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Growing up Online: Some Myths and Facts About Children's Digital Lives in Ireland Today

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Abstract

Digital technologies and the widespread adoption of the internet have given rise to an unprecedented social transformation that is having a profound impact on childhood today. While debate continues on the precise nature of its effects and the extent to which we can refer to a distinctly different 'digital' generation, there is growing consensus that the centrality of new modes of sociality and new ways of communicating online in children's lives today are shaping new contours of risk and of opportunity.   This paper examines some of the myths and the facts about children's use of the internet in Ireland today as revealed in the EU Kids Online survey of children's use of the internet across Europe. It also explores ideas of media ecology and how they may help us understand the opportunities, challenges and risks of growing up in today's digital environment. Does the concept of media education that evolved in the era of Telstar have the same relevance for the children of Facebook? What are the implications for policy makers today and how can we ensure that the information society remains an inclusive and positive phenomenon in the lives of children?

Bio

Brian O'Neill is Head of Research in the College of Arts & Tourism at Dublin Institute of Technology, Ireland. His research interests include media literacy research, policymaking and public interest issues in media and communications. He has written widely on media technologies and media literacy for academic journals as well as for organizations such as UNICEF and the Broadcasting Commission of Ireland. Brian O'Neill is a member of the Management Group of EU Kids Online II (*EU Safer Internet Programme*) and leads the work package on Policy and Recommendations. He is also a founder member of the International Media Literacy Research Forum, convened by Ofcom. He is on the Management Committee of COST Action ISO906 - *Transforming Audiences, Transforming Societies* and Vice Chair of the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR) Audience Section.

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Introduction

My topic, in addressing the theme of 'changing childhoods' at this year's Summer School, concerns mediated childhoods and the online environment in which children grow up to become citizens (or 'netizens'). The media, it seems, are inescapable for all of us but particularly so for children, for reasons to be explored further in this talk.

Media have always been an important and valued part of childhood. Even when their influence is questioned, the learning, discovery and enrichment of experience through diverse channels of information, entertainment and communication is something that we would all wish to support as part of a balanced and normal childhood. But with the development of digital and internet technologies, and the rapid and wide ranging changes that seem to flow from them, there seem to be a whole new set of questions to look at from the point of view of childhood. Where once we might have been concerned to look at, say, how too much television viewing might affect children's play or healthy development, or how exposure to certain kinds of content could have negative effects on children's behavior, now engagement with the media seems to be so pervasive and all-embracing that it is constitutive of the very process of growing up itself. It is not, in other words, about understanding what the impact of the internet or the media is on children's lives but on recognizing how it is part of their daily lived experience, exploring what it means and examining its implications from the perspective of child wellbeing.

Broadly, what I am arguing in the following is that today's media constitute an environment in which children grow up and develop. It offers them tools, resources and affordances that may assist or hinder them, much as any other

environmental factor, and which require appropriate management to ensure the best outcomes.

For this lecture, I would like to address three main areas within what is a sometimes fraught and contested field.

Firstly, I discuss the notion of a 'digital generation' – using the terminology of the digital native, the 'netizen' and its variants – to characterise a new millennial experience that sets this media age apart. This is a predominantly celebratory discourse that stands in contrast to a received tradition of distrust and suspicion when it comes to research on the topic of media and childhood. However, there is equally a countervailing cautionary perspective, often fueled by public anxiety about 'digital downsides' that needs to be considered. Both of this play out in the policy arena and need to be carefully balanced and evaluated on the basis of evidence rather than rhetoric.

Secondly, I present research findings from Ireland about children's and young people's experience of online technologies. On a topic where there has been a fair share of sensationalist media coverage, can we separate facts from the myths about the use, abuse or extent of the embeddedness of the internet in children's lives? What do we know about young people's use of digital technologies and how does this compare on an international level?

Finally, drawing on ongoing debates about public policy towards the internet, as well as looking at the distinctive features of children's online experience in Ireland, what are the implications for public policy? How are we responding and what are the key areas of current priority and future concern regarding the internet and media technologies in children's lives?

