Mapping the possibilities for beneficial online resources for children:

Issues of trust, risk and media literacy

Working paper for the EU Media Expert Seminar:

More trust in contents – the potential of co- and self-regulation in digital media

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1   Introduction

What opportunities and risks face children on the internet?
Can provision of positive online contents ameliorate digital exclusion and avoid risk?

The Internet and new online technologies are becoming embedded in everyday life across Europe and elsewhere, with all countries under pressure to get online so as to stimulate markets, roll back regulation and facilitate education, participation and innovation. Although everybody is affected, in one way or another, by the introduction of new media technologies, children, young people and their families tend to be in the vanguard of new media adoption. Thus, they benefit from the early take-up of new opportunities afforded by the Internet, mobile and broadband content, online games, peer-to-peer technologies, and so forth. However, two problems are attracting ever more public and policy attention.

- First, the problem of inequality and social inclusion, as the digital divide is gradually transformed, in country after country, from a matter of basic inequalities in access to the more subtle yet equally important matter of inequalities in internet skills, literacies and communicative competencies.[1]

- Second, the problem of risk of harm to children's safety and social development, these expanding in range, intensity and scope as online contents and services themselves expand and grow. Here too, children and young people are often in the vanguard, exploring new activities, especially peer networking, in advance of adult scrutiny and regulatory intervention and, too often, encountering negative experiences that are unanticipated, for which they may be unprepared, and which may challenge their capacity to cope.

This article explores the possibility that increasing positive opportunities online for children will both encourage greater participation in online activities (i.e. reduce the digital divide) and reduce risks by facilitating alternative, beneficial activities. I suggest that enhancing positive provision of online resources for children must be a vital public policy goal if we are to support children's education, creativity and participation in society (thus harnessing their spontaneous motivation to use the internet for greater benefits), and if we are to protect them from online risk. And I would defend this public policy goal even though research on the digital divide shows that any online resources provided are likely to differentially support the already information-rich more than the information-poor, and even though research on online risks show that these often accompany the increased take-up of online opportunities.

My analysis demands, however, on a realistic appraisal of the evidence base. A review of the international research literature on children's internet use just a few years ago found that most research was North American, and most took a quantitative approach, producing reliable and representative data to identify statistical

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[1] Recent literature on the digital divide as it applies to children and young people in particular is reviewed in Livingstone, S., & Helsper, E. (in press), Gradations in digital inclusion: Children, young people and the digital divide, *New Media & Society*. The research literature on public policy interventions reveals that these risk exacerbating rather than reducing digital exclusion unless offline inequalities are carefully counteracted as part of the intervention; see Otto, H., N. Kutschner, A. Klein and S. Iske (2005) "Social Inequality in the Virtual Space: How Do Young People Use the Internet?", German Federal Ministry for Family, Seniors, Women and Youth. http://www.kib-bielefeld.de/externelinks2005/Social_Inequality%20KIB.pdf. Also, Warschauer, M. (2003). *Technology and Social Inclusion: Rethinking the Digital Divide*. Cambridge: MIT.

frequencies, differences and patterns of use, but less often exploring a topic theoretically or in depth. The then-available body of European research was divided between qualitative and quantitative approaches, often using rather small samples that could offer insights into the contexts and nature of internet use but could not support claims about representativeness, demographic distribution or scale.[2] However, the research landscape is changing fast, both in Europe and beyond, as our current project, *EU Kids Online*, is revealing, and as this article summarises.[3]

Indeed, the opportunities and risks, the everyday contexts in which they occur, and the ways they are being addressed by industry, policy makers, teachers and parents, are all subject to continual change. Access platforms are diversifying (e.g. from a focus on the PC to new forms of online and mobile technologies), new opportunities and threats are emerging, and parental mediation of children's internet access/use is increasingly demanding. Often less expert than their children, parents face problems of Internet literacy, parental authority (particularly in the new 'democratic family'), time and effort (media regulation at home was once 'women's work' but gender roles are changing), and children's rights to privacy and self-expression (potentially conflicting with their right to protection).[4]

The present agenda - the nature of online opportunities and risks facing children and young people today - may be scoped as follows:

Online opportunities
- Access to global information
- Educational resources
- Social networking for old and new friends
- Entertainment, games and fun
- User-generated content creation
- Civic or political participation
- Privacy for expression of identity
- Community involvement/activism
- Technological expertise and literacy
- Career advancement or employment
- Personal/health/sexual advice
- Specialist groups and fan forums
- Shared experiences with distant others

Online risks
- Illegal content
- Paedophiles, grooming, strangers
- Extreme or sexual violence
- Other harmful or offensive content
- Racist/hate material/activities
- Advertising/commercial persuasion
- Biased or mis-information
- Exploitation of personal information
- Cyber-bullying, stalking, harassment
- Gambling, financial scams
- Self-harm (suicide, anorexia, etc)
- Invasions/abuse of privacy
- Illegal activities (hacking, terrorism)

Doubtless these above lists can be extended. But before exploring either opportunities or risks, we should first ask how many children and young people across Europe are using the internet and for what activities.

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[2] Livingstone, S. (2003), Children's use of the internet: Reflections on the emerging research agenda, *New Media & Society*, 5(2), 147-166.

[3] *EU Kids Online* is an 18 country thematic network, funded by the EC's Safer Internet plus programme (2006-9), that is working to identify available research on children's online safety in order to scope and compare findings, frame methodological best practice, and inform EU and national policy and research agendas. Participating countries are Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, The Netherlands and The United Kingdom (see www.eukidsonline.net).

[4] The UKCGO survey found that although children usually consider themselves more expert than their parents, neither children nor parents claim great expertise: 28% of parents and 7% of children (9-19 yrs) who use the Internet described themselves as beginners. Low parental expertise is one reason among several why relying on parents to keep their children safe is considered insufficient. See www.children-go-online.net.

2 Trends in European children's internet use

In Europe, who is using the internet?
What are children and young people doing online?
How is internet use changing with the advent of social networking?

2.1 Who has access to the internet, across Europe?

Recent statistics for the EU25 show that:

- Households with children are more likely than those without to have a computer (70% vs. 46%), internet access (55% vs. 38%) and a broadband connection (18% vs. 12%). Other factors affecting household adoption are country, degree of urbanisation, education, access costs and age (but not gender).[5]

- The 2005/6 Eurobarometer survey shows that 50% of children (<18 years old) in the EU25 have used the internet, rising from just 9% of those under six to 1 in 3 6-7 year olds, 1 in 2 8-9 year olds and more than 4 in 5 teenagers aged 12-17. Home is the most common location for children's internet use, especially in 'old' Member States. This gives both the greatest flexibility in use and the greatest chance for parental supervision.

- The exceptions are interesting, however: for example, in the UK (45% use at home, 58% use at school), the Czech Republic (35% vs. 44%), Poland (22% vs. 33%) and Portugal (17% vs. 27%) the situation is reversed. This suggests two consequences – first, the school has the potential to equalise access, since home access is strongly stratified by socioeconomic status, but second, home access is generally richer and more entertaining, privileging those who gain access via the home and undermining positive attitudes towards provision at school.[6]

A breakdown by country, for adults (18+) and children (<18) in the 18 countries included in *EU Kids Online,* reveals considerable variation in internet use:[7]

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[5] Eurostat (2005). *Community survey on ICT usage in households and by individuals*, European Communities. Note that the survey period was the first quarter of 2004.

