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Growing body of research on online risk in Europe

Risk findings

EU Kids Online has been tracking the online risks faced by children across countries. In some countries, research has produced several quantitative estimates of risk.

- It appears that high risk countries are those that, on the one hand, are new to the internet (Poland, Czech Republic) and, on the other hand, are experienced with the internet (UK, The Netherlands).
- The next riskiest are Iceland, Ireland and Estonia – all small northern European countries.
- The low risk countries, research suggests, are Germany, Norway, Denmark, France and Italy.
- Unfortunately, few quantitative estimates exist for children's experiences of online risk in some countries: Austria, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Denmark, Greece, Portugal, Slovenia and Spain.

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Comparing across risks, rather than across countries, research suggests that some risks are more prevalent and/or more homogenous across countries, than others. Our findings show an approximate ordering of online risks to teenagers as follows:

- Giving out personal information: this is most common risk – around half of online teens, with considerable cross-national variation (13% to 91%)
- Seeing pornography: the second most common risk at around 4 in 10 online teens across Europe, but again considerable cross-national variation (25% - 71%)

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- Seeing violent or hateful content: the third most common risk at approximately one third of teens and, apart of a figure of 90% among social networking teens in Ireland, a fair degree of consistency across countries
- Being bullied/harassed/stalked: generally around 1 in 5 or 6 teens online, though there is also a group of high risk countries here (Poland, possibly Estonia) and one low risk country – Belgium
- Receiving unwanted sexual comments - only around 1 in 10 teens in Germany, Ireland and Portugal; but closer to 1 in 4 teens in Iceland and Norway (and 1 in 6 in Sweden), rising to 1 in 3 in the UK and 1 in 2 in Poland
- Meeting an online contact offline – the least common but arguably most dangerous risk; there is considerable consistency in the figures across Europe at around 8% (1 in 12) online teens going to such meetings; the exceptions are Poland (23%) and, especially, the Czech Republic (65%).

Interim conclusions (these will be developed in our forthcoming report, due September 2008):

- There are considerable cross-national variations in the incidence of risk.
- There seems to be more cross-national variation in the more common risks, and more homogeneity for the less common risks.
- Poland is a striking outlier, reporting high levels of risk across several categories and being highest for seeing porn, being bullied, receiving unwanted sexual comments, second highest for stranger danger, and third highest for giving out personal information.
- In some countries it is particular risks that stand out, but they are not high risk across all risks e.g. Ireland for seeing violent and hateful content and giving out personal information, Czech Republic for giving out personal information, Estonia for being bullied.
- The only country that is somewhat (comparatively) a low risk outlier on a few items is Italy – on porn, seeing hateful content, although the actual figures are not so striking as the high risk outliers, and this is partly because the population surveyed was much younger (7-11 year olds).

Preview of the comparative analysis report

The above findings illustrate the first step in our ongoing work of systematic comparison and interpretation of findings within EU Kids Online. It is one step to identify a pattern, as in the data above, but quite another to interpret these patterns. The report, due in September 2008, will ask:

- Where, and to what extent, are there European commonalities or differences regarding children's online experiences, risks and opportunities?
- What common European responses and patterns exist and what factors explain these? Where there is variation, how is this to be explained?

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To explain the observed patterns of findings, researchers in the network are assembling national information concerning, for example:

- The internet (e.g. internet and media content for children, the nature of internet regulation and promotion, factors shaping public discourses about the internet).
- Media coverage of children and the internet (which is also a separate empirical sub-project within the broader project)
- The education system (including internet access and use within schools)
- Wider country-specific factors (e.g. social structures and social change, the role of the state), etc.

One challenge involves looking for ways to seek and manage the 'softer' data, this background information about the countries concerned, in order to explore whether these factors influence findings such as those outlined above.

Israeli Children Go-on-line

Dafna Lemish and Rivka Ribak designed a parallel project to the UK Children Go Online project directed by Sonia Livingstone. The sample consisted of 532 children (9-18 year olds), 80% Jews, 20% others, mostly Arabs, a group who are often excluded in Israeli studies.

Professor Dafna Lemish, of Tel Aviv University, presented their findings to the EU Kids Online network at its last meeting in Brussels in November 2007. Their PowerPoint slides are available (in the section headed 'PowerPoint Presentations') on our website: www.eukidsonline.net

In fact, translating the project from one country to another was far from straightforward since risk cultures are very different. For example, 'Internet safety' meant mainly 'political safety' for Israeli parents – they were concerned about the Internet being used by terrorists to contact their children. Hence it was not paedophiles that came first on the list.

The research team were surprised to find that gender differences still existed (the access gap is closing, but activities are still gendered). There was no difference according to religiosity or income. When the children were asked which ICT they would miss most, the internet was named by more than in the UK study, being nearly as important as TV. As in the UK study, the perceptions of parents and children regarding parental rules and restrictions differed considerably. As has been found elsewhere, Israeli children thought that they were more skilful users than their parents.

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The survey found the children to be willing to give out personal info – in fact, more willing to do as they grew older. As children grow older, risk-taking increases generally, and it does not appear that they become more cautious as they get older because they are more aware. On the other hand, the children gave out information about themselves but not about other people (e.g. they did not give out credit card information at all, nor information about friends or parents). In the in-depth interviews they explained why they gave out information – they were trying to make friends of own age, to make romantic contacts, etc. Specific findings regarding online risk were as follows:

- 61% of high school children who use the Internet had talked to someone only online.
- 36% of high school children who use the Internet had met someone face-to-face who they had first met online.
- 41% of those 36% would tell their parents when they did this.
- 6% of those 36% were accompanied to such meetings.
- 26% of those 36% reported back to parents after the event.
- 95% of high school children who use the Internet use IM (Instant Messaging) with friends.
- 30% of high school children who use the Internet used IM with strangers.

