Growing up in digital societies – supporting and protecting children online

Digital Society Initiative (DSI), University of Zurich: Lecture Series “Communicative Challenges in Digital Societies”

Zurich, October 16, 2018
Prof. Dr. Uwe Hasebrink
Two discourses – two audiences

- Digital Society Initiative (DSI) lecture series: “Communicative Challenges in Digital Societies”

1. Digital Societies? Connected World?
Digital societies? Connected world?

▶ Reference to the general assumption that today’s societies differ in some respect from former societies without digital media, but no claim that ...
  ▶ society is exclusively based on digital media
  ▶ all parts of the society are connected or mediatized in the same way

▶ Key question: How do (digital) media contribute to the transformation of societies in general and to children’s growing up in particular?
2. Conceptualising the role of media for societal transformations
Media as integral parts of social domains

Media cannot be conceived as “external factors” that have an “impact” on society as such.

Society as a whole and specific social domains are constructed by communicative practices.

In times of mediatization, many of these practices are based on different kinds of media.

Thus, media matter. We need to look at specific social domains and investigate the role of media in the process of constructing these domains.
Macro:

Society: (communicative) constructions of reality

Communicative figurations:

- Actor constellation
  - e.g.: Who is involved? Who has power?

- Frames of Relevance
  - e.g.: What are the domain’s guiding ideas?

- Communicative Practices
  - e.g.: How do actors realise the guiding ideas?

Micro:

Individuals: (communicative) practices

Media trends:

- Differentiation
- Connectivity
- Omnipresence
- Pace of innovation
- Datafication
Focus on children’s growing up

Media do not have a direct impact on individual children; they rather change the way that social domains, in which children are involved, are constructed – family, school, peer-group and others.

Therefore, in order to better understand how digital media contribute to children’s growing up and well-being, it is helpful to analyse the contexts of growing up, the social domains, in which children are involved as active participants.
3. Family as a context for growing up
The context of family: Balancing trust and control

- Growing up as a continuous process, in which children are gaining autonomy and establishing their specific social position.
- Family and interactions with parents as the key social context of growing up.
- These interactions are based on the dialectical interplay of trust and control with their respective positive and negative aspects:
  - Trust may open opportunities for increasing skills and autonomy, but it might also overstrain the child and lead to disorientation and harmful experiences.
  - Control may prevent children from potential risks and provide helpful guidelines for orientation, but it might also hinder them to develop skills and their own interests.
- General assumption that the interaction between parents and their children can be regarded as a continuous shift from control to trust.
- However, the challenges of families' everyday lives are much more complicated: Parents and their children are continuously negotiating how to find a balance between trust and control that meets their particular needs and expectations.
Empirical approach

For children and parents:

- **Concerns**: What are children and parents concerned about?
- **Attitudes**: How do they think about online safety issues and practices?
- **Knowledge**: What do they know about issues of online safety?
- **Practices**: What do they actually do in order to protect themselves / their children against negative experiences?
Method

- Study commissioned by the German Association for Voluntary Self-Regulation of Digital Media Service Providers (FSM e.V.)
- Standardised survey: Computer Assisted Personal Interview (CAPI)
- Population: Households in Germany with children between 9 and 16 who use the internet
- Sample: 805 children and one of their parents (who is best informed about the child’s online use); quota for age and sex of the child and for region within Germany
- Data collection: February 13 and April 13, 2017
The way how parents and their children balance trust and control is influenced by the mutual perceptions of their online skills. For example:

- As long as parents think they have more online skills than their child, control is at least a plausible option to support online safety.
- When parents think they have less online skills than their child it is unlikely that they will try to control their children’s online practices; instead they will have to develop trust.

In our survey parents as well as children where asked how they assess their own and their children’s/parents’ online skills.
Parents and their children agree: from 13 years on children have more online skills than their parents.

Parents and children are very similar in how they assess children’s skills over the years.

Younger children “overestimate” their parents’ skills; the older they grow the lower they assess their parents’ skills.
In order to illustrate the diversity of family constellations, in which trust and control with regard to online safety are negotiated, we analysed eight „constellations of children‘s and parents‘ concerns regarding online risks“. This was based on three indicators:

- Are parents more or less concerned? (median split based on number of risks they are concerned about)
- Are children concerned about any online risk or not? (based on open question)
- Are children more or less likely to encounter online risks? (median split based on number of experienced risks)
### Constellations of children’s and parents’ concerns regarding online risks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Children not concerned</th>
<th>Children concerned</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low risk experience</td>
<td>High risk experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Parents slightly concerned</strong></td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Parents highly concerned</strong></td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Distribution of age groups within the constellations: Younger children overrepresented in constellations with low risk experience, be it...

- ... with concerned parents and unconcerned children,
- ... with unconcerned parents and concerned children
- ... or with unconcerned parents and children.
Distribution of age groups within the constellations: Older children overrepresented in constellations with high risk experience, be it ...

... with concerned parents and children,

... with unconcerned parents and concerned children

... or with unconcerned parents and children.
Balancing trust and control in different constellations

Parents and children agree in being concerned, and children report many experiences with online risks. This constellation is the most frequent in our sample (26%) and it occurs in all age groups. It indicates that online communication is perceived as risky sphere, which might limit the exploration of opportunities.

