GLOBAL KIDS ONLINE

Research synthesis

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Executive summary

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LSE Media and Communications

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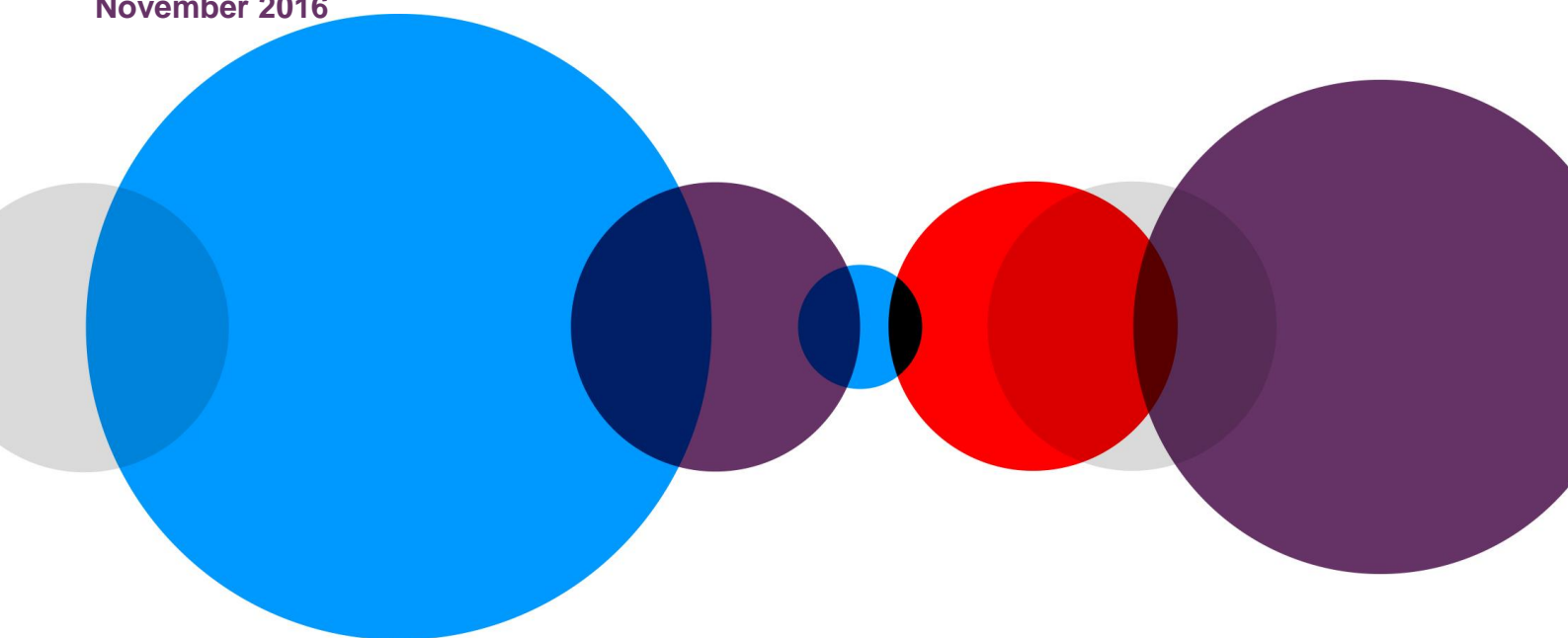
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MEDIA AND COMMUNICATIONS AT LSE

Established in 2003, the Department of Media and Communications at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) hosts outstanding and innovative research and scholarship that shape future academic knowledge in the media and communications field globally. The work of the Department was ranked first in media and communications in the most recent UK research evaluation in 2014, with 91 per cent of research outputs ranked world-leading or internationally excellent. Strongly comparative and transnational, its research addresses crucial issues in the emerging digital world concerning knowledge construction, political agency, cultures and identities, and governing the media and communications environment. With an engaged and critical approach, the Department is committed to strengthening interdisciplinary scholarship drawing on a number of social science disciplines and multi-method approaches to research.

