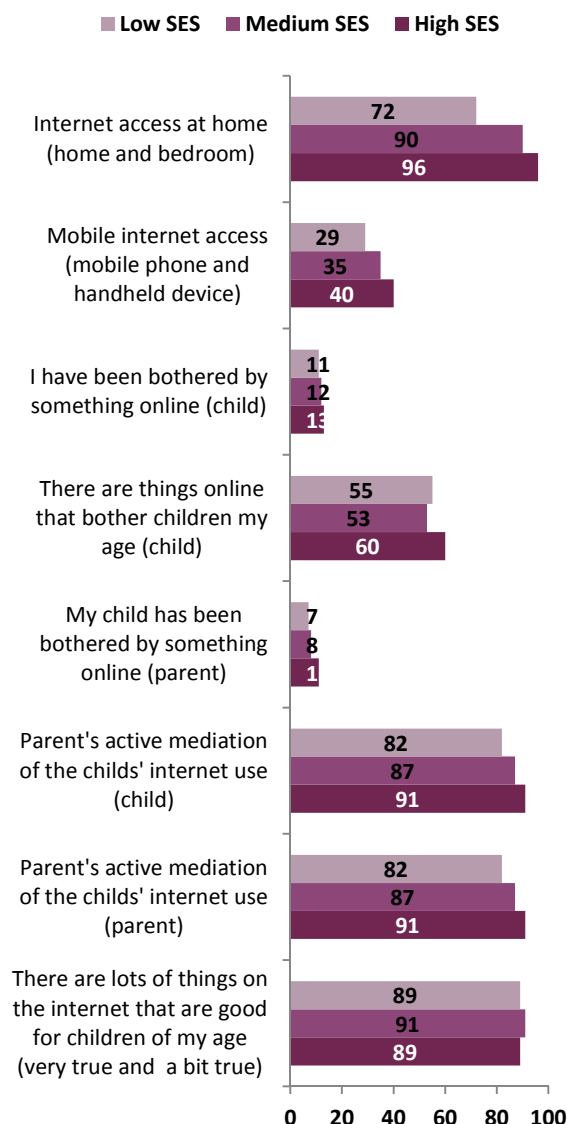
Turning to families who have to face particular challenges in their everyday lives, social disadvantage in Europe or in other developed nations may be seen as a lack of options to participate in society. This lack can be analysed in two dimensions: in a socio-economic dimension and in a socio-emotional dimension. The socio-economic dimension consists mainly of a lack of financial means, affecting the family's ability to provide healthy food, clothing, recreational activities etc., but it also involves factors like low formal education and non-prestigious jobs. We must take growing poverty, social exclusion and people without prospects into consideration, more so in countries affected by crises and exhibiting high unemployment rates, especially among young people. Apart from severe forms of poverty, there is evidence suggesting that the impact of socio-emotional factors can actually be more important for the well-being and

progress of children than the impact of socio-economic factors (Paus-Hasebrink & Kulterer, 2014b)<sup>1</sup>. Socio-emotional factors address the importance of stable and trustful relationships at home and the feeling of not being alone in the world. These factors are especially important for children, helping them to become strong and resilient individuals. Evidence for this can be found in a German study showing that poor migrant adolescents can better deal with economic problems than poor German non-migrant teenagers, in part because they are supported by stronger social networks through strong family structures (AWO-ISS, 2012, p. 2).

## Socially disadvantaged children and online use – Empirical evidence from the EU Kids Online survey

Based on the EU Kids Online survey in 2010 Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig and Ólafsson (2011a, p. 2) tested several indicators of potential disadvantage concerning children and parents in their report on disadvantaged children and online risk. The authors take a closer look at children who have parents with a lower secondary education or less, children whose parents do not use the internet and children who use the internet less than once per week. These children tend to encounter slightly fewer online risks than their peers in Europe, but they are more upset if they experience them. Furthermore, their online skills are noticeably below the European average. This is illustrated by the following findings that compare children from households with lower, medium, and higher socio-economic status, which has been defined on the basis of parents' formal education. Children from families with lower socio-economic status use the internet slightly less and more often not at home than children from higher socio economic groups (Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig & Ólafsson, 2011b, pp. 25, 29). Furthermore, they also have significantly less access to the internet through mobile devices and their parents tend to use less active mediation strategies (cf. Fig. 1). However, in terms of their age when they first used the internet and in relation to the average time spent online, there is hardly any difference between children and adolescents in low, medium and high SES families (cf. Tab. 1).