[6] Krotz, F., & Hasebrink, U. (2001). Who are the new media users? In S. Livingstone & M. Bovill (Eds.), Children and Their Changing Media Environment: A Comparative European Study (pp. 245-262). Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. See also Mediappro (2006) MEDIAPPRO: A European Research Project for the Appropriation of New Media by Youth.Available at: http://www.mediappro.org/publications/finalreport.pdf

[7] Source: Eurobarometer Survey (May 2006) Safer Internet, Special Eurobarometer 250 / Wave 64.4, Brussels. Sample QC1: 18+ years old (N=24738). Sample QC4: adults reporting on a child (<18 years old) they are responsible for in the household (N=7560). Country abbreviations: AT Austria, BE Belgium, BG Bulgaria, CZ Czech Republic, DE Germany, DK Denmark, EE Estonia, EL Greece, ES Spain, FR France, NL Netherlands, PL Poland, PT Portugal, SE Sweden, SI Slovenia, UK United Kingdom.

QC1 During the last month, did you use the Internet?
QC4 Does this child, to your knowledge, use the Internet in any of the following places?
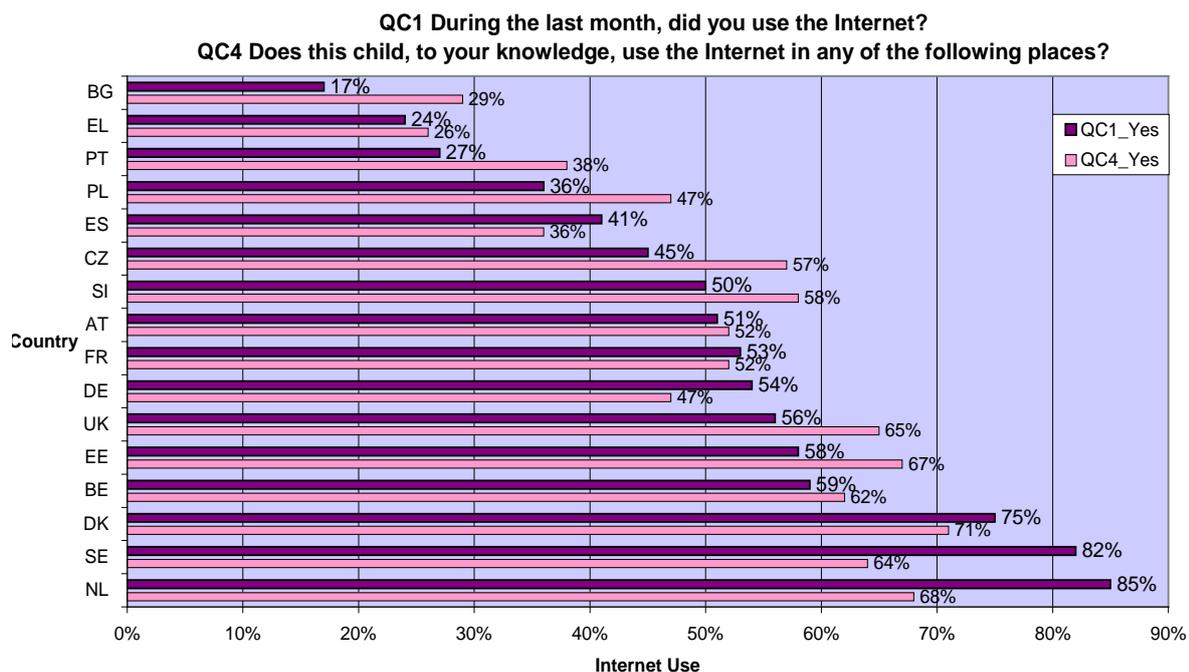
Several observations follow:

- Digital divides are significant, with a factor of four separating The Netherlands (85% adult users) and Sweden (82%) from Bulgaria (17%) and Greece (24%). Northern European countries (The Netherlands, Sweden, Denmark, Belgium, Estonia, UK) have the greatest proportion of internet users. The lowest – Bulgaria, Greece, Portugal, Poland Spain – tend to be either Southern European or new entrants to the EC.

- In some countries, children use the internet more than adults (Bulgaria, Portugal, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovenia, UK, Estonia. In others, adults are 'ahead' of children: Spain, Germany, Denmark, Sweden, Netherlands. Last, children and adults use the internet to a similar degree in Greece, Austria, France, Belgium.

- The widely held view that children are the pioneers, leading in internet adoption over their less experienced parents (c.f. digital natives and digital immigrants[8]) is too simple, even misleading. Nor is it obvious why these cross-national differences exist, though differential diffusion paths, depending on cultures of work, education and leisure are suggested. The implications for the competence of parents in different countries to guide their children's internet use are thought-provoking.

2.2   What do children and young people do online?

European information on how children and young people use the internet is uneven. Among 9-19 yr olds in the UK who use the internet at least weekly (84% of the

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[8] M. Prensky (2001), Digital natives, digital immigrants, *On the Horizon, 9*(5).

population), the *UK Children Go Online* survey, conducted in 2004, found the following incidence of online activities:[9]

- 90% doing schoolwork
- 94% searching for information
- 72% sending/receiving email
- 70% playing games
- 55% instant messaging
- 55% (aged 12+) visit civic/political site
- 46% downloading music
- 44% (12+) search careers/education
- 44% completed a quiz
- 40% (12+) search goods/shop online

- 40% visit sites for hobbies
- 34% made a website
- 26% (12+) read the news
- 28% visiting sports sites
- 25% (12+) seek personal advice
- 23% info on computers/internet
- 22% voted for something online
- 21% visit chat rooms
- 17% post pictures or stories
- 10% visit a porn site on purpose

The 2005/6 Norwegian SAFT survey of 888 9-16 year olds shows a similar pattern of activities online among internet users, here broken down by gender:[10]

What kind of things do you do on the internet?	Boys (%)	Girls (%)
Play games on the internet	84	59
Do homework	52	64
Download music	57	54
Chat in chat rooms	47	48
Send and receive email	44	50
Search for information (other than schoolwork)	38	40
Surf for fun	41	29
Instant messaging	32	30
Visit news sites	32	27
Make personal website/blogging	22	24
Visit fan sites	21	23
Publish pictures or information	15	20
Download software	23	8
Visit sites for hobbies	13	14
Shop or make a purchase	16	8
Watch pornography	15	3

The Mediappro survey of 7393 12-18 year olds regarding their appropriation of new media in nine European countries found some cross-national variation in online activities.[11]

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[9] See www.children-go-online.net. Similar figures are reported in the USA – see Lenhart, A., Hadden, M., & Hitlin, P. (2005). *Teens and Technology*. Washington D.C.: Pew Internet & American Life Project.

[10] SAFT Children's Survey (2006). Findings presented at the Stakeholder Event for the German launch of *EU Kids Online*, University of Hamburg, December 2006. See also http://www.saftonline.no and http://www.saftonline.org

[11] Mediappro (2006), op cit., p.12. Available at www.mediappro.org

Activities on the Internet (% sometimes/often/very often)

	Search engines	Email	Instant Messenger	Chat rooms	Downloading
Belgium	95	74	81	28	58
Denmark	92	66	87	26	50
Estonia	90	69	88	33	73
France	94	97	69	32	49
Greece	81	46	39	41	65
Italy	86	59	49	33	59
Poland	91	62	75	34	67
Portugal	95	69	77	38	60
UK	98	81	78	20	60
Average	91	66	71	32	60

Several observations are appropriate at this point:

- Broadly, speaking, these figures show a fairly constant and familiar picture, with children mixing educational, entertaining, informational and networking activities in substantial numbers, while tailoring internet use to suit their interests.

- Comparing these activities with the list of online opportunities presented earlier, it seems that some are taken up more than others, the most popular activities being homework, games, communication and information–seeking of various kinds. Civic activities, for example, are much less popular, while even creative activities are often less common that one might anticipate.

- As research consistently shows, the range of opportunities taken up is influenced by socioeconomic status, with internet use being rich and varied for some, especially those more affluent, while it is cautious and narrow for others, especially those less affluent.[12] The gender differences identified in the SAFT survey may reflect patterns of choice rather than constraint, though these too have differential implications for life chances.

