

## Approaches to Cross-National Analysis: The *EU Kids Online* Project

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### Abstract

This article draws mainly on the first nine months of the project *EU Kids Online*, an 21-country<sup>1</sup> study evaluating European research on children's experience of the Internet. The project is funded<sup>2</sup> by the EC's *Safer Internet Plus Programme*. Although this is work-in-progress, and the first formal reports only appeared on the website in the autumn<sup>3</sup>, there is already enough material and experience from the project to provide some first reflections for any other research that plans to consider cross-national analysis. The areas of the project<sup>4</sup> that will be considered in this article are: the goal of charting empirical studies conducted in this area of research, the analysis of factors shaping why certain types of research are conducted in certain countries and, the strategies involved in the comparative evaluation of the actual data. Since one working group within COST298 is also covering these issues, albeit in relation to research on the Internet in general, the final section of the article reflects on synergies, similarities and differences between the two projects.

### Charting a field of study

The first task involved mapping research in this field within the participating countries. Here the aim was to chart the pattern of available data, including where there is a preponderance of material and where there are gaps. In the course of doing so, we would create a repository, a searchable database, containing the details of projects that would then serve as a general resource for researchers in this field and an output from the project in its own right.

The first step involved scoping the project in terms of specifying what types of studies we wanted to document. Any charting exercise entails a process of drawing boundaries, making decisions about what to include and exclude, setting cut off points and providing definitions<sup>5</sup>. One simply has to bear these boundaries in mind when evaluating the patterns that emerge from this process.

Ultimately we decided to consider those research projects that had been carried out since 2000 that examined children's experience of the Internet, including studies of parents' and teachers' accounts in as

<sup>1</sup> Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, The Netherlands and The United Kingdom.

<sup>2</sup> This funding pays for the coordinators of the network, in this case based at the London School of Economics, and it pays for the meetings. As in the COST system, much of the data collection and analysis by other participants is not funded.

<sup>3</sup> For more details see [www.eukidsonline.net](http://www.eukidsonline.net). The three reports that became available are Staksrud et al (2007), Hasebrink et al (2007) and Lobe et al. (2007)

The researchers involved in the coordination of the study are Sonia Livingstone, Leslie Haddon and Panayiota Tsatsou.

<sup>4</sup> *The EU Kids Online* project also has a component writing a methodological literature review (Lobe et al, 2007), also available in the autumn, and best practice guide relating to the research on children, research on Internet use and cross-national comparisons.

<sup>5</sup> An example here would be who to count as being a child. In this particular study, we followed the common legal definition, specifying someone under 18 years old.

far as they commented upon or were relevant for children's online experiences<sup>6</sup>. Since the aim was to chart what was publicly available, the search excluded proprietary commercial research if the details were not in the public domain. In countries where a good deal of research existed, we prioritised searching for the more recent studies. If there were fewer studies in other countries, we would be more likely to consider documenting doctorate and masters theses in this field at an earlier stage in the collection process<sup>7</sup>.

The original project outline noted that one challenge to providing a comprehensive account is that members of the team came from a range of disciplines and had different types of familiarity with the subject matter. But they were generally very competent researchers and the workshops as well as communications in between meetings provided an opportunity to share experiences in this respect and try to develop some common strategies. Since other work packages in the project required the input from this charting exercise at early stage, we took January 2007 as the deadline for our initial first analysis of the field. At that point we had collected 235 studies from the 18 countries that were at that stage participating in the project, enabling us to comment tentatively upon the patterns existing at that stage<sup>8</sup>.

For anyone intending to carry out such as charting exercise in their own field of study, a number of lessons were learnt in this process of collection and documentation.

- A number of practical decisions had to be taken as team members sometimes discovered that, however much we attempted to anticipate all possibilities in advance, there was more than one way to code the details of a project. For example, multinational studies could be coded once in a section for such studies and/or they could be listed under each country<sup>9</sup>. Inevitably grey areas were also thrown up, even when great care was taken over the scoping of the study. For example, when some studies had really only very little on the topic of children and the Internet we decided they were not worth including.
- The amount of publicly available information that exists about studies varied and there were sometimes difficulties with tracking down missing information. In this respect, the most common problem was that the findings of studies were reported without sufficient details of their methodology (e.g. the nature of the sample). *EU Kids Online* team members tried to find the missing information (e.g. sending emails to the relevant researchers asking for details) but this was sometimes not successful, or else took time – a scarce resource in the project.

