Bulgaria: an evidence-informed approach to promoting digital literacy

Summary

The Impact good practice examples aim to demonstrate how different research teams from the Global Kids Online network planned their knowledge exchange and impact strategies in a way that matches the particular country contexts, responds to the challenges faced and draws on the resources available to them. The examples introduce the key Global Kids Online findings and the challenges presented by the country context, outline the decisions made regarding impact priorities and the choices of impact strategy and actions, and discuss the outcomes and example activities. Some ways in which the impact has been measured are also outlined, mostly related to the short- and medium-term impact.

The Bulgarian country example highlights the Applied Research and Communications (ARC) Fund's strategy to prioritise children's digital and media literacy, and demonstrates how a number of long-term partnerships and collaborations have been utilised towards the effective creation of new educational and training opportunities. The Bulgarian example focuses on the Fund's key priority areas, including curriculum changes and the introduction of training programmes, assisting parental involvement and producing online educational content.

Global Kids Online research findings

In September 2016, the Applied Research and Communications (ARC) Fund, coordinator of the Bulgarian Safer Internet Centre (SafeNet),[1] in cooperation with the Market LINKS agency, conducted a national representative survey entitled 'Online conduct of children in Bulgaria'. The survey, part of Global Kids Online, examined how children and young people engage with the internet and digital technologies in their everyday lives. It found that children aged 9–17 start using the internet fairly young, spend more time online than in 2010, have relatively high digital skills, but benefit less from parental supervision (Georgiev et al., 2017; Hajdinjak et al., 2017; Kanchev et al., 2017). The average age of accessing the internet for the first time in Bulgaria has dropped to eight years old over the past six years, and by the time children reach 10 years old, 90% are already online. Over 9 in 10 children (93%) child internet users are online daily, and the majority (79%) spend at least one hour using the internet, primarily via a smartphone (80%).

Although Bulgarian children actively search for entertainment online, this is less often for school-related information. Moreover, there were issues around verification skills, as half of Bulgarian children could not evaluate the truthfulness of online information. Children also seem to be mainly passive users of the internet – rather than posting text, pictures or videos, they spend time online viewing, downloading and sharing content made by others. For example, less than a third of students receive weekly school tasks that require online information skills, and less than a fifth receive collaborative online assignments from school; 15% of Bulgarian children have access to 'Digital Star Teachers'[2] (Kanchev, 2017).

Challenges presented by the Bulgarian context

Although the ICT curriculum was recently introduced for the youngest school children, ICT education in primary school mostly emphasises technical skills, while online safety, critical understanding and evaluation of information, and other social skills for safe and responsible use of digital technologies, are under-represented (Hajdinjak et al., 2017). The potential for the constructive and beneficial inclusion of digital technologies into a classroom and educational process has been only modestly exploited to date.

[1] More information about the Bulgarian Safer Internet Centre can be found at www.safenet.bg/en/

[2] Refers to teachers who communicate with their students online weekly or more often

Three further challenges apply:

- **Public discourse:** the media tends to polarise children as 'digital natives' who are very internet competent or as victims who are at a great risk of online harm. A research-informed and comprehensive understanding of children's needs, skills and vulnerabilities needs to be established.

- **Lack of suitable online content:** both entertainment and educational content appropriate for children of different ages is limited, and little is available in the children's mother tongue (especially for ethnic and linguistic minorities). More diverse content is necessary to allow children to take advantage of the full range of online opportunities.

- **Procedures and lobbying:** the procedures for proposing changes to the curriculum are complex and time-consuming. In addition, procedures and policies change with new governments, which makes lobbying for change difficult, and sustainable funding sources uncertain.

Deciding on impact priorities

The results demonstrate the need to work on improving children's digital and media literacy and their safe and ethical conduct online, which also corresponds with the strategic priorities of the Bulgarian Safer Internet Centre (SafeNet). SafeNet, having already established its strategy, relationships with stakeholders, a communication strategy and partnerships with schools, could use these strengths to plan a successful knowledge exchange and impact strategy.

The team identified several **priorities for knowledge exchange and impact with stakeholders**, focusing on education and digital literacy:

- **Introducing digital literacy education to all stages of the education process:** the increasing share of pre-school children using the internet suggests the need to build and enhance their digital and media literacy as early as possible. Elements of early digital literacy training with an enhanced focus on online safety, even in pre-schools, are essential. About 42% of Bulgarian children report that internet safety is not sufficiently addressed in their ICT classes (Hajdinjak et al., 2017). Increasing the frequency and comprehensiveness of safety training in schools would counter these issues and help students avoid online risks.

