LSE Research Online

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Introduction- Kids online: opportunities and risks for children

Book section

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Editors' introduction

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Few issues in the past decade have so dominated the headlines or captured the public imagination as that of children as online pioneers, in the vanguard of exploring and experimenting with new opportunities on the internet. Although many adults are also online, and although parents make considerable efforts to keep up with their children, it may seem that, one decade after gaining access *en masse* to online technologies, children and young people are living in a different world from that familiar to the adults who are bringing them up, teaching them what they need to know, and designing policies to ensure their well being. This new world has become invested with all the hopes and fears we have ever had for our children, but with a dramatic new twist because, it seems, everything is so much more available and easily accessible. One no longer has to go to the library or rely on a teacher for expert knowledge. Opportunities to meet people are no longer significantly constrained by transport, time and money. Many more have the chance to get involved in decisions that matter - local, national and even international. And most can find like-minded others who share their own particular hobby or interest. All this was beyond the scope of children growing up just a decade earlier. And the list of opportunities extends far further, both because the internet is now commonplace across the developed world and because all human life can now be found online.

But although the hopes are considerable, leading parents, schools and governments worldwide to invest in information and communication technologies to give children new opportunities, expanded horizons and a better chance in life, it is the associated dangers of the internet that dominate the headlines. Since all human life is now online, this includes many risks – bullies, racists, cheats and, the greatest fear of all, sexual predators. Although long encountered by children

in one form or another, today these risks too are more available and more accessible, readily crossing national borders to reach children anywhere, anytime, too easily escaping local and national systems of child welfare and law enforcement. The first instinct of many adults observing this expanded array of risks that even reaches children at home and in their bedrooms is to turn off the computer, ban the mobile phone and call a halt. The first instinct of many children, however, is to shrug their shoulders, laugh it off, and tell the worried adults that they know what they are doing.

Moving beyond this impasse has proved a fascinating and complex task for parents, educators and policy makers in many countries. It has demanded original empirical research to discover what children and young people are really doing online – what do they enjoy, what have they learned, what are they good at, and in what ways do they struggle? Such research has been conducted by experts in diverse disciplines – child development, family dynamics, online technologies, youth culture, sociology, media and communication, education and many more. It has been conducted also in many countries, published in many languages and discussed in many international conferences. This has enabled a valuable period of balanced assessment, asking – are young people's online activities really beneficial, are the benefits fairly distributed, do children need educational or other forms of support? In terms of risks, research has asked whether the various forms of potentially harmful content, contact and conduct children encounter online are really worrying or not – and if they are, how can such risks be managed and, indeed, minimised?

In recent years, consensus has been reached that 'magic bullet' solutions to online risks are not to be found. Moreover, though simple solutions (trust the children, rely on parents or turn off the computer) don't work, more complex solutions can only deliver if the multiple stakeholders involved each play their part and provided that society does not set the expectations too high. A safe childhood is unattainable – child psychologists would also say it is undesirable - but a safer one is feasible. Similar conclusions apply for the opportunities afforded by online technologies. Here too, 'magic bullet' solutions don't work. Providing computers for every child does not mean all will use them, nor will they necessarily use them

in intended or 'approved' ways. Moreover, patterns of use and non-use are likely to be shaped by long-established social expectations and to reproduce familiar forms of social inequality. In short, policies focused on access but not use or skills often go awry, and policies designed to benefit all children equally often result in the 'rich getting richer'. Again, complex solutions, involving multiple participants –curriculum designers, teacher training, local communities, children's charities, public service broadcasters, industry partners and many more – are required if the benefits of the internet are to be more widely and fairly enjoyed.

This book offers an up to date account of current research, current policy and, especially, the current practices of children and young people as they relate to the internet and online technologies, drawing on lessons of the recent past in order to look ahead to anticipate what's coming. The very pace of change sets particular challenges to researchers, policy makers and the public, for European children have gained access to new online, mobile and networked technologies with considerable rapidity (see Appendix 1). In the EU27, internet penetration had reached 61% by December 2008, this ranging from 33% in Romania and Bulgaria to 83% in the Netherlands and Finland (Internet World Statistics). Children and young people lead in internet use, with 75% of 6-17 year olds using the internet across the EU27, ranging from less than half of children online in Italy (45%) and about half of children online in Greece and Cyprus (both 50%) to two-thirds of children using the internet in many countries and rising to 91% in the UK and Sweden, 93% in the Netherlands and Denmark, and 94% in Finland (Eurobarometer, 2008). Parents too have recently gained access in considerable numbers, as many now using the internet as their children in most European countries.