Parents and children agree in being concerned, and children report only a few negative experiences. This constellation is more likely among younger children. It indicates that parents tend to control their children and that children tend to be careful, so they avoid negative experiences – and might miss opportunities and develop less skills and resilience.
Balancing trust and control in different constellations

- While parents are only slightly concerned, children express concerns and report many experiences with online risks. This pattern is most likely among the older age groups. These children might feel left alone with their concerns.

- Parents as well as children are not particularly concerned about online risks, although children report many experiences with risks. Again, this constellation is more likely among older children. Both sides seem to trust in the child’s ability to cope with negative experiences.
Implications

▶ The development of parents’ and children’s **mutual perceptions of online skills** is an important factor for balancing trust and control regarding online safety.

▶ While it is plausible that age matters particularly with regard to the likelihood **to experience online risks** it is remarkable that, across the age groups, we find different **constellations of parents’ and children’s concerns** – indicating **different dynamics of balancing trust and control**.

▶ Advice for parents with regard to online safety has to start from the specific forms of balancing trust and control within the family. The findings demonstrate that, even within a given age group, these forms can differ substantially.
4. Protection of children as societal challenge
Protection of children as societal process

Societal change

Media change

Perceiving problems → Defining goals → Implementing measures → Evaluating impact

Politics → Industry → Parents → Children → Educational institutions
OECD classification of online risks

- Internet technology risks
  - Content risks
    - Illegal content
    - Harmful content
    - Harmful advice
  - Contact risks
    - Cybergrooming
    - Online harassment
      - Cyberbullying
      - Cyberstalking
    - Illegal interaction
    - Problematic content sharing
  - Online marketing
    - For child inappropriate or unsuitable products
    - For illegal and age-restricted products
    - HFSS food and drinks
  - Over-spending
  - Fraudulent Transactions
    - Online fraud
    - Online scams
    - Identity theft

- Consumer-related risks

- Information privacy and security risks
  - Information privacy
    - Personal data collected from children
    - Oversharing
    - Unforeseen Consequences
    - Long-term consequences
  - Information security
    - Malicious code
    - Commercial spyware
    - Online scams
    - Identity theft
The 4-C model of online risks

Children can be considered as recipients of pre-produced media content, who are positively or negatively affected by these media products (“content”).
Children can be considered as participants in individualised communication processes, during which they get into contact with different kinds of people, which turn out as positive or negative (“contact”).
The 4-C model of online risks

Children can be considered as agents who themselves produce or spread content that affects others in a positive or negative way (“conduct”).
The 4-C model of online risks

Industry → Media content → Content risks → Child → Conduct risks → Communication platforms → Contact risks → Contract risks → Industry

Children can be considered as market participants and contracting parties for service providers (“contract”).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspects of communicative practices</th>
<th>Related to service providers</th>
<th>Related to communication</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Standardised services</td>
<td>Individual relation to service provider</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“content”</td>
<td>“contract”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children’s roles</td>
<td>Recipient</td>
<td>Communication partner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“contract”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Child’s communication practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“conduct”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provision</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protection</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If we combine these four roles with the three main dimensions of digital rights (e.g. Livingstone & O’Neill 2014) we can specify indicators that allow for operationalising empirical indicators for the situation of children’s rights in the online world.
5. Conclusions
Conclusions:
Growing up in digital societies

- Digital societies and connected worlds are under constant change.
- So are the social contexts that shape the conditions for children’s growing up with media.
- Growing up in mediatized social contexts means that children’s relevant social contexts are constructed partly through media-based practices.
- At the same time, through their evolving practices of coping with developmental tasks, children contribute to the construction of these contexts.
Conclusions:
Protection of children

- The protection of children is a **dynamic societal process**, too. Risks, objectives, and measures have to be constantly evaluated and re-negotiated.

- **Legislative responses** to online risks have to be **coordinated**: Children’s online experiences are linked with a wide range of social contexts; thus, consistent policies will help.

- They have to be **comprehensive** and not limited to either contact risks or content risks or conduct risks or contract risks.

- While almost everybody agrees that **multistakeholder** approaches are needed, there is quite a lot of room left for improvement in order to actually realise the expected benefits.
Conclusions:
Protection of children

- **Digital and media literacy** can be regarded as prerequisites both for online opportunities and for online safety. Efforts to define and measure literacy have to consider that we have to deal with a “moving target” – skills that can help today will not necessarily help tomorrow.

- Thus it is important to support children (and adults!) in developing skills to cope with innovation and change and to use them for their own interest and needs.
Conclusions: Protection of children

► With regard to **measuring and monitoring** the effectiveness of legal and policy measures, EU Kids Online, the European network into children and online media, sets out to contribute to a consistent approach to definitions, methodologies and indicators.

► The network members share the common understanding that **international and regional co-operation** is central to addressing the challenges of child protection in an inherently global medium.
Protection is just one dimension of children’s rights. Without complementing efforts regarding the dimensions of provision and participation, any approach to protecting children will fail.

Thus we have to support positive online content and stimulating communicative spaces.

And we have to support children’s participatory role in developing future “digital societies” and “connected worlds”.

Conclusions:
Protection of children
Contact:
u.hasebrink@hans-bredow-institut.de / @UweHasebrink
www.eukidsonline.net / @EUKIDSONLINE
www.hans-bredow-institut.de/en / @BredowInstitut