Figure 1: Dimensions of media use (SES)



QC301a, b: Looking at this card, please tell me where you use the internet these days. QC300h, e: Which of these devices do you use for the internet these days? QC110: In the PAST 12 Month, have you seen or experienced something on the internet that has bothered you in some way? For example, made you feel uncomfortable, upset, or feel that you shouldn't have seen it? QC322: Do you think there are things on the internet that people about you age will be bothered by in any way? QP228: As far as you are aware, in the past year, has your child seen or experienced something on the internet that has bothered them in any way? QC327 and QP220: Does your parents/do either of your parents sometimes [which of the following things, if any do you (or your partner/other carer) sometimes do with your child ...? QC319c: There are lots of things on the internet that are good for children of my age. Response options: very true, a bit true, not true.

Base: All children who use the internet. For parents: All children who use the internet and one of their parents.

<sup>1</sup> We have to keep in mind that an extremely difficult economic situation can also strain the socio-emotional atmosphere in the family.

**Table 1: Internet use (age and time)**

Internet use	Low SES	Medium SES	High SES
Average age when child first used the internet in years	9	9	9
How long children use the internet for on an average day in minutes	84	91	87

QC302: How old were you when you first used the internet? Derived from QC304 and QC305: About how long do you spend using the internet on a normal school day / normal non school day?

Base: All children who use the internet.

In their analysis of the EU Kids Online dataset, Paus-Hasebrink, Ponte, Dürager and Bauwens (2012) investigated the influence of parents' formal education on children's internet use and the relationship between children's and their family's internet use. Parents' formal education was selected as the "key indicator of socioeconomic status" (p. 258), which influences the way children and parents interact and which mediation strategies parents employ. Although a low degree of formal education is of course not the only indicator of disadvantage, it is an indicator that quite accurately depicts social stratification (p. 261). The authors show that according to the EU Kids Online dataset, higher educated parents are more confident about using the internet than lower educated parents. Additionally, higher educated parents use more active mediation strategies regarding their children's internet use and children of higher educated parents generally have higher internet skills (p. 264). Furthermore, children of lower educated parents are often left alone when dealing with the internet. Compared to children of higher educated parents, they more often claim that they have higher internet skills than their parents. In fact, 15% of families in the 25 countries can be classified as this type of "Unskilled Family" (Paus-Hasebrink, Bauwens, Dürager & Ponte, 2013, p. 122). Parents in this type of family are characterised as having "a low educational background and SES", while communication in the family tends to be authoritarian (ibid., pp. 122f.). This family type is overrepresented in Austria, Turkey (outliers), Greece, Hungary and Romania, and it occurs less often in Belgium, Bulgaria, Portugal, the United Kingdom and Cyprus (ibid., p. 128).

## Further research evidence from the EU Kids Online database

Apart from in its own comparative survey in 2010, the EU Kids Online Network has identified other recent evidence about children's use of new media across Europe and collected this research in a public online database<sup>2</sup>. A search query encompassing social disadvantage and related topics in this database was used in order to get an overview of the research field of social disadvantage and internet use (cf. Tab. 2)<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> This European evidence base contains more than 1200 studies concerning children, adolescents and their internet use from 33 countries, reflecting the current state of research on the topic in Europe and beyond. In a review of the database it turned out that language is still one of the major obstacles to overcome: Only "39% of studies have at least part of the findings published in English (in some cases this might be only a summary)" (Ólafsson, Livingstone & Haddon, 2013, p. 18; h.i.o.). One of the network's main aims is to make research more available for peers and the public. To achieve these objectives, all studies in the database (published since 2009) have bullet point summaries in English, composed by the national teams (see ibid., p. 24). The database is freely accessible on [www.eukidsonline.net](http://www.eukidsonline.net).

<sup>3</sup> The following search terms were used: disadvantaged (8 search results), poverty (0), discrimination (1), poor (2), socio (41), higher (64), lower (31) and digital divide (21). The results were then manually searched for studies matching the topic. According to this, there are only a few studies focusing explicitly on this topic. As noted by Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig and Ólafsson (2011a, pp. 1-2), "knowledge gaps" exist that have to be addressed by further research. However, we identified some studies that can provide further evidence on our topic. Two key areas of research are access and inclusion but it also makes the point quite clearly that several other aspects are taken in account, too (cf. Tab. 2).

