



# UK Children Go Online

## ESRC E-Society Programme

**Young people are the target of a range of policy initiatives designed to realise the benefits of the internet while minimising the potential risks. These are often developed in the absence of rigorous empirical data. This research by Sonia Livingstone from the London School of Economics was designed to contribute new qualitative and quantitative findings on how 9-19 year olds are accessing and using the internet to both inform policy decision-making and identify emerging themes and issues regarding children's internet use.**

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- Nearly all children and young people have used the internet and access platforms are diversifying. Use of the internet is fairly frequent although most 9-19 year olds are online for less than an hour which is still less than they watch television or listen to music.
- There are significant gaps in understanding between parents and children which impede effective regulation of children's internet use in the home.
- The internet has become a key information resource to support school work.
- More than half of the young people in the research have seen pornography online, mostly unintentionally.
- Despite awareness of the risks of meeting people they don't know, a number of children have made an online acquaintance with some saying that they have met face to face with someone they first met online.
- Young people are more excited by the internet as a communication medium, with internet (instant messaging, email, chat) and mobile phone (talk, text) used mainly to contact local friends.

## Background

As UK households gain access to the internet, the growing significance of the internet in everyday life raises questions for social scientists and policy makers. Public discussion is moving beyond the initial hyperbole of high hopes or moral panics as a complex picture emerges of the diverse ways in which people use this new technology. This suggests in turn a range of ways in which the internet is socially shaped and socially embedded within the practices of everyday life.

Young people are the target of a range of policy initiatives designed to realise the benefits of the internet while minimising the potential risks. These are often developed, of necessity, in the absence of rigorous, empirical data making an informed assessment of access, attitudes, skills and uses essential. In addition, many have called for a continuing effort to identify emerging issues regarding children's internet use.

## The Project

The UK Children Go Online project was designed to contribute new qualitative and quantitative findings on how 9-19 year olds are accessing and using the internet. The research had five key objectives. First, to provide in-depth qualitative data on the emerging place of the internet in children and young people's lives. Second, to provide detailed, national survey data documenting the extent and nature of understandings, practices and contexts of internet use among 9-19 year olds and their parents. Third, to target original empirical research on key policy relevant domains, drawing out timely policy recommendations. Fourth, to ensure that children's own voices are heard in public and policy debates. Finally, to develop our theoretical understanding of household adoption and appropriation of the internet.

## Implications of the research

### Access, inequalities and the digital divide

The research found that nearly all children and young people have used the internet, with a high proportion accessing the internet from a computer at home. Access platforms are diversifying with

Children having computers, mobile phones, digital television and games consoles, all with internet access. Socioeconomic differences are sizeable: 88% of middle class though only 61% of working class children have access the internet at home.

Use is fairly frequent with 9-19 year olds being divided between daily users and weekly users. There are some low or no users of the internet with the majority of these saying that they lack access. Most 9-19 year olds are online for less than an hour still less than they watch television or listen to music.

The research found that access influences, though does not wholly determine, use. Middle-class teenagers, those with home access and those who have spent more years online tend to use the internet more often, spend more time online per day and, consequently, have greater online skills. Parent's experiences of the internet matters: daily users have parents who use the internet more often and are more expert than less frequent users.

## Undesirable forms of content and contact

### The risks of undesirable content

The research found that more than half of the young people had seen pornography online, mostly unintentionally. Parents and children agreed that the internet is more likely to expose young people to pornography than television, video or magazines. A proportion of young people (22%) have accidentally ended up on a site with violent or gruesome pictures and 9% have found a site hostile or hateful to a group of people.

### The risks of online communication

One third of 9-19 year old regular users of the internet had received unwanted sexual or nasty comments online or by text message. Only 7% of parents were aware that their child had received sexual comments and only 4% that their child had been bullied online.

Although most children are aware, from media coverage, of the risks of meeting people online, 46% had given out personal information to someone that they met online and 40% say they had pretended about themselves online. In addition, 30% had made an online acquaintance

and 8% said they had met face to face with someone they first met online. Nonetheless, it was found that the vast majority told a friend or parent and, generally, went with a friend to the meeting.

The research found that social-psychological factors, family communication patterns and gender all play a role in the interaction risks that are taken by teens online. While online psychological characteristics of the teens affect the frequency of online communication and of having online friends, offline confidence influences whether they look for personal advice or meet people offline. Offline family communication patterns and parental attitudes towards the internet and other media also had an impact on communication online by young people.