- **Targeted programmes for children aged 12–14:** the survey showed that this group of children experience a higher risk of harm due to two coinciding factors: they start exploring and experimenting more with the internet while parental mediation and supervision decreases. Therefore, this group need special attention in the form of training, awareness-raising and information campaigns tailored to their needs and interests, and communicated in a way and in a language they can easily relate to.

- **More peer-to-peer training programmes:** some of the most widespread risks connected to the use of digital technologies are associated with the online conduct of children and young people themselves (e.g. online bullying, sexting, sharing of illegal or inappropriate content). Peer mediation is an effective approach to teaching children how to use digital technologies safely and responsibly. To train young trainers, SafeNet will seek to collaborate with NGOs, schools, state institutions and corporate actors, to achieve the best and lasting results.

- **Promoting and assisting parental involvement and mediation:** as Bulgarian children demonstrate rather passive attitudes regarding constructive online interaction, collaboration and civic participation, it is important to help and empower parents to assist their children in gaining digital and media literacy skills, to offer support and mediate their children's internet use.

- **Collaborating on the production of positive online content:** Bulgarian children are not particularly active in online content creation, collaboration and civic participation. Large-scale collaborative efforts between policy-makers and industry to create positive online content can be helpful for facilitating a better online environment. Such efforts could also target small

and medium-sized ICT businesses by encouraging them to create effective online solutions for children directed towards interactive content that promotes digital collaboration and content creation.

Impact strategy and actions

The strategy employed for working with stakeholders was based on a marketing communications model that was originally developed for business, and that was then adapted to fit the needs of the project (Kanchev, 2017). Still ongoing, it prioritises the following:

- Which audiences should be reached by the messages? Who are their key influencers?
- What behavioural objectives should be achieved?
- What content facilitates these objectives?
- Which channels can facilitate content delivery?
- How can we evaluate the impact of our communication activities?

To improve digital and media literacy, the team chose an approach based on developmental psychology, which aims to change children's behaviour by teaching them a range of digital skills and general peer support behaviours that can increase their online safety.

SafeNet used a range of strategies to reach different stakeholders and to increase the use of the research outputs with a main focus on improving children's digital and media literacy.

- The organisation has a portfolio of literacy and risk awareness activities for **children and families** organised independently or in collaboration with other stakeholders, such as government agencies, educators, NGOs and industry.

- The team also works with **educators** and has an established partnership with key figures (head teachers, teachers, school psychologists and pedagogic counsellors) in about 180 schools around Bulgaria, and also maintains a website targeted at teachers and parents.

- In collaboration with Sofia University, SafeNet has developed a programme for **teacher training and curriculum development**. It uses the Montessori pedagogy for teaching digital literacy to primary school students – there is a handbook with 10 topics to be included in the curriculum, with guidance for teaching sessions and teachers. A second version of the handbook is currently being developed in collaboration with academics from Sofia University, teachers from four Bulgarian primary schools and an expert from the Ministry of Education and Science. Its aim is to place the development of digital and media literacy skills at the core of the Bulgarian curriculum, to demonstrate how digital and media literacy can be developed in a variety of subject areas, and to adapt know-how from the Finnish educational reform in 2016 that placed media literacy central in the core curriculum.

- SafeNet has built a **strategic partnership** with other stakeholders interested in collaborating on media and digital literacy. These include NGO-based networks (e.g. National Network for Children, Национална мрежа за децата, 144 NGOs working on child-related issues); a Civic Council with experts from 22 organisations having consultative, regulatory and lobbying functions, and including members from partner NGOs, networks and state institutions (e.g. State Agency for the Protection of Children, Държавна агенция за защита на детето, the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Culture); private companies (e.g. internet providers Telenor and Mtel); and collaboration with government agencies, industry and the media.

- SafeNet has also successfully used the **hot topic of the day**, such as media interest in fake news about the Blue Whale game, to talk about the results from the study and to organise a campaign with media partners to promote digital literacy.

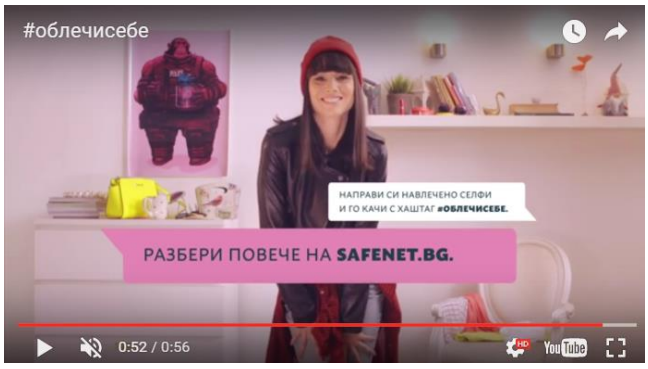
Outcomes and impact activities

- **Cyber scout programme:** annually, in collaboration with the Ministry of Internal Affairs and a large internet provider, SafeNet runs a two-day training programme for children. Groups of up to 30 children from the whole country take part in an interactive, educational performance training related to online safety awareness and

becoming peer supporters in the community. Based on the knowledge acquired during training, the children and their schools create and organise local online safety initiatives. Each year an expert panel selects the three best campaigns to receive an award.