**Table 2: Overview of research by country**

Country of the study	Topic covered	Sample characteristics	
		n*	Description
Portugal	online experiences – inclusion and exclusion	279	socially disadvantaged children and adolescents (9 to 16)
Spain	participation and online risks	148	Adolescents
Cyprus	comparison of adolescents' online experiences in the Republic of Cyprus/Greek-Cypriot community and in Northern Cyprus/Turkish-Cypriot community	346	adolescents (18 to 24) in both parts of Cyprus
The Netherlands	access, way of use, digital divide	749	Dutch adolescents (13 to 18)
Russia	access to the Internet, media ownership and use	3.833	parents (18 to 55)
The United Kingdom	media literacy among children and young people and their parents/carers	2.131 (2.071)	children (5 to 15) and their parents/carers
Brazil	access, use, risks, opportunities, harm	1.580	children and adolescents (9 to 16) and their parents/legal guardians
Italy	high school students' use of new media and digital skills	3.634	students (15 to 18) and 980 teachers in Lombardy and Trentino
Turkey (Akbulut et al.)	cyberbullying victimization among Turkish online social utility members	1.470	adolescents (15 to 18)
Turkey (Batigün et al.)	Internet addiction, access and use, risks and harm	1.198	adolescents (18)
Austria	access, use, activities, risk, harm, mediation strategies, media education	20 (18)	families; children (5 to 13) and parents

## **Portugal – social exclusion is not necessarily digital exclusion**

Simões, Ponte and Jorge (2013) investigated the online experience of socially disadvantaged children and young people in Portugal in 2011, adapting the EU Kids Online questionnaire for a sample of 279 socially disadvantaged children (nine to 16 years old) that were recruited through a social inclusion centre for vulnerable children and adolescents. In general, they find only surprisingly minor differences between those children and the Portuguese EU Kids Online sample. In terms of access, the socially disadvantaged children have less access at home due to the fact that their parents are more likely to be non-internet users compared to the general population. These differences in access in a “private and individualized manner” (p. 102) do not, however, fully translate into a second-level digital divide. Socially disadvantaged children in this study show almost the same levels of digital skills as their peers, with the exception of safety skills like blocking spam, changing filter preferences and comparing websites to see if information is true (p. 98). Additionally, these children access more entertainment content than the representative sample of children

surveyed by EU Kids Online. In conclusion, the authors remark that it would be exaggerated to equate social exclusion with digital exclusion. Rather, attention should be paid to the detailed differences between socially disadvantaged children and the general population of children.

## **Spain – socially disadvantaged but able to participate**

A Spanish study conducted by Cabello Cádiz (2013) is an example from a country severely hit by crisis and with one of the highest rates of youth unemployment in Europe. He made an effort to capture social disadvantage among young people in its different forms. In addition to parents' low educational level and low family incomes, different types of migration background and housing in “segregated and stigmatized neighbourhoods” (p. 62) were taken into account. A total of 148 adolescents who were contacted in youth centres participated in the study. Four focus groups and 15 workshops (involving role play and the creation of a social profile) were used for data collection (ibid., pp. 66-67). This method provided an insight into adolescents' perception of risks on the

internet and how such risks are socially constructed (p. 78). The socially disadvantaged adolescents are able to participate in the use of new media, although they are missing a healthy financial background. “Formal and informal institutions outside the family” (p. 61) empower them to do so. Another important finding of the study is that, “early adolescents and, especially, adolescents seem quite aware of many risks in the use of ICTs, showing a strong sense of control and knowledge of what we can call social network pragmatics, which allow them to unmask potential perpetrators” (p. 78; h.i.o.).

## **Cyprus – a reverse digital divide in a divided country**

The results of the next study were published in short in January 2014, but fieldwork had already been completed a few years previously. Milioni, Doudaki and Demertzis analysed data from 346 adolescents aged 18 to 24, who were selected out of two larger samples. Their main goal was to compare adolescents’ online experiences in the Republic of Cyprus/Greek-Cypriot community (using data from the Cyprus World Internet Project, 2010) and in Northern Cyprus/Turkish-Cypriot community (based on the Census of the administrative authorities, 2006). There are fundamental differences between the still well-developed Republic of Cyprus in the south, which is a member of the European Union, and the northern part of the country, the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, which is characterised by a weak economy and high unemployment rates. The authors examined the digital divide among young internet users both within the different ethnic communities and comparing the two geographical parts of the country. Unsurprisingly, higher educated users and older users are more experienced and gather more information than younger users and those with lower formal education. As regards income, the results are more ambiguous. On the one hand, the authors underlined the importance of income as a factor influencing access and use in general, that is able to deepen existing inequalities. On the other hand, they pointed out that income is not related to the digital divide in any special way in Cyprus: “In Cyprus, income does not appear to be related either to access, experience, and use the internet or to specific activities online” (Milioni et al., 2014, p. 12). Comparing the two parts of Cyprus, adolescents belonging to the Greek-Cypriot community have slightly more options to access the internet and spend more time online than their peers in the Turkish-Cypriot community, but the latter are significantly better skilled. They gather more

information and create content more often – the lack of access and time seems to be compensated for by more advanced ways to use online opportunities. The internet may be seen as an exit point out of the isolation experienced in Northern Cyprus.