EU KIDS ONLINE

EU Kids Online is an international research network, which currently encompasses 33 countries. It aims to coordinate and stimulate investigation into the way children use new media in Europe and beyond, with a particular focus on evidence about the conditions that shape online risk and safety. EU Kids Online uses multiple methods to map children's and parents' experience of the internet, in dialogue with national and European policy stakeholders. The network has been funded by the European Commission's Better Internet for Kids programme (originally, Safer Internet) and coordinated by Sonia Livingstone (LSE). At present the network continues its work under the direction of Uwe Hasebrink (Hans-Bredow-Institut, Global Kids Online Expert Group). The EU Kids Online network developed an original theoretical framework for research on children's online experiences and a research toolkit that underpins the work of Global Kids Online. The network has also created a wide range of comparative research outputs and a public database of findings.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

With children making up an estimated one third of internet users worldwide, living in the 'digital age' can have important implications for children's lives.[1] Currently close to 80 per cent of people in Europe,

North America and Australia have internet access, compared with less than 25 per cent in some parts of Africa and South Asia.[2] But this is bound to change soon, as there is already a steady increase in internet access in the global South where most investments are taking place. The international community has recognised the importance of internet access for development, economic growth and the realization of civil rights and is actively seeking ways to ensure universal internet access to all segments of society. Children should be an important part of this process, not only because they represent a substantial percentage of internet users but also because they play an important part in shaping the internet. The internet in turn plays an important part in shaping children's lives, culture and identities.

The many stakeholders responsible for children's safe and positive use of the internet (governments, civil society and the private sector alike) have an important task to formulate policies that are inclusive, balanced and based on solid evidence. But at present, the evidence on which such policies can rely is very scarce, especially in the global South. Through evidence-generation and research, one can identify both the commonalities and specificities of children's online access and opportunities, skills and practices, risks and safety. Research is also invaluable for contextualising online experiences in relation to children's and families' lives and the wider cultural or national circumstances. Prevailing social norms and value systems, prevalence of violence offline, places and access to use of the internet, children's support networks, can all contribute to the benefits or harm associated with internet use. At the global level, evidence is needed to help build a consensus among international actors on international standards, agreements, protocols and investments in order to make the internet a safer and better place for

children.

Responding to evidence gaps, the Global Kids Online research project (www.globalkidsonline.net) was developed as a collaborative initiative between the UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti, the London School of Economics and Political Science, and the EU Kids Online network. Supported by the WeProtect Global Alliance, the project developed a global research toolkit that would enable academics, governments, civil society and other actors to carry out reliable and standardized national research with children and their parents on the opportunities, risks and protective factors of children's internet use. The research toolkit and other resources available to the public include:

- Modular survey and a range of quantitative research tools

- Qualitative research protocols and tools

- A series of expert method guides on key issues related to researching children's online risks and opportunities (e.g. how to carry out research on online sexual exploitation and how to follow appropriate ethical procedures when conducting research with children);

- National reports from Argentina, the Philippines, Serbia and South Africa;

- A research synthesis of the national reports from the four pilot countries;

- Website (portal) for hosting the research toolkit, national reports, and a synthesis report. Available at www.globalkidsonline.net

Global Kids Online (GKO) follows a child rights framework, as this offers a unifying approach to children's everyday experiences online, as well as offline, while also recognising the diverse contexts in which children live. The project aims to connect evidence with the ongoing international dialogue regarding policy and practical solutions for children's well-being and rights in the digital age, especially in countries where the internet is only recently reaching the mass market.

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[1] Livingstone, Carr and Byrne (2015).
[2] ITU (2016).

National research partners from Argentina, the Philippines, Serbia and South Africa, with support from UNICEF country offices, piloted the research toolkit and wrote national reports. These partners were instrumental in building and testing research resources and in demonstrating how research results can be used for policy and practice. The model that emerged was one of co-creation and co-ownership with centralized coordination and technical support and a de-centralized approach to national research and dissemination of the findings. The countries were selected originally as being middle-income, representing different continents, having a strong interest in pursuing research on this topic, and keen interest from both governmental and non-governmental sectors to provide universal access and promote safer and better internet for children. Each country also had its unique interests in investigating particular issues as follows:

- Argentina – rural/urban divide and opportunities for strengthening digital literacy;

- Serbia – conditions of internet use among different population groups (Roma, children with disabilities);

- South Africa – barriers to access and availability of online content in local languages;

- The Philippines – challenges of online sexual exploitation.

