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Reframing media effects in terms of children's rights in the digital age

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ABSTRACT

As research on children and the internet grows, this article debates the intellectual and political choices researchers make when they frame their work in terms of effects (often risk-focused) or rights (drawing on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child). I contrast these frameworks in their guiding assumptions, methodology, conception of children and of media, and stance towards evidence-based policy. The case for media effects research, as well as its critique, is well known among researchers of children and media, but the case for a rights-based approach—and its accompanying critique—appears less familiar and so I examine it here in more depth. I conclude with an endorsement of research on—but not necessarily advocacy for—children's rights in the digital age in a way that encompasses the insights both of effects research and of qualitative and participatory research with children.

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Children's lives in the digital age raise new questions about the risks and the opportunities of the changing media and communication environment. In relation to the dominant mass media of the twentieth century, risks and opportunities were primarily examined through the social psychological study of the effects of media exposure on children's attitudes, beliefs and behaviours. Often too, the focus was on the potential media harms of exposure to aggressive, sexual and commercial media contents. Over time, increasingly complex models have identified multiple pathways of media influence along with key mediating factors (notably, parental mediation and children's media literacy) and contextual factors that differentiate children's life chances (Lemish, 2015; Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). Meanwhile, scientific and political critiques and a range of qualitative alternatives have also developed, coexisting with the effects tradition, not always harmoniously. With the advent of digital, networked and social media in the twenty-first century, research on children and media has embraced more diverse disciplinary perspectives. It has also found itself in the public spotlight as policy-makers call upon the evidence base to justify interventions designed to maximise the benefits and minimise the harms associated with heavily mediated childhoods.

So far, so familiar. In this article, I address an important question that has been present but tacit within the pages of this journal, yet which occasions lively discussion in the wider public sphere. That is: can and should we reframe familiar questions of media-related risks and opportunities in terms of children's rights? Relatedly, can we harness the insights of media effects and other research to advance the rights agenda now gaining momentum as children globally gain access to the internet and mobile technologies? Or, are there scientific or political reasons why we should not?

The year 2014 saw the twenty-fifth anniversaries of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC; UN, 1989) and the World Wide Web. This coincidence stimulated a flurry of activity among researchers and policy-makers concerned with the connections between internet governance and children's well-being. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child organised its first Day of General Discussion on digital media. The Council of Europe convened its Committee of Experts to foreground digital rights as its new priority. Workshops on this theme were held at the Internet Governance Forum (a multi-stakeholder forum established by the UN Secretary General in 2006) and at UNICEF-instigated events internationally. In seeking an evidence base to support policy deliberations and recommendations, rights-focused organisations often draw on the kinds of research published by this journal (Freeman & Veerman, 1992). Is that what we collectively would wish? To some, the answer would be a resounding "yes". They (we) might rewrite my opening paragraph explicitly to position research on children and media within a rights framework as follows.

Children's lives in the digital age raise new questions about the so-called 3P's of the CRC—rights to provision, protection and participation—in the changing media and communication environment. Drawing on a mix of legal, sociological, journalistic and child-centred scholarship, these rights have been examined in terms of human rights legislation and its implementation by states, child welfare organisations and, in relation to communication rights, by media regulation and internet governance policies. As children's daily lives become ever more heavily mediated, and as the media themselves simultaneously converge and diversify, researchers along with policy-makers and the public are now debating whether "the digital age" is enhancing or undermining children's rights, with current controversies centring on children's right to privacy online as offline, to information and freedom of expression, and to protection from sexual and aggressive threats variously mediated and amplified by the internet. Meanwhile, critics of this tradition have raised concerns about the normative assumptions and practical consequences of rights-based interventions in children's lives.

Choosing a framework

Some of the articles published in JOCAM's first decade have been by researchers who conceive of their task as refining and extending the media effects model. Some are by those who wish to explore and understand children's perceptions and lifeworld contexts in qualitative terms. Some are by those who also choose to advise policy-makers so as to inform new regulations or initiatives to improve children's lives. None need frame their research or advocacy in terms of children's rights, and yet some of them do. What's at stake in making this choice? As I see it, whether children and media researchers favour an effects framework, a rights-focused one or something else, we should reflect on our political as well as our intellectual commitments. I shall argue most simply for a plurality of approaches, provided there is sustained critical dialogue among their various proponents, though it will also become

clear that for myself I favour a rights-focused approach that, on the one hand, encompasses both effects and qualitative approaches and, on the other, stops short of direct advocacy.

