

UK Children Go Online

Surveying the experiences of young people and their parents



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Innovative Academic Research on the Digital Age

Authors
Sonia Livingstone
Magdalena Bober

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The research project

UK Children Go Online (UKCGO) aims to offer a rigorous and timely investigation of 9-19 year olds' use of the internet. The project balances an assessment of online risks and opportunities in order to contribute to developing academic debates and policy frameworks for children and young people's internet use.

The research was funded by an Economic and Social Research Council grant under the 'e-Society' Programme, with co-funding from AOL, BSC, Childnet-International, Citizens Online and ITC.

This report presents key findings from a major national, in-home, face to face survey, lasting some 40 minutes, of 1,511 9-19 year olds and 906 parents of the 9-17 year olds, using Random Location sampling across the UK (see Annex). It complements the project's recent qualitative report on young people's experiences of the internet.

The fieldwork, conducted via multi-media computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI) with children and a paper questionnaire to their parents, took place between 12 January and 7 March 2004. In this report of findings from the UKCGO survey, all percentages have been weighted in accordance with population statistics.

Key findings on access and inequalities

Internet access and use is widespread among UK children and young people, being considerably higher than among adults and among the highest in Europe. However, significant inequalities persist especially in home access. Continuing changes in the nature and quality of access indicate fast-rising standards and expectations.

Among all 9-19 year olds:

- **Home access is growing:** Three quarters (75%) have accessed the internet from a computer at home. Currently, 74% have internet access via a computer, games console or digital television while one quarter of 9-19 year olds (23%) have never accessed the internet on a computer from home, and 29% currently lack such access (see p. 9).
- **School access is near universal:** 92% have accessed the internet at school, and one quarter (24%) have access at school but not at home. However, two thirds (64%) have also used the internet elsewhere (see p. 9).
- **Socio-economic differences are sizeable:** 88% of middle class but only 61% of working class children have accessed the internet at home; 86% of children in areas of low deprivation in England have used the internet on a computer at home compared with 66% in areas of high deprivation (see p. 10).

- **Homes with children lead in gaining internet access:** They are also now acquiring multiple computers plus broadband access to the internet – 36% have more than one computer at home, and 24% live in a household with broadband access (see p. 12).
- **Access platforms are diversifying:** 87% have a computer at home (71% with internet access), 62% have digital television (17% with internet access), 82% have a games console (8% with internet access), and 81% have their own mobile phone (38% with internet access) (see p. 13).
- **Many computers in private rooms:** One fifth (19%) have internet access in their bedroom – 22% of boys versus 15% of girls, 21% middle class versus 16% working class, 10% of 9-11 year olds versus 26% of 16-17 year olds. Fewer than half the computers online at home are located in a public room, and four fifths (79%) of those with home access report mostly using the internet alone (see p. 14).

Key findings on the nature of internet use

Most young people use the internet frequently though often for moderate amounts of time. They use the internet for a wide range of purposes, not all of which are socially approved.

- **Most are daily or weekly users:** 9-19 year olds are mainly divided between daily users (41%) and weekly users (43%). Only 13% are occasional users, and just 3% count as non-users (see p. 18).
- **Most online for less than an hour:** One fifth (19%) of 9-19 year olds spend about ten minutes per day online, half spend between about half an hour (25%) and one hour (23%) online, and a further fifth go online for between one (14%) and three hours (6%) each day. One in 20 (5%) spend more than three hours online on an average day (see p. 19).
- **More time spent watching TV or with the family:** Time spent online is still less than time spent watching television or with the family, but it is similar to that spent doing homework and playing computer games and greater than time spent on the phone or reading (see p. 20).
- **Most use it for searching and homework:** Among the 84% of 9-19 year olds who use the internet daily or weekly, 90% use it to do work for school or college, 94% use it to get information for other things, 72% use it to send and receive emails, 70% to play games online, 55% to send and receive instant messages, 45% to download music and 21% to use chat rooms. Further, 44% look for information on careers and further education, 40% look for products or shop online, and 26% read the news (see p. 21).
- **Some use it for less-approved activities:** Among 12-19 year olds who go online daily or weekly, 21% admit to having copied something from the internet for a school



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project and handed it in as their own, 8% claim to have hacked into someone else's website or email, 5% have visited an online dating site, and 4% have sent a message to make someone feel uncomfortable or threatened (see p. 23).

One in six (16%) 9-19 year olds make low levels or even no use of the Internet, and even among more frequent users, use is often narrow.