A changing media landscape
That media are undergoing substantial change is a truism that needs little

repeating. The convergence of telecommunications and electronic forms of distribution – long predicted – is now a reality for all industries. The key drivers of digitalization, faster internet access and increasingly mobile communications with more context and location aware capabilities are revolutionizing media and information services and the way they are accessed by all consumers.

But the changes are not just technological.

The commercial launch of the World Wide Web in 1995 brought about a fundamental revision of the relationship between the world of professional media and their publics. The implications of this revolution have not always been immediately apparent and have played out somewhat differently and at a different pace within each of the distinct media of radio, television, cinema and music.

But as the following clip shows the nature and scale of change across the media landscape is dramatic, unpredictable, sometimes paradoxical, and unfinished.

This clip is one of a series of viral videos which try to inspire awe at what has unfolded in an incredibly short space of time. For media researchers, the opportunity to study the diffusion of such radically disruptive technologies such as the internet is exceptional and gauging how far reaching their impact may be one of the great research challenges.

But one of the central features of this transformational paradigm is the way in which the user/audience member/consumer is now the centre of the communications process. *Time* magazine famously named "You" as their Person of the Year in 2006 in recognition of the growth of user-generated content on the internet. Web 2.0 is the popular name for the rise of a phenomenon that features to a much greater extent than ever before the power of the internet to connect people and to use that potential in productive and creative ways.

The revisioning of the internet around Web 2.0 represented a fundamental shift in the hierarchy of relationships within the traditional media worlds. According to the influential O'Reilly consultants, Web 2.0 has the following features:

a) *the web becomes a platform*, allowing applications to be delivered and used through a web browser

b) *an architecture of participation*: systems are designed to encourage and support users in contributing to them

c) *data consumption and remixing*: mash-ups, where content is often sourced from third parties via an API

d) *a rich, interactive, user-friendly interface* based on user needs and wants with personalisation as the key in the use of online media.

e) *elements of social networking* whereby social elements and interaction is used to support engagement and user contribution.

Social media are, of course, the most distinctive aspect of the Web 2.0 phenomenon. The rapid growth in social media applications is phenomenal by any standards and unprecedented in any previous form of media development. Comparisons with growth in other media forms are often quoted and worth repeating: where it took radio 38 years and television 13 years to reach a total audience of 50 million users, the internet reached that in 4 years but Facebook gathered 200 million users in less than a year.

Changing Media, Changing Childhoods

Not surprisingly, such far reaching changes in the media world find their way also into children's lives and while children of different ages and circumstances may experience media differently, no child is, as it were, untouched by today's media revolution. A key point here is that children everywhere are among the early adopters and are often in the vanguard of new media developments, particularly so in the case of social media (Rice, 2006). Media has always occupied a special role in children's lives but the enthusiasm with which young people have

embraced new media technologies allied to the rapidity of change in the online space now creates a new chapter in the long tradition of research on media and childhood.

For Sonia Livingstone (2009), children's engagement with the online world stands as an expression of and highlights many of the deep-seated changes in post-traditional family forms that now characterize childhood. Contemporary childhood marks a shift in the received and traditional relationships between adulthood and children and exhibits features such as:

- A 'prolonging of childhood' and an unprecedented period of extended youth, marked by extension of formal education, pushing back the start of education, and increasing the time spent at home, financially dependent on parents for longer.
- Increasing incursions of the outside, public world into the formerly private, domestic world. This includes the immersion in a vast consumer and leisure culture – filling the gap between childhood and adulthood. Growing independence and autonomy in realms of leisure, consumption and identity in conflict with dependence.
- What Giddens refers to as a de-traditionalisation of the family in late modernity – 'a democratization of the private sphere, a historical transformation of intimacy in which children .. are gaining the right to determine and regulate the conditions of their association' (Giddens, 1993). Thus, in contrast to the traditional notion of the family based on status hierarchies and its associated values, today's democratic family prizes authenticity, trust, reciprocity and role flexibility (Livingstone, 2009).
- Challenges for children as well as parents in this reconfiguration of the normative nuclear family model, one in which a biographical project of identity construction places a heavy burden on them against a background a loss of many traditional sources of support again referred to by Giddens as "A reflexive project of the self ..consisting in the sustaining of coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narratives (Giddens, 1991).

