

# Studying children and their internet experiences: online risks between theoretical approaches and methodological issues

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**Abstract** *The paper reviews and discusses a series of researches and data having as main topic the children's use of internet with a special focus on risks associated with online activities. Taking into account the results and classifications resulted from a recent cross-national survey, as well as definitions and dimensions generally accepted in the field of risk research, the article outlines and presents some of the methodological issues which should be considered in order to improve the validity and reliability of the internet and online risks researches.*

**Keywords:** *children, internet use, online risks, research methodology.*

## Rationale

In many countries from Europe and outside, both adults and children are gaining rapid access to the Internet and online technologies. Eurostat statistics show that the proportion of households in the EU with access to the internet was 76 % in 2012, an increase of 6 percentage points compared with 2010. In the European Union's 27 state members (EU27), 72 % of households have access to broadband at home, an increase of 11 percentage points compared with 2010 (Eurostat, 2012).

Regarding children and young people's use of the internet nowadays, it seems it continues to grow. According to Livingstone et. al. (2011 b), around 65% of the 9-16 years old children living in Europe go online daily or almost every day and the average age when they first go online is nine. The 2012 report from the United Kingdom's Office of Communication (OFCOM, p.3), show that children aged 12-15 are spending more time online (rising from 14.9 hours a week in 2011 to 17.1 in 2012) and now spend as much time in a week using the internet as they do watching television. Despite the rhetoric of "digital natives" which argues that children have been surrounded by, and interacted with, new technologies since young ages (Helsper, Eynon, 2009), many of them still lack resources to use the internet in such a manner as to explore its opportunities or to develop vital digital literacy skills (Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig, Ólafsson, 2011a, pp. 5-6).

The most common location of internet use among children is at home (87%), followed by school (63%), as Livingstone et. al. (2011 b) point out. The privacy of accessing the internet at home from children's own bedroom (49%) raised great concerns among scholars, researchers and public authority representatives regarding children's exposure to risk of harm online, since the parents cannot supervise their children's online activity (Valcke et al, 2011; Staksrud, Livingstone, 2009). Even though children nowadays are very skilled in using new technology, especially the internet, and are perceived as being highly creative and innovative in terms of communication and education, when it comes to risks they are considered to be very vulnerable to the harmful contents and contacts provided by the internet. Facing these risks, parents, teachers and policy makers may choose either to ignore them, or to control and restrict children's online opportunities, as risks cannot be separated from opportunities (Staksrud, Livingstone, 2009). On the one hand, there is the idea of encouraging and sustaining the further promotion of the internet as it facilitates many benefits for the users, but on the other hand, there is the idea of reducing the attendant risks. Research shows that the experience of online opportunities and risks appear to be strongly positively related, in spite the long-standing idea that they are rather opposing variables and therefore, should be analysed separately (Livingstone, Helsper, 2010; Staksrud, Livingstone, 2009). Put it in other words, increasing opportunities means automatically increasing the risks. This means that in one's attempt to restrict internet use so as to avoid risks, there is also a great chance to restrict the opportunities that the internet offers. As a consequence, an accurate and appropriate identification of the online risks along with a reliable methodology to assess the extension and intensity of the children exposure to harmful content are important tools not only for a policy goal oriented to maximise the benefits and minimise the negatives of the internet use, but also for the individual practices concerning the online presence of children.

## **Children and online risks: theoretical approaches and methodological issues**

Despite the vast literature on the topic of risk, there is still little consensus over a commonly accepted definition for this term. The general understanding of risk implies some feared and negative consequences over the environment or human health, even though in the economic theory it refers to both gains and losses which are subject to social judgments (Klinke, Renn, 2002). In the simplest understanding of the term, as the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development argue (OECD, 2003, p. 32), risk refers to potential damages caused by a single event or a series of events. The International Risk Governance Council (IRGC 2005, p. 20-21) suggest that the focus on risk should be seen from a broader perspective related to how humans transform their natural environment into a cultural one with the purpose of improving their living conditions and satisfying their human wants and needs. When doing these changes, some intended or unintended consequences may occur that affect other aspects of what humans value.