Actually, I do not imagine that JOCAM contributors and readers disagree greatly over the phenomena specified in the CRC as vital to enabling children to develop to their full potential. Considering just those phenomena which bear some relation to media and communication, these include the importance of parenting, health, education and play. Equally obvious is the importance of protection from discrimination, violence, abuse, exploitation or neglect. More abstract but no less important is the value placed on children's identity, dignity, privacy and cultural belonging. Last and perhaps more contentious is the CRC's emphasis on children's agency and, therefore, their access to information, participation, freedom of thought and expression, and freedom of association.

Not only might we agree on the above, we might also agree that the CRC leaves out little of importance to children's well-being—arguably, if children's rights are fulfilled, their well-being must be equally assured. Being media researchers we might further agree that all these phenomena are now affected, even reconfigured in their nature and the conditions that support them, by society's growing reliance on digital, networked and social media. But we might differ on whether all these phenomena (from parenting, protection and play to freedom of information and association) constitute rights. And, further, whether it is the responsibility of researchers not only to investigate but also to advocate for children's rights in policy and practitioner domains?

Being curious as to how researchers were approaching such questions I first searched the archives of JOCAM, finding three times as many papers mentioning effects and twice as many mentioning risks as mentioned rights. Since this might reflect the priorities of editorial policy rather than those of the wider research community, I conducted a search on Google Scholar. Admittedly, this has its limitations—if you search for the key terms “media” or “effects”, the results include medical studies concerned with growing bacteria or health studies on the effects of manipulations unrelated to media influence. After some experimentation, I settled on four terms that illustrate my present concerns well enough: “child”, “internet” (instead of “media”), “risk” (instead of “effects”, though this captures harmful rather than beneficial effects) and “rights”.

Effects-based vs. rights-based frameworks

The search results (conducted on 21 July 2015 using Google Scholar's advanced search function and omitting patents and citations) are shown in Figure 1. This revealed that researchers of children and media indeed differ among themselves in whether to frame their research in terms of risk or rights (or neither).

It will surprise no one that scholarly interest in children and the internet has increased steadily since 2000—the apparent decline since 2010 is likely to be an artefact, since recent publications receive fewer citations than older ones. The large number of results is surely encouraging too, although it may remind readers of this journal that research on children and the internet is of growing interest to researchers in education, social policy, childhood studies, development studies and elsewhere. The lowest line in the figure shows that a combined interest in risks and rights also represents a substantial preoccupation in our field (rising from one-third to one-half of all publications on children and the internet). The two middle lines are most pertinent to our present purposes—they represent the choice of either