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<sup>6</sup> For example, the EU Kids Online study included research on parents competence, their regulation of children's internet use, their awareness of risks - amongst other things.

<sup>7</sup> One issue that emerged in group discussion was that, for example, the number of years spent studying for a Masters degree varied by country, with implications for the amount of depth-in research.

<sup>8</sup> The aim is to continue collecting data about research project throughout the 3-years of *EU Kids Online*, and update our reflections on these patterns at the end of the project.

<sup>9</sup> This is an example of a choice that was even more complex. In some studies identical research is carried out in several countries, in other studies, the national teams add on extra national research questions. To do justice to this, we coded multinational studies once, but then coded them in addition under the country heading if national researchers had conducted extra research or added extra analysis at the same time as conducting the agreed international research and levels of analysis.

- In the process of compiling details of projects, various factors affected the ease of finding the relevant research. One was the degree to which (at least some) information about such research is centralised. For instance, in Greece one site provided such a useful starting point for charting national research. In UK, the national research council had provided over 10 years of funding for research on ICTs in general, but in other countries there had been no such funding. In addition to searching online, national teams also sought the information by word of mouth, but the success of this was partly influenced by the degree to which there were larger or smaller research communities in the countries concerned<sup>10</sup>.

We can now turn briefly to some examples of patterns observed within the studies collected so far. Sometimes it was already clear why certain patterns existed as we inspected the studies collected. As can be seen in Table 1, most studies were single country studies, even if there some EC funded multinational studies in the field. There was quite a large imbalance of Internet research across countries in general, as well as considerable variation in research on particular topics of interest to us such as risks to children and Internet safety.

**Table 1: Number of single country studies and total studies by country<sup>11</sup>**

	AT	BE	BG	CZ	DK	EE	FR	DE	EL	IS	NO	PL	PT	SL	ES	SE	NL	UK	N
Single country studies	13	22	3	6	10	10	4	24	22	1	8	5	10	5	6	18	8	41	216
Total studies	21	33	7	12	19	17	15	33	29	7	17	12	19	11	14	27	15	50	

A number of the studies, especially quantitative ones, were of ICTs in general, more often the Internet in general and occasionally children in general. But each included some data relating specifically to children and Internet. The inclusion of these types of study boosted the coverage of our basic knowledge of children's access and usage since there were the more commonly asked questions in these surveys. Methodologically quantitative studies clearly dominated, followed by ones combining qualitative and quantitative methods. However, qualitative studies predominated in certain areas of research (e.g. interpreting data online, creating content, children's frustrations and concerns, strategies for finding material online, online learning, identity play and social networking).

<sup>10</sup> For example, in Denmark and Poland many of the relevant researchers were in the team or known to them. In the Czech Republic one of the key researchers in the field was in one of participating universities, but tracing other research was more problematic as an unsuccessful approach to the Czech Ministry of Informatics revealed. The Czech national team described the field as 'chaotic' in this respect. In Belgium, the research is divided by language groups, but we were fortunate in this respect in terms of having both Flemish- and French-speaking participants in EU Kids Online who could cover their respective research communities.

<sup>11</sup> Total studies means single country studies plus multi-country studies. The same multi-country study may clearly cover a number of the countries list here.

Topical issues changed over time (e.g. chatrooms are now receiving less attention, partly because children use them less). Overall, there was less research on younger children, despite the fact that the age of Internet access is falling. Partly, there was more data on older teenagers because they are included in surveys of the general population (e.g. surveys starting at age 14 or 15). The proportion of commercial studies varied by country. In some there was very little commercial research in the public domain, whereas in some more of these studies were published.

### **The social shaping of research**

A second strand to this project involved an analysis of the social shaping of research: why do different amounts of research exist in different countries and why are some research questions followed up in some countries more than others? This part of the project aims to explore the differences and similarities in national histories of interest in and concerns about children and the Internet. Obviously one key interest of European policy makers in this field concerns how much research is common across countries versus how much is country specific. But this question of social shaping is also of academic interest given that this issue is very rarely addressed, at least in any sustained manner. Since this will be the last of the reports from the project we have at this stage only made a start in considering the factors involved.