It is in this context that the media and even more so new media have filled a role for children, supported by parents and care givers, anxious to provide a safe and secure environment for their educational, developmental, identity and leisure needs within increasingly self-contained and regulated domestic spaces.

Digital natives

For children born since the development of the world wide web, these features have been particularly marked and the distinctions between the worlds of traditional media and the new media culture all the more acute.

For this generation, framed by an experience that is palpably different to earlier experiences of childhood (though recognising the variability of this experience), special consideration has been given to the extent of providing new labels capturing the sense that all is somehow changed.

Mark Prensky (2001) coined the term 'digital native' at a relatively early stage but it has been variously rephrased in popular and academic discourse by a host of authors including the 'net generation' (Tapscott, 1999), digital kids, N-geners-, 'screenagers' (Rushkoff, 1996), in what David Buckingham called 'a new generational rhetoric' (Buckingham, 1998) that set out at once to challenge public anxieties but also to promote in an often uncritical way a celebration of everything new about the internet and its infinite possibilities.

This is a discourse that was much in evidence in the early years of the Internet, and the inflated dot.com era, when impossible expectations were accompanied by equally unrealistic valuations leading to an inevitable crash. But it is a language that has persisted and in fact as children of the digital age come of age – as it were – and that as technologies become more widely diffused, somehow being 'born digital' becomes both persuasive and real.

So, for example, John Palfrey and Urs Gasser of the Berkmann Centre at Harvard, declare that "Digital Natives" – children who were born into and raised in the digital world – are coming of age, will reshape the world in their image. Our economy, our politics, our culture, they argue, and even the shape of our family life, they argue, will be forever transformed (Palfrey & Gasser, 2010). This necessitates, they argue, a fundamental review of widely-held perceptions and policy towards such issues as privacy and creativity, social relationships, identity building, and political activism.

The authors have recently commissioned interns at the Berkman Centre to produce short videos inspired by chapters in the book *Born Digital*. This is the short video essay by digital natives on the theme of 'creators'.

It may seem an idealized portrait but both it and the chapter that inspires it are self-portraits of an increasingly assertive and confident 'born digital' culture.

A legacy of concern

In some ways, this 'new generational rhetoric' is to be welcomed as an antidote to the prevailing tradition of distrust, caution and suspicion that has often attended the role and influence of media on childhood.

This tradition, a legacy of concern regarding the effects of media on childhood is one which, according to Wartella and Reeves (1985), developed independently of the broader media effects tradition and arose in the context of public anxiety about each medium as it was introduced, a pattern that was repeated successively with each new innovation. Thus, between 1900 and 1960, for example, there were three identifiable epochs of research, one associated with each of the electronic media, film, radio, and TV.

So, for example, the so-called Payne Fund Studies carried out between 1929 and 1932 were some of the first examples of systematic audience research

carried with the specific purpose of assessing the effects on children's information acquisition, attitude change, emotion stimulation, health, and behavior. The resulting public debates led to calls for greater vigilance on the part of parents, more responsibility by industry and calls for government to regulate the content produced by the film industry (E. A. Wartella & Jennings, 2000).

Later, researchers turned their attention to radio and similarly examined not just the enthusiastic way the medium was embraced by young people but different effects might be observed for different children according to age, gender or developmental stage. While radio was always more regulated than the film industry, again research placed pressure on the broadcast sector to be responsive to family listening contexts, particularly once commercial pressure was brought to bear.

The introduction and rapid growth of television as a mass medium proved the most controversial with congressional hearings as early as 1955 on the supposed negative effects of television on juvenile behavior, delinquency, increases in crime and violence.

McLuhan and Media Literacy

Standing in marked contrast to this dominant and negative discourse about television in the 1960s was the work of Marshall McLuhan. As James Carey notes, McLuhan was an unusual and refreshing perspective on a medium that was then 'an object of universal contempt (and secret viewing) among the educated classes. No one with intellectual pretensions took it seriously except as further evidence of the decline of high culture and Western civilization' (Carey, 1998). McLuhan, later to become the adopted patron saint of *Wired* magazine, and found a whole new audience in the process, is in fact also author of that most important of concepts in current media policy discussion, that of media literacy.