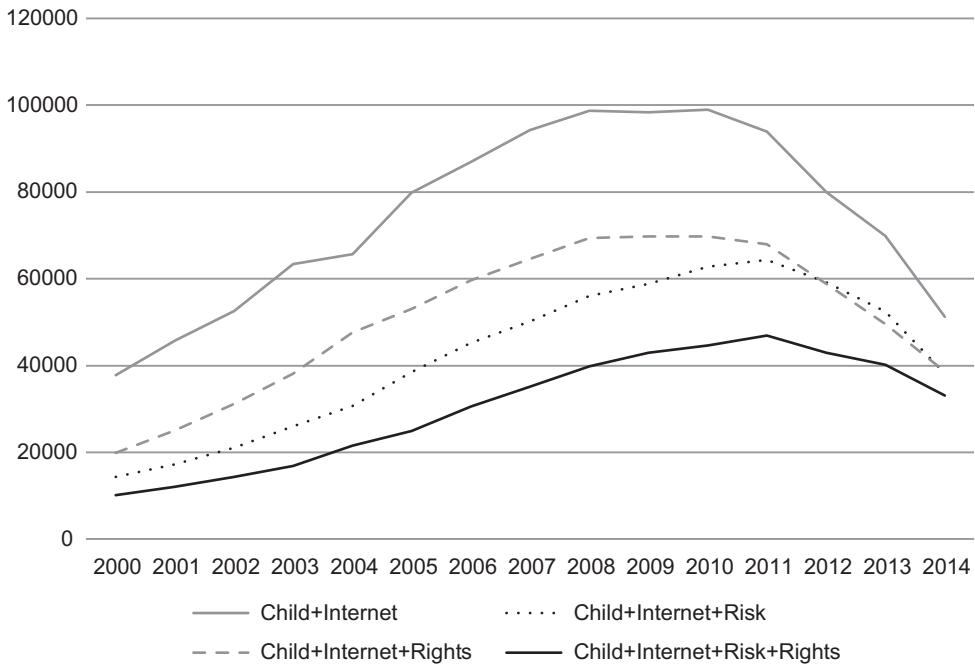


Figure 1. Number of Google Scholar results for key search terms, by year.

Table 1. Comparison of effects and rights frameworks for children’s engagement with media.

	Media effects (harmful or prosocial)	Children’s rights in the digital age
Research tradition	Consequences of media exposure on attitudes, beliefs and behaviour—i.e. an analysis of how things are and why	Inquiry into the conditions that support well-being—i.e. an analysis of where we want to get to and the steps needed given where we are now
Guiding assumptions	General mechanisms of human functioning underlie the observed variation in attitudes, beliefs and behaviour, as mediated by contextual and individual variables	Universal human rights set the standards by which to judge the quality of people’s well-being and then to improve provision or combat threats so as to ensure rights are met without discrimination
Preferred research methodology	Mainly experimental, positioning media as cause and identifying their separate effects	Mixed methods, to analyse how media themselves mediate between everyday contexts and the fulfilment of rights
Conception of the child	As the product of interacting external forces including media influences	As an agent and rights-holder as well as potential victim in a mediated world
Conception of the media	Primarily critical of mass media content and their often biased or negative representations of the world	Both positive and negative, being mainly concerned with interactive and social media (i.e. mediated access to the world)
Approach to evidence-based policy	A descriptive/analytic body of academic evidence, often mined for policy guidance to regulate media content, promote media literacy or reduce media-related harm to children	A normative combination of evidence and argumentation, designed to inform legal or policy guidance to regulate mediated content, contact and conduct, and promote media literacy and children’s rights

risks or rights—and it seems they are fairly well matched. Thus, although many researchers of children and the internet refer to both risk and rights, some refer only to risk and others refer only to rights. Why might this be?

Let me unpack my opening (effects-focused) and rewritten (rights-focused) paragraphs to contrast the assumptions underlying this choice. As Table 1 shows, these frameworks differ in their research tradition, guiding assumptions, preferred methodology, conception of both children and media, and relation to evidence-based policy, reflecting profound differences in the theory of childhood and in social science epistemology. Moreover, these are not simple alternatives, since the rights framework may encompass effects research in its concern to legitimate initiatives that support children's right to protection, while also being more eclectic in scope and more normative in its ambitions. Meanwhile effects research tends to define its scope more narrowly, seeking parsimonious causal explanations that rarely acknowledge the complex real-world conditions that give rise to harms or benefits and, moreover, render these meaningful (Barker & Petley, 2001; Livingstone, 2007).

Given the critiques of effects research, I had supposed it the more controversial of the two, although clearly it has respect of influential policy-makers and research funders. Children's rights, meanwhile, I had assumed to enjoy consensual support, so I was surprised when a colleague challenged me to explain why I was now reframing my own research on children's online risks and opportunities in terms of children's rights in the digital age. How, I wondered, could one question the value of children's rights or, even, be against rights?

Doubts about rights

To understand why some researchers examine children and the internet in relation to risk without reference to rights, we could first acknowledge that a rights framework takes many children and media researchers into new territory—demanding considerable legal expertise as well as knowledge of international development. Then, critics of what Moyn (2011) calls the human rights turn since the 1970s are concerned with the political difficulties that arise specifically from the move from evidence to advocacy. These difficulties are increasingly apparent when research and recommendations developed in the global North are applied with little local adaptation in the global South (Livingstone & Bulger, 2014). As Moyn observes of rights advocates' often-triumphalist narratives, "there is no way to move from announcing formal entitlements to securing real conditions for their enjoyment without acknowledging different possible paths and controversial political choices" (2011, p. 4). The irony is that it is precisely in contexts where legitimate governance is lacking that rights-based research and advocacy are most needed and yet it is in these contexts too that researchers most risk problematic if unintended consequences of their efforts.