## **The Netherlands - once access gaps are bridged, other gaps open up**

In an earlier study conducted by Peter and Valkenburg (2006), the authors conducted a survey of 749 Dutch adolescents aged 13 to 18. They investigated two different approaches to the question of a digital divide: whether it was disappearing or whether there was increasing digital differentiation as different ways of using the internet are shaped by “socio-economic, cognitive and cultural resources” (p. 3). Social inequality, in terms of socio-economic and cognitive resources, had a major influence on the internet use of the adolescents surveyed. Adolescents from families with higher socio-economic resources use the internet more often as an information medium (p. 15), which is also true for adolescents with higher cognitive resources. Similarly, young people with a higher socio-economic background and higher cognitive resources use the internet less often as an entertainment medium (p. 16). In sum, the findings indicate “once access gaps are bridged, other gaps open, most notably in terms of adolescents’ use of the internet [...]” (p. 18).

## **Russia – a country characterised by opposites**

Digital Parenting Russia I: How Russian Parents View and Capitalize on Digital Media is a study conducted by Ravve (2012). The Anketki Research Team sets its focus on young people’s digital behaviour in former USSR countries (<http://www.digitalparentingrussia.com>). They interviewed 3,833 parents (aged 18 to 55) living in cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants.

As an introductory remark, Russia is a country characterised by contrasts. There is variation in infrastructure as well as an imbalanced distribution of income and access to the internet in different parts of the country. While internet connections are quite fast and cheap in the central area between Moscow and St. Petersburg, the situation currently is the opposite in the far eastern regions. We can see both a range in broadband speed (from 1 Mbps to 17 Mbps) and significantly higher costs for broadband connections in the peripheral regions (factor 17) (Ravve, 2012, pp. 5; 21).

New media are seen as “digital babysitters”. Fathers in particular prefer to use digital media for this role while mothers tend to use more traditional media to entertain their children (ibid., p. 9). “The gap between wealthy and poor parents is significant not only in terms of children’s access to devices, but also in their attitudes towards technology. Higher income families tend to see a more positive impact of the digital media on kids development” (ibid., p. 12).

In addition, the place of residence is one of many aspects of social disadvantage. Media are more widespread in larger cities and metropolises, but this does not affect cell phones and computers. Surprisingly, the authors were not able to show differences between wealthy and poor people with regard to access to television and printed books. In contrast to this result, “children from more wealthy families have more access to gaming consoles” (ibid., p. 7). These families are also more likely to own e-books than families with lower incomes.

### ***The United Kingdom – a large-scale study on media literacy***

Ofcom’s 2011 study on UK children’s media literacy is a large-scale study that does not focus on social disadvantage, but captures information relevant to this topic because the socio-economic background of the children’s household was collected. Like the Portuguese example and the EU Kids Online dataset, the study also shows that children with higher socio-economic status use the internet more often at home (89%) than their lower status counterparts (69%) (p. 4), and parents are also more likely to know more about the internet than their children (p. 62) and more likely to give their children advice. However, regarding most other aspects of internet use and digital literacy, the differences are quite small. This may in part be due to the large-scale, quantitative design of the study, which does not pay special attention to issues of risk and harm.

### ***Brazil – socio-economic status as a key factor for access and use of ICTs***

In 2012, a Brazilian team carried out the EU Kids Online survey using the same questionnaire and methodology (ICT Kids Online Brazil 2012 - Barbosa & cgi.br, 2013). These results were compared to the European data (Barbosa, O’Neill, Ponte, Simões and Jereissati, 2013). Socio-economic status, social disadvantage and several forms of inequality are of

particular importance in Brazil. Despite the rapid pace of economic development, the area where people live and socio-economic status have a great influence on people’s access to and use of ICTs.

“Only 7% of the households where family income is below one minimum wage claimed to have internet access at home against 91% of the families whose total incomes were over five times the minimum wage. Similarly, I

internet access for the lowest socio-economic households was 6%, while it was 97% for the highest” (Barbosa, O’Neill, Ponte, Simões and Jereissati, 2013, p. 6). Considerably more children in Europe are able to use the internet at home or in their schools, thus, cybercafés and other public access points are significantly more important in Brazil (ibid., pp. 4; 6).