One of his chief work's *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964) had its origins in a commission by the National Association of Educational Broadcasters and proposed a radical overhaul of the curriculum to embrace new media as the primary platform of engaging student learning in the twentieth century. Despite many misgivings about his work, there remains something important in his overall project of historicizing and aestheticizing media communication that has found resonance within new media culture and provides a valuable reminder of its potential for innovative learning and social engagement.

The Policy Agenda

Is it the case then, as some would argue, that this pattern is being repeated with new media, the internet and digital technologies. There are two very different schools of thought on this. On the one hand, there is, as we have seen, a wide ranging techno-utopian discourse about the internet and all that it offers children and young people, often expressed in a romantic democratic and libertarian language that celebrates the freedoms which this technology offers. But then, never far away, is another language which is fearful and suspicious of the implications and the potential for exploitation and harm that may come from the enhanced access that internet technologies provide.

Both are very much represented in policy agendas and feature variously in public perceptions, and through media representation and debate. If the former is represented primarily in the 'new generational rhetoric' described by Buckingham, and promoted though public policies towards enhancing information society opportunities for children, the latter has, arguably, had more purchase in popular media representations and to a certain extent in policy interventions regarding safety and security online. Thus, for example, just as educationalists and activists were in the late 1990s promoting the concept of e-inclusion for all, overcoming digital divides, so also was the agenda – for example illustrated by

Europe's Safer Internet Action Plan – of combatting illegal and harmful uses of the internet, minimizing its downsides and threatening regulation and greater restriction of the kinds of services that could be offered.

These seem like incompatible discourses and do indeed, for the most part, come from different camps: civil libertarians promoting free speech and communication rights on the one hand, and on the other child welfare organisations, and other civil society groups concerned about child protection issues and the potential for harm in the online world (Powell, Hills, & Nash, 2010).

And when we look at some of the objectives of the European Commission's Safer Internet Programme – we can see how the continuity with this legacy of concern continues to be represented albeit located within the context of the overarching *Digital Agenda for Europe.*

EU Kids Online
Turning now to research which sheds light on the world of digital lives, I present here findings from the EU Kids Online survey of children and young people's use of the internet.

EU Kids Online is a large multinational thematic network that seeks to understand the complex nature of the changing risk context for children and their families, so as to inform policy makers, educators and the public about emerging online trends and possible solutions. In 2010 EU Kids Online II undertook a survey of 25,000 children and their families across Europe to examine children's and parents' experiences and practices regarding use, risk and safety online. The aim was to produce a rigorous, cross-nationally comparative quantitative evidence base regarding internet use across Europe.

1000 interviews were carried out in each of 25 countries – most but not all members of the European Union. It is the largest project of its kind ever taken in

Europe and adds to international knowledge in a field that to date has been dominated by research from the United States.

The model used to develop this analysis is a child-centred one that highlights children's experiences, perspectives and actions, contextualising these within concentric circles of structuring social influences – family, community and culture (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This recognises the complex interdependencies between the institutions and structures that enable or constrain children's opportunities and their own agency in choosing how to act online while negotiating these possibilities and constraints (Bakardjieva, 2005). Following Bronfenbrenner, the working model operates at three levels – the level of the individual user, that of social mediations (particularly, home, school and peer culture) and, third, the national or cultural level (where macro factors such as socio-economic inequality, educational policy or technological development play a role).

The survey operationalised this model in interviews by scoping children's internet use (amount, device and location of use), following this with a mapping of their online activities (opportunities taken up, skills developed and risky practices engaged in) before focusing in on the risks they may have encountered or any harm that may have resulted. In the *EU Kids Online* project, the factors hypothesised to increase risk of harm include encountering pornography, bullying/being bullied, sending/receiving sexual messages (or 'sexting') and going to offline meetings with people first met online. Also examined are risks linked to negative user-generated content and personal data misuse. As the shaded funnel illustrates, the focus of the project encompasses just part of the larger picture of children's internet use – not directly focusing for instance on the many benefits of using the internet. Most European children tread a path from use through to a range of activities online, but only a subset of these encounter risk factors, and a smaller subset, as a consequence, experience harm. The report of experiences from the sample as a whole provide a valuable insight into

the practices, attitudes and experiences of digital natives (aged 9 to 16) and provide the first fully comparable European dataset of uses, activities and safety online.