These changes have generated some pressing questions for policy makers, regulators, industry and the public. The most obvious is how to encourage children and young people to gain access and make the most of the opportunities afforded by the internet, including learning, communication, entertainment, creativity, self-expression and civic participation, whether they use it at home, school or elsewhere. A further question is whether, in encouraging children to go online, society inadvertently increases the risks children encounter in their daily

lives, including exposure to violent or hate content, inappropriate sexual content and contact, harassment, bullying or abuse of personal information. One may also put this problem the other way around since policy makers must also ask whether efforts to reduce online risks inadvertently constrain children in their exploration of the benefits afforded by the internet. In response to these and further questions, a critical mass of researchers and policy makers are now investigating, debating and shaping children's internet uses in new and constructive ways. Mapping these activities is the focus of the chapters that follow. But first we set out some guiding principles in the form of a theoretical framework.

Theoretical framework

Opportunities and risks are inextricably entwined at both a societal level and as experienced by individuals in their everyday lives. Thus in today's complex, modern societies, it is apparent that, somewhat paradoxically, efforts to harness science and commerce towards the grand goal of progress have themselves generated new risks – while risks associated with the internet are typical, other examples include risks associated with new forms of energy or crops or medicine. Reflecting on what he calls 'the risk society', Beck argues that modern life contains both 'the threat *and* the promise of emancipation from the threat that it creates itself' (1986/2005: 183) - hence the populist rhetoric of optimism and pessimism so widely associated with innovations of many kinds, including the internet. However, processes of social and historical change are always contingent, unfolding with different inflections at different times in different parts of the world. Thus even within Europe, children's encounters with the internet differ in important ways, which is why we adopt a comparative approach in this book.

In their everyday lives, too, people ordinarily negotiate a range of interconnected opportunities and risks in the hope of constructing a meaningful lifestyle, a valued identity and satisfactory relations with others. As Giddens puts it, these days, 'self-actualisation is understood in terms of a balance between opportunity and risk' (1991: 78). The so-called 'new sociologists of childhood' have developed this idea, showing how the construction of a meaningful identity, always a vital

preoccupation task of adolescence, is no longer merely the means to an end (namely, a means of achieving psychological and economic independence from one's parents) but has rather become its own focus and source of satisfaction - a goal in its own right (James & James, 2008; Qvortrup, 1994). At the same time that young people are absorbed with experimental explorations of identity, representation and sociality – many of them mediated by the internet - society has gained a heightened awareness of new risks to the self. Thus in late modernity, 'it is not only children who are perceived as being "at risk" but the institution of childhood itself' (Jackson & Scott, 1999: 86).

Too often, research or policy on risks is conducted independently of that on opportunities, and vice versa. But as research finds over and again in the examination of distinct dimensions of internet use, the two cannot be clearly separated, not least because what adults regard as risks (for example, meeting strangers), children often see as opportunities (for example, making new friends), though also because the very construction of online opportunities is, as Beck anticipated, accompanied by new forms of risk – for example, to express oneself online, one must disclose personal information, and by doing this on a social networking site, one provides the data for new forms of marketing. To understand the relation between opportunities and risks, research must consider both children's agency – their motivations, interests and knowledge – and also the structures, offline and online, which enable certain actions and inhibit others (Giddens, 1984).

Research provides some good grounds to celebrate children's agency, motivation and literacy in relation to online opportunities, though it also demands recognition of their agency in perpetrating harm, whether innocently or maliciously. However, children's activities are highly constrained both online (through the provision, construction and design of websites, interfaces, networks and services) and offline (through the defining and constraining role of schools, families and communities) (Livingstone, 2009). In this volume, we explore the relation between agency and structure by taking a child-centred approach. This means first identifying children's experiences, voices and actions, and then contextualising them within the concentric circles of structuring social influences

- family, community and culture (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). That permits us, on the one hand, to recognise ways in which children determine what happens in their lives, but on the other hand, it permits us to recognise the power of institutional actors - those multiple stakeholders who, in policy terms, may or may not benefit children's internet use. These include parents and teachers but also commercial and state providers of internet-related services and resources. Without the structural approach, one may fall into the trap of exaggerating children's agency, celebrating them as 'digital natives' by contrast with their supposedly 'digital immigrant' parents and teachers (Prensky, 2001) and so fail sufficiently to support their development or to address their inevitable problems.