- Cross-national differences in practices of use are little recognised or understood as yet. For example, some of the variations in the above Mediappro findings suggest differential diffusion paths across Europe: use of search engines or instant messenger is greater in Denmark and the UK than in Italy, for instance. For some activities, national specificities are suggested, as in the preference of Greek youth for chat rooms over instant messenger.

For many internet users, the move is well underway from solely information receiver (typically of mass-produced content, on a one-to-many model of communication) to also content creator (typically of peer-produced content, on a one-to-one or some-to-some model of communication). A recent Pew Internet survey in the USA found more than half of online teens are creating content in one way or another. Among 1100 12-17 year old internet users, 33% share their own creations online (e.g. artwork, photos, stories, videos), 32% have created or worked on webpages or blogs for

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[12] Livingstone and Helsper (in press), op cit.

others, 22% maintain a personal webpage, 19% have created their own blog and 19% have remixed online content to make their own artistic creation.[13]

The Mediappro project suggests that among European teenagers, levels of creativity are similar for blogs and lower for websites:

> "Creating their own content is much less widely-practiced than forms of communication: for instance, 18% of young people say that they have a personal site, and 18% a blog. A blog is quite popular in Belgium (38%) and in France (25%), while in some cases, young people seemed uncertain what a blog was (a third of the Danish sample, for instance). The Belgian study observes that the life-span of young people's blogs is typically very short, while the French study notes that a large proportion of blogs owned by young people are dormant…. While the creative potential of new media is much-discussed in academic literature, the evidence here was that creative work was limited, with a minority of young people developing their own websites or blogs, and some evidence that these products could easily become inert".[14]

2.3   Social networking – the latest trend

The recent phenomenon of social networking has transformed children's internet use, linking website creation, music listening and, especially, peer networking in a single application (e.g. Myspace, Facebook, Bebo, etc.). Worldwide, Myspace visits now exceed those of Google.[15] Both the opportunities and the risks relating to the internet are intensified by social networking.

- The rapid take up of these new communication opportunities reflects a highly positive response, and considerable pleasure, on the part of teenagers especially: internationally, 12-17 year olds make up 12% of MySpace traffic, 14% for Facebook, 11% for Friendster and 20% of Xanga (though for several of these sites, younger teens are supposedly not permitted).[16]

- In the USA, a survey of 935 teenagers aged 12-17 in 2006 found that 55% of online youth use social networking, especially older girls.[17] Of these, 66% say their profile is private not public. Nearly half visit these sites at least daily, with 9 in 10 saying their purpose is to stay in touch with friends, both close and less close, though half use the sites to make new friends and, say 1 in 6, to flirt. Another 2006 US survey, of 1487 8-18 year olds, found that among 13-18 year olds, the average number of 'friends' via social networking is 75, the average

[13] Lenhart, A., & Madden, M. (2005). *Teen Content Creators and Consumers*. Washington D.C.: Pew Internet & American Life Project.

[14] Mediappro (2006), op cit., p.12-13 and p.16.

[15] For example, Youth Trends October 2006, reported at http://www.emarketer.com/eStatDatabase/ArticlePreview.aspx?1004326

[16] See www.comscore.com/press/release.asp?press=1019

[17] Lenhart, A. and M. Madden (2007) *Social Networking Websites and Teens: An Overview*. Pew Internet & American Life Project Memo, 1 July 2007. Available at: http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/198/report_display.asp The study notes that: "For girls, social networking sites are primarily places to reinforce pre-existing friendships; for boys, the networks also provide opportunities for flirting and making new friends".

number of Instant Messenger 'buddies' is 52, and the average for mobile contacts is 38.[18]

- A smaller survey of 374 Irish teenagers revealed that over 4 in 5 of those surveyed use social networking sites, usually several times a week or even daily. One in 6 maintain more than one profile, 1 in 3 access social networking sites from their bedrooms, and 71% had their profiles set to public, even though most sites include their full name, along with other personal information. Three in 4 have 'added' other users they have not met offline, and most have encountered pornography and hurtful content via social networking.[19]

- Some data chart the spread of social networking activities from the PC to the mobile: industry data for Q3 2006, shows that among 13-17 year olds mobile subscribers, 37% American, 44% German, 58% French, 64% British, 63% Spanish and 70% Italian teens have expanded their social networking into their mobile communication, this including instant messaging, chat, dating, photo or video messaging, creating own ringtone and watching video sent by a friend.[20]

Most of the above data focuses on teenagers rather than younger children. However, in the UK, Childwise[21] reports that 37% of 5-6 year olds and 64% of 7-8 year olds use the internet. As online activities become more widespread among younger children, the research agenda must encompass younger users.

3   Risk, regulation and evidence-based policy

What are the challenges for policy?
What assumptions guide research?
Why is risk so high on the agenda?

3.1   Opportunities are accompanied by risks

Each new form of online activities brings a renewed wave of public anxiety and, indeed, genuine risk. Of course, it is a normal part of growing up to test boundaries, question adult norms, experiment with relationships, play with identity, explore new sexual experience, maintain or break secrets, exclude or be excluded by peers, deceive parents and worry about one's development. All this is, therefore, to be expected online as offline.

But online, such practices may be amplified, spread, manipulated or shared in ways that are easier and quicker than offline, and also unexpected in their consequences because of the socio-technological infrastructure of the Internet. Since young people push the boundaries of online experience, they find themselves in the vanguard in terms of risk of harm as well as exciting opportunities.

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[18] Rochester (2006) *Teens Set New Rules of Engagement in the Age of Social Media*. 31 October 2006. (survey conducted by Harris Interactive, summary of findings). Available at:
http://www.harrisinteractive.com/news/allnewsbydate.asp?NewsID=1114

[19] Anchor Youth Centre (2007) *The Anchor WATCH_YOUR_SPACE Survey Report*. Available at:
http://www.webwise.ie/article.aspx?id=7030

[20] M:Metrics: (2006) *Teens Take User-Generated Content and Social Networking To Go.* Seattle and London, 14 December 2006. Available at:
http://www.mmetrics.com/press/articles/20061214-social-networking.pdf

[21] Childwise (2006) *ChildWise Monitor Trends Report 2006.* See http://www.childwise.co.uk/trends.htm

Thus they positively enjoy …

- Posting pictures that reveal identity/location (sports team, school, etc)
- Posting sexually provocative/indecent images (via mobile or webcam)
- Circulating messages to 'friends of friends' whose identity is unclear
- Circulating hostile or bullying content about peers
- Making personal profile info public (or, misunderstand what's public)
- Tricking others into silly/embarrassing/indecent acts on webcam
- Encouraging peers regarding suicide, anorexia, drug-taking, self-harm
- Copying private messages to all contacts
- Seeking new contacts, ever more 'friends'
- Expressing insecurities and fantasies in blogs
- Choosing sexual nicknames (e.g. Lolita, sxcbabe)
- Pushing boundaries, experimenting with identity

Crucially, the distinction between opportunities and risks is far from straightforward. Several activities regarded as opportunities by children (e.g. social networking, posting personal information, downloading music, visiting chat rooms) are considered risks by parents and other adults. Even as viewed by parents, it is expected that teenagers should take some risks in order to learn to cope (i.e. coping with risk is itself a positive outcome of internet use). Since adult regulation of children's internet use relies on a shared or negotiated understanding of both the activities and the degree of risks associated with them, rather than being simply a matter of parents imposing restrictions, the difficulty in drawing the line between opportunities and risks complicates matters.