Facts and myths about digital natives in Ireland
In the following, I present a snapshot of some of the findings from the Irish survey, the full findings of which were published on Safer Internet Day in 2011 (O'Neill, Grehan, & Ólafsson, 2011). For the purposes of this presentation, I set out to challenge some of our assumptions about digital natives in Ireland Myth-building is intrinsically a part of the new generational rhetoric but is unhelpful in understanding the real dilemmas faced by children and their families or developing policies to support them.

The first myth is that digital natives are tech-savvy youthful experts. It is a widely held assumption that nothing comes easier to today's generation than navigating the world of the internet, negotiating complex technology and acquiring with apparent ease new technical skills, leaving parents and older adults far behind.

There is always some truth behind the myth and what the findings show that is that children in Ireland enjoy a lot of access to the internet. The main kind of access is still the home PC and most children who go online in a public room at home (87%), more so than at school of college (66%) or at a friend's house (64%). But going online is no longer confined to using a computer and a variety of devices can offer internet access (just over 3 on average are used by children).
Mobile access – much more privatised than a shared PC - is particularly prominent: The use of mobile phones for internet use is above the European average (46% vs. 31%), as is going online via gaming consoles (44% vs. 26%). Over a quarter go online using a personal laptop (28%) and 23% use a handheld or portable device (e.g. iPod Touch, iPhone or Blackberry) reflecting again the

growing importance of mobile devices.

For over of half of Irish children, internet use is deeply embedded with 53% going online everyday. Then, there   is the group who use it once or twice a week (36%). Combined, this is 89% of all children who go online at all. Nearly three quarters (73%) of 15-16 year olds go online every day.

The average time spent online by 9-16 year olds is just over one hour per day (61 minutes). The amount of time spent online is most marked by age. 9-10 year olds spend 45 minutes online each day rising to nearly double that amount or 80 minutes for 15-16 year olds.

This data gives an impression of fairly embedded online activity supporting the 'digital natives' thesis. However, note also that the average time spent online for children in Ireland is below the European average (61 minutes vs. 88 minutes) and well below the UK average of 99 minutes (and over two hours per day for children aged 13 and over). Overall, it may be said that children in Ireland lag somewhat behind their European counterparts in terms of embeddedness of internet use in everyday life. Both in terms of daily use and time spent online, Ireland lies below European norms. It is likely that as internet penetration grows, children will spend more time online and conform to those northern European countries where daily ubiquitous internet use is well established.

Challenging the 'youthful experts' label also are findings in relation to digital skills. Children were asked about 8 specific skills related to internet safety but which represent a subset of more general digital literacy skills. On average, children say they have four of the eight skills asked about. Most 11-16year olds can bookmark a website (66%), block messages from someone they do not wish to be in contact with (64%) or find safety information online (64%).

Only 42% say they compare websites to judge the quality of information. This is

substantially below the European average of 61%. Less than a quarter can change filter preference settings (21%).

Across all ages, children in Ireland are below their European equivalents in this basic area of media literacy. The average number of skills claimed is slightly below the European average of 4.2 and at the lower end of the European spectrum, i.e. 7th lowest of EU25.

Another measure of skills was a self-efficacy indicator whereby children were asked how true it is for them that "I know more about the internet than my parents". Findings break down roughly into three groups, where one third are very confident about using the internet compared to their parents, another third say 'it is a bit true' and a further third are not confident. Age is a factor here and under 12 year olds, who use the internet in substantial numbers, are in general much less confident.

Overall, while the majority of children are able to manage the specific skills asked about in the survey, and over one third are very confident about their internet use, there is plenty of scope for developing skills and confidence, particularly among younger users. The lower levels of skills and confidence claimed by younger children are especially of concern, given that they are increasingly using the internet in substantial numbers.

Myth#2 *Digital natives embrace lots of online opportunities*

Secondly, we might assume that digital natives are involved in all the different kinds of opportunities offered by the internet ranging from basic information seeking to constant communication and sharing of user generated content.

We asked about 17 different activities that cover the range of activities from the relatively unskilled to the most advanced and include categories of *content*,

contact and *conduct* activities.