So far, we have drawn on insights from psychology and sociology or social theory in scoping a repertoire of concepts and ideas to work with. In addition, we add some insights from social studies of the internet and new technologies (Berker, Hartmann, Punie, & Ward, 2006; Haddon, 2004; MacKenzie & Wajcman, 1999; Mansell & Silverstone, 1996). The first is the rejection of the technological determinism commonplace in public and policy discourses (resulting in questions or claims that begin, 'the internet impacts/affects/results in…'). After all, society shapes the process of technological innovation and its diffusion, adoption and implementation in specific historical and cultural contexts. Thus, we must ask careful questions about the dynamic and contingent relations between users and technologies, and between practices of the social shaping and social consequences of new technologies (Lievrouw & Livingstone, 2006). The language of affordances – asking how the internet may (or may not) distinctively afford certain social practices – captures the recognition that the internet enables certain consequences precisely because it has been shaped so to do (Hutchby, 2001).

Another insight, drawn from empirical work throughout the history of new media, is that, contrary to popular rhetoric, there is little evidence that the internet is revolutionising society, transforming childhood or radically changing the family or education. To be sure, the internet is implicated in complex processes of social change, facilitating some possibilities and impeding others. But questions such as, is e-learning radically different from print-based learning, or is cyber-bullying really different from offline bullying, are best approached by recognising the

simultaneous influence of the old and emergence of the novel. Many use the prefix re- to mark this combination of continuities and change, talking of recombining or remixing media texts and formats, or reconfiguring or remediating social practices.

A third insight, also drawn from empirical work, is that there are substantial continuities between the online or 'virtual' world and the offline or 'real' world. Thus research is now rejecting early conceptions of 'cyberspace' as a qualitatively distinct place (Woolgar, 2002). Indeed, the more familiar we – as researchers, policy makers and the public – have become with the internet, the more it is recognised that while the internet extends and reconfigures information and communication, it does not constitute a virtual world wholly disconnected from the offline (Orgad, 2007). Offline practices – whether of social networking, social hierarchies or social hostilities – are typically reproduced and reinforced online. Similarly, legal frameworks increasingly insist that what is illegal or regulated offline is illegal and should be regulated online. In short, activities and structures in on and offline spheres are mutually influential, not least because the actors are the same in both.

EU Kids Online: translating principles into practice

How can these principles guide empirical investigation? The present contributors and their colleagues have been closely collaborating between 2006 to 2009 on a 'thematic network' entitled EU Kids Online, funded by the European Commission's Safer Internet plus Programme (part of DG Information and Media), precisely in order to identify the evidence base to inform policies regarding children, young people and the internet in Europe. Comprised of some sixty researchers selected to span multiple forms of expertise across 21 European countries, the network was funded not to conduct new empirical research but to identify, evaluate and compare the many recent and ongoing research studies conducted across Europe (see Appendix 2). This it undertook by employing an approach to understanding children's online experiences characterised by four C's - child-centred, contextual, comparative and critical.

Researchers working in academic, public sector and private institutions are, as a matter of course, continually conducting new projects for a variety of purposes, using a range of methodologies, to a greater or lesser degree in each country. But identifying this research and keeping track of new developments is a demanding task, especially in a field that has burgeoned so rapidly since the turn of the century (Livingstone, 2003). Policy makers may lack the expertise required to locate, evaluate or interpret the significance of available research. Researchers working in one language may never learn what has been published in another. Those with the resources to commission research in one country may not learn what has proved useful in another. For such reasons, a bridge is required between the specialist domain of empirical research and the policy imperatives of children's internet-related initiatives. Moreover, cross-national comparisons are required if findings obtained in different countries are to be meaningfully related to one another. The EU Kids Online network was therefore designed to ensure that the available empirical evidence could inform policy deliberations by examining European research (national and multi-national) on cultural, contextual and risk issues in children's safe use of the internet and online technologies.