Findings regarding content-related risks showed that pornography is the main concern in Israel, and that the internet is where children are most likely to encounter porn. Exposure to pornography increases with age, and is more common among boys.

70% reported being exposed in media to stories about dangers on the Internet and many could say what they had heard. There was an event five years ago when a boy talking to women in a forum had been lured to his death by terrorists: 10 and 11 year olds could still report this, showing it to be a formative story in their experience.

Children said they were exposed to various forms of problematic contact, more than their parents reported. Parents claimed to check what children saw, but children said they do not.

Turning to the benefits, the findings showed that the internet is major source of help for homework – more than books and parents. Parents thought it was good for teaching English. Overall there was considerable appreciation of the internet. Many visited news sites – notable since in Israel, news is related to everyday survival. The major surfing language was Hebrew but others also surf in their native language - e.g. Russian; usually they did not surf in English.

What did parents want more in order to make the internet safer? In the UK they wanted legislation first, but in Israel legislation is low on list. First, they wanted better teaching, better guidance in schools. Second they wanted more information for parents: as parents agreed it was their responsibility to supervise children, and 90% said they could trust their children online.

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Media analysis project

EU Kids Online is undertaking a media analysis in order to see how children and the internet are represented in the press of different countries. This will address questions such as: Do the media contribute to shaping parents' and children's perceptions of risks and opportunities online? Does press coverage stimulate research or help to shape research questions? To what extent does research result in press reports regarding online risks to children?

During October-November 2007, we collected and coded newspaper articles (both in national and regional, quality and popular press) in 14 of the EU Kids Online countries. The analysis of this material is currently taking place, but it is already clear that press coverage is quite diverse: in some countries there is far more coverage of children and the internet than in others; in some the balance of coverage is neutral in tone, but in others coverage is often negative. This reflects both the effort to raise awareness of potential online dangers and also the newsworthiness of negative stories. There are also differences between countries in terms of whether they predominately covered national or international stories.

The Internet Governance Forum

This is a UN-organised Forum designed to inform the UN about the regulation of the internet and to foster cooperation between the regional and international level. This second meeting was in Rio in November 2008. About 2000 people attended, including industry, researchers, NGOs, Government staff.

The EU Kids Online delegation was asked to present their work on online risk and safety, an issue not hitherto high on the Forum's agenda. In their panel they give a short presentation of the objectives and framework of the EU KidsOnline project followed by the key issues from the first report. The team also gave a presentation at a pre-conference meeting arranged by the EU Commission and attended by about 50 people and succeeded in generating interest and making the issues in this field more visible.

Safer Internet Day 2008

Once again media interest in Safer Internet Day and the events related to it varied considerably by country. Below we pick out some examples reported by our national teams across Europe:

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Safer Internet Day received a good deal of publicity in the Czech mainstream media, mainly because of joint activities of the Czech Safer Internet node and the Czech Ministry of Interior. They organised a thematic seminar and a press conference where they announced some new projects aimed at enhancing children's safety online in the Czech Republic. Several commercial players in the field of Internet and mobile technologies also used the day to present their contribution to achieving these goals.

The Estonian EU Kids Online team launched their webpage on this day, generating interviews on four Estonian radio channels, and a Russian radio channel. The Minister of Economy and Communication related Safer Internet Day to the Estonian electronic ID-card that the Government is currently promoting.

In Greece a Safer Internet Day celebration gala was held at the Ministry of Education building, with prizes awarded to schools. There was substantial press, radio and TV coverage of this event.

The EU Kids Online team in Portugal wanted both to make the media aware of Safer Internet Day and to start some initiatives to hear the voices of young Internet users on this issue. Hence, they joined other agencies in promoting workshops on this day that involved adolescents. More than 40 news reports in radios, TV news and popular newspapers were identified by a media-clipping system. They focused mainly on the discussion of social networks by young people in these workshops

In Spain the EU Kids Online project featured in some news items and there were various radio stations interviewed the team.

On Safer Internet Day the Media Council in Sweden launched the project 'My life 2.0' about young people's everyday and social life on the Internet. Youths aged 12-18 will be invited to write personal digital stories about life on the net. It is hoped that this will create a basis for a dialogue between young people and adults.

Safer Internet Day in Italy coincided with two large police operations against paedophiles. These received considerable coverage in the press and TV, and Safer Internet Day was mentioned at the end of these reports, largely drawing on press releases. The media report research conducted by Doxa for Save the Children Italy on social networking among children. The findings most highlighted by the media have stressed the concern for children being left alone in front of their screens, the risks associated with meeting strangers online and children giving out personal information.

In Germany, as in some other countries, the Safer Internet Day was not mentioned in the press, but instead appeared on the online versions of the newspapers. There were some short reports on radio and TV, in addition to being on the websites of these media.

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Dissemination

This year EU Kids Online researchers will present, or have submitted presentations, of project findings at a range of international academic conferences, including the International Communications Association (May, Montreal), the IAMCR (Stockholm, July), the Association of Internet Researchers (October, Copenhagen) and The European Communication Research and Education Association (November, Barcelona).

In addition, special issues of the *Journal of Children and the Media* and the *International Journal of Media and Cultural Politics* will be devoted to EU Kids Online and related research.

The article 'Livingstone, S., and Haddon, L. (in press) Risky experiences for European children online: Charting research strengths and research gaps. *Children and Society*' is now available on the website www.eukidsonline.net.

Contact details

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