Methodology

Global Kids Online methodology uses both qualitative and quantitative tools designed for child and adult respondents. The qualitative tools include materials needed for conducting and analysing individual interviews and focus groups with children and parents/caregivers. Quantitative tools contain materials needed for conducting and analysing a modular survey, including core, optional and adaptable questions. It also includes a data dictionary and guidelines for preparing a clean dataset ready for sharing and comparing.

The qualitative and quantitative research sampled internet-using children aged 9-17 in the Philippines, Serbia and South Africa, and internet-using children aged 13-17 in Argentina. The South African sample included both internet users and non-users but the internet-related questions were asked only of the users. The child sample sizes from the quantitative data collection were: Argentina (N=1,106), Serbia (N=197),

South Africa (N=913) and the Philippines (N=121). Furthermore, three out of four countries (Philippines, Serbia and South Africa) also conducted interviews with parents. Conducting a survey with both parents and children in the same household provides an opportunity to understand and compare both parental and children's digital skills, as well as the level of parental engagement, support and monitoring and their general understanding of their children's internet use. Special measures and ethical considerations were taken when children were asked sensitive questions about online risks, harm, and sexual solicitation.

The findings presented below are indicative as this is a pilot research conducted to test and adapt the toolkit, based on small sample sizes, especially in the Philippines and Serbia. The presentation of these findings focuses on within-country and between-country comparisons where results are sufficiently large as to indicate that such age and country findings would be confirmed in representative samples. They are, however, sufficient to demonstrate the potential of the Global Kids Online toolkit for future research within and across countries as ever more children gain internet access around the world.

Key findings from the pilot research

1. Children predominantly access the internet at home and through mobile devices

- Children in all four countries report that they most frequently go online at home, with over 90 per cent in Argentina, Serbia and South Africa and 62 per cent in the Philippines doing so. Access to the internet through schools is not as common, with children from Serbia accessing the internet only in 20 per cent of the cases, while in other countries it ranged between 50 and 60 per cent. Not surprisingly, children use smartphones most to go online.

- Mobile access may be positive in terms of flexibility of use, enhancing children's opportunities for private or personalised benefits. But it can also reduce parents' and caregivers' chance to support children as they explore the internet. Moreover, the small screen limits the amount and complexity of content

that can be readily viewed, and because of its privacy it may be associated with risk.

2. The majority of children learn something new by searching the internet

- Most children who use the internet say they learn something new online at least every week. In Argentina, it is common to look for information about work or study opportunities online, more so than in other countries. Around one third of children in Serbia and South Africa and one quarter in the Philippines look for health information online at least every week.

- It seems children are gaining information benefits from internet access. However, more research is needed to know whether they have access to the range of high quality information that they may need and whether they are successful in finding what is available.

3. Younger internet users lack the digital skills of their older peers

- There is a clear age trend in all four countries in terms of children's self-reported ability to check if information they find online is true. Older children were more confident in their ability to do so than younger children. This age trend, where younger children are less confident in their ability than older children, applied to most digital skills in this study. Gender differences were not so prominent.

- Access and skills are linked to opportunities and risks: in South Africa, for example, and especially the Philippines, younger children use the internet less, undertaking fewer online practices and developing fewer digital skills than children in Argentina or Serbia.

4. Younger children's digital safety skills also need support

- Most of the older children, but fewer younger children, report knowing how to manage their privacy settings online, a key indication of their digital and safety skills. Children in the Philippines report the least competence in this regard overall, especially among the youngest age group. Similar findings were obtained for children's reported ability to

remove people from their contact lists (on social networking sites, for example).

- Digital skills also matter for parents – the parent survey in South Africa revealed that parents are about as skilled as their 12-14 year olds. This means that although parents may be able to adequately guide the youngest children as they go online and help them develop their digital skills, they may not have the knowledge and ability required to guide children as they get older.