In the perspective of other authors, risks are seen as “perceptions of dangers and uncertainties that may have negative outcomes but which may also be undertaken with positive consequences” (Madge, Barker, 2007, p. 2). They argue that risk-taking is important within young lives as the patterns established in one sphere of life are likely to be transferred to others. Learning to manage risk is a useful skill, therefore parents and care-takers need to ensure that young people understand what “risk” means and know how to cope with it. For Cooper, Hetherington, and Katz (2003, p.58), risks are “a function of interaction between those creating risks and those trying to prevent them, and not of control, management or elimination. Equally, they depend absolutely upon the exercise of judgment and interpretation in continually changing circumstances”.

A more complex understanding of this term can be achieved if considered next to the “resilience to risk” and “coping” approaches. Resilience, a long-debated concept among scholars (Daniel 2010; Masten, Gewirtz, 2006), is defined as ‘the quality that helps individuals or communities resist and recover from adversities’ (Newman, 2002, pp. 5). When referring to children, Newman and Blackburn (2002, p. 1) consider that “resilient children are better equipped to resist stress and adversity, cope with change and uncertainty, and to recover faster and more completely from traumatic events or episodes”. A resilient child is one who “bounces back” having endured adversity or who continues to function reasonably well despite continued exposure to risk. (Gilligan, 1997, pp. 14-15). Put it in other words, this approach argues that children must learn for themselves how to navigate the wider world, including learning from their mistakes and recovering from accidents (Staksrud, Livingstone, 2009, p. 365).

'Coping' refers to behavior that protects people from being psychologically harmed by risky experiences. Although the literature regarding children's coping with online risks is scarce, there were recent attempts to study this behavior (D'Haenens, Vandoninck, 2011). In this sense, three risks were compared with regard to coping strategies (sexual images, online bullying and sexual messaging). The coping strategies were examined in connection to socio-demographic and psychological characteristics, as well as whether they are related to the intensity of harm (degree that the child indicated being upset) and the duration of harm (how long the child had indicated to be upset for). Results show that generally, children who feel more upset when confronted with risks and those who take longer to get over being upset are more likely to display a coping response (be it passive, communicative or proactive).

Even though the attempts to offer a generally acceptable definition for risk have been unsuccessful, there is a common characteristic for risk concepts, meaning the distinction between "reality" and "possibility" (Rosa, 1998; Klinke, Renn, 2001). If the present human activities made no difference for the future (in the sense that it was either predetermined or independent of human actions), then the term "risk" would make no sense. For Rosa (1998, p. 28) risk is "the situation or event where something of human value (including humans themselves) has been put at stake and where the outcome is uncertain". As he points out in his definition, risk also refers to certain states of the world which are not predetermined but rather probabilistic and with a certain degree of uncertainty. Similar to this perspective, the OECD (2003) adopts a more technical point of view, perceiving risk as a combination of two factors. The first one refers to the probability that a potentially harmful event might occur. The second one, vulnerability, reflects the potential damage generated by the occurrence of a harmful event in terms of both direct and indirect consequences.

Klinke and Renn (2001, p. 160) proposed an even more complex definition in which risk is seen as 'the possibility that human actions or events lead to consequences that harm aspects of what humans value'. Considered from an in-depth perspective, this definition perceives risk as both a descriptive and a normative concept, pointing to a causal relationship between human activities or events and the consequences they produce. When these consequences are labeled as harmful or negative- depending on how people assess their health, their well-being, their values, their social status etc.- the only way they can be altered is by changing the initiating activity or event or by reducing the impacts to human beings (Klinke, Renn 2002, p. 1071). Therefore, conceptually, risk involves at least two core dimensions: uncertainty (the occurrence is probable, but the probability of occurrence remains rather low) and the negative consequences. Derived from these dimensions, but remaining central for the cutting frames aiming to predictions with actional stakes are *time* and the *normative frame*. A risk, any risk, is inherently specific and contextual.