The first task was to identify and assess the available research, noting patterns and biases in the kinds of research conducted, examining whether more or different kinds of research have been conducted in different countries or for different groups of children, also pinpointing gaps in the evidence base. The outcome was a publicly accessible, searchable online database cataloguing some 400+ empirical studies conducted across Europe that met a sufficient quality threshold (see Appendix 2). Although this included many studies of children's internet access and use in general, our primary interest was children's online opportunities and risks. These were classified by theme, as shown in Table 1, with the second, horizontal dimension distinguishing the three modes of communication afforded by the internet: one-to-many (child as recipient of mass distributed content); adult-to-child (child as participant in an interactive situation predominantly driven by adults); and peer-to-peer (child as actor in an interaction in which s/he may be initiator or perpetrator).

Table 1: A classification of online opportunities and risks for children

	Content: Child as recipient	Contact: child as participant	Conduct: child as actor
OPPORTUNITIES			
Education, learning and literacy	Educational resources	Contact with others who share one's interests	Self-initiated or collaborative learning
Participation and civic engagement	Global information	Exchange among interest groups,	Concrete forms of civic engagement
Creativity	Diversity of resources	Being invited/ inspired to create or participate	User-generated content creation
Identity and social connection	Advice (personal/ health/sexual etc)	Social networking, shared experiences with others	Expression of identity
RISKS			
Commercial	Advertising, spam, sponsorship	Tracking/ harvesting personal info	Gambling, illegal downloads, hacking
Aggressive	Violent/ gruesome/ hateful content	Being bullied, harassed or stalked	Bullying or harassing another
Sexual	Pornographic/ harmful sexual content	Meeting strangers, being groomed	Creating/ uploading pornographic material
Values	Racist, biased info/ advice (e.g. drugs)	Self-harm, unwelcome	Providing advice e.g. suicide/ pro-

		persuasion	anorexia

Having classified research findings, the second task was to compare these across categories of children and across countries. To achieve this, an analytic model was formulated which centred on children's online activities, as shown in Figure 1, and which contextualises these by dividing the wider research field into an individual (child-centred) level of analysis and a country (macro-societal) level of analysis (Hasebrink, Livingstone, Haddon, & Ólafsson, 2009). The individual level of analysis (shaded in darker grey) examined whether and how opportunities and risks vary depending on children's age, gender and socioeconomic status, together with findings concerning the mediating role played by parents, teachers and peers. The starting assumption, based on prior research, was that these factors are likely to influence children's opportunities and risks in a similar manner across Europe. However, since there were good theoretical and empirical reasons to expect cross-national differences, a second, country-based level of analysis was formulated to compare countries according to such contextual factors as their media environment, ICT regulation and so forth, as shown in the figure, this allowing for the explanation of observed differences in children's opportunities and risks across Europe.

Figure 1.1: An analytic model of individual and country-level factors shaping the online activities of children