5. A substantial minority of young internet users have had contact with unknown people online

- Between 19 per cent (in the Philippines) and 41 per cent of children (in Serbia and South Africa) have been in touch online with somebody they have not met in person. These are not necessarily people without any prior connection to the child, and most children do not then go on to meet such a person face to face, but some do. Nonetheless, such activities clearly pose a risk of harm that merits awareness-raising and education, ideally without overly restricting children's opportunity to explore the online world.

6. Argentinian children are most likely to report having been bothered or upset online in the past year

- Between a fifth (in South Africa) and three-quarters (in Argentina) of children report feeling upset about something that happened online, with older children reporting more incidents.

- The qualitative research and an open-ended survey question allowed children to describe the concerns about what bothers them online in their own words. Children mentioned a wide range of issues, including internet scams, pop-up adverts that were pornographic, hurtful behaviour, unpleasant or scary news or pictures, discrimination, harassment (including sexual harassment by strangers) and people sharing too much personal information online.

7. Countries vary in the amount of risks encountered and the balance with online opportunities

- As many as one third of children in Serbia reported being treated in a hurtful way by their peers, online or offline, though in South Africa and the Philippines only a fifth said this had happened to them. Older children are more likely to report experiencing such behaviour. Smaller proportions also report treating others in hurtful ways.

- The proportion of children who have seen sexual images during the past year ranges from about a third of all children in the Philippines to slightly over two-thirds in Argentina and Serbia. Boys and older teenagers are more likely to have seen such images. While online sources such as pop-ups and social networking sites account for a significant amount of this exposure, 'traditional' sources such as television or film are also sources of potentially pornographic exposure.

- Fewer than one in twenty children in the Philippines and South Africa reported some kind of online sexual solicitation – being asked for sexual information, to talk about sex or to do something sexual, although even these low numbers merit serious attention.

- A child-rights approach seeks to consider the balance between risks and opportunities in the round. In this respect, the findings show large differences across countries. In Serbia, South Africa and the Philippines, most children considered the internet beneficial, although around a third had experienced something upsetting online in the past year. In Argentina, most children reported experiencing a problem online, matching the proportion who found the internet beneficial. It is indeed possible that there are more problems for children online in Argentina, but it is also possible that the internet is more familiar to Argentinian children and they encounter more risks because they explore the internet more widely.

8. Children are most likely to seek support from a friend, and rarely from a teacher

- In all four countries the most common source of support is friends – between a third and two-thirds of children spoke to a friend the last time something upsetting happened online. The next most popular source of support is parents, followed by siblings. Few children confided in a teacher, and the follow-up survey questions suggested that few children had

received e-safety or digital literacy teaching at school; more had received some guidance on internet use from their parents.

- The qualitative research suggests that children make a judgement about whether the parent needs to get involved or whether the problem can be handled by talking to peers. In a sense, children mediate their own negative experiences, figuring out the best coping mechanism based on the situation as they see it.

Policy implications

Access, skills, risks and opportunities are all part of the overall picture of children's well-being and rights in the digital age and should all, therefore, be kept in mind when developing policy interventions. Furthermore, children are not a homogenous group and their internet use, opportunities and risks are closely linked to their age, level of digital skills, places of access (school or home), devices they use and support they receive. It is important therefore to differentiate policy goals based on these differences and real life situations. Policy must also pay special attention to those who may be of greater vulnerability, such as indigenous or ethnic minority children, migrants, children in poor or rural settings or those who have some form of disability. Sources of potential vulnerability like these are measured in the Global Kids Online toolkit and can be investigated in depth in the future.

Children are generally positive about the opportunities available for them online. However, children do not use the internet in schools as much as expected and they generally do not see teachers as those they could confide in about what bothers them online. Improving school access, supported by teacher training, could further link internet use with education and information benefits, specifically by developing children's digital skills which have been shown in this report to include notable gaps in competence, again especially among younger users.