- **Non-use not just a matter of lack of interest:** Access and expertise remain significant issues – 47% of occasional and non-users say that they lack access, 25% are not interested, 15% say they don't know how to use the internet, and 14% lack the time to use it (see p. 24).
- **Even frequent users make narrow use of the web:** Among those who go online at least once a week, half concentrate their use on fewer than five different websites (see p. 23).

Key findings on education, learning and literacy

- **Many have not received lessons on how to use the internet:** Despite the stress laid on ICT in education policy, nearly one third (30%) of pupils report having received no lessons at all on using the internet, although most have been taught something – 23% report having received 'a lot' of lessons, 28% 'some' and 19% 'just one or two' (see p. 26).
- **Skills gap between parents and children:** Children usually consider themselves more expert than their parents – 28% of parents who use the internet describe themselves as beginners compared with only 7% of children who go online daily or weekly, and only 12% of parents consider themselves advanced compared with 32% of children. While most parents and children are confident in their searching skills, among parents only 1 in 3 know how to set up an email account, and only a fifth or fewer are able to set up a filter, remove a virus, download music or fix a problem (see p. 27).
- **Children lack key skills in evaluating online content:** Four in ten pupils aged 9-19 trust most of the information on the internet, half trust some of it, and only 1 in 10 are sceptical about much information online. Only 33% of 9-19 year olds who go online at least once a week say that they have been told how to judge the reliability of online information, and among parents of 9-17 year olds, only 41% are confident that their child has learned how to judge the reliability of online information (see p. 28).

Thus, there is considerable scope for increasing the internet-related skills and literacy of both children and their parents. Many children are using the internet without skills in critical evaluation, and many parents lack the skills to guide and support their children's internet use.

Key findings on pornography online

Coming into contact with pornography is, the UKCGO survey shows, a commonplace but often unwelcome experience for children and young people.

Among 9-19 year olds who go online at least once a week:

- **More than half have seen pornography online:** Nearly six in ten (57%) have come into contact with online pornography. However, only 16% of parents think that their child has seen pornography on the internet (see p. 29).
- **Most porn is viewed unintentionally:** 38% have seen a pornographic pop-up advert while doing something else, 36% have accidentally found themselves on a pornographic website when looking for something else, 25% have received pornographic junk mail by email or instant messaging, 10% have visited a pornographic website on purpose, 9% have been sent pornography from someone they know, and 2% have been sent pornography from someone they met online (see p. 29).
- **More porn on the internet than in other media:** Among teens (12-19 years), 68% claim to have seen pornography on the internet, 20% saying 'many times'. Moreover, 53% of parents consider (and children agree) that the internet is more likely to expose children to pornography than are television, video or magazines (see p. 31).
- **Mixed responses to online porn:** When young people encounter pornography on the internet, half claim not to be bothered by it, but a significant minority do not like it, and one quarter of 9-15 year olds who have seen porn say they were disgusted. Half of those who encounter online pornography leave the site as quickly as they can, while the others say they look at it, tell a friend or parent, click on the links or return to it later (see p. 31).
- **Too young to have seen it:** Interestingly, nearly half (45%) of 18-19 year old internet users who have seen any pornography (online or offline) now think they were too young to see it when they first did (see p. 32).

Key findings on communication and participation

Rather than seeing face to face communication as automatically superior, young people evaluate the different forms of communication available to them according to distinct communicative needs. The mobile phone is fast overtaking the desktop computer as a prioritised means of communication.

Among 9-19 year olds who use the internet at least once a week:

- **The mobile phone is the preferred method of communication:** Whether for passing time, making arrangements, getting advice, gossiping or flirting, the phone and text messaging are preferred over emailing or instant messaging (IM) (see p. 33).

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- **Most online communication is with local friends:** Contact with people that children have not met face to face, on the other hand, occurs mainly among the 21% who visit chat rooms (see p. 33).
- **Talking online is less satisfying but has its advantages:** A third (33%) of email, IM and chat users think that talking to people on the internet is at least as satisfying as talking to them in real life, and a quarter of children and young people identify significant advantages to online communication in terms of privacy, confidence and intimacy. Further, a quarter of 12-19 year olds who use the internet at least weekly say they go online to get advice (see p. 35).
- **Not all use is receptive but, rather, interactive:** 44% have completed a quiz online, 25% have sent an email or text message to a website, 22% have voted for something online, 17% have sent pictures or stories to a website, 17% have contributed to a message board, and 8% have filled in a form. Most active of all, 34% have set up their own website. Further, 9% have offered advice to others while 8% have signed a petition (see p. 36).
- **Some are interested in civic issues:** 55% of 12-19 year olds who use the internet at least weekly have sought out sites concerned with political or civic issues, although two fifths are not interested. However, only a minority have responded to or contributed to these sites in any way (see p. 37).