In accordance with the perspective of IRGC (2005) and Rosa (1998), risks are not taken as independent actions or events but they are rather an integral factor in every activity that is oriented towards achieving a particular human need or purpose. This is why public authority representatives, policy makers and the professional community strive to keep risks under control, even to avoid or reduce them, since they are perceived as undesirable for society. As Klinke and Renn (2002) suggest, they need to be assessed, evaluated, analyzed, and managed in order to reduce harm to humans and the environment. Therefore, the authors distinguish between risk assessment (calculating risk probability and magnitude), risk evaluation (determining the acceptability of a given risk) and risk management (the process of reducing risks to a level deemed tolerable by society). As Staksrud and Livingstone (2009) state, all these three processes are important, but when it comes to children, risk management is impeded by apparent public reluctance to tolerate any risk whatsoever (p. 365).

As concerns the topic of children online risks and opportunities throughout Europe, Hasebrink, Livingstone and Haddon (2008) brought together over 400 case studies on the national level. They were guided by the assumption that a cross-national perspective is vital for children’s experiences of online technologies which may (or may not) differ in different countries. After reviewing the evidence base, they scoped “risks” and “opportunities” (Table 1) with the mention that these experiences are expected to vary according to children’s age and gender, as well as by the socioeconomic status (SES) of the household, or other stratifying factors such as parental education or urban/rural location (p. 6).

**Table 1:** Scoping online opportunities and risks

<b>Online opportunities</b>	<b>Online risks</b>
Access to global information	Illegal content
Educational resources	Pedophiles, grooming, strangers
Social networking among friends	Extreme or sexual violence
Entertainment, games and fun	Other harmful offensive content
User-generated content creation	Racist/hate material and activities
Civic or political participation	Advertising and stealth marketing
Privacy for identity expression	Biased or misinformation
Community involvement/activism	Abuse of personal information
Technological expertise and literacy	Cyber-bullying/harassment
Career advancement/employment	Gambling, phishing, financial scams
Personal/health/sexual advice	Self-harm (suicide, anorexia)
Specialist groups/fan forums	Invasions/abuse of privacy
Shared experiences with distant others	Illegal activities (hacking, copyright abuse)

Source: Hasebrink, Livingstone and Haddon, 2008, p. 6.

Starting from this list of online experiences that children might encounter, Livingstone and Haddon (2009) made a classification of risks (p. 9). Across Europe, the rank ordering of risks experienced seems to be fairly similar in each country. The most common risk is related to giving out personal information, followed by seeing pornography online, seeing violent or hateful content, being bullied, meeting an online contact offline and feeling uncomfortable or threatened online. This classification (Table 2) characterizes the child as a recipient of mass communication (content risks), as a participant of peer/ personal communication (contact risks) and as an actor offering content or acting in personal contacts (conduct risks).

**Table 2:** Risks relating to children’s internet use, adapted from Livingstone et. al. (2009), p.10.

	<b>CONTENT</b> Child as recipient	<b>CONTACT</b> Child as participant	<b>CONDUCT</b> Child as actor
<i>Commercial</i>	Advertising, spam, sponsorship	Tracking / harvesting personal information	Gambling, illegal downloads, hacking
<i>Aggressive</i>	Violent/ gruesome / hateful content	Being bullied, harassed or stalked	Bullying or harassing another
<i>Sexual</i>	Pornographic / Harmful sexual content	Meeting strangers, being groomed	Creating / Uploading pornographic material
<i>Values</i>	Racist, biased info / advice (eg. drugs)	Self-harm, unwelcome persuasion	Providing advice eg. Suicide / pro-anorexia

General results of a cross-national study including 25 participating countries across Europe - 25,142 children (9-16 years old) who use the internet, and one of their parents were interviewed - show that the more children use the internet, the more digital literacy they gain, the more opportunities they take up, and the more risks they encounter (Livingstone et al. 2011 b, p. 23). Older teenagers do encounter more online risks but they seem to be better prepared to deal with them. As Hasebrink et. al. (2011) recommends (p. 70), “older children should be the focus of safety measures, therefore, because their risk of harm is higher in terms of incidence; younger children should be the focus of safety measures because the potential severity – their subjective perception of harm – tends to be greater, and because they are less well equipped to manage risks themselves”. At country level, based on national differences for children’s internet usage and the risks they encountered online, Haddon and Livingstone proposed a classification which comprises 4 categories of countries (Haddon, Livingstone, 2012, p. 2):

- **‘Lower use, lower risk’ countries** (Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Hungary) – here children make the lowest use of the internet, and they are below average on all risks apart from meeting online contacts – online and offline; still, it may be expected that as levels of use rise in these countries, so, too, will risk.
- **‘Lower use, some risk’ countries** (Ireland, Portugal, Spain, Turkey) have the lowest internet usage, although there is some excessive use of the internet and some problems with user-generated content.