It also appears that the internet and social networking sites represent both an opportunity for the majority of children to communicate and express themselves, but also a risk of harm for some. It should not be forgotten, however, that the offline world still poses risks to children – of bullying, pornography, sexual abuse and other harms. The findings suggest that use of the internet is now contributing to the risks facing children,

but policy and practice focused on the internet should not neglect offline risks, while those focused on offline risks should now take into account online dimensions. The relationships between online and offline activity may amplify risk by extending the ways in which a child can be approached, but they can also help ensure children's safety, for example by providing online helplines or confidential support, for example.

Further research is needed to examine the outcomes of children's internet use in terms of their well-being and to investigate the circumstances under which the internet is beneficial for children, but also when and for whom it might enhance the risk of harm.

The strategies that promote empowered and safe online experiences should take into account children's agency, including their desire to experiment and sometimes to take risks, and also their desire to be responsible for themselves and their actions. As our research shows, children like to explore and seek information, news and answers to their concerns independently. Therefore the internet should be a place where they feel safe to do so and where there is enough good, age-appropriate, and locally adapted content.

Future policy and practice should encompass the full range of children's rights including the rights to information, education, protection, privacy and participation; it needs to be holistic but also integrated and mainstreamed in other national policies that a) deal with children's rights in general and b) are aimed at the development of ICT services and the information society.

Lessons from research

A decentralized approach to research was successful in that it enabled individual country teams to draw on and adapt the Global Kids Online toolkit to develop their own national research toolkit, ready to be used in the local context. By involving government agencies and civil society stakeholders from start to finish, the national research teams were able to contribute to relevant agendas by asking questions that matter to stakeholders in their own country. At the same time, national research teams benefited from the centralized coordination and sharing of knowledge, resources and data within the Global Kids Online network.

Qualitative research has usefully informed the survey design and adaptation process. In the countries where

interviews and focus groups with children and parents preceded the survey implementation, many useful insights were gained into children's contemporary engagement with the internet that helped further adapt the survey instrument.

In some countries, certain survey questions had comparatively low response rates; these were predominantly questions of a sensitive nature. However, in some instances the missing data could be explained by questions that are poorly phrased or worded in a language not appropriate for children, using terminology that is unfamiliar to them. Ideally, each team would carry out cognitive interviews to test how the survey works in practice, as well as a small-scale pilot study with the full questionnaire to assess both the quality of the data collected and the length of the survey interview.

Measuring socio-economic status by asking children proved difficult in all countries. Even after the adaptation and use of well-tested instruments for measuring material deprivation as a proxy indicator for socio-economic status, this approach was not successful. It is therefore recommended either to ask parents about the socio-economic status, or adopt the method judged most valid and reliable in the country.

A module introduced by South Africa on barriers to access to the internet was an important addition to the survey as it helps understand why certain children have unlimited access and some do not, and what socio-economic factors influence their ability to benefit from resources offered by digital technologies. Given that the digital divide between certain regions and countries is still significant, this module can help policymakers identify entry points for the provision of universal access.

In each partner country a combination of national researchers, government agencies, the private sector, civil society and UN agencies worked together to guide the adaptation of the methodology on a country level, ensuring that the questions asked were relevant in every country and to facilitate research uptake and dissemination.

Next steps

The Global Kids Online toolkit is intended for researchers worldwide, including both experienced and junior researchers, as well as those who contract and manage research, such as international agencies and non-governmental organizations. Anyone may use the

resources under the Attributive Non-Commercial Creative Commons License (CC BY-NC), crediting Global Kids Online as the source.

It is important that the toolkit continues to evolve as it is adapted and used in new countries all over the world, with each research team being able to create their own questions and topics to test and include in the full toolkit as optional elements. It is equally important that the core of the toolkit remains constant to enable longitudinal and cross-national comparisons with the goal of contributing to a global knowledge base around children's use of the internet and its associated risks and opportunities. It will also be important to develop standardized indicators of internet use for inclusion in other surveys. Many of the key surveys that track the conditions and outcomes in children's lives have developed robust ways of assessing the main influences in terms of family, education, community and culture and can also include key questions from the Global Kids Online survey.

We encourage researchers to communicate with us to share ideas of how they might use and adapt the existing toolkit as well as the lessons they have learned, thus contributing to the ongoing development and improvement of the Global Kids Online initiative.