

# A children's rights approach to risk and opportunities in a digital world

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## Abstract

The field of children's media engagement has repeatedly sought to rebut or transcend the moral and media panics which accompany each technological innovation. One strategy has been to identify historical continuities in children's experiences as well as the changes over past decades. Another has been to conduct cross-national comparative research to situate media engagement within specific cultural contexts. Taking a more critical stance, a third has been to bring our theory and evidence to policymakers and public fora to challenge popular assumptions and demand change in the interests of children. In this article I reflect on these strategies and show how they have set the scene for the emergence of a children's rights framework for research, policy and practice concerned with the digital environment.

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In media studies, some of us have been researching children's and young people's engagement with the changing media environment for several decades, first hand witnesses to the evolving sociotechnical, political-economic and cultural factors that shape our lives. At times, it has felt like being on a rollercoaster, with technological innovation leading us by the nose into a digital future that has acquired an increasingly dystopian character. At other times, we have found time to reflect on the continuities across the decades, centuries even. The continuities centred on children's agency, creativity and optimism give us the heart to continue our efforts. The continuities that reflect society's persistent marginalisation of children and childhood, and its relentless drive for power and profit, resulting in inequality and injustice, make us determined to stay in the fight. What efforts, what fight? To understand children's mediated lives from multiple perspectives including, importantly, their own. To conduct research that documents the contours of children's lives within both public and elite debates. To bring the evidence of what children and young people need, want and deserve to the policymakers and practitioners who have the power to engineer genuine improvements.

Twenty years ago, a group of us embarked on a path-breaking project to make this work cross-national, by linking researchers across Europe and beyond to compare how the changing media environment was reshaping children's everyday lives and their future life chances (Livingstone and Bovill 2001). Determined to collect high quality empirical evidence that could rebut the latest wave of moral panics surrounding 'new media' (Drotner 1992), we faced three main challenges: to develop an

ecological approach to replace the previous focus on one medium or another; to examine the national/transnational dynamic whereby children live locally but engage with increasingly globalised media flows; to rethink theory and methods to capture a newly interactive and participatory media culture underpinned by networked communications (Drotner 2001). The internet, then largely available to relatively privileged children, epitomised these challenges, being simultaneously transmedia, interactive and globalised.

Looking back at what we wrote then, I am struck by our enthusiasm for the flexible and experimental forms of identity expression in relation to the internet and other media, capitalising on increasingly personalised modes of access. Equally noteworthy were our concerns about digital inequalities, especially for girls, and about threats to public service media and local cultures of childhood. These are valid concerns then and still, although our attention to media contents, genres and preferences has been somewhat displaced, and problematically so, by today's fascination with technologies more than texts and practices more than meanings. Also noteworthy is what was missing from our earlier inquiry – barely a mention of digital literacy or, more strikingly, online risks of harm.

When Kirsten Drotner and I edited *The International Handbook of Children, Media and Culture* (2008) just a few years later, much had already changed. We included chapters on new literacies, child protection regulation, creative and civic cultures of youth, and children's communication rights, among other familiar and emerging topics. At around the same time, the EU Kids Online network gained European Commission funding, framing its agenda in terms of the balance between and, as it turned out, dependencies among online risks and opportunities. All of this, the research found, is mediated by childhood vulnerabilities, inequalities in access, digital literacies, parental mediation strategies, and a host of cultural, socio-technical and political-economic factors (Smahel et al. 2020). This research has indeed helped in the fight against the moral panics focused on such media constructs as “stranger danger,” “screen time” and “internet addiction” (Mascheroni et al. 2010). It has also produced valuable evidence to inform the new policy arenas of child online protection, digital literacy education and internet governance strategies (Livingstone et al. 2018).