For Moyn, then, rights advocacy (unlike research about rights) is not part of the academic's task. Hanson (2014) argues that such advocacy might even be counter-productive, warning of research that obscures critical examination of "the intended and unintended consequences of developing legislation, policies and programmes in the name of children's rights" (p. 443). He calls for a reflexive and deliberative approach "that critically engages with the environments in which children's rights are produced and applied," thus calling for children's rights studies with the stress on "studies" (i.e. stopping short of advocacy).

Consider, by contrast, those who research children, internet and rights without referring to risk. Such researchers often choose to focus on the positive opportunities of the internet, and

this may appear less problematic, even benign in the effort to promote pro-social effects—with calls for more (digitally mediated) opportunities for children to learn or play or express themselves. Yet even greater doubts about rights arise precisely in relation to these ambitious efforts to make the world a better place for children. For who is to decide what is better? From what standpoint and in whose interests?

Berlin's (1958) classic distinction between positive and negative freedoms is helpful here. Protection rights concern negative freedoms (or negative rights). They seek to remove impediments or harms and they receive widespread support. For example, it is uncontroversial that children should be free from sexual or violent abuse and that, today, protection is required online as well as offline. One may question whether it helps children to frame the case against harm as a right, but few are overly concerned either way. But participation rights, which concern positive freedoms (or positive rights) to information and engagement, are far from straightforward. Who are we, critics ask, to assert that children have the right to live not merely without fear or harm but according to a late-modern vision of participatory democracy? The same problem applies to provision rights. The right to education (or play or identity or culture) is easily asserted, yet policies to implement such provision risk imposing a particular Western capitalist vision of what is good for children (Blackburn, 2011).

In favour of rights

While I have tried to be even-handed in this article, concerned more to raise questions for JOCAM readers than foreclose on answers, it will be apparent that I favour the potential of a rights framework. One reason is epistemological. Since all research is value-laden, there being no neutral or objective methodologies or evidence, it is incumbent on all researchers to explicate their normative claims so as to facilitate critical debate. Much of the critique of effects research has precisely been concerned to reveal its implicit values and this in itself has been useful.

A further reason is intellectual. The universal language of the CRC and its wide international support offers an inspiring and ambitious vision for researchers seeking to improve children's well-being. Yet the diverse individual and contextual factors that shape media uses, meanings and consequences appear at odds with a universalist approach. Here, I would argue that it is possible to assert a coherent and comprehensive framework of rights framed at a high level of abstraction while simultaneously recognising the contextual diversity according to which these are rendered meaningful. In terms of the 3P's of the CRC, this means that research should examine the conditions that give rise to children's needs (to guide provision of resources necessary for development to their full potential), second, the array of specific harms they may encounter (to protect children from threats to their dignity, survival and development), and, third, the significance of and particular opportunities for their agency (so that they may participate in matters that affect their well-being and enable them to play an active part in society). Today these contexts, conditions and particularities include the digital, in ways we are only beginning to understand.

A third reason concerns the wider impact and value of research. Reflecting on the past 25 years of the CRC, UNICEF (2014, 40) concluded that its

greatest contribution has been in transforming the public perception of children. Whereas children previously tended to be seen as passive objects of charity, the Convention identified them as independent holders of rights. States parties are no longer just given the option to

pursue policies and practices that are beneficial to children—they are required to do so as a legal obligation.

For example, among those keen to promote media literacy or online safety or parental mediation or fair access to the internet, a rights framework offers political and practical advantages (Staksrud, 2013). Take the case of Article 17 of the CRC, which recognises “the important function performed by the mass media” and encourages provision of diverse information and material of social and cultural benefit to the child (including minorities) to promote children’s well-being and avoidance of “information and material injurious to the child’s well-being.” While the interpretation of Article 17 has been debated (Sacino, 2012), it has stimulated some significant evidence-based policy initiatives, including the 1999 UN Oslo Challenge (UNICEF, 1999), which applied the CRC explicitly to the media, as well as the internationally endorsed Children’s Television Charter (World Summit on Media for Children Foundation, 1995), the triennial World Summit on Media for Children, and respected practitioner publications that seek to harness the media to improve children’s well-being (Kolucki & Lemish, 2011; POSCON, 2014; UNICEF, 2003).