- **‘Higher use, some risk’ countries** (Cyprus, Finland, the Netherlands, Poland, Slovenia, the UK) make high use of the internet but are high only on some risks, possibly because of effective awareness-raising campaigns, regulatory strategies or strategies of parental mediation of children’s internet use.
- **‘Higher use, higher risk’ countries** (Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Lithuania, Norway, Romania, Sweden) include both wealthy Nordic countries and Eastern European countries (better called, ‘New use, new risk’).

Taking into account both the theoretical issues associated with the definition of risk and the data obtained from empirical research dealing with children’s exposure to negative and harmful contents, a series of important methodological aspects can be emphasized in order to help maximize the relevance and validity of the results obtained from the coming surveys.

One of the aspects refers to the way of defining the investigated populations. In practice, the most simple and frequently used method is that of employing a common, taken for granted criteria, such as the age when studying online risks among children - that was the case for the EU Kids Online II survey. Such an option is very useful for descriptive researches, but in the same time, it is problematic for the studies aiming at causal finality (Mills, Bunt, Bruijin, 2006). An alternative possibility is that of constructing and identifying the populations as a stage of the investigative process (for instance, children as commercial recipients). These are configured according to the theoretical circumscriptions or frames used, and therefore, are more relevant for the theoretical ideas under testing. The option for one possibility or another is strongly tied to another aspect which is important for the research strategy in general, and for the population sampling in particular. Most often, the theoretically circumscribed populations are associated with an intentional, deliberate selection of the investigated cases and small samples, specific to case-studies methodological approaches. In this way, eventually the data obtained can be significantly distorted, supporting the acquirement of conclusions which are concordant with the theory involved as instrument of selection. The statistical samples characteristic to exhaustive approaches or taken for granted populations are far less affected of this kind of errors but may contain numerous irrelevant cases which can influence the results as well (Mills, Bunt, Bruijin, 2006).

In what concerns the researches dealing with the internet as main subject of investigation, defining the investigated population and the units of analyses used ((individuals, groups, nations, phenomena, processes) is even more complicated by the fact that analysis is more relevant in terms of flows and networks, not as geographically located and bounded communities (Livingstone, 2003). The internet and the risks online, as well as numerous other phenomena and categories essential to social knowledge are rooted and result from cross border interconnections. Globalisation does not only erode and blur space but questions the validity and relevance of tradi-

tional delimitations. Thus, the transnational character of social phenomena requires reconceptualisations that are theoretically and methodologically challenging. Some of these are due to the fact that the global (be it institution, process, discursive practice) simultaneously transcends national settings and resides in national territories and institutions (Sassen: 2007). Others originate in the fact that physical and social spaces multiply and combine in a blend that compels researchers to new conceptual definings and redefinings because of a reality that, instead of being factual and firm, is kaleidoscopic and delineated by fluid and dynamic polarities: virtual-real, local-global, private-public, center-periphery, recipient-participant, opportunity-risks, individual benefits-social commitments (Chiribuca, 2010).

Eventually, more than in the case of other themes, the studies having as subject the internet and the risks online need a comparative approach and the cross-national research is somehow a natural choice as concerns the methodological options. On one side, with the goal of identifying similarity and variance in cases, the research validity is dependent on the use of equivalent instruments and definitions to measure constructs (Mills et al., 2006). At least when quantitative methods are involved, the construct equivalence – capacity of the instrument to measure the same latent trait across all cases – is considered a core/key dimension of the validity. On the other side, the success in achieving the construct equivalence most often means a failure in collecting data able to provide contextual relevance. The tension and inherently opposition between standardization and contextual relevance is highlighted by the fact that contextualisation relies on insider knowledge, while generalization depends on outsider knowledge (Livingstone, 2003).