- **SafeNet has established a Youth Panel** of 12 young people from different genders, ethnic groups and socioeconomic backgrounds to take part in training and workshops, to act as moderators and peer educators, to contribute to communication strategies and activities and to initiate their own campaigns.

A recent successful campaign initiated and developed by the Youth Panel is Let's Get Dressed! (#облечисебе), focusing on educating young people about the safe sharing of online content, online sexualisation and self-image. It included a number of initiatives, such as talks, workshops, youth conferences, an online initiative for sharing 'overdressed' selfies and a video message to young people.3



The Youth Panel was also involved in two key communication events – co-organising the launch of findings and formulating key messages for young people, and contributing to a risk prevention event organised with Facebook's regional representatives.

- **Annual open air family festival:** this is a joint outreach initiative of over 40 child-based organisations running an open air family event including competitions, demonstrations and stalls with awareness-raising materials. Between 2,000 to 2,500 families usually participate in the activities each year.

[3] For more about the campaign, see www.safenet.bg/bg/iniciativi/242-oblechisebe

Measuring impact

SafeNet uses a number of impact indicators and assessment strategies for the different projects and initiatives, such as:

- **Cyber scouts:** pre- and post-evaluation survey on awareness, skills and attitudes.
- **'Children, Teachers and Parents against Hate Speech' educational campaign:** counting the number of distributed copies of teacher guidance for lesson content (500), and the number of children's workbooks (10,000) and schools reached across the county (180). Appointing an external evaluator to develop an evaluation methodology approved by ARC Fund that includes: process evaluation (achieved output and engagement targets); interviews with the project team, the expert group developing the materials and the donor organisation; evaluation of the developed materials; classroom visits when the methodology is used/tested; and assessment of the overall management process.
- **Areas for improvement:** aiming for better assessment, in the future the team will identify learning outcomes when creating educational methodologies, and assess if the children have acquired these outcomes via pre- and post-measures, including an evaluation of progress towards the desired outcomes.
- **For their helpline and hotline** SafeNet uses an online self-assessment platform that is filled in by the organisation (every three months for the hotline and helpline, and every six months for overall awareness). The assessment also includes quantitative indicators, such as the

number of people contacting the lines or reporting inappropriate online content (568 since the beginning of 2017), the number of consultations (296), media publications (58 press releases), people reached by the campaigns (about 6,000) and the number of training sessions and people trained (630 children, 90 teachers).

Future directions

- Campaigning for **change in educational and parental practices related to digital literacy**: the team will collaborate with parent-based NGOs, local schools, government institutions, educators, children's services workers and educators for improving digital literacy education and ensuring that children are better able to use existing online opportunities.

- **Improved measures**: the team wants to be able to measure digital literacy more reliably by introducing task-based assessments in addition to the current self-assessment measures. SafeNet will also work on better measuring the impact of teaching handbooks by introducing learning outcomes and pre- and post-assessments in relation to planned learning outcomes.

Global Kids Online's areas of impact	Areas of impact demonstrated by the case study
✓ Academic	✓
✓ Conceptual	✓
✓ Capacity-building	✓
✓ Collective	
✓ Instrumental	
More about GKO's approach to impact and the five areas of impact: www.globalkidsonline.net/impact	

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Appendix 1

Population (2015, in 000s)	7,202
GDP per capita (2015)[1]	46.2 PPS per inhabitant
Fixed-telephone subscriptions per 100 inhabitants[2]	23.3
Mobile-cellular subscriptions per 100 inhabitants[2]	129.3
Fixed (wired)-broadband subscriptions per 100[2] inhabitants	20.7
Mobile-broadband subscriptions per 100 inhabitants[2]	81.3
Households with a computer (%)[2]	59
Households with internet access at home (%)[2]	59.1
Individuals using the internet (% of inhabitants)[2]	56.7

Sources:

[1] Eurostat (2015)

[2] ITU (2015)

Appendix 2

Survey sample size: 1,000 internet-using children and their parents

National partner: Applied Research and Communications (ARC) Fund and Bulgarian Safer Internet Centre (SafeNet)

Age group: 9–17

Data collection: September 2016

Data collected by: Market LINKS Research & Consulting

Areas: Rural and urban

Administration: Home, face-to-face

Language: Bulgarian

Publications: Three reports on Risks and harm, Parental support, Digital and media literacy

Further details: www.globalkidsonline.net/bulgaria

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