A final reason is political, for the CRC legitimates children’s agency. Although the CRC qualifies children’s participation rights according to their capacity (or maturity) to express themselves, it also insists that decisions that affect children are taken in their best interests. Making children’s voices heard is a task that many researchers of children and media are keen to undertake; those who have tried it know that children can indeed contribute to policy and practice that represents and meets their interests (for example, in internet governance; Nordic Youth Forum, 2012). A case in point is a recent multinational consultation on children’s rights in the digital age—grounded in participatory workshops held with children aged 6–18 living in 16 countries (and speaking eight languages) worldwide. This generated several messages from children to policy-makers (Third, Bellerose, Dawkins, Keltie, & Pihl, 2014). Of these, two reveal children’s conviction of the importance of the internet in their lives. To paraphrase, children stressed that:

- The offline/online binary has been transcended by the diversity of communicative modes and settings that comprise children’s daily lives.
- Wherever or however they live, children’s digital media uses are motivated by widely shared purposes and are mostly positive.

This sets the scene for their more radical argument that digital media have become prerequisites to fulfilling other rights:

- Access to digital media is a fundamental right; lack of access is often children’s biggest problem.
- Digital media are the means through which children exercise rights to information, education and participation; thus they are a route to well-being.
- Literacy (digital, media, social) is fundamental to accessing, understanding and participating in digital media and, thus, to exercising rights in a digital age.

Yet children recognise the complexities of such rights, noting that:

- Risks and opportunities must be balanced, with the former not undermining the latter and with children’s agency to the fore so they can learn to navigate opportunities and gain resilience against risk.

- The dominance of the risk narrative means that, for the present, children find it easier to articulate the risk of harm posed by digital media than the possible benefits.
- In negotiating conflicts between rights, especially to protection vs. participation, children's own perceptions of their internet use and its consequences should be taken into account.

Last, children recognise their own responsibilities in relation to internet governance:

- Children understand that with rights come responsibilities, including being accountable for their own actions, and they want adults to support and trust them in using digital media wisely.
- Children wish to be involved in the policy deliberations that affect them, so they can offer their expertise and engage with processes that affect their rights.

Conclusion

I find much to respect in these messages, and they remind us of the relevance and urgency of including children's voices within our research on children's rights in the digital age. Such research must thereby navigate the relation between universal nature of rights and the growing diversity of contexts within which children engage with the internet worldwide, including recognition of the conditions under which rights conflict. It also must examine the increasing reliance on all things digital, encompassing not only the reconfiguration of the conditions that support or undermine children's rights but also, possibly, the reconfiguration of those rights themselves—as identity or privacy, for example, are themselves transformed in the digital age. Nonetheless, I have argued cautiously in judging the rationale for children's rights studies stronger than the rationale for rights advocacy. Even for researchers who generate evidence designed to advance children's rights, it is important reflexively and critically to examine the consequences of interventions that draw on the research, especially in developing countries where rights-based interventions may harbour colonialist ambitions or be abused by inter-necine power struggles. Further, I have suggested that the rationale for a minimalist rights agenda (that seeks to identify and remove the impediments to well-being) is more straightforward than that for a maximalist agenda (which specifies what the good life is or should be around the world).

No doubt some in our field will continue to regard their primary task as that of understanding children's needs, harm and agency in a mediated world, whether they work within or outside the media effects tradition—and I invite them at least to consider how their work can be used by those concerned with rights. Others will take the further step to advocacy—and I have invited them to anticipate the unintended consequences of their intervention. And yet others will adopt a critical standpoint, independently evaluating research findings and their uses—them I have invited to sustain a lively dialogue with both child rights studies and advocacy as they engage more deeply with the implications and transformations of the digital age. All these approaches are legitimate, of course, provided we collectively remain alert to the complexities of each stance. I hope to see these debates further played out in JOCAM's pages in the years ahead.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Sonia Livingstone is a professor in the Department of Media and Communications at LSE. She is author or editor of 19 books and many academic articles examining the opportunities and risks afforded by digital and online technologies. Research projects have concerned children and young people at home and school; developments in media and digital literacies; audiences, publics and the public sphere more generally; and a recent focus on children's rights in the digital age. www.sonialivingstone.net.

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