### **Balancing opportunities and risks**

The research found that boys, older teens and middle class children experience a broader range of online opportunities and risks and these opportunities and risks go hand in hand. The more children and young people experience the one, the more they also experience the other, and vice versa. The author argues that what is also important is that internet literacy positively influences the breadth of both online opportunities and risks experienced. Indeed, not only do the most skilled young people fail to avoid online risks, but their risky encounters increase with increased use.

### **Education, informal learning and literacy**

The internet has become a key information resource to support school work and 60% of pupils regard the internet as the most useful tool for getting information for homework. Nonetheless, the research has identified a range of ways in which children struggle with the internet. Children and young people encounter some difficulties with searching, evaluating online content, critical evaluation and a range of online skills, partly because they have received only patchy educational support.

Many young people have not received lessons on using the internet with a sizable proportion receiving little guidance on safety, reliability and searching. However, the research suggests that most young people prefer to learn about the internet informally, through trial and error.

### **Communication, identity and participation**

Young people are more excited by the internet as a communication medium, with internet (instant message, email and chat) and mobile phone (talk, text) used mainly to contact local friends. The author argues that children and young people make skilful choices about communication. Generally whether for passing time, making arrangements, getting advice, gossiping or flirting, the phone and text messages are preferred over emailing or instant messaging.

Most online communication is with local friends. Being in constant contact is highly valued and they showed little interest in contacting strangers. A small majority, 54% of 12-19 year olds who use the internet at least weekly have sought out sites concerned with political or civic issues although many visit only one or two civic sites and they take little further action. Those whose school, family and/or peers supported civic participation were more likely to engage with the civic or public sphere, on or offline.

### **Regulating the internet at home**

The research identified significant gaps in understanding between parents and children (in internet expertise, in awareness of risks and in acknowledgement of domestic regulation implemented) which impede effective regulation of children's internet use within the home. For example, most parents claim that they directly support their child on the internet, but their children are less likely to report this. Similarly, most parents ban their children from giving out personal information, yet only half of children recognise this rule and, a further half of these have given out such information.

The research also shows that children are adept at evading regulation, suggesting a game of strategy and tactics played out between parents and children. The research suggests that negotiation and trust are hallmarks of the changing family, and this makes the internet attractive to children precisely as a means to express their identity, autonomy and privacy apart from their parents. If parents exert tight controls over their children's online activities, this seems to undermine children's freedom and privacy to explore and express themselves online, albeit also reducing risks, while if they loosen these controls, children encounter more online risks but also more opportunities.

## Policy Lessons and Future Research

One of the outcomes of the research has been to present a clear picture of the nature and extent of online risks as well as an account of attempts by parents and children to reduce those risks. In the view of the author, the risks do not merit a moral panic, and nor do they warrant seriously restricting children's internet use because this would be to deny them the many benefits of the internet. However, the risks are widespread and they are experienced by many children as worrying or problematic and do warrant serious attention and intervention by government, educators, industry and parents.

The research has led to a number of recommendations targeted at policy makers, internet service providers, teachers, parents and children. They have included issues around; access, internet literacy and critical evaluation skills, internet safety and awareness, and encouraging parental sharing in children's internet use.

Given the pace of technological and market developments, this research has demonstrated the importance of continuing to track and understand children and young people's access to and use of the internet, in relation to both opportunities and risks. Inequalities and digital exclusion will continue to demand research effort; especially for specific subgroups that require dedicated projects (disabled children, ethnic minorities, very young children etc.).

Project findings reveal the importance of researching websites/content so as to enable children's active participation online and improve their safety. Comparisons would be fruitful between low/narrow users and those who are gaining creative, participatory or even socially inappropriate skills. Other priorities include

research on critical and consumer literacy, children's privacy protections and designing effective safety awareness messages for children, parents and teachers.

### Further Information

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## The e-Society Programme

Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and co-ordinated by the Department of Sociology at the University of York, the e-Society is a multidisciplinary programme of research that seeks to investigate how institutions, practices and behaviours are being changed by the technologies that constitute the digital age. This £5 million programme draws on the expertise of leading academics from across the UK. Launched in October 2003, the programme will run until the end of October 2007.

**Further details of the projects in the programme can be found at**  
<http://www.york.ac.uk/res/e-society/>

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