For example, teens need, and will actively seek out, opportunities to discuss sexuality among their peers, and here the internet plays a crucial role: "girls will be most free to explore and construct their identities and express feelings about the issues of greatest importance to them when they are in a space they consider safe – that is, free from the potentially judgmental or inhibiting influence of adults or male peers."[22] Thus teenage girls use the Internet not only to express their identity but also to explore, often in a private, intimate, sometimes confessional manner, their confusions, vulnerabilities, uncertainties and ignorance regarding sexuality.[23] It seems that those particularly in need of sexual information (e.g. early maturing girls) are more likely turn to teen media, including the internet.[24] Too often, however, the media depictions they find are negative or exploitative rather than positive and empowering.[25]

Research findings show that, as young people become increasingly skilled internet users, their experiences of risks and opportunities typically go hand in hand. Perhaps

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[22] Grisso, A. D., & Weiss, D. (2005). What are gURLS talking about? Adolescent girls' construction of sexual identity on gURL.com. In S. Mazzarella (Ed.), *Girl Wide Web* (pp. 31-50). New York: Peter Lang. p.32.

[23] Stern, S. (2002). Sexual selves on the world wide web: Adolescent girls' home pages as sites for sexual self-expression. In J. Brown, J. Steele & K. Walsh-Childers (Eds.), *Sexual Teens, Sexual Media: Investigating Media's Influence on Adolescent Sexuality* (pp. 265-285). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

[24] Brown, J. D., Halpern, C. T., & L'Engle, K. L. (2005). Mass media as a sexual super peer for early maturing girls. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 36*(5), 420–427.

[25] Buckingham, D., & Bragg, S. (2004). *Young People, Sex and the Media: The facts of life?* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. What is meant by negative depictions? Arguably, depictions of sexuality that are 'out of context', that emphasise a narrow and restrictive conception of (usually female) attractiveness, that are associated with hostility or violence, etc.

partly because young people often construe as an opportunity the very activities that adults perceive as a risk, there is a positive correlation between the range of opportunities that teenagers experience online (e.g. learning, games, communication, creation) and the range of risks that they encounter (e.g. bullying, hate content, sexual harassment). This suggests that increasing young people's take up of online opportunities tends to increase their online risk of harm. Conversely, seeking to reduce the risks tends also to reduce their online opportunities, either by generally limiting internet use or by specifically restricting interactive or peer-to-peer activities online.[26]

The challenge is clear: how can society effectively facilitate the opportunities for children and young people online (i.e. positive regulation) while also reducing or managing the risks they encounter online (i.e. negative regulation)? There is a growing consensus that meeting this challenge is a task for multiple stakeholders, not simply a new burden for already over-taxed parents. For all concerned, this demands adapting to rapid change, learning new forms of expertise (including enabling and critical literacies), apportioning responsibility flexibly among relevant parties, identifying feasible strategies for enhancing safety, adapting local or national experience to confront a global phenomenon and, last, acknowledging some very real limits of regulatory power.

3.2   The European policy agenda for young people and the internet

Policy in the European Union, as in many countries around the world, requires the active promotion of internet diffusion and use in the workplace, schools, communities and households, as mapped out in the eEurope 2005 Action Plan designed to facilitate Europe's Information Society (c.f. the policy framework for i2010).[27] This far-reaching and ambitious agenda specifies a series of targets and milestones, including European initiatives for e-learning and e-inclusion and the promotion of media and information literacies to empower consumers so they benefit from a converged communications environment.

Since EC policy seeks both to maximise opportunities for European business, public sector and citizens while also minimising risk, this produces a tension that is evident in phrases such as 'a secure information society' or a 'safer' (but not 'safe') internet, as well as, for example, in the fraught relation between the revision of the Television Without Frontiers Directive[28] in order to further liberalise markets and the Council's Recommendation on the Protection of Minors and Human Dignity.[29] It seems that policy is particularly hotly contested when it appears, perhaps superficially, that children's safety is pitched against commercial freedoms or when the enforced regulation of firms can be reduced only by the compensatory burdening of often ill-equipped parents with the duty to protect their children in a fast-changing and technologically complex environment.

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[26] Livingstone, S., Bober, M., & Helsper, E. J. (2005). *Internet literacy among children and young people*. London: LSE Report. Available at www.children-go-online.net.

[27] See http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/policy/index_en.htm (accessed 27/2/07). As this site records, "i2010 is the European Commission's strategic policy framework laying out broad policy guidelines for the information society and the media up to 2010. It promotes an open and competitive digital economy and emphasises ICT as a driver of inclusion and quality of life".

[28] Currently being reformulated as the Audiovisual Media Services Directive; see http://europa.eu.int/comm/avpolicy/revision-tvwf2005/ispa_scope_en.pdf.

[29] Adopted by the European Parliament and Council in December 2006, this guides national legislation for combating illegal and harmful content transmitted over electronic media, and includes a call for the promotion of children's media literacy; see http://ec.europa.eu/comm/avpolicy/reg/minors/index_en.htm.

Though children often figures as a brake on market developments, demanding a pause to protect them from emerging risks, children's activities also drive the market – witness their eager adoption of mobile and social networking services, their music consumption, the fast-growing educational sector, and so forth. Thus as citizens both now and in the future, their needs and rights are, surely, paramount.

An equally challenging tension lies in the relation between individual countries and regional or international regulatory bodies, including the EC. Although neither the new technologies, nor the industries that produce and distribute them, can be confined within national boundaries, and although the protection of children is a universal value, it remains the case that, for the most part, the public (children, parents, teachers, and others) inhabits a nationally-specific contexts characterised by particular values, knowledge, practices and concerns, as well as by particular institutional, regulatory and cultural histories.

Consequently, different countries - for reasons of language, religion, family structure, moral priorities, political economy and media history - regard new online opportunities and risks through a cultural lens, asserting varying priorities and concerns (regarding, say, safety and risk, violence and pornography, racist or offensive content), these in turn resting on somewhat divergent value systems including different cultural understandings of childhood, of the balance to be struck between freedom and protection, and of the responsibility of parents, industry and/or the state.

3.3   The academic research agenda for young people and the internet

Parallel challenges face the European research community. Current debate centres on the ways in which globalisation is transforming national research contexts and on the potential of applying comparative cross-national methods. Beyond the inherent demands of comparative cross-national research, adequate cooperation and comparison within the European research community has been, in practice, impeded by different national traditions of research funding, institutional structures and intellectual divides, as well as by the limited opportunities to network knowledge and coordinate comparative investigations. [30] The speed of technological change also poses challenges for multi-national networking, for it demands a constant updating of the research agenda.

Certain conceptual frameworks within the academy guide this area of empirical research, arguing that:

- While policies for child protection may be the goal, it is important to recognise children's agency and competencies as well as their vulnerabilities in understanding how and why they use the internet as they do. An adult-centred approach frequently misinterprets their experiences, and tends to be swayed by moral panics regarding the 'new', especially when these incorporate societal fears about threats to childhood, incomprehension regarding technology and/or anxieties about the limits of social control.[31]

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[30] Livingstone, S. (2003), On the challenges of cross-national comparative media research, *European Journal of Communication, 18*(4), 477-500.

[31] Livingstone, S. (2002), *Young People and New Media: Childhood and the Changing Media Environment*, London: Sage.

- Although it is convenient to talk of 'children' or 'youth', it is vital to recognise considerable variation in children's competences, interests and life situations, according to their age, gender, socioeconomic background, and so forth. For cross-national or pan-European research, many other factors may also differentiate among children's experiences – school system, family structure, cultural values, technological experiences and expertise, and so forth.

- It is important to avoid a technologically determinist, impact-centred approach and instead seek to understand how the internet is both socially shaped, in terms of institution, design and political economy, and also meaningfully appropriated in diverse contexts by its users.[32] This is not necessarily to assert a social determinism instead, but rather to ask careful questions about the dynamic and contingent relations between practices of social shaping and technology use.