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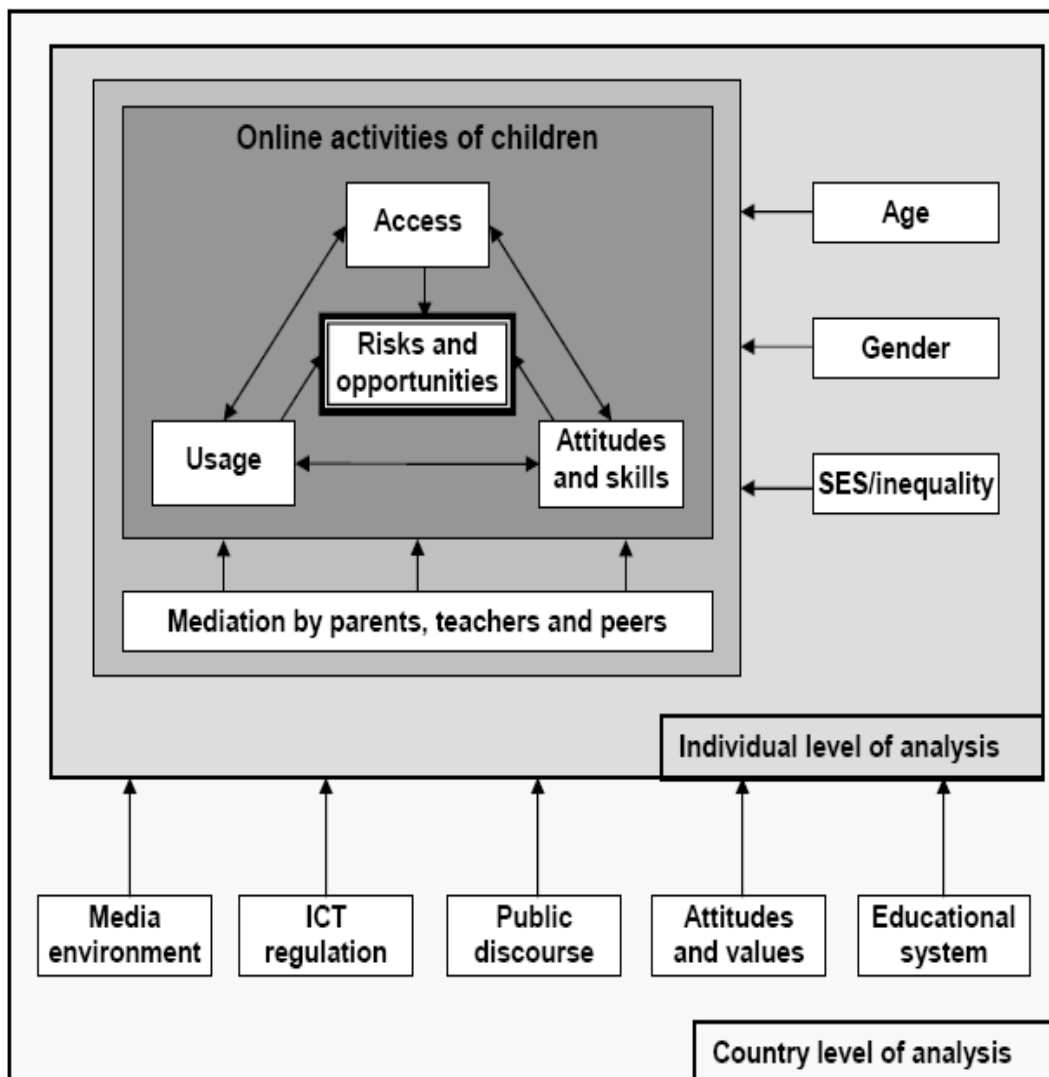
Note: SES = socio-economic status.

In practice, it was not feasible to directly compare the findings of the 400+ separate research studies identified in the online database, given their many differences in approach, sample, methodology and quality. Instead, the EU Kids Online network constructed a list of research questions and hypotheses to be tested against the findings - for example, are there gender differences in internet access? how do parents mediate children's internet use? do middle class children enjoy more online opportunities than working class children, and many more. The body of research from each country was then interrogated by network members from that country in order to judge whether there is sufficient evidence within each country to answer each research question, and to support or contradict

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each hypothesis, or not. This proved an effective approach with which we draw qualified conclusions as appropriate to the evidence available.

Towards evidence-based policy

This book is being written a decade or so after many children and young people first went online. In policy circles, many initiatives have been developed, with some success, though some mistakes have also been made and the early lessons learned. Research has certainly revealed what children do online. They relish the internet, love staying in constant connection with friends, and feel free and safe in the world provided they have their mobile phone with them. They devote hours to creating art or music and sharing it with others in collaborative communities, gain confidence in knowing that information is always at their fingertips and that the most personal advice can be obtained in privacy. And, most simply, they appreciate that a source of huge entertainment is always open to them. Much of this has been enabled by public and private sector policy developments to encourage internet adoption and appropriate use in homes, work, schools, leisure, government and commerce.

However, research has also revealed some of the failures of ill-conceived policies. It shows the parents who struggle with unreadable manuals and safety guides, unused computers neglected in classrooms, naughty children evading adult supervision, poor children disadvantaged anew, teachers deskilled in the face of digitally literate pupils, and so on. Today, attention is switching from efforts focused on improving basic access to the more difficult task of ensuring people have the skills, or digital literacies, to make the most of the internet. Equally difficult is the question of how to respond to growing evidence of online risk (Millwood Hargrave and Livingstone, 2009): as ECPAT International's review for the United Nations observes, although many of these risks are hardly new to society, key features of the online environment (its increasingly networked and mobile nature, convenience of distribution, permanence of images, ability to manipulate messages and conditions of anonymity and privacy) are reshaping

children's risk experiences on and offline (Muir, 2005; see also Internet Safety Technical Task Force, 2008).