The project team initially identified some of the influences that we might consider investigating. The goal was then to develop systematically a range of questions one would need to ask about these research histories for each country and then explore what people or sources could contribute to answering such questions. Once again, the challenge is working out how to investigate this topic, trying out strategies to see both what is more fruitful but also evaluating how much effort was involved given that this, like any, project has limited time resources.

Starting with some of the processes within the researcher community, what is researched clearly reflects the particular interests of researchers. But looking more broadly it is influenced by a wider research context, including the histories of (social science and related) research in general, the methodologies favoured in different institutions or even countries, the nature and wider interests of the disciplines involved in research and questions of available funding.

Since the research community does not operate in isolation, we would have to consider the national histories of interest in and concern about the Internet in general as well as about children and the Internet in particular. This in turn would lead us to ask whether specific events, national lobbying by certain groups, the nature of coverage in the national media, national policy decisions, educational activities, etc., had had some bearing on the research that took place. To a certain extent, once you start this activity of identifying

possible factors at work and discussing the experiences in different countries, the task then became one of prioritising what to cover in more depth.

As in the charting exercise, the project members are discovering how to act as 'detectives', piecing together the relevant information, including the task of identifying relevant sources and channels.

- For example, one of the relatively more straightforward tasks is gathering data on the diffusion of the Internet in different countries. But then we decided that we also needed to investigate legal issues (e.g. the legal age of children for specific purposes, the legal boundaries of what can be researched<sup>12</sup>) or how the educational system is organised. While this type of information can be tracked down there is still the task of organising this into typologies in order to make more systematic comparisons.
- If we consider the funding issue, it became clear that it can be difficult to find out how decisions are made. Who is in a position to comment on this process as an informed observer? How transparent are the processes in national research councils? How does one investigate commercial processes which may be even less visible? Not only is there the problem of finding out about these processes but there is the question of what type of account we actually write, with what credibility?
- As a third example of the considerations we face, we were interested in media coverage of children and the Internet. Some countries, such as the UK, have national databases of at least press coverage (i.e. Nexis-Lexis) or else the research teams in *EU Kids Online* had already constructed their own databases. In such countries the first step of searching for material was at least relatively more straightforward, but in other countries where no such databases existed there was not the same starting point.

Since we are still in the beginning phase of this part of the project, the following observations are just some 'tasters' of the material that we may decide to develop.

In terms of academic disciplines, a summary of Belgian research noted that media and communications tended to deal with access to the Internet, use, skills and consequences; sociological studies were more interested in social inequality, stratification, social pressures relating to the internet; and pedagogy dealt mainly with risks and strategies to cope with this. However, at this stage it is not clear that the same disciplines have identical foci in the different countries. Hence, this is an interesting starting point but it needs to be explored further. Still using the Belgian example, French speaking Wallonia has a tradition of being critical to the media, looking at the social impacts of media, looking how we are influenced by the media – but often within a theoretical discussion. In contrast, the Flemish equivalent media departments

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<sup>12</sup> For example, the Polish team pointed out that there are laws specifying what types of research one cannot do with children

have worked with the private sector, look at such matters as uses and gratifications, digital divides, cultivation analysis and in the course of this have generated far more empirical data as regards Flanders.

Turning to funding, while a majority of studies are, as in the other countries, publicly funded (e.g. national research councils, the Government, the industry regulator, etc.) it is clear that in UK one of the factors contributing to the relative wealth of research on children and the Internet is also commercial research as well as research by Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), especially on risk issues. But the very active NGOs, such as charities, have not only funded some projects themselves but have managed to win the support of some commercial companies to fund some studies. One question when we write the report in this area is how to handle examples of processes which may turn out to apply to one or only a few countries.

As regards Internet adoption itself, the teams in countries such as Bulgaria and the Czech Republic noted that the lack of research was probably in part related to the relatively slower diffusion of the Internet compared to other parts of Europe. This was also reflected in the fact that media coverage of the Internet was more limited. Moreover, in these and some other participating countries (e.g. Greece, Bulgaria, Belgium) the specific question of Internet 'risks' to children (e.g. relating to content viewable, contact with strangers, commercial exploitation and invasion of privacy) was only just starting to be discussed and hence there was very little research on this topic.