- New media supplement and remediate older media and, indeed, older cultural practices; only rarely do they replace them entirely.[33] An account of children's internet use should, therefore, examine how this use is contextualised by other media and cultural forms, embedding any account within an analysis of parenting, education, social values and norms and the other practices and institutions of everyday life that give meaning to the particularities of internet use.[34]

To understand, then, why online opportunities attract such hyperbolic optimism, and why online risks attract so much public fear and anxiety, we must invite a wider gaze. In his account of 'the risk society', Ulrich Beck argues that a result of contemporary social changes, "a new twilight of opportunities and hazards comes into existence – the contours of the risk society". contours that we are only now beginning to glimpse.[35] These social changes are such that society is,

> "… concerned no longer exclusively with making nature useful, or with releasing mankind from traditional constraints, but also and essentially with problems resulting from techno-economic development itself… Questions of the development and employment of technologies (in the realms of nature, society and the personality) are being eclipsed by questions of the political and economic 'management' of the risks of actually or potentially utilized technologies".[36]

Thus, "risk may be defined as a systematic way of dealing with the hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernization itself".[37] Since people are differentially resourced to deal with these hazards and insecurities, an account of risk should include a mapping of 'social risk positions' – how are risks distributed across society, creating which inequities, and associated with which other societal determinants?

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[32] Mansell and Silverstone (1996) argue for the analysis of the degrees of freedom available to both technology producers and users, including recognition of the interests at stake in determining up one particular design over another. See Mansell, R. and R. Silverstone (eds.) (1996) *Communication by design: the politics of information and communication technologies.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[33] Lievrouw, L., & Livingstone, S. (2006), Introduction. In L. Lievrouw & S. Livingstone (Eds.), *Handbook of New Media: Social Shaping and Social Consequences* (pp. 1-14), London: Sage.

[34] Berker, T., Hartmann, M., Punie, Y., & Ward, K. J. (Eds.). (2006). *The domestication of media and technology.* Maidenhead: Open University Press.

[35] Beck, U. (1992). Risk society: Towards a new modernity. London: Sage. p.15.

[36] Beck (1992), op cit., p.19.

[37] Beck (1992), op cit., p.21. Note that this definition differs crucially from the more usual statistical notion of probability of harm. For Beck, risks are co-determined by natural hazards and the social environment by which they are shaped, expressed and addressed.

As Lash and Wynne summarise, in the risk society,

> "… risks are always created and effected in social systems, for example by organizations and institutions which are supposed to manage and control the risky activity", with the magnitude of the risk being "a direct function of the quality of social relations and processes"; consequently, "the primary risk, even for the most technically intensive activities (indeed perhaps most especially for them), is therefore that of social dependency upon institutions and actors who may well be – and arguably are increasingly – alien, obscure and inaccessible to most people affected by the risks in question".[38]

These observations surely ring true for the many children, parents and teachers struggling to understand how it is that exactly the technology that promises such wonderful opportunities for education, communication, participation and creativity is also, at the same time, the means of bringing into the privacy of the home the very worst of society. The internet, it seems to them, introduces risks into children's lives that indeed vary depending on the quality of social relations on and offline, that are unequally distributed and so greater for those least able to cope, and that make plain their growing dependency on an often incomprehensible technology and the largely inaccessible institutions behind it.

These changes as experienced by the public are paralleled by the adaptation of regimes of regulation to the changing landscape of risk. Driven by the pressure to liberalize (and deregulate) markets both nationally and globally, and challenged to be seen to address the all-too-frequent public crises associated with the regulation of risk (e.g. in financial services, food safety, health care, environmental problems, etc.[39]), regulatory regimes are shifting away from the previous mixture of hierarchical, 'command-and-control' approach of both self-regulatory bodies and government departments towards a 'softer', more indirect approach that seeks to disperse the role of the State by establishing more accountable and transparent regulatory bodies (both super-national bodies such as the European Commission and bodies within the state), and by engaging civil society in the processes of governance so as, it is held, to empower the public by enhancing choice. [40]

One key consequence of this empowerment, however, is the individualisation of risk – in other words, the increasing exposure of the individual to the consequences of their own risk-related decisions.[41] For children, teenagers and their parents, already absorbed in the fraught emotional conflicts of negotiating boundaries of public and private, dependence and independence, tradition and change, this is indeed a new burden, adding potentially dramatic consequences to their hitherto private struggles.

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[38] Lash, S., & Wynne, B. (1992). Introduction. *U. Beck, Risk society: Towards a new modernity*, London: Sage, p.4.

[39] D. Lupton (1999) (ed.), *Risk and Sociocultural Theory: New Directions and Perspectives* (Cambridge, CUP).

[40] J. Black, M. Lodge & M. Thatcher (2005), *Regulatory Innovation: A Comparative Analysis*. (Cheltenham). B. Jessop, 'The State and the Contradictions of the Knowledge-Driven Economy', (Lancaster, 2000); B. Jessop, *The Future of the Capitalist State* (Cambridge, 2002).

[41] Lunt, P., and Livingstone, S. (in press) Regulating markets in the interest of consumers? On the changing regime of governance in the financial service and communications sectors. In M. Bevir and F. Trentmann (Eds.), *Governance, citizens, and consumers: Agency and resistance in contemporary politics*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

4 Positive steps forward

What positive online opportunities already exist for children?
How can further positive opportunities be developed and evaluated?
Can does improving media literacy help?

4.1 Promoting positive opportunities

Possibly the best way to avoid the negative dimensions of internet use is to direct children towards the positive dimensions, thereby both avoiding harm and empowering children in terms of learning, communication, participation and creativity. This is not merely a strategy for risk reduction but also a matter of children's communication rights.

The United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child (ratified by nearly all countries, though not the USA) asserts children's rights to freedom of expression through any medium of the child's choice (Art. 13) and to mass media that disseminate information and material of social and cultural benefit to the child, with particular regard to the linguistic needs of minority/indigenous groups and to protection from material injurious to the child's well-being (Art. 17). In taking this forward, the Children's Television Charter, formulated in 1995, states:

(1) "Children should have programmes of high quality which are made specifically for them, and which do not exploit them. These programmes, in addition to entertaining, should allow children to develop physically, mentally and socially to their fullest potential";
(2) "Children should hear, see and express themselves, their culture, their languages and their life experiences, through television programmes which affirm their sense of self, community and place";
(3) "Children's programmes should promote an awareness and appreciation of other cultures in parallel with the child's own cultural background";
(4) "Children's programmes should be wide-ranging in genre and content, but should not include gratuitous scenes of violence and sex";
(5) "Children's programmes should be aired in regular slots at times when children are available to view, and/or distributed via other widely accessible media or technologies";
(6) "Sufficient funds must be made available to make these programmes to the highest possible standards";
(7) "Governments, production, distribution and funding organisations should recognise both the importance and vulnerability of indigenous children's television, and take steps to support and protect it".[42]

That these principles could be readily adapted for the internet is thought-provoking. This would be consistent with the broader movement seeking to develop and protect communication rights or entitlements – for adults and children world wide. Cees Hamelink defines communication rights as those rights recognised by the United Nation's Universal Declaration of Human Rights that relate to information and communication, arguing that:

> 'Communication is a fundamental social process and the foundation of all social organization….Communication rights are based on a vision of the free flow of

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[42] Livingstone, S. (2007) Children's Television Charter. In J. Arnett (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Children, Adolescents, and the Media*. Thousand Oaks, Cal.: Sage. p.164.

information and ideas which is interactive, egalitarian and non-discriminatory and driven by human needs, rather than commercial or political interests. These rights represent people's claim to freedom, inclusiveness, diversity and participation in the communication process.'[43]

What might this mean in practice, for the positive provision of online resources for children?

In researching this article, I note that it seems easier to think of the risks online for children than it is to identify the opportunities. We can all agree that stranger contact, bullying, race hate and pornography pose problems, though the importance given to these, and the proposed solutions, vary. But what exactly do we – adults – want children to do online? When we look over their shoulders, what do we hope to see? What, indeed, do children themselves want there to be more of online? And of this, what should be provided by the public sector or encouraged in the private sector?