Key findings on the risks of online communication

Online communication is not always a positive experience for children and young people, and the benefits must be balanced against the problems.

- **Parents underestimate children's negative experiences:** One third of 9-19 year olds who go online at least once a week report having received unwanted sexual (31%) or nasty comments (33%) via email, chat, instant message or text message. Parents substantially underestimate their children's negative experiences online and so appear unaware of their children's potential need for guidance. Only 7% of parents think that their child has received sexual comments, and only 4% think that their child has been bullied online (see p. 38).
- **Children divulge personal information online:** Most parents whose child has home access to the internet (86%) do not allow their children to give out personal information online (though only 49% of children acknowledge this). Moreover, nearly half (46%) of 9-19 year olds who go online at least once a week say that they have given out personal information, such as their full name, age, email address, phone number, hobbies or name of their school, to someone that they met on the internet. By contrast, only 5% of parents think their child has given out such information (see p. 39).

- **Children engage in identity play:** Two fifths (40%) of 9-19 year olds who use the internet at least weekly say that they have pretended about themselves online – using a different name, changing their age or appearance etc. And though they often know the rules, a minority admits to forgetting about safety guidelines online (see p. 38).
- **Some have attended face to face meetings:** One third (30%) of 9-19 year olds who go online at least once a week have made an online acquaintance, and one in 12 (8%) say they have met face to face with someone whom they first met on the internet. However, the majority of these young people tell someone they are going to the meeting, take a friend with them, meet someone of their own age and, they say, have a good time (see p. 40).

Key findings on parents' and children's views of the internet

Parents' view of the internet is ambivalent – much more so than for other media in the home. They are concerned that it may lead children to become isolated from others, expose children to sexual and/or violent images, displace more worthwhile activities and risk their privacy. On the other hand, 73% believe that the internet can help their child do better at school and help them learn worthwhile things.

Despite their considerable enthusiasm for the internet, children, like their parents, are sensitive to media anxieties. While awareness of risks is important, widespread anxiety may also contribute to restrictions on young people's use of the internet, undermining exploration, expression and creativity.

- **Children worry about the internet:** Three quarters of 9-19 year olds (74%) are aware of some internet safety campaign or have heard or read a news story that made them think the internet can be dangerous; 48% of daily and weekly users worry about 'being contacted by dangerous people', 44% worry about 'getting a virus', and 38% worry about 'others finding out things about you' (see p. 43).
- **Confusion about filtering:** In homes with internet access, 35% of children say that filtering software has been installed on their computer, and 46% of parents claim this. However, 23% of parents say they don't know if a filter is installed, and only 15% of parents who have used the internet say that they know how to install a filter (see p. 44).

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Key findings on regulating the internet at home

In regulating their children's internet use, parents face several challenges, not least that they often lack the expertise to do so, especially compared with their children.

Overall, the UKCGO survey finds that children perceive a higher incidence of risky problematic experiences online than do their parents. It also finds that parents perceive a higher degree of domestic regulation than do their children. This suggests that parents tend to assume that rules are not needed when they are and/or that rules are being followed when they are not.

- **Confusion about parental guidance:** Most parents whose child has home access to the internet claim that they directly share in and/or support their child on the internet, though their children are less likely to say that this occurs. Parents also claim to monitor their child's internet use indirectly or discreetly, though again children appear less aware of this. However, one in ten (10%) say they do not know what their child does on the internet, and a fifth (18%) say they do not know how to help their child use the internet safely – suggesting a clear need to improve and extend the reach of awareness and internet literacy initiatives (see p. 46).

Since computers are often located in private rather than public rooms, and since children may seek privacy online, even evading parental monitoring, parents' attempts at regulation are not easy to implement.

- **Children don't want restrictions:** Two thirds (69%) of 9-17 year olds who go online at least once a week say that they mind their parents restricting or monitoring their internet use in various ways (see p. 46).
- **Children protect their privacy from parents:** Moreover, two thirds of 12-19 year old home internet users have taken some action to protect their privacy online – 38% have deleted emails so no one else could read them, 38% have minimised a window when someone else came into the room, 17% have deleted the history file, 17% have deleted unwanted cookies, 12% have hidden or mislabelled files to keep them private and 12% have used someone else's password without their permission (see p. 46).

A parental wish list

Notwithstanding pressures to rely on parents to regulate their children's access to and use of the internet, it is worth noting that parents themselves favour a multi-stakeholder approach (see p. 48):

- **Stricter regulation:** 85% want to see tougher laws on online pornography, with 59% wanting stricter regulation of online services.
- **More education:** In support of media and internet literacy, 75% want to see more and better teaching and

guidance in schools while 67% want more and better information and advice for parents.