Furthermore, the financial background of a family has an impact on whether unsupervised adolescents can access and use the internet (in a private bedroom or from a mobile device). Children from higher socio-economic classes start using the internet at a younger age. In addition, they use the internet more frequently and over a longer period of time than their peers with a lower socio-economic status (ibid., p. 10).

There are also notable differences concerning the use of SNS: “Younger children and those from lower socio-economic classes primarily use Orkut [39% at all], while older children and upper socio-economic classes prefer Facebook [61% at all] (ibid., p. 12). One key finding of the comparison is, “that regardless of their SES, slightly more than two thirds of Brazilian children consider they know more about the internet than their parents (from 68% among SES AB to 78% in DE). In Europe these values range from 28% (high SES) to 46% (low SES)” (ibid., p. 14).

### ***Italy – digital literacy and social disadvantage***

In an Italian study (Gui, 2013) 3,634 high school students (aged 15 to 18) and 980 teachers in Lombardy and Trentino (Northern Italy) were interviewed about students’ use of new media and digital skills. Additionally, a test of their digital literacy was conducted (see also Vallario, 2008). With regard to social disadvantage, they were able to verify that there is a relationship between family’s educational background, children’s privacy settings and personal information published on social network sites. Children with better educated parents are acting more safety-

oriented. Furthermore, digital literacy is influenced by the parents' educational and socio-economic background: Children whose parents have a higher level of education achieve significantly better test scores.

## **Turkey – Children from high-income families experience more risks**

Akbulut, Sahin and Eristi (2010) interviewed 1,470 representatively chosen teenagers (aged 15 to 18) in Turkey about their online experiences and cyberbullying victimization. One of the key results should be emphasised in our context: "The victimization scores of the high-income group were significantly higher than those of the middle-income group, whereas the low-income group was in between and did not differ from other groups significantly" (p. 199). The greater amount of internet use by high-income group children was not identified as an explanatory factor. However, the latter have better skills in foreign languages and "the high-income group surfed foreign websites more often, which made them more vulnerable to cyberbullying" (ibid.). This result may be seen as a negative example of the correlation between opportunities and risks; it outlines the importance of having a dialogue that brings both aspects – risks and opportunities – together.

Internet addiction was the research topic of another Turkish study by Batigün, Kiliç, Akün and Özgür in 2010. They identified 18% of the adolescents they surveyed as being addicted to the internet. Boys are affected more often than girls. Moreover, they concluded that persons with a higher socio-economic status are more often affected by internet addiction than those with a lower socio-economic status. One reason may lie in the greater online opportunities of the former.

## **Conclusion: Social disadvantage and internet use**

To conclude, it becomes very clear from these studies that it is a rather difficult task to measure differences in socio-economic status cross-nationally. Although one family's income and parents' educational status are seen as key factors, it is striking how different social disadvantage is operationalised within the studies collected (cf. Tab. 3). Countries differ heavily in terms of income, education, social welfare and other factors, leading to different perceptions of what counts as being

socially disadvantaged between, and even within, countries and regions.

**Table 3: Understanding of social disadvantage**

Country	Understanding of Social Disadvantage outlined in the study
Portugal	integration in a social inclusion center for vulnerable children
Spain	parents' low educational level, low family incomes, different forms of migration backgrounds, bad housing areas
Cyprus	part of the country (economic facts, unemployment rates), family income, adolescents' level of formal education
The Netherlands	Family's socio-economic status (income), adolescents cognitive resources
Russia	family wealth, place of residence, infrastructure
The United Kingdom	household socio-economic group (AB - DE)
Brazil	area of living, household socio-economic group (AB - DE)
Italy	parents' level of formal education, financial background of the family
Turkey (Akbulut et al.)	family income (high, middle, low)
Turkey (Batigün et al.)	higher or lower socio economic status
Austria	poverty, low income, unemployment, low level of parents' formal education, one-child-families, large families, migrant families, bad housing conditions and less opportunities for spending one's leisure time

Despite the difficulty of integrating findings from studies that use different definitions of social disadvantage some overall conclusions can be drawn from this overview. Looking at the most prominent indicators for social disadvantage, i.e. income and formal education, these two are generally highly correlated. However, when it comes to explaining differences in children's online experiences, the educational background of the family plays the major role. In general, children from higher educated parents use the internet more competently and have more competent parents to help them and to mediate their internet use. This results in higher opportunities for these children, but can also backfire because they are also subject to more risks online. Children from lower educated and lower SES parents, on the other hand, generally use the internet less, thus experiencing fewer opportunities and risks.



However, if they experience a risk, they are also less competent in dealing with the risk and developing resilience.