The reasons why people scratch their heads when asked about the positive opportunities for children online – beyond restating the broad and important desire to encourage learning, communication, participation and creativity – seem to be first, that adults and children's perspectives diverge, and adults are profoundly ambivalent about children's preferred online activities (games, chat, social networking, etc) and second, that the scope of the internet is vast, potentially supporting any or all of children's offline activities.

I have, therefore, cast around among my academic, policy and personal networks for great examples of online contents and services for children. What follows is unashamedly ad hoc and biased towards sites in the English language, for there is, at present, no systematic account of the status quo for online provision suitable for children within Member States (or elsewhere).

Suggested cases of good practice:

- In France, the children's search engine, Takatrouver, is designed for 7-12 year olds, and began 7 years ago. [44] As content is pre-moderated, and as it is an individual initiative with no external funding (though with advertising on the adults' part of the site), the choices provided can be fairly limited. It receives 13,000 hits per day, especially during and soon after school hours.

- Childnet-International is a UK-based charity that actively engages young people in its work to develop positive online content. This includes providing funding for children to produce sites, and an annual awards ceremony to celebrate creative content produced by children. [45]

- In Greece, a portal for children by the Hellenic World Foundation, provides virtual reality projects for school children (e.g. the life and history of the olive tree, the chronicle of an excavation, the ancient Agora, a virtual trip to ancient Greek maths, a virtual theatre tour). [46]

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[43] Hamelink, C. (2003), Statement on communication rights. Presented to the World Forum on Communication Rights 11 December 2005. http://www.communicationrights.org/statement_en.html, p.1.

[44] See www.takatrouver.net.

[45] www.childnet-int.org. A successful example of a site produced by three young sisters in Australia is www.Matmice.com, which has 268,000 members worldwide.

[46] See www.fhw.gr/imeakia. The Hellenic World Foundation is a privately funded, not for profit foundation founded in 1993 by an act of Parliament.

- In Slovenia, young children can visit a storytelling site and other sites that mix educational content with games and entertaining activities, including a publicly funded children's portal.[47]

- In California, the Digital Underground Storytelling for Youth project is collaboration between the University of California, Berkeley, local communities and educators to support children's creation of digital stories to express and explore their identities using multimedia tools.[48]

- An EC funded project, *Children in Communication about Migration*, provided national (offline) clubs which trained 10-14 year olds to create productions including animation, documentary, music video, drama and role play that expressed the experience of migration for children in six European countries.[49]

- In a one-off project as part of Safer Internet Day 2007, Semley Primary School (UK) & Athens-Chilesburg Elementary (USA) won the Innovation Award for their team project on 'The Power of Image'. The 9-11 year old students used the internet to collaborate, learning about teamwork and cultural differences as well as internet safety.

- In The Netherlands, Stichting Mijn Kind Online (My Kid Online) provides criteria for good sites for children, including site reviews based on assessable criteria and implemented by an independent editorial board of parents. This initiative seeks to empower parents and children to judge themselves what is positive online content for children.[50]

- In the UK, BBC Children's Interactive and On-demand provision is developing 'a dynamic virtual hub' for those under 12 years old (CBBC for 7-11 and Cbeebies for younger children).Cross-platform content links television, radio and internet through a consistent 'look and feel', including on-demand viewing, behind-the-scenes footage, extra content and interactive services (creative, gaming, community, learning, etc) already in place or planned for 2008, along with a pre-moderated search tool.[51]

Observations:

- These cases vary considerably in scale and scope, and not everyone will agree that these are all 'good' cases. Particularly, children and adults may disagree. They also vary considerably insofar as they rely on resources provided on a national or international basis or on those dedicated to a particular school or neighbourhood.

- Each Member State can provide varied examples of small, public sector projects, some countries include many of these. Those that are successful tend to begin

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[47] See www.prazniki.net/default.aspx. Also, www.otroci.org/ and the children's portal, www.zupca.net/. The main responsibility for online content for children lies with the Ministry of Education, though the Ministry of Culture also funds some projects, especially those supporting the Slovenian language. There is little available for Slovenian teenagers, however, apart from social networking sites.

[48] See http://gse.berkeley.edu/research/dusty.html

[49] http://chicam.org/

[50] See http://www.planet.nl/planet/show/id=703280 and www.mijnkindonline.nl.

[51] See www.bbc.co.uk/cbbc - this includes a search tool (not a search engine, but a pre-moderated resource linking to external websites that meet clear guidelines regarding content, advertising, messaging, use of personal data and suitability for 7-11 year olds.

offline, grounded in a school or community. They are often specifically targeted at disadvantaged or minority groups, but they tend to be resource intensive, often dependent on one or a handful of enthusiastic individuals, reliant on temporary project funding and so difficult to sustain and update.

- They also, it seems, struggle to reach a wider audience beyond that already involved in creating the resource. Those sites provided top-down (e.g. by governmental organisations), without direct engagement with children built into the process of design and use, risk being seen by children as particularly irrelevant and dull.[52] Others, despite best intentions, seem to revert to adult-centred ideas of right and wrong (even, as in www.filmstreet.co.uk, in specifying the 'correct' costume for a fantasy figure, despite inviting the player to be creative).

- Pre-moderating content is very expensive, as is providing child-appropriate interactive services. Consequently, public sector sites tend to be non-interactive,[53] while private sector sites are either provided for everyone rather than specifically dedicated to (and safe for) children or they contain advertising to pay for the child-specific interactive services.

- Within the exception of resources maintained by public service broadcasters or government bodies, large-scale and sustainable resources tend to be private sector based, thereby depending on a commercial strategy of market reach and profitability, with advertising/ sponsorship prominent in the online offer, and with little reason to reach out to the digitally excluded.[54]

- While private sector sites are often greatly enjoyed by children, these are not necessarily specifically tailored for children (e.g. Google, Wikipedia – could there be kids' versions?). However, as with other media (television, film, books), it is likely that once children become teenagers, they prefer content for adults (or, the general public), eschewing content marked 'for children'.

- There are few publicly reported evaluations of these resources, even for public sector resources. Thus there is also little information on whether children use them or whether they prefer them to other online or, indeed, offline resources. Moreover, many initiatives fail, of course. Possibly the most prominent failure was the attempt to establish a Dot Kids domain (under the US domain – i.e. .kids.us). In 2002, this appeared successful, when President Bush signed the Dot-Kids Implementation and Efficiency Act in the USA.[55]

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[52] Livingstone, S. (in press), The challenge of engaging youth online: Contrasting producers' and teenagers' interpretations of websites, *European Journal of Communication*, 22(2).

[53] This tends to be the case also for sites for the general public, with these often limiting peer or other forms of interaction, providing little accountability for content, and with little scope for marginalised voices, notwithstanding the wealth of information provided; see Kenix, L. J. (2007). In search of utopia: an analysis of non-profit web pages. *Information, Communication & Society, 10*(1), 69-94.

[54] As yet, little research has examined children's susceptibility to various forms of online advertising and promotion, notwithstanding many calls for such research: Montgomery, K., & Pasnik, S. (1996). *Web of Deception: Threats To Children from Online Marketing*. Washington: Centre for Media Education.

[55] http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/12/20021204-1.html. Essentially a walled garden friendly to filters and search engines, the site quotes the President as saying, "Dot Kids will be part of the U.S. country domain on the Internet. It will function much like the children's section of the library, where parents feel comfortable allowing their children to browse… This bill is a wise and necessary step to safeguard our children while they use computers and discover the great possibilities of the Internet. Every site designated .kids will be a safe zone for children. The sites will be monitored for content, for safety, and all objectionable material will be removed. Online chat rooms and instant messaging will be prohibited, unless they can be certified as safe. The websites under this new domain will not connect a

- There is much to be learned from the popular children's sites (especially, social networking sites) that could be implemented within public sector provision. Clearly, children enjoy user-generated content, peer-to-peer networking, personalised content, messaging, music-sharing, and many other applications that pose especial challenges to those producing online resources dedicated to children's needs, rights and safety. At present, most of these sites are (or are meant to be) restricted to teenagers, leaving much less interactive or peer opportunities available for younger children.