'Watching video clips' – a content activity - and 'playing games alone' – a computer-based rather than an internet activity– are the most popular at 76%.

Further contact and content activities are next and include 'Social networking' and 'schoolwork' as the next popular at 58%.

Other *Contact* activities such as communicating online (emailing – 41%; instant messaging - 41%) are the next most important activities, particularly for teenagers, though notably below the European averages of 62% and 61% respectively.

Conduct activities, those involving more creative or technical skills, such as creating and sharing content, writing a blog, participating in virtual worlds, are the least used.

In the full European survey, the range of online activities has been conceptualized as a ladder of opportunities, a graduated series of steps which through time and the building of expertise children ascend and undertake activities of increasing sophistication and complexity (Livingstone & Helsper, 2007).

In Ireland, the average number of activities for children in Ireland is just 5 of the 17 asked about, below the European average of 7 (rising to 9 and 10 for teenage boys and girls respectively.

Ireland's positioning within a European map of opportunities (and risks given that increased opportunities also mean more risks) is presented here in a scatterplot below the European averages for both and well below the majority of countries which exhibit greater levels of use, of ranges of online activities as well as

experience of risks.

Myth #3 Digital natives are mostly teenagers

The third assumption that needs to be challenged that internet activity is predominantly a teenage phenomenon.

The average age of first internet use for children in Ireland is 9. Overall the age of first use is dropping in Europe. The average is 9 but in the UK and in Scandinavian countries, the average age is 7 to 8. As the Figure shows, this is declining in Ireland also. Note that 9-10 year olds were 7 when they first used the internet and now spend on average 45 minutes per day online.

Social networking is perhaps the most surprising aspect of younger children's internet use is arguably the fastest growing online activity among young people. Overall, 71% of teenage boys and 86% of teenage girls use social networking sites but sizeable numbers of younger children under the age of 12 also use social networking sites (32% of boys and 41% of girls), despite the fact that for many services the minimum age is 13. Facebook is the most popular SNS and 21% of 9-12 year olds (and nearly half – 47% of 13-16 year olds) said they have their own profile on the service.

Why this may matter is that it is younger users who have the least skills and experience to deal with privacy settings, preferences and so on. 14% of 9-12 year olds say their Facebook profile is public so that anyone can see it (compared to just 8% of 13-16 year olds). Other possible areas of risk include:
- numbers of contacts and here 8% of 9-12 year olds say they have 100+ contacts on their profile
- contact with people online that they have no other connection with outside the internet which 25% of 9-12 year olds is the case
- and whether children display their address, phone or school on their SNS profile. Here 6% give either an address or phone number, and 11% list

their school. In the case of teenagers this rises to 58% for giving their school, reflecting the community network aspect for this age group.

It should be noted also that nearly 40% of parents of the children surveyed say their child is not permitted to have an SNS profile. A fifth (20%) say their child can only use SNS with supervision. 42% say they do not restrict their child's use of SNS.

Myth #4 Digital natives are very positive about the internet

Do we have any reason to think other than that digital natives are very positive about their experience of the internet?

Children were asked for their assessment of the quality of online content and if there things on the internet that were good for children their age. Four in ten (44%) 9-16 year olds are very satisfied with the online provision available to them.

Younger children are less satisfied by online provision – only 39% of 9-10 year olds and 37% of 11-12 year olds say there are lots of good things for children of their age to do online. Teenagers, by contrast, are the most satisfied (55%), presumably because they share in wider public provision.

By contrast, 56% of younger children in the UK are very satisfied despite the fact that children in both countries share the widest range of English-languages resources.

A different indictor is provided by an overall subjective measure of harm whereby children were asked if they felt there were things on the internet that would bother children their age.

A strikingly large proportion (67%) of children aged 9- 16 think that there are things on the internet that will bother children of their age. Clearly, many children do not regard the internet as a totally safe or unproblematic environment. This is slightly more for teenagers than for younger children.

At the same time, children are nearly five times more likely to say that there are things on the internet that will bother other children (67%) compared to saying that there are things that have bothered them personally in the past year (11%).

