## Sonia Livingstone
# Children's internet culture: power, change and vulnerability in twenty-first century childhood

## Book section
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**Children's internet culture:**
**Power, change and vulnerability in twenty-first century childhood**

Sonia Livingstone

**The internet as harbinger of change in children's lives**

The early twenty first century witnessed the emergence of a new form of children's culture. Children's internet culture is, in one sense, a form of children's media culture like any other, yet it now intersects all dimensions of childhood, at least in developed countries. In recent years, children's homes, timetables, relationships, education and entertainment have been rearranged such that everyday activities are conducted on and through the internet. While, traditionally, children were expected to accommodate to adult cultural norms, in relation to the internet they are celebrated for their pioneering exploration – sanctioned or otherwise - of the unfolding digital opportunities for identity, sociality, learning and participation. However, the highly combustible mix of rapid change, youthful experimentation and technological complexity has reignited the moral panics that typically accompany media change, amplifying public uncertainty, parental anxiety and policy attention to the risks accompanying children's internet use.

In the UK, for example, internet adoption has risen with astonishing rapidity from just 13% of 7-16 year olds accessing the internet at home in 1998 to 41% in 2000 and plateauing at 89% in 2010 (ChildWise, 2011). Although the pace and nature of change vary across cultures, in many countries children, parents, teachers, youth work professionals, marketing companies and media providers have all responded energetically by incorporating the internet into their activities with children. In developing countries too, children are gaining internet access, often via a mobile phone rather than a computer, swept along in the apparently relentless global trend towards personalised, portable, networked media ownership (Gasser, Maclay, & Palfrey, 2010; Ito et al, 2005). But as technology becomes differentiated, with ever more devices becoming internet-enabled, content appears increasingly mainstreamed. Notwithstanding public hyperbole regarding the internet's extraordinary breadth, children devote their energies to a few highly corporate sites developed for adults: among UK 7-16 year olds, for example, the top websites are Facebook, YouTube, MSN and Google (Childwise, 2011).

How shall we analyse children's internet culture? A few years ago, Corner (1995, p.5) observed "the powerful capacity of television to draw towards itself and incorporate (in the process, transforming) broader aspects of the culture" and also to project its images, character types, catch-phrases and latest creations to the widest edges of the culture, permeating if not dominating the conduct of other cultural affairs". Today we might say the same of the internet, for these centrifugal and centripetal forces seem to be rewriting the values, practices and ambitions of a generation. Faced with clamorous voices on all sides – from the sceptics (children are still children, there's nothing new under the sun), the anxious (our children are under threat, the good old days are gone) and the optimists (children are leading the way into a bright new dawn, existing institutions must reshape themselves for the digital future) – it is a timely moment to examine children's internet culture critically in relation to the emerging evidence base (Livingstone, 2009).

**Theorising children's internet culture**

Consider the terms that comprise children's internet culture (see Figure 1). Each term requires unpacking to recognise its heterogeneity across contexts. The first and third bring a sizable legacy of academic analysis, while the middle term refers to a phenomenon that changes faster than research is published. The intersections among these terms also invite attention: many scholarly books on 'culture' say little about the internet, many on the 'internet' have no index entry for 'children' and only recently have the sociology of childhood and the psychology of socialisation acknowledged that internet use is already embedded in contemporary childhoods. Any term marks an analytic distinction from its obverse and this helps us to pinpoint some fascinating debates in relation to children's internet culture, as also shown in the figure.

Figure 1 about here

Specifically, *children* are most simply defined as *not adults*, though the nature of the difference varies by age, psychosocial development and socioeconomic context. The costs and benefits of distinguishing child and adult domains online are much contested because, in some respects but not others, children are vulnerable – or, put positively, they merit special consideration to ensure their well-being.

As for the *internet*, early research made a strong distinction between the so-called cyber- or virtual world and the real or *offline world*, a distinction that is no longer tenable. Today's researchers ask whether the online extends, amplifies or transforms phenomena previously occurring offline, opening up a host of questions about the emerging opportunities and risks online, along with policy proposals about how to manage them.

Thirdly, note that the question of *culture*'s dependence on *political economy* has long proved fraught, as has the distinction between elite and quotidian conceptions of culture. There are, therefore, tensions surrounding the cultural versus political economic factors shaping children's internet cultures and, within the cultural factors, there are also tensions over whether to provide content and services for children according to normative ideals or children's expressed preferences.