In addition to income and education the area of living makes a great difference as well, may it concern quarters of a city (e.g. in Spain and Portugal) or rural and urban areas of a whole country (e.g. Brazil and Russia but also in Austria). This leads back to the discussion about access and use: While internet and online-services are able to connect remote areas and metropolises or central areas of a country, we have to face that living in remote areas may still lead to disadvantage due to expensive and slow, or even not existing internet connections. Such a situation prevents opportunities and promotes exclusion.

The studies we discussed look at differences in internet use with regard to differences in and stratifications by socio-economic status. All in all, most studies find differences in internet use and appreciation between socio-economic groups. When looking at the digital divide (Hargittai, 2002; Helsper, 2012) globally, access is still of grave importance. In countries like Brazil, access to the internet is in fact still one of the most pressing issues regarding digital inclusion. In highly developed countries however, access is no longer sufficient for measuring gaps in online media use. Although socially disadvantaged children in general use the internet less often (especially at home), access is almost equally distributed. In cases where there is no internet access at home, public institutions like schools or special projects can fill these gaps by providing the necessary technical equipment.

In line with the above mentioned research the second-level digital divide is more relevant with regard to the consequences of social disadvantage. Socially disadvantaged children and adolescents differ in their way how they use the internet; they prefer entertainment programmes and have a less safety-oriented attitude.

Finally, what the studies that have been presented above have in common is that they look at the consequences of social disadvantage in a cross-sectional way. Thus the dynamic aspects of social disadvantage in the process of growing up of children cannot be covered. An earlier analysis of the evidence database has identifies a general “lack of continuity. The evidence database holds very few long-term or longitudinal studies. Most research is concerned simply with the short term nature and consequences of

internet use. Some studies are repeated a few years apart, providing the possibility of trend analysis. But more tracking studies are required to understand the wider implications of online technologies in the long term.” (Ólafsson, Livingstone & Haddon, 2013, pp. 32-33; h.i.o.) Against this background the following chapter presents results of a qualitative longitudinal panel study (2005-2012; 2014-2017) on (media) socialisation of socially disadvantaged children in Austria.

## Findings of a panel study from Austria

The long-term perspective is especially fruitful for the investigation of socialisation processes as “childhood is about change; research on children is about development” (Paus-Hasebrink, Sinner & Prochazka, 2013, p. 27). The qualitative long-term perspective allows for insights into the interplay of the dynamics of children’s development. It does so in the context of their individual ‘life world’ and the wider social framework of their families (schools, kindergartens, etc.). Thus, the whole space of socialisation can to be taken into account, as neither children nor their parents are influenced by media in a unidirectional way (Paus-Hasebrink & Kulterer, 2014a). For the study mentioned above, 20 (later 18) families with low income and low formal education have been interviewed every two years from 2005 to 2012 (Paus-Hasebrink & Kulterer, 2014b). Further selection criteria were urban or rural housing situations, number of children in the family, single parent or not and migration background (Paus-Hasebrink & Bichler, 2008). The in-depth interviews were conducted with one child (4 to 13) and one parent from the family (usually the mother). In addition, researchers had to follow protocols concerning how to react to the housing and living conditions when they visited the families. Parents also had to complete standardised questionnaires concerning their living conditions and family income. All this information was used to create global characteristics of the surveyed families and to be able to point changes over time.

## ***Social disadvantage in the context of socialisation – general findings***

Our study shows that social disadvantage has many different faces – the circumstances of families differ greatly and depend on many factors, so one should be careful to avoid generalisations. When discussing their subjective perceptions of their demanding socio-structural conditions and, when children talked about the special developmental tasks they face, children as well as their parents give their own answers and display their own ways of coping with everyday life. Our study identified different forms of coping with these challenging conditions wherein media play a central role. It shows that the circumstances in which the children grow up have a severe impact on their socialisation, which can be characterised as a highly media-oriented socialisation. The parents' grave situation and the vicious circle that they and their children are at risk of being drawn into, are reflected in the children's behaviour and actions. The burden of the lower SES is passed on to them and manifests itself in different ways ranging from aggressive behaviour to mental and physical illnesses (Paus-Hasebrink & Kulterer, 2014a). With regards to the media, our study showed that children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds use media intensively and in different forms to cope with their everyday life challenges. Media become crucial elements in their socialisation as the other agents often fail to assume responsibility. In the following paragraphs we shed light on the children's usage of the internet in particular.