But parents also corroborate what children are saying and 11% confirm that their child has been bothered by something in the past 12 months.

Specifically, in relation to some of the risks asked about in the survey, one in five (23%) say that they have seen obviously sexual images in the past 12 months, whether online or offline.

This is clearly related to age. 13% of older teenagers have seen sexual images online or offline more often than once a week. Nearly half of 15-16 year olds (45%) have seen such images compared with just 8% of 9-10 year olds.

One in three of those who have seen it (4% of all children) were bothered by this experience.

A similar number (23%) has experienced some form of bullying, online or offline, in the past 12 months. Most of this is face to face (15%) with lesser but equal numbers online and by mobile phone or text (4%).

It is teenagers who experience more electronically mediated forms of bullying, 15-16 year olds report the greatest levels of cyberbullying – 9% on the internet and 10% by mobile phone.

Reports of bullying, it should be noted, are at the lower end of the European spectrum, but that overall a consistent trend is noticeable linking offline and online forms of bullying.

Older children (11-16 years old) were also asked about some of the potentially harmful kinds of user-generated content that have provoked some public anxiety and debate, including by young people themselves.

Overall, 25% of children have seen websites containing some form of potentially harmful user- generated content.

- 16% of all children have seen hate messages on the internet.
- 11% overall have seen sites promoting ways to be thin.
- 9% (20% of 15-16% year olds) have seen sites talking about drug use.

12% of children overall have experienced some form of personal data misuse. The most common form is someone using the child's password or pretending to be them. This was experienced by 10% of children overall, and more by older teenagers than younger children.

Children also gave some examples in an open-ended question about some of the things they felt bother children their own age.

In response to the growing public anxiety about excessive internet use or even 'internet addiction' and the impact this may on children's development, older children (11-16) were asked some features drawing on an established scale.

These include whether the internet led to them spending less time than they felt they should with family and friends, whether they caught themselves surfing when not really interested, whether they felt bothered when they could not use

the internet and whether they had gone without eating or sleeping because of the internet.

Overall 32% said yes to one or more of these. It seems, therefore, that as an activity which children would like to cut down on, and which has some adverse effects on other aspects of their lives, excessive use is a problem for a minority of children.

Ireland is very high among European countries in terms of excessive internet use: 43% of Irish children answer 'fairly' or 'very often' to one or more of these five experiences. This is the same as the UK and topped only by Bulgaria (44%), Portugal (49%) and Estonia (50%). This compares with a European average of 30%.

Myth #5 Digital natives have all the support they need
Finally, can we assume that digital natives have all the supports they need in terms of advice, training and access to social support when they come across difficulties? We examined in this case mediation and support of children's internet use by parents, teachers and peers.

Firstly, it should be noted that the vast majority of parents do mediate their children's internet use in some way.

Most parents (72%) stay nearby children when using the internet, particularly for younger children. This is the most popular way to actively mediate children's internet use.

Many parents also talk to their children about what they do on the internet (67% overall and over 75% for younger children).

Less than half (42%) sit with children while on the internet or do shared activities (35% overall).

In addition to active mediation, parents also place rules or set restrictions on children's internet use.

- Most rules apply to disclosing personal information, where 91% say that they are either not allowed to do this or that restrictions apply. This applies to 99% of younger children.

- Next most regulated is downloading music or films (69%) and uploading material (68%), though possibly this reflects rules in cases where photos or videos are of the children themselves.

- 56% have restrictions in their use of instant messaging. A little over half of children (52%) are restricted in their use of social networking sites, and 42% experience rules watching video clips.

Overall, levels of restrictive mediation for children in Ireland are high compared to the European average of 85%, and are in fact the highest in Europe.

A striking finding from the survey in all countries was the awareness gap between child and parent accounts where children reported encountering the risks asked about. In the Irish sample, this included the following:

Where children reported seeing sexual images online:
- 49% of parents are not aware of this, 15% say they don't know
- 36% of parents are aware when their children have seen sexual images online

Being bullied online:
- 68% of parents are not aware of this, 3% say they don't know
- 29% of parents are aware this has happened

Receiving sexual message online:
- 52% of parents are not aware of this; 27% say they don't know

- 21% of parents are aware this has happened

In spite of this, parents – according to the children in the survey – do provide an important source of advice, support and guidance. Importantly, children do turn to parents when they encounter difficulties such as bullying or experience things that bother them online.