Although the distinctions between contents and services and between public and private sectors are, in practice, blurred, the positive online offer can be organised thus:

	Contents	**Services**
Public sector	Diverse programme-related and educational content by public service broadcasters.[56]	Children's search engines[59]
		Children's helplines and advice services[60]
	Public bodies scientific, artistic and cultural organisations (e.g. NASA, the Nordic Council)	E-learning and educational support (software, edugames, e-tutoring)
	Many national sites with entertainment/creative content[57]	
	Civic sites to encourage youth participation[58]	
Private sector	Google Earth	Children's portals e.g. Yahooligans[62]
	Wikipedia	Multiplayer games (e.g. Simtropolis, World of Warcraft)
	TV/film-related sites[61]	

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child to other online sites outside the child-friendly zone. This was widely regarded by critics as highly restrictive, since all content and links must be appropriate for children under 13, and unmoderated peer-to-peer interaction is precluded. The task of ensuring the domain meets these conditions has been undertaken by NeuStar, see http://www.kids.us/content_policy/content.html Several years on, few organisations have in practice taken the opportunity to invest in and populate this domain with child-friendly content and the initiative has become effectively inactive.

[56] For example, VRT in Belgium, ZDF in Germany, NRK in Norway, RTE in Ireland, & CBBC/BBC Education in UK, www.hetklokhuis.nl/sketchstudio in The Netherlands, sesameworkshop.org and pbskids.org in the USA; National Danish Television (www.dr.dk/boern/?oversigt).

[57] e.g. in The Netherlands, www.monstermedia.nl; in Spain, www.chaval.es, www.elhuevodechocolate.com

[58] In the USA – www.rockthevote.com, www.kidsvotingusa.org and www.vote-smart.org; in the UK – www.ukyouthparliament.org.uk.

[59] e.g. in France, www.takatrouver.net; in Germany, www.blinde-kuh.de; in The Netherlands, www.davindi.nl

[60] e.g. in Spain, www.portaldelmenor.es (bullying, other problems); e.g. in UK, www.talktofrank.com (drugs), www.childline.org.uk (child abuse).

[61] For example, the Disney High School Musical site has some innovative tools to remix content: http://psc.disney.go.com/disneychannel/originalmovies/highschoolmusical/. See also www.TheSimpsons.com and, in Norway, www.donald.no, a commercial website branded with Donald Duck, providing diverse forms of entertainment for children, including pre-moderated user-generated

Sports-related sites	Search engines (not child-dedicated) e.g. Google and Google Images

However, what about?

- Neopets (games, chat)
- MSN (instant messenger)
- Habbo Hotel (chat)
- MySpace (social networking)
- YouTube (video)

- Limewire (music)
- LiveJournal (blogging)
- Deviant art (creative art)
- Fanzines[63]
- Fox Kids (in many languages)[64]

It is unlikely that even adults agree here, both because opinions are divided regarding the value of private sector content and because of the close links between opportunities and risks. Nonetheless, any listing of children's top ten favourite sites generally puts these ahead of those carefully provided for them by the public sector. So, consensus is not yet reached regarding the specification of positive online content for children. As things stand, we may conclude that the task ahead requires:

- a systematic scoping of the status quo in terms of children's online provision;

- an independent evaluation of current provision, by country and target age;

- an investigation into what children themselves want more of online;

- an investigation into children's needs and rights, as judged by education and child welfare experts;

- the identification of quality criteria by which to evaluate positive provision;

- a critical mapping of current provision against children's needs, in order to determine key gaps and prioritise the development of future online resources;

- a determination of which bodies are, and should be, tasked with the responsibility for providing and funding children's online resources;

- a promotional strategy for ensuring that children, parents and teachers become aware of positive provision for children online, both current and future;

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content and a partially post-moderated community forum. It also provides 'news for youngsters' (cultural news). This site may soon be launched in other European countries.

[62] e.g. in Greece, www.erevnites.gr/greek/company.aspx, www.fhw.gr/imeakia/ & www.netkids.gr/; see also the privately funded children's search engines in The Netherlands - www.meestersipke.nl and www.netwijs.nl.

[63] e.g. Mugglenet.com (unofficial site for Harry Potter fans); insanebuffyfans.com (Buffy the Vampire Slayer fan site); http://www.flatoutblind.org/bb/ (for Beavis and Butthead fans).

[64] In Spain, for example, foxkids.es is popular, as is cartoonnetwork.es.

- a network of providers, with a forum in which to meet/communicate, to ensure that experiences are shared, lessons learned and best practice models disseminated.

4.2   The promise of media literacy

The EC defines media literacy thus:

> "Media Literacy may be defined as the ability to access, analyse and evaluate the power of images, sounds and messages which we are now being confronted with on a daily basis and are an important part of our contemporary culture, as well as to communicate competently in media available on a personal basis. Media literacy relates to all media, including television and film, radio and recorded music, print media, the Internet and other new digital communication technologies."[65]

Although it notes the positive benefits of media literacy for citizenship, freedom of expression and personal choice, the primary thrust of its approach concerns a negative conception of media literacy, namely as a means by which individuals may protect themselves from the harmful or problematic aspects of the new media and information environment (e.g. to evaluate the many messages that confront today's media consumer, to be aware of media filtering and bias, to help them become judicious consumers and to be aware of issues regarding intellectual property rights).

There is little in this definition that recognises that a positive and multidimensional engagement with society is, today, necessarily mediated by a complex communication and information environment. To put it the other way around, without media and communication technologies, most forms of political, social, cultural and educational participation become all but impossible. After all, the challenge is not to ensure people can engage with media but, as with reading and writing, the challenge is to ensure they can engage with society as mediated by their competence in reading and writing. And, today, the third literacy, namely media and information literacies. Thus the real purposes of media literacy, surely, are to support:

- Democracy, participation and active citizenship

- The knowledge economy, competitiveness and choice

- Lifelong learning, cultural expression and personal fulfilment

The European Charter for Media Literacy is broader, asserting that media literate people can:

- "Use media technologies effectively to access, store, retrieve and share content to meet their individual and community needs and interests;
- "Gain access to, and make informed choices about, a wide range of media forms and content from different cultural and institutional sources;
- "Understand how and why media content is produced;
- "Analyse critically the techniques, languages and conventions used by the media, and the messages they convey;
- "Use media creatively to express and communicate ideas, information and opinions;

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[65] See http://ec.europa.eu/comm/avpolicy/media_literacy/index_en.htm

- "Identify, and avoid or challenge, media content and services that may be unsolicited, offensive or harmful;
- "Make effective use of media in the exercise of their democratic rights and civic responsibilities."[66]

While rather lengthy, this specification brings together both positive and negative definitions, foregrounding the former. It also combines both the skills required to use the media in a literate manner with recognition of some of the purposes for which such media use is important. In other words, a literate approach to the media matters because, increasingly, many dimensions of our lives are mediated.

However, although the various initiatives to promote these positive ambitions for children are often laudable,[67] it must be recognised that the primary impetus behind the development of media literacy policy is as a response to the growing complexities of media and communications regulation internationally, as noted earlier.