### ***Access and internet use***

At the beginning of the study in 2005, when the children were about five years old, only about half of the parents claimed to use the computer, most of them on an irregular basis. Seven years later, with their children being about twelve years, most parents in the panel made use of the computer and the internet. Most of the families are well equipped with electronic media but only in very few cases do they possess the latest or high-end-versions of media devices, partly due to financial reasons. Thus, in line with the results of the European studies presented above, socially disadvantaged children do not differ from their peers in a significant way in terms of simple access to media in general and to the internet in particular. But looking at the actual patterns of internet use in socially disadvantaged families we observed a later integration of computers and the internet in their everyday life and

lower levels of competence among both parents and children.

### ***Social networking***

Another media innovation emerging in the research period of our long-term study are social networks. In the interviews in 2010, only a few children used social network sites. This fundamentally changed in the following two years. In 2012, nearly every second child in the sample had his or her own Facebook account. This rate of increase, at the age of about eleven years can be observed in all European countries. Only 26% of the nine to ten years old internet users in Europe have a personal profile on a social network site whereas for the eleven to twelve years olds this figure is already 49% (Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig & Ólafsson, 2011b, p. 36).

The most often named motivation for the use of Facebook is communication with friends and relatives. Campaigns and education programs seem to be fruitful since the interviewed children are fully aware of problems and risks concerning data security and privacy from an early age. Nevertheless, the specifics of socially disadvantaged groups become evident when taking a closer look at their acquaintance with social networking sites. Almost all children have limited knowledge of the risks and do not reflect upon where information comes from. They lack a deeper understanding of the internet. The limited knowledge they have comes from the media or from their moderately informed parents, who cannot support them adequately and are in most cases not able or willing to explain the background of online risks. This may be illustrated by this apt quote by a twelve year old girl talking about her privacy settings on Facebook: "My given name is correct, but my family name is not... this is said to be risky."

### ***Parental mediation of computer and internet***

It was not possible to identify a clear approach to the regulation of internet use across all the families in the sample. Half of the parents make use of fixed rules and set limits, the other half prefer to make use of more situational restrictions. Parents frequently reveal very little knowledge of and skills concerning internet use, which leads to across-the-board limitations. There is an impalpable anxiety about risks and dangers on the internet.

Many parents are overwhelmed when they have to deal with the media education of their children. They actually do not want to control everything at all times and prefer not to have a closer look at the content their children use. Many of them still have a negative attitude towards screen and electronic media. At the same time parents recognise that nowadays competent use of computers and the internet is a key qualification for the future career of their children. Parents largely rely on schools to teach media literacy, especially when it comes to computers and the internet. Most of the children already know some basic things about the functions and the use of computers and media in general.

## Conclusion

Socially disadvantaged families are not all the same – they are different in terms of their socio-economic and socio-emotional conditions. But all of the families investigated have one thing in common: despite their difficult financial situation, all of them are well equipped with media. All families possess at least one television set and have internet access in their homes. Not only the families as a whole, but also the children themselves possess several media of their own: books, TV sets, gaming consoles, personal computers, mobile phones and also smart phones. Regarding general access to media, those children who grow up in disadvantaged families do not differ significantly from their peers. However, they do not use the latest versions or very expensive high-end products of well-known manufacturers. Hence, access and ownership of media are not the urgent issues within socially disadvantaged families. Far more serious are two sides of the same coin: The first is the poor skills of the parents in using the media and in explaining to their children how media and the media system work. Thus, the children are missing a trusted and competent contact in their own family. Second, but closely linked, the parents do not pursue deliberate strategies in their media education. Rules are set inconsistently and spontaneously. The children have to deal with this uncertainty, and in many cases they have learned to exploit their parents' lack of consistency in order to use any kind of media whenever and wherever they want.

The results of this long term study show that over all phases since 2005 the socially disadvantaged families in our sample are challenged to cope with many problems in their daily life. Resulting from restricted financial resources, unemployment and lower education, lack of time and leisure opportunities their

life world conditions are very demanding. Our research points out that these children are at risk in a double way. On the one hand they suffer from the effects of their parents' socio-structural problems, on the other hand they use media very intensively which means that their socialisation is dominated by media (Paus-Hasebrink & Kulterer, 2014a).

## Consequences and recommendations

Even as communication researchers we have to acknowledge that media and practices of media use are just one part of children's everyday life. Socio-economic and socio-emotional contexts provide the framework for children's socialisation. Media related specificities of socially disadvantaged children reflect these basic social contexts. Therefore it is not sufficient to focus on media literacy in isolation. Instead the issue of social disadvantaged is a general challenge for social politics. Children in socially families as well as their parents need support in coping with their everyday lives in general. This includes all efforts to fight poverty, social exclusion, and unequal opportunities in our societies. Thus social inequalities within countries are still a major challenge for social policies. In particular, political economists point out that dynamics of inclusion and exclusion continue to affect the communicative rights and competencies of considerable groups of citizens (Murdock & Golding, 2004). Therefore, there is a particular responsibility for politicians and society as a whole to recognise processes of exclusion within their countries, to empower socially disadvantaged children and to help them to participate in society.