Spurred in part by public fascination with 'digital natives' (Prensky, 2001; see also Buckingham, 2006; Palfrey & Gasser, 2008; Selwyn, 2009) along with public anxieties over paedophiles, pornography and other online risks, society has found itself asking – and researchers have found themselves investigating – basic questions of change, power and vulnerability, as also shown in Figure 1. Specifically, are online opportunities and risks genuinely unique to the digital age? Who or what is responsible for these changes? What type of special interventions, if any, do children require?

**Cultural vs. political economic dimensions of children's internet *culture***

Children's internet culture is strongly marked by the commercial imperatives now mediating information and communication processes that were, until recently, both more private (i.e., personal) and yet more public (i.e., non-profit). Where once children phoned their friends, visited relatives, kept a photo album, shared music tapes or wrote a diary, today they do this in a commercially-owned online environment, and this also has implications for control over personal information and rights to free expression (Livingstone, 2005). The commercial is linked to the global: for example, national, culturally-appropriate, linguistically-specific social networking sites are being displaced by one global company, *Facebook*, resulting in huge critical attention to *Facebook*'s proprietary protocols for data protection, networking and privacy management (boyd & Hargittai, 2010). Relatedly, searching for information – once an admittedly elite process of visiting a library or consulting an authoritative reference book – is displaced by 'googling' within an advertising-heavy space according to opaque algorithms that may not serve the public interest. Consider too how the traditional staples of childhood – picture books, board games, sports, painting and craft activities as well as more recent mass media – are gaining online versions that may supplement but may also displace the offline original. On the one hand, the online greatly extends children's opportunities (including for intimacy, expression, and participation), but on the other, since content is ever more detached from medium, it also amplifies the success of today's hugely profitable children's content brands (e.g., Disney, Barbie, Nickelodeon, The Simpsons, McDonalds, Harry Potter; Wasko, 2008).

Twentieth century analyses of culture commonly start from Raymond Williams' (1983) dissection of 'culture' as 'one or the two or three most complicated words in the English language'. Two complexities are especially relevant to children's internet culture.

First, culture encompasses both the material (goods, products, media, technologies) and the symbolic (images, narratives, discourses, imaginaries), necessitating the integration of disciplines which compete in their accounts of power. The former tend to emphasise structural determinisms (especially informed by political economic analysis) while the latter tend to emphasise agentic processes of meaning creation (as developed by cultural studies), although both shape children's internet culture (Curran, Morley & Walkerdine, 1996). Second, culture connotes both that which is superior or refined (as in civilised or high culture) and that which is ordinary (as in popular or folk culture). For children, the question of values is particularly fraught since it has long been the responsibility of adult society to provide children with the optimal resources to support their development and yet today's liberal multiculturalism suspects such effort to be paternalistic or elitist, instead seeking to validate children's own activities and interests.

The possibilities opened up by conjoining these theoretical positions are now being explored in the analysis of children's internet culture, whether taking a more political economic (e.g., Grimes & Shade, 2005; Wasko, 2008) or cultural studies position (e.g., Stern, 2008). For example, David Buckingham applies the 'circuit of culture' to reveal how newly profitably but technocratic opportunities for online edutainment are either successfully imposed or to some degree renegotiated by parents and children in building their meaningful domestic learning environments (Buckingham, Scanlon & Sefton-Green, 2001). Ito et al's (2010) ethnographic approach to youthful 'hanging out' online helps to identify whether and when interest-driven or 'geeky' activities harbour the potential for new modes of learning among those alienated by established, hierarchical pedagogy. Henry Jenkins (2003) reveals the lively clashes between transgressive but highly literate young fans and litigious content owners desperate for new ideas that enable some unexpected innovations in cultural forms and experiences.

**The online vs. offline shaping of children's *internet* culture**

Almost uniquely in relation to the internet, children's knowledge is widely recognised as both valuable and exceeding that of adults. Is the internet effecting a reversal of traditional power relations among the generations in a world where adults are digital immigrants, the grandchild teaches the grandparent to skype, the pupil challenges the teacher's knowledge, and even commerce tries to 'get down with the kids'? The largely unanticipated growth of peer-to-peer culture, user-generated content, social networking and remix culture is stamping a youthful imprint on cultural domains hitherto dominated by adults. Is this to the benefit of children or, as also argued of television (Postman, 1992), is something lost as children increasingly participate in the adult world? Children still love to play outside with their friends, learn to swim or kick a ball, snuggle in front of the television with their family and daydream in places hidden from adult eyes.