- **Better content:** Parents also hope for a more stimulating and rewarding online experience for children and young people, with 64% wanting more sites developed specifically for children.
- **Improved technology:** Lastly, 66% want improved filtering software, 54% improved parental controls and 51% improved monitoring software.

However, one cannot simply recommend greater control over or monitoring of children by parents. From children's point of view, some key benefits of the internet depend on maintaining some privacy and freedom from their parents, making them less favourable particularly to intrusive or secret forms of parental regulation.

Managing, guiding and regulating children's internet use is, therefore, a delicate and challenging task and one that will surely most effectively be pursued with children's cooperation. Such cooperation need not be impossible. While children are often confident of their online skills, they are also aware of many ways in which they are confused, uncertain or lacking in skills, and their desire to combat these is genuine.

Balancing opportunities and dangers

It might be supposed that children who go online more often become more savvy and so able to avoid the risks while optimising the benefits. Expert children can, it is often hoped, be left to their own devices while attention is given to those not yet or not much online who, because they lack experience and expertise, run greater risks than those who 'know what they are doing'.

- **High users – more benefits but also more risks:** The UKCGO survey finds that those who use the internet more make a broader use of it, and, more significantly, frequent users both take up more of the opportunities of the internet and are also exposed to greater risks. Compared with weekly users, daily users of the internet are more likely to use the internet for making webpages, for political participation, for exam revision and for interactive engagement. However, they are also more likely to have encountered pornography and violent or hateful material online, to have met online 'friends' offline and to have revealed personal information online.
- **Low users – fewer risks but also fewer benefits:** The UKCGO survey also finds that those who make less use of the internet both face fewer risks but also benefit from fewer opportunities. Hence, simply restricting children's access to the internet represents a poor strategy for minimising the risks they face, given the other costs of reduced use.

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A new divide

No longer are children and young people only or even mainly divided by those with and without access, though 'access' is a moving target in terms of its speed, location, quality and support, and inequalities in access persist.

Children and young people are divided into those for whom the internet is an increasingly rich, diverse, engaging and stimulating resource of growing importance in their lives, and those for whom it remains a narrow, unengaging if occasionally useful resource of rather less significance.

Hence, a new divide is opening up, one centred on the quality of use. The UKCGO survey finds that middle class children, children with internet access at home, children with broadband access and children whose parents use the internet more often are more likely to be daily users and so to experience the internet as a rich, if risky, medium than are less privileged children.

Conclusion

- **Is the glass half full or half empty:** Much public attention is focused on the risks children are encountering when using the internet, and rightly so. Some may read this report and consider the glass half full, finding more education and participation and less pornographic or chat room risk than they had feared. Others may read this report and consider the glass half empty, finding fewer benefits and greater incidence of dangers than they would hope for. Much depends on one's prior expectations.
- **Evidence-based policy:** It is hoped that the present findings provide a clear and careful picture of the nature and extent of these risks, as well as an account of the attempts that parents and children are making to reduce or address these risks. In our view, the risks do not merit a moral panic, and nor do they warrant seriously restricting children's internet use. But they are nonetheless widespread, they are experienced by many children as worrying or problematic, and they do warrant serious attention and intervention by government, educators, industry and parents.
- **Internet not yet used to full potential:** The UKCGO survey reveals a plethora of ways in which children and young people are taking steps towards deepening and diversifying their internet use, many of them gaining in sophistication, motivation and skills as they do so. But it has also identified many children not yet taking up the potential of the internet. These young people worry about the risks, visit only a few sites, fail to upload and maintain personal websites and treat sites more as ready-made sources of entertainment or information than as opportunities for critical engagement, user-generated content production or active participation. How this potential can be better realised remains a key challenge for the coming decade.
- **A balanced approach to regulation:** In sum, this report suggests that a balanced approach to regulation is vital if society is to steer a course between the twin risks of exposing children to danger or harm and of undermining children's opportunities to participate, enjoy and express themselves fully. Focussing on either dangers or opportunities, without recognising the consequences of particular policies or provision for the other, is likely to be problematic, undermining either children's rights or their safety.





MEDIA@LSE
Department of Media and Communications

LSE

Sonia Livingstone, Professor of Social Psychology
and Principal Investigator
Magdalena Bober, Postdoctoral Research Officer

Department of Media and Communications

The London School of Economics and Political Science
Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE, UK

Tel: **+44 (0)20 7955 7710 / 6005**

Fax: **+44 (0)20 7955 7248**

Email: **s.livingstone@lse.ac.uk, m.bober@lse.ac.uk**

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