While there have been some successes in actually influencing policy, these have come at the cost of skewing research toward a focus on risk and safety, with less effort devoted to advancing an imaginative and ambitious view of the opportunities of digital media for children. So, although some scholars have opened up exciting visions of what the digital world could be for children and young people (e.g. Drotner 2001; Ito et al. 2020; Jenkins et al. 2016; Third et al. 2019), it is still hard to articulate what good looks like and what we should work towards. This is especially apparent when one asks policymakers, teachers or parents for a positive vision of a digital future, for they may struggle to answer. Indeed, the prospect of encouraging children to explore, experiment, network and express themselves online can seem even more risky and open to exploitation today than it did twenty years ago. Hence in many academic and policy publications on digital policy, internet governance or even digital skills, the main mention of children (if there is any mention at all) concerns child protection.

Interestingly, a new paradigm is emerging that rebalances the predominant focus on protection with attention also to provision and participation in a digital world. This is centred on children's rights. A child rights framework insists that rights cannot be ranked, so the right to protection is important but so too are children's civil rights and freedoms, their rights to leisure and play, and to develop to their fullest potential. It prioritises the child's best interests (a judgment that balances rights as they apply to a specific individual or group), demands attention to children's evolving capacity (a contextual judgment of maturity, bearing in mind vulnerabilities), and insists that children's voices should be heard and taken into consideration in matters that affect them. These and other rights are set out in the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child, itself coincidentally as old as the World Wide Web. Both date from 1989, a momentous year in many ways. So bringing them together to ensure children's rights in a digital world seems an obvious task to undertake. Yet it is far from straightforward.

Plenty of researchers are, reasonably enough, sceptical of the universalist rather than contextualist vision of human rights thinking, its focus on the individual rather than the collective as the rights-holder, and its reliance on the State rather than on, say, popular social movements as a force for change (Livingstone 2016). Indeed, contextualist, collectivist, bottom-up approaches are both important and necessary. For example, only through such research can one reveal *how* providing structured opportunities to create digital content can foster the media and information literacies that children need to thrive in today's world (Drotner 2020). In my view, advocating a high-level rights approach directed to governments can complement rather than contradict such work. For there are advantages in translating what we know from working *with* children into the policies required to work *for* children.

In the last few years, I have worked with human rights lawyers as much as I have with media studies researchers, trying to translate our theory and research into authoritative documents that set out the obligations of governments as the primary duty bearers responsible for realising children's rights and, especially, that explain the measures required to realise children's rights online as well as offline (Livingstone et al. 2020; UN Committee on the Rights of the Child 2021). In such work, the voice of the child is not only heard indirectly through research but also directly through consultation (Lansdown 2014). Most recently, in working with the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, my colleagues and I consulted children around the world for their views, concerns and calls for change (Third et al. 2021). They told us of the pleasures and freedoms they enjoy online even though these are often misunderstood or disparaged by adults, their view that it is not only *through* the internet that they now access their rights but that access is itself now a right in their eyes; and their concern that the opportunities they need and the inequalities, injustices and other harms they face online are not given sufficient priority by adult society.

Some of these issues have been researched by the academy, often with nuance and attention to context, experience and equity issues. Yet the available research often speaks less compellingly to policymakers, lawyers and internet governance experts than we would hope. This is in part because we academics often disagree with each other (consider the lively debates on whether use of smart phones is

linked to adverse mental health outcomes for young people, for example). It is also because it is difficult to link our research to the specific decisions on the table (introducing a strict “digital age of consent” for instance, or determining whether and which contents children should be prevented from accessing; or deciding if facial recognition can offer benefits that mitigate its privacy-invasiveness). There are no simple answers here – the academy reserves its right to debate, contest and contextualise its arguments; the world of policy and regulation has different masters, whether laid down by law, determined by technological possibilities or determined by commercial or political will.

Ultimately, researchers of youth and media contribute to a contested domain of deliberation along with many other kinds of actors and interests. We need to sustain each other within our academic field, to clarify our arguments and reflexively reaffirm our values. And we need to act in the wider world to ensure that our voices, and the voices of those we represent, contribute effectively and critically to the difficult issues of the day.

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