In what concerns the online risks topic, there are at least two examples which point out the content of the problem and the difficulty to find proper and balanced methodological solutions. The first one questions the epistemological realism of the categories identified and used in order to assess the range and intensity of children's exposure to risks. Many of the facts, contents, actions or consequences tagged as risks (see table 2) remain dependent not only on etic definitions, agreed by the community of experts and researchers, but also on emic positions and understandings shared by the research subjects who eventually may agree or not upon the terms and definitions proposed by experts. As the risk is twofold anchored in a factual and a normative dimension with a very fragile border between them, the risk assessment cannot be fully cleared by constructivist inclusion. Therefore, the construct equivalence would remain more a desiderate, a wishfull thinking, rather than a reality.

The second example addresses another source of biases which affect the data even if the instruments of research are properly standardized. The context dependency is involved again, not as a pre-requisite for meaningful insights related to analysis and outputs, but as a source of error in the process of data collection. This is the case of the presence in the room of another person while the questionnaire is



applied. Children's exposure to risks while being online is a particularly sensitive topic, that is why the EU Kids Online II survey was administered in the child's home, allowing parents, other adults or children to be around. Some sections were interviewer administered, while the others- those concerning the delicate questions- were compiled in a self-completion questionnaire. The latter method of data gathering and the most representative in what concerns the actual risky and harmful online experiences of the children allowed more than half of the respondent's parents to be around (51%); a further almost 9% of the children had another adult in the vicinity, and around 12% had another child around. Only 42% of the children were alone in the room while filling the self-completion sections. Even though the percentage of parents who tried to involve themselves in the child interview was fairly low (overall, almost 87% of the parents showed no or little attempt to get involved) the actual presence of someone else in the room generated statistically significant differences in children's reported answers, especially in what concerns older children. So, for almost all the risks considered, regardless the type (commercial, sexual, aggressive, values) or the children status (recipient, participant, actor) the exposure to risks was significantly underestimated when the questionnaires were completed in the presence of someone else.

Another important issue for current researches on internet and risks online resides in the fact that the Internet as communication medium is extremely dynamic in terms of content, users, services, practices of use and effects. It is enough to mention that a study launched and carried out less than 10 years ago would not include any reference to Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, or many other agents who did not exist until soon, and are impossible to be ignored today. Classifications defined for previous generations of Internet users cannot be automatically applied as a template for more studies on current Internet users, even if the same measures/items are employed (Helsper, Gerber, 2012). Most research regarding online technologies is still focused on the fixed internet. But new, interactive, online media accessed via mobile, games console, convergent devices, etc raise new questions and challenges for research and policy. The change in what the Internet is becomes even more problematic because of inequalities of access objectivated in different stages of diffusion and use not only between countries, but also between groups who might be otherwise rather homogeneous at the country level. Studying the internet as a single unit might be a source of major fallacies, considering it as multiple or dynamic units rise a lot of other methodological questions difficult to sort out.

## **Conclusions**

Without doubts, the internet has become in the last years one of the most important instances for children's education, entertainment and social interactions. Children spent online a time almost equal with a usual part time job (17.1 hours a

week in 2012) and even though they are very skilled in using new technology, highly creative and innovative in terms of communication and education, when it comes to risks they are still considered very vulnerable to the harmful contents and contacts provided by the internet. Neither ignoring the risks associated with internet use, nor controlling and restricting children's online opportunities does represent an entirely acceptable or realist option for parents, teachers and policy makers. Since research shows that the experience of online opportunities and risks appears to be strongly positively related, a more balanced and realistic approach would be grounded on accurate and appropriate identification of the online risks along with reliable methodologies to assess the extension and intensity of children's exposure to harmful contents provided through internet. With this goal set as a starting point, the paper outlined and discussed a part of theoretical and methodological issues which have to be considered when children's online risks are investigated: challenges related to appropriate definition of the investigated population and the choices of the units of analysis, the relevance of comparative approaches and cross-national researches, the specificity of the internet in terms of rhythm and depth/range of change.

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