Clearly this part of the project is at the point of developing its ideas further, including through group discussions and reflecting on observations raised by its members. The next stage involves specifying the contents of national reports that we would like each team to write. Once everyone can see what is described in other countries we will be in a better position to enhance these early reflections on the processes shaping research.

### **Comparative analysis**

The third strand of the project entails making sense of the different patterns of findings within the different countries. 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 have been identified and what explains these? In contrast, where is there variation and how is this to be explained? To put this in terms of Kohn's framework (1989) we are looking at both countries as units of analysis, trying to explain similarities and differences, and countries as case studies to evaluate more general hypotheses.

To put this part of the project into context, existing cross-national studies, especially surveys, present statistics comparing national patterns but they often do not attempt to explain why these patterns exist. In studies which do try to explain patterns, this is often done by referring to some other data from the same datasets (Haddon, 1998). But in this project we wanted to go a step further to consider influences that may not be captured in other parts of the same database, looking to other national and international surveys for further evidence. We also wanted to look at ways to seek out and manage 'softer' data, including background information about countries concerned. In this respect, there is some overlap with the approach taken in the analysis of the social shaping of research part of the project, as outlined above.

For practical purposes, this part of the project started with a three-country analysis covering Poland, Portugal and the UK. Following the experience of a previous comparative study (Livingstone and Bovill, 2001) it was felt to be easier to establish procedures and principles of analysis with a limited number of countries before rolling these out to all 18 countries. Of course, one has to think through the implications of picking particular countries as the starting point. For example, some of the data we use may be available in these countries but not necessarily in others. Some themes may be less likely to emerge because they were not prevalent in these particular countries, but might be in others.

One of the key reasons for choosing the above three countries, apart from the fact that they conveniently represented central, southern and western Europe, is that the two multi-country surveys that had examined children and the Internet - *Eurobarometer* (2006) and *Mediapro* (2006) – had both covered Poland, Portugal and the UK. Therefore, we had two datasets with comparable questions<sup>13</sup>. As a validation exercise, the national teams then reflected on the plausibility of the results from these two sources, especially by comparing the findings against any existing national research that had asked related questions.

If we take a particular example currently being considered, it is clear from a variety of statistics within the *Eurobarometer* survey that parents have different perceptions of Internet risks across these countries. Hence we are considering a variety of potential contributory factors as well as different ways of trying to measure them. Some of these are outlined below in order to demonstrate the variety of strategies that we are using.

- In some cases, we can to an extent draw upon other statistic sources. Examples would be measures of Internet diffusion in the different countries (noted also in the previous section), information about more general values and attitudes from the Social Values survey, and some data on comparative risk perceptions asked within other Internet surveys.

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<sup>13</sup> However, there were some problems with these studies. The *Mediapro* data had not always been collected in the same way in the different countries. The *Eurobarometer* study may have been interested in parents roles in relation to children and the Internet and parents as informants on children's behaviour. But what it actually covered was 'carers', which included older siblings as well as parents.

- To elaborate a little, in relation to the last point, there is the question of whether people in some countries more than others are more concerned about potential risks to children, or risks associated with ICTs (e.g. TV), so their awareness of Internet risks may in part be an extension of this wider concern. In this instance, and in relation to a number of other factors we look at, we may well not simply rely on one set of statistics, but rather draw on a range of evidence to mount an argument.
- Taking another example, we want to examine parents' views on children and parenthood. In different countries, how far do parents think that monitoring their children's socialising on the Internet is their responsibility versus the responsibility of other agencies? Here we might, as in the case of social values, look to the research outside the field of ICTs, in this case the literature on comparative parenting.
- Other potential influences include that of NGOs (as lobbying and awareness raising bodies) and the policies of (Internet Service Providers (ISPs) in the different countries (e.g. in terms of how much their literature and the organisation of their access draws attention to Internet risks). Some of this can be gleaned from looking at the ISP's literature or the campaigns of NGOs (which comes out in the press coverage). But the national teams have also attempted to set up national advisory panels of relevant stakeholders (including NGOs and ISPs) and so some of the relevant information for writing national reports can be found through talking with these bodies.