Teenagers still flirt, worry about their appearance, skimp their homework and get drunk. So how shall we understand the changes wrought by widespread use of the internet?

Early research conceived of virtual or cyber worlds as entirely 'other', disconnected from 'reality' (and so open to radical postmodern speculation about the end of identity, representation, inequality, morality and more). But empirically grounded research soon recognised significant continuities between life online and offline, especially the ways in which the offline shapes the online socially, economically and politically through processes of design, usage or appropriation and regulation (Wellman, 2004; Woolgar, 2002). Does this mean the internet itself is not a player in social change? As already noted, incorporating the internet into the very fabric of society exacerbates processes of globalisation, commercialisation and individualisation in children's lives. Yet it is salutary to reflect that after half a century of mass television, Katz and Scannell (2009) struggled to identify just what difference even half a century of television made, and so it is unsurprising that social science is not ready to pronounce on the consequences of internet use for children, despite the pundits' many claims. Sober assessments of 'what difference the internet has made' to children's social relations (Valkenburg & Peter, 2009), parenting (Clark, 2011), civic participation and educational outcomes (Livingstone, 2012) or personal risks and safety (Wolak, Finkelhor & Mitchell, 2008) tend to claim contingent and modest effects only.

But, just as media studies has long argued that television is far from a neutral window on the world, the same should be argued for the internet. Its characteristics, its anticipation of its users, its design features (for example, shaping privacy, authenticity, safety or networking) are, on the one hand shaped by the institutions that developed them but also they mediate the relations among people in particular ways. To recognise, critique and intervene in the power of media representations, scholars have long sought to promote media literacy to the wider public (especially through media education for children). Now, too, internet scholars are promoting digital literacy alongside their critical scholarship (Frau-Meigs & Torrent, 2009). For notwithstanding the excitement about children's digital expertise, the online environment is far more complex – sophisticated, yet treacherous – than most people can competently navigate, evaluate or contribute to, and a critical engagement with the online environment is therefore crucial for today's citizens, young and old.

Adapting boyd's (2008) analysis, we can recognize the internet's distinctive communicative affordances as including *persistence* (content is recorded, always visible, difficult to erase), *scalability* (simple interactions can be rapidly made available to vast audiences), *asynchronicity* (enabling interaction management), *replicability* (permitting seamless editing and manipulation of content), *searchability* (both extending and permitting specialization within networks of information and relationships), *audience uncertainty* (regarding who is listening and who is speaking) and *collapsed contexts* (absence of conventional boundaries for social situations, a key consequence being

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public/private blurring). These features pinpoint how the internet's affordances mediate children's experiences. Telling cases include: the extraordinary focus among youth on self-presentation and relationship management newly enabled by social networking sites' exploitation of persistence, scalability, asynchronicity and replicability; the deepened pain of bullying once extended into cyberbullying and so now, too, persistent, scalable and visible to uncertain audiences across home and school contexts; the unprecedented potential for children with niche interests (whether chess or photography, a diasporic identity or a desire for self-harm) to harness the 'long tail' of the internet (Anderson, 2006) via the features of searchability and self/audience anonymity. In short, the possibility is not merely that children's lives are increasingly filled by online activities, but that the main aspects of their lives (identity, pleasure, pain, relationships) are altered by the fact of their digital, networked, online mediation.