Just a few years ago, ministries of education promoted online opportunities while ministries of justice worried about online risks. But it is increasingly recognised that, since both research and practice reveal the many interdependencies between opportunities and risks, policies for kids online must be developed in tandem with each other. In developing such policies, two points of consensus have emerged – first, that policy should be generated through multistakeholder dialogue and, moreover, be implemented by multiple stakeholders rather than just by governments; second, that policy should be evidence-based, firmly grounded in and tested against the experiences of children and families across diverse everyday settings. Thus, recent years have seen an explosion in multistakeholder conferences, government consultations and international events all designed to bring together those players who have a stake in how the internet could and should both empower and protect children and young people (on occasion, this has included parents though too rarely has it included children directly). These are not always easy occasions, with many tensions still to be resolved, yet national and international alliances are developing and useful policies are resulting. The demand for evidence-based policy is no easier, research findings quickly become out of date, as the technologies, the institutions that promote and regulate them, and children's own practices all continue to change. Further, the research agenda may not align with the policy agenda, partly because this policy agenda is not always accessible to the research community, partly because researchers seek a complex and contextualised understanding that may not generate straightforward policy implications.

In scoping the array of relevant policies, the EU Kids Online network has identified a number of facets as being central to shaping the conditions of children's engagement with the internet. One is the issue of children's rights[1], including e-inclusion[2] and equality considerations, positive content provision and promoting creative, civic and learning opportunities. Awareness-raising is also important, taking into account parental mediation, as well as education and the role of the internet in schools.[3] Effective industry self-regulation, involving the

development of an array of codes of conduct and institutional practices associated with content classification, age verification and social networking, is to be strongly encouraged, as are efforts towards child welfare and protection, including the operation of law enforcement agencies. Additionally, there is growing interest in programmes to promote media and digital literacy[4] and the regulation of privacy, including the protection of data and treatment of personal information.

To address these and related agendas, this book encompasses a wide range of findings and policies concerned with the online opportunities and risks afforded by the internet. Much of the research conducted thus far has been largely descriptive of children's activities or problems associated with the internet. However, increasingly, researchers seek to go beyond description in order to guide policy more directly. In part, the agenda for this research must be informed by policy makers: they play a crucial role in shaping EC and government actions, and this in turn relies on knowledge of, for example, whether filtering software or parental supervision is more effective in making children safer online, whether girls and boys benefit equally from the internet or whether internet-related policies developed in a country with long-term experience of the internet can be applied or adapted for a country still new to it. In part, however, the research agenda must be independent of policy, drawing more widely on what researchers know of children's lives, educational systems, the risk society or cultural values in parenting and using this both to inform and at times to critique or redirect the policy agenda. Different contributors take different approaches in this book, but we hope that, taken together, the chapters provide an insightful, valuable and multi-dimensional portrait of children's internet use in the first decade following widespread diffusion across Europe.

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Endnotes

[1] The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child asserts children's rights to express their views freely in all matters affecting them (Art. 12), freedom of expression through any medium of the child's choice (Art. 13), freedom of association and peaceful assembly (Art. 15), protection of privacy (Art. 16) 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).

[2] "e-Inclusion means both inclusive ICT and the use of ICT to achieve wider inclusion objectives. It focuses on participation of all individuals and communities in all aspects of the information society." See

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http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/events/ict_riga_2006/doc/declaration_riga.pdf

[3] Developing the latter specifically, the EC's successive Safer Internet programmes have sought to increase the knowledge base to guide the promotion of a safer online environment for children and young people in Europe, initiating a series of actions to minimise online harms (via the *Inhope* network of hotlines) and to maximise awareness of online risk among parents, teachers and other stakeholders, including children (via the *Insafe* network of awareness nodes).

[4] Widely defined as "the ability to access, analyse, evaluate and create messages across a variety of contexts" (Aufderheide, 1993), this is increasingly considered vital for children and adults alike. The EC has formed an Expert Group on Media Literacy, and its enhancement is required by the Audiovisual Media Services Directive (November 2007) as well as supported by the Council of Europe and UNESCO.