Put simply, the more media literate the population, the more the regulatory framework can be rolled back, in effect devolving state/industry regulation to individual or parental regulation. For example, in its response to the EC Consultation on Media Literacy, the UK regulator Ofcom states:

"Media literacy is increasingly becoming a fundamental component of European and national regulatory policy agendas in the communications sector, especially as developments in the creation and distribution of content challenge current approaches to regulation in this area".[68]

As state regulation gradually shifts to industry self-regulation, encompassing codes of conduct, content management systems (rating, filtering, access controls, etc), 'these schemes rely for their effectiveness on consumers actively taking measures to protect themselves and their families'.[69]

The problem is obvious: what happens when consumers do not take sufficient measures? When media literacy is lacking? When the consumer is not a 'good citizen'?[70] Research on media literacy consistently supports such concerns, showing that:

- Levels of media literacy vary considerably across populations, with those 'ahead' tending to sustain their relative advantage over others as the media environment develops;

- Lower levels of media literacy are associated with other forms of social exclusion and relative deprivation, thus adding to already-existing forms of disadvantage;

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[66] http://www.euromedialiteracy.eu/index.php?Pg=charter

[67] For example, Unesco has just published a Media Education Kit (January 2007. Edited by Divina Frau-Meigs, and including an internet literacy handbook, this is available at http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/ev.php-URL_ID=23714&URL_DO=DO_PRINTPAGE&URL_SECTION=201.html

[68] Ofcom (2006), op cit. See www.ofcom.org.uk. Consultation response December 2006, p.1.

[69] Ofcom (2006), op cit.

[70] Oswell, D. (1998). The place of childhood in Internet content regulation: A case study of policy in the UK. *International Journal of Cultural Studies, 1*(1), 131-151..

- Critical media skills of interpretation and evaluation are not always implemented or practiced in real-life circumstances, reflecting a persistent knowledge/behaviour gap;

- Greater levels of media literacy are assumed, but have not been shown convincingly, to reduce media-related risk of harm;

- Initiatives to promote media literacy are generally more effective in reaching the information rich than the information poor.[71]

Measuring media literacy and, particularly, measuring change in media literacy against relevant benchmarks is largely lacking on anything other than a project-by-project basis. The UK's establishment of a media literacy audit – measuring such variables as access to, attitudes towards, trust in and complaints or concerns about each of several media – is one way forward. Whether it asks the right questions, however, has been little debated in public.[72] This debate would be worth having as a precursor to a possible media literacy audit – for adults and children – across Europe.

Given these challenges, and notwithstanding the importance of a significant degree of competence in using media and communication technologies, we can discern some attempts to scale down some of the hopes for media literacy.

For example, following the academy's widely agreed definition of media literacy as "the ability to access, analyse, evaluate and create messages in a variety of forms", the UK's Ofcom, which has a statutory duty to promote media literacy, defined it as "the ability to access, understand and create communications in a variety of contexts", thereby combining the elements of analysis and critical evaluation under 'understanding'.[73] While clear and straightforward, it appears that most effort is being devoted to the dimensions of access and basic understanding, with little attention as yet to a more sophisticated understanding of the media, with much more needed to increase critical evaluation and the ability to determine reliable and trustworthy information, and with a persistent and regrettable tendency to neglect the importance of creating communications, though this is the key point at which people become not only consumers but also active citizens regarding communications.[74]

There is also an attempt to define media literacy as purely a personal matter – as predicted by Beck's earlier noted trend toward the individualisation of risk. Within the academy, there is also a lively critical debate regarding the social versus individual nature of media literacy. While Ofcom asserts, "media literacy is a personal attribute",[75] the social literacies approach argues instead that literacy is a social

[71] See Buckingham, D. (2005). *The media literacy of children and young people: A review of the research literature*, and Livingstone, S., Van Couvering, E. J., & Thumim, N. (2005). *Adult media literacy: A review of the literature.* Both reports for Ofcom, see www.ofcom.org.uk.

[72] See www.ofcom.org.uk for Media Literacy Audits of adults and children.

[73] Livingstone, S. (2004) Media literacy and the challenge of new information and communication technologies. *Communication Review*, 7: 3-14. See also www.ofcom.org.uk

[74] Ofcom's layperson's paraphrase of the definition, in its response to the EC consultation on media literacy, is telling. Media literacy is, "put simply, the ability to operate the technology to find what you are looking for, to understand that material, to have an opinion about it and where necessary to respond to it". Here, critical evaluation is reduced to the relativist 'having an opinion' (rather than making an accurate assessment of the value of the information) and creating content or participating in online activities is reduced to 'responding' to the agenda of the provider, where necessary. The tendency to adopt a minimal rather than a more ambitious expectation for media literacy in practice contrasts with the ambitious statements that often open policy discussions.

[75] Ofcom (2006), op cit., p.8.

practice that results from the interaction between the individual and the technology.[76] To pursue the road safety analogy, for crossing a well-regulated road, a child should be taught how to cross safely. But if the roads are unregulated and badly designed, so drivers drive badly, it is hardly a simple failing of the individual child if they are knocked down. Similarly in cyberspace, internet literacy depends on the design, rules and conventions of the environment as well as on the knowledge and competence of the users. Indeed, there is a very real limit to how far the latter can compensate for failings in the former. And of course, if there were more great places to go, children would be less likely to play in the street in the first place.

At present, there are many unresolved debates regarding the agenda for media literacy. Moreover, and perhaps in consequence, there remains in most countries a considerable gap between the ambitions of those promoting media literacy and the delivery of an effective media literacy curriculum.[77] Media literacy principles are often articulated but not translated into teaching resources, educational resources when developed may not be distributed or implemented, while other routes to media literacy (media campaigns, parenting guidance, online resources) tend to reach the already-informed more than those who really need to know. Increasing resources and equalising competences so that all children may benefit remains a challenge for the future.

5   Author biography

Sonia Livingstone is Professor of Social Psychology in the Department of Media and Communications at the London School of Economics and Political Science. She is author or editor of nine books and 100+ academic articles and chapters on media audiences, children and the internet, domestic contexts of media use and media literacy. Recent books include *Children and Their Changing Media Environment* (edited with Moira Bovill, Erlbaum, 2001), *Young People and New Media* (Sage, 2002), *The Handbook of New Media* (edited with Leah Lievrouw, Sage, 2006), and *Harm and Offence in Media Content* (with Andrea Millwood Hargrave, Intellect, 2006). She is a member of the UK's *Home Secretary's Task Force for Child Protection on the Internet*, the Department for Educational and Science's *Ministerial Taskforce for Home Access to Technology for Children*, the Board of the *Voice of the Listener and Viewer*, Ofcom's *Media Literacy Research Forum*, and the Board of the *Internet Watch Foundation*. She is President-Elect of the *International Communication Association*. Following the research project, *UK Children Go Online*, she directs the thematic network, *EU Kids Online*, for the EC's *Safer Internet plus Programme*. See
http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/media@lse/whosWho/soniaLivingstone.htm.

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[76] See Snyder, I. (in press). Literacy, learning and technology studies: Challenges and opportunities for higher education. In R. Andrews & C. Haythornthwaite (Eds.), *The Handbook of e-Learning*. London: Sage. Also, Street, B. (1995). *Social Literacies: Critical Approaches to Literacy in Development, Ethnography and Education*. London: Longman.

[77] See Hobbs, R. (1998). The seven great debates in the media literacy movement. *Journal of Communication, 48*(1), 6-32. National differences are considerable. In Denmark, media literacy is accorded considerable importance, and located within the realm of education. Thus the Danish Media Council works with the Education Ministry and teachers to integrate media education within schools. In The Netherlands also, media literacy ('mediawijsheid') is an important topic of discussion, though there is little budget for concrete actions (see statement of advice from the Council of Culture at www.cultuur.nl; also www.mediawijsheid.org). However, in Spain, media literacy receives little policy attention, while in Slovenia, most attention regarding literacy is concentrated on print literacy, with only four hours per year devoted to interactive media (including audiovisual media) in the primary school curriculum.