**The specificity of childhood (vs. wider adult society) in *children*'s internet culture**

Children's online opportunities and risks depend substantially on their familial, socio-economic and national contexts, making for considerable heterogeneity in children's internet cultures, even though the power of the global brands provides a counter-veiling homogenising effect. The EU Kids Online project proposes the metaphor of the ladder to capture the commonalities within this diversity (Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig, & Ólafsson, 2011). Its survey of 9-16 year olds' online activities found that when they first use the internet, children tend to look up information for school and play games alone or against the computer; most also check out YouTube or similar sites for watching video clips. These activities involve engaging with mass mediated content, and young children do little more than this. Older children take the further step of peer to peer communication (social networking, instant messaging, email), and teenagers more than younger children do more complex interactive activities such as playing games with others online, downloading content and sharing it via webcam or message boards, for instance. The most advanced and creative step – file-sharing, blogging, visiting virtual worlds – is reached by only a minority of teenagers. Thus despite the hype, it seems that few children undertake new kinds of creative, fan-based or remixed 'produsage' (Bruns, 2008) or contribute to civic activism (Dahlgren & Olsson, 2007). What does progression up the ladder depend upon? The importance of age reveals how children's motivations and interests matter, as do their digital skills and literacies. Some variation by country can be attributed to contextual factors such as the degree of internet adoption, the level of national investment in digital resources for education, or the size of the language community (that provides online content for children). Most within-country variation in amount of use is attributable to socioeconomic status, though once children gain access, age differences matter more, with gender adding some nuances through the relative preference for games (boys) or communication (girls) (McQuillan & D'Haenens, 2009).

In relation to online opportunities, there is a policy debate over whether children should share in the online resources available to adults or whether they require – and have a right to – specific, age-appropriate provision (for whom, funded by whom, to what end?). But in the online world as in the offline world, opportunities go hand in hand with the risk of harm - because the internet has been designed in this way (for example, searching for 'teen sex' produces useful health information and violent pornography), because the internet is populated not only by children but also by those who would harm them, and because children use their maturing skills and inventiveness to take risks, as they must if they are to develop resilience. In relation to risks as for opportunities, age is crucial, far more than either gender or socioeconomic status.

Figure 2shows findings from EU Kids Online for the proportion of children by age who have encountered online opportunities, risks or – a crucial mediator between the two, risky opportunities (such as looking for new friends online, adding contacts that one hasn't met face to face, pretending to be a different kind of person online, disclosing personal information to 'strangers'). From this we learn that children's internet cultures are (i) heavily differentiated by age, (ii) that risks and opportunities are positively correlated, so that seeking to reduce the former may jeopardise the latter too, (iii) and that risky opportunities – 'playing with fire', perhaps – are part of the overall experience. However, accounting for experiences of risk and, even more so, of harm to children requires consideration of a further set of factors that differentiate among children, namely the psychological and social sources of vulnerability in children's lives. For as research confirms, children who suffer particular problems or difficulties in their lives are also more vulnerable to online risk of harm (Livingstone, Haddon, & Görzig, 2012), and identifying ways of redesigning the internet to enhance safety without costing more resilient children their rightful opportunities is proving an interesting policy-relevant challenge (Wolak, Finkelhor, & Mitchell 2008).

Figure 2 about here

**Conclusion**

It may be argued that children's internet culture differs little from any other area of consumer culture. As is the case for late modernity writ large, it is shaped by the fundamental processes of social change – globalisation, commercialisation, individualisation and mediatisation (Krotz, 2007). Thus children's internet culture is embedded within the global flows of people, technology and finance. It is increasingly subject to a market logic distinct from the organic needs of children and childhood. It is ever more focused on the child as individual divorced from community structures and affiliations (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). And it is thoroughly mediatized – for

beyond extending children's culture to the internet, the affordances of the online environment are also reshaping children's culture both online and offline.

But as we have seen, this analysis underplays the contribution of the everyday activities of children themselves, for which we must mobilise a conception of culture that emphasises ordinary activities 'under the radar' of both culturally normative and political economic perspectives. Indeed, a closer examination of children's internet culture reveals counter processes that qualify grand claims about childhood engulfed by increasing commercialisation and globalisation – the embedded nature of local meanings, the agency and creativity of children's activities and meaning-making online and offline, the emergence of new publics and non-commercial spaces, the elaboration of ever widening social and civic networks, and even a renewed appreciation for face to face interaction (Turkle, 2011). In short, a more satisfactory analysis of children's internet culture recognises (but does not overstate) children's agency in contributing to their culture as well as the power of social structures beyond media and market (family, school, religion, tradition, politics).

Scholarly analysis of children's internet culture has tended to illustrate, complicate and contextualise but not entirely transcend the oppositional thinking (optimistic versus pessimistic, virtual versus real, opportunities versus risks) that characterised the early years of internet studies (Wellman, 2004). In introducing our *International Handbook of Children, Media and Culture* (2008), Kirsten Drotner and I argued for three principles to guide the analysis of children's media cultures:

- Research must transcend technologically-determinist discourses of celebration and anxiety and develop multi-disciplinary, empirically-grounded accounts of the complex relations among children, media and culture;
- Media-specific research should be contextualized within a comparative account of children and young people's life worlds, recognising the multiple influences upon children and their diverse positioning in relation to these influences;
- Research should include child-centred methods, seeking to recognise children's own agency, experiences, perspectives and priorities rather than imposing an adult agenda or adult values.