Turning to some evidence that we already considered, from surveying the press databases it is already clear that media coverage of Internet risks is very different within the different countries. There is much more material on this in the UK and correspondingly much greater parental awareness of risks, as shown in the *Eurobarometer* survey. This in part reflects the greater visibility and activity of NGOs in the UK combined with the organisational framework provided by the Home Office Task Force on this topic – a body unique in Europe.

If we look at legislation and policing, in the UK case there are a range of laws (and ambiguities in those laws) relating to paedophiles, for example. An official list of convicted paedophiles is maintained which employers have to check when recruiting staff to work with children. Special police units exist to monitor the Internet for images of children used in pornography and they have named police operations when they make an effort to find paedophile rings. Hence there is a good deal of regulation and implementation of that regulation in this field, somewhat more so than in Poland and much more so than in Portugal.

At this moment in time we are still reflecting on the lessons to be learnt from the process of comparing the 3 countries, before we make decisions about which strategies to use and which elements to compare in the larger 18 country study. But there is enough to show the direction in which this part of the project is going, and the type of analyses that will come out of it.



### Implications for COST298

One of the aims of reporting the *EU Kids Online* research at this point in time is to provide some indication of the types of considerations and choices one has to face when attempting to break new ground in international comparative analysis and provide some initial and broad indications of the type of material it can generate. As an example of how these might inform other research, but how different choices may have to be made, this last section considers the workgroup within COST298 looking at *The Multiple Cultures of the European Information Society*<sup>14</sup>.

In fact, this latter project shared some of the same goals as *EU Kids Online*, reflecting the fact that the author was in both. As part of the initial process for acquiring COST funding the proposed Memorandum of Understanding indicated that part of the COST298 project would consider charting the field of broadband research, offering some explanations for the patterns of research and exploring some of the patterns found in the data. In other words, it promised to consider the three elements outlined in this article. However, the thinking behind this was elaborated far further into a full-blown project with the collaboration of Sonia Livingstone<sup>15</sup> when *EU Kids Online* was subsequently formulated.

But if they share some similar goals, the differences between COST298 and *EU Kids Online* inevitably lead to some different decisions (and the same would probably be true of any other study attempting the equivalent comparative analysis). First the resources are different. All of the parts of *EU Kids Online* project address the cross-national analysis in one way or another, whereas it is dealt with by only one subgroup with COST298. That subgroup also has other goals, such as considering issues about digital divides in relation to broadband, making sense of the different rates of adoption and charting national discourses about the Internet. And the COST298 work is entirely voluntary, whereas at least the coordinating institution is (partly) funded in *EU Kids Online*. This makes a vast amount of difference to the amount of work - collection and analysis - that can be undertaken. Lastly, the focus of the COST298 subgroup is not specifically research on children but rather 'broadband' more generally, which potentially covers a far greater body of research.

Like *EU Kids Online*, COST298 has set up and started to fill a database of research (which will be a public resource for the research community). This will provide at least some empirical basis for charting the material that exists, and it has been partly based on the insights learnt from developing the *EU Kids Online* database. But it is also clear that the fewer resources and the wider field covered mean that it will be far less comprehensive than the more focused *EU Kids Online* repository. Hence in COST298 we had to take different decisions and open up access to our database at an early stage in order to allow people to make

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<sup>14</sup> In the previous action COST269, this group had considered the potential cultural factors shaping national variation in people's experience of information and communication technologies (see Thomas 2005, and more generally Haddon, 2005).

<sup>15</sup> For a previous appraisal of the literature on cross-national studies, see Livingstone, 2003.

their own entries directly. It also became important to use opportunities, like COST298's Moscow conference<sup>16</sup>, to gather data about studies when an audience informed about these is actually present. Even adopting these strategies, the analysis of the database collected will have to be a little more tentative, probably asking where we might expect or where we might see evidence of processes similar to or dissimilar from those identified in the *EU Kids Online* reports. This is an illustration of how one practical way forward has been to build on the experiences and insights from *EU kids Online*, to search for synergies and develop complementary forms of analysis.

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