Within the broader social context media obviously have become an integral part of everyday life. In particular, children who grow up in socially disadvantaged families often find it difficult to take advantage of the opportunities offered by media or to cope adequately with the risks that they might encounter while using them. Therefore all societal stakeholders need to develop approaches that enable all citizens to use media for actively participating in society.

Parents are "the most influential people in the development and socialization of children carry the primary responsibility for guiding their children's media behaviour" (Sonck, Nikken & de Haan, 2013, p. 96). Research results clearly show that the active mediation strategies by parents are one of the most important factors in preparing children for a fruitful and yet safe

use of the internet (Helsper, Kalmus, Hasebrink, Sagvari & de Haan, 2013, pp. 30f.).

Socially disadvantaged parents mostly are overstrained to have a look at their children's media use because they are overloaded with difficult everyday problems. Against this background, parental reactions are often a lack of interest, a denial of any problems or the excessive and unreflective use of prohibitions and restrictive measures. Beyond that their (media) education strategies are highly inconsistent. In addition, only a few socially disadvantaged parents actually see media education as one of their (key) educational goals. As one first important step these parents need to be sensitised to and to be made aware of media education issues (Wagner, Gebel & Lampert, 2013, pp. 254ff.). Therefore these parents need particular support.

Restrictive mediation strategies and prohibitions are still common among parents. However, they are problematic in two respects: On the one hand, only younger children can be protected by prohibitions and restrictions. Moreover, these might "enhance the child's interest in 'forbidden' media content" (Sonck, Nikken & de Haan, 2013, p. 108). On the other hand, such measures may actually prevent risk and harm, but they also reduce online opportunities (Dürager & Livingstone, 2012, p. 4).

Although we have taken social disadvantage as one category we have to acknowledge that there are many different forms of social disadvantage (Paus-Hasebrink & Kulterer, 2014b). Therefore, there cannot be one single programme that covers all families and parents. A broader approach that pays attention to the particular conditions and requirements of the affected families is necessary. One aspect is to strengthen the responsibility of kindergartens and schools; teachers are important actors (Kalmus, von Feilitzen & Siibak, 2012, pp. 254f.). This is particularly important because of any socially disadvantaged parents want to hand the responsibility in media education over to schools and kindergartens, as they reach all children in a country.

Nevertheless, these organisations themselves need to be prepared and equipped (in terms of personnel, money and technical devices) to meet all the desired goals (see also O'Neill & Laouris, 2013, p. 194). Many teachers and educational staff are not trained and well prepared to teach all aspects of media education and in many cases they are themselves overwhelmed with more and more new technological developments. A

stronger exchange between parents and educational staff is urgently needed.

One important lesson from research on children and the internet tells us that the internet can provide useful tools for actively participating in society. Therefore we should not regard the internet exclusively as potential risk; instead children should be encouraged to use the opportunities: "A ship in a harbor is safe, but that is not what ships are built for" (Shedd, 1928).

Last but not least the industry has to be addressed as well. In order to make the internet a better place for children some requirements like reporting tools that work easily and securely (O'Neill, 2013, pp. 47ff.), age-appropriate content and default privacy-settings for younger users are needed. Furthermore efficient age and content classification systems that empower parents to decide if media are appropriate for their children or not could be useful (Livingstone, Ólafsson, O'Neill & Donoso, 2012, pp. 19f.). These aspects are particularly urgent for socially disadvantaged children, because they tend to be less capable and to get less social support to cope with internet related problems.

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The *EU Kids Online* network has been funded by the EC Safer Internet Programme in three successive phases of work from 2006-14 to enhance knowledge of children's and parents' experiences and practices regarding risky and safer use of the internet and new online technologies.

As a major part of its activities, *EU Kids Online* conducted a face-to-face, in home survey during 2010 of 25,000 9-16 year old internet users and their parents in 25 countries, using a stratified random sample and self-completion methods for sensitive questions.

Now including researchers and stakeholders from 33 countries in Europe and beyond, the network continues to analyse and update the evidence base to inform policy.

For all reports, findings and technical survey information, as well as full details of national partners, please visit [www.eukidsonline.net](http://www.eukidsonline.net)

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