These surely provide a good guide for children's internet cultures also. Already, no aspect of children's lives is entirely untouched by the internet, yet society's exploitation of the internet is still unfolding. The public and policy spotlight will remain on children's internet cultures for some time and, given the many difficulties children face in their lives, it seems incumbent on researchers not only to track their internet use but also to use this knowledge in the wider effort to optimise the benefits.

SEE ALSO in this volume chapter by Alper and chapter by O'Neill.

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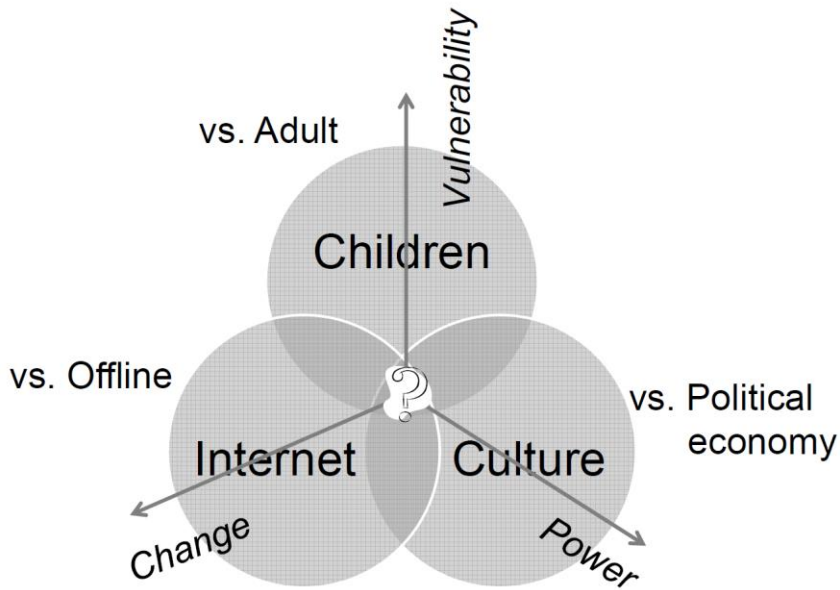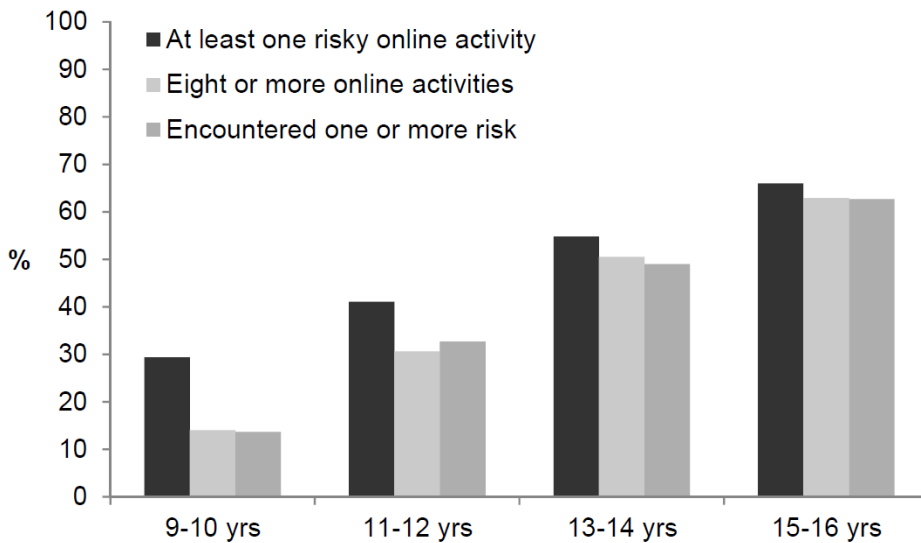**Figure 1: Intersecting concerns regarding children's internet culture**



**Figure 2: Children's online activities and risks, by age**



*Base:* 25,142 9-16 year olds in 25 European countries, surveyed in 2010.
*Source:* EU Kids Online, see www.eukidsonline.net