Parents, teachers and peers are clearly important, but there are also additional sources of information available to children regarding how to use the internet safely. How important are these?

- Other relatives (51%), interestingly, are generally as important as peers in providing advice to children on how to use the internet safely.
- Information received via the traditional mass media (20%) is less used, with online sources even less frequently used. 10% have gained safety advice from websites).
- Few report turning to other adults for guidance, though some get advice from online advisors, youth workers, their internet service provider or a librarian.

Conclusion – implications and recommendations

A central objective of the EU Kids Online survey is to inform and guide policy making in the area of internet safety. This is very much a multi-stakeholder activity and there are implications for current policy and for a number of policy actors who have responsibility for the overall environment in which children engage in the online world. Here, I highlight just 4 main points arising from findings in Ireland insofar as they impact on improving the quality of children's media experience and supports available to them.

The first relates to the ladder of opportunities referred to earlier.

This is an idealised map of how children can learn and develop in experience of the online world through graduated steps of increasing complexity.

- The first step – common to all children - is when children first go online and use the internet for **schoolwork and playing games alone** against the computer.
- The second step which in addition to schoolwork and games, adds **watching video clips** online (e.g. YouTube). These are all ways of using the internet as a mass medium – for information and entertainment. Notably, a third of children in Ireland (as well as Austria, Greece, and Turkey) do just these activities.
- The third step involves using the internet interactively for **communication (social networking, instant messaging, email) and reading/watching the news**. Half of children in Ireland (as well as Austria, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland and Turkey) only reach this step.
- The fourth step includes **playing with others online, downloading films and music and sharing content peer-to-peer** (e.g. via webcam or message boards). Children in Sweden, Lithuania, Cyprus, Belgium and Norway are most likely to reach this step.
- Only a quarter of children reach the fifth, most advanced and creative step. This involves visiting chatrooms, file-sharing, blogging and spending time in a virtual world.

In Ireland, one third of children confine themselves to the top three, most basic activities. Here, there is a clear case where children do 'progress' very far up the ladder of opportunities for educational and digital literacy initiatives should be prioritized.

Secondly, in response to the overall perception of the quality of online content,

and particularly in the case of younger users who were the least satisfied with the available online provision, it is important to develop new resources, new content targeted to their needs. This is a finding which the European Commission has already taken up with the establishment this year of a "European Award for Best Children's Online Content" as well production guidelines for websites and online content for younger users. This is a valuable step, but high profile national initiatives supported by the large media producers and broadcasters, who are often host the most popular content, should also be promoted.

The lack of parental awareness, despite the apparent high levels of mediation in children's media activities, is a striking finding and raises questions about the effectiveness of current strategies.

Parental awareness of risks and safety online, as well as their digital skills, need to be enhanced. The priority for awareness-raising for parents should be on alerting parents to the nature of the risks their children may encounter online whilst encouraging dialogue and greater understanding between parents and children in relation to young people's online activities. This needs to be done while avoiding an alarmist or sensationalist approach.

At the same time, enhancing parental awareness and skills is also the most effective way of empowering children and enhancing their digital literacy. This applies to teachers and peers as well and one can see that an amplification effect operates whereby support from parents, teachers and friends is positively correlated with children's digital literacy and safety skills, and that types of social mediation have considerable potential for contributing to preventing online risks and harm through further advancement of children's online media competences.

Finally, perhaps the most important major gap in current approaches to the digital landscape for children is any provision for fostering digital citizenship. Given the rapidly changing nature of the technologies involved, the emerging applications

which pose new challenges of their own, and that direct parental supervision is much less relevant to children's online usage, the only sensible priority is to encourage children to be responsible for their own behaviour and safety as much as possible The number one recommendation therefore has to be: *A focus on empowerment rather than restriction* of children's usage, emphasising responsible behaviour and digital citizenship, treating children as a competent, participatory group encouraging self-governing behaviour. Children, young people and their parents, in other words, should not always be seen as the target of awareness-raising but also as active agents with a central role in promoting and supporting safer internet practices.

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