

# Comparing online risks faced by European children: Reflections on youthful internet use in Britain, Germany and Spain<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

European research and policy is paying growing attention to the risks faced by children as they use the internet. The EU Kids Online network has recently scoped the available findings, comparing research across 21 European countries in order to identify both cross-national similarities and differences across Europe. This article first presents the justification and methodology for a cross-national approach, then overviews the key findings. On the basis of a classification of countries according to children's internet use and risk, the article then focuses on three contrasting countries: Britain (classified as high use, high risk), Germany (classified as medium use, low risk) and Spain (classified as low use, medium risk). Findings and policy initiatives can thus be meaningfully compared across these countries

### Key words

Internet's use, children, online risk experiences, teenagers, EU Kids Online.

### Resum

La recerca i la política europees presten cada cop més atenció als riscos que afronten els infants quan utilitzen internet. La xarxa EU Kids Online ha analitzat recentment les conclusions disponibles comparant la recerca duta a terme en 21 països europeus per tal de determinar les semblances i les diferències. Aquest article presenta en primer lloc la justificació i la metodologia per a un enfocament internacional i a continuació analitza les conclusions més importants. A partir d'una classificació dels països segons l'ús d'internet per part dels infants i el risc que comporta, l'article se centra en tres països amb resultats diferents: el Regne Unit (ús elevat, risc alt), Alemanya (ús mitjà, risc baix) i Espanya (ús baix, mitjà). Les conclusions i les iniciatives polítiques poden ser útils quan es comparen entre aquests països.

### Paraules clau

Ús d'internet, infants, experiències de risc en línia, joves, EU Kids Online.

## Introduction: Is the internet risky for children?

Across Europe, children and young people are gaining access to the internet and online technologies at a rapid pace. Cross-national differences in children's internet use remain substantial, ranging from less than a third of children online in Greece and Bulgaria to over two thirds in Estonia and Denmark (Eurobarometer 2006). Growing public concerns about online risk in many countries often overshadow early optimism regarding the benefits of internet access for children. To understand what the internet may afford children and their families, both in terms of their education, leisure, participation and community and, more negatively, in terms of the risk of harm, this growing use of the internet and online technologies is being closely tracked by empirical research.

The EU Kids Online network asserts that a cross-national

perspective is vital to understand whether, how and why children have different experiences online in different countries.<sup>2</sup> Thus the network asks, what can be learned of the similarities and differences in children's risk experiences across 21 countries? Its work is based on the comparison of available evidence from recently completed studies, reported in various languages. By 2008, over 400 studies had been identified, coded and compared within the network (see Hasebrink, Livingstone, & Haddon 2008). Focusing on three exemplar countries, this article highlights some of the key findings in order to draw out the implications for European research and policy.

But first, a note of caution is necessary. Most of the available evidence concerns teenagers rather than younger children. Most of it derives from surveys of self-reported risk of harm rather than direct evidence of harm. And there are many ques-

tions entering the policy agenda that have not yet been addressed by social science research (Staksrud, Livingstone, & Haddon 2007). We know most, therefore, about the incidence and demography of risky experiences among online teenagers – in other words, about the activities and encounters which may be associated with a probability of harm. Asking about risky experiences raises some difficult methodological issues also (see Lobe, Livingstone, & Haddon 2007). For example, children and adults do not always agree on definitions - to children, making new friends or disclosing personal information online is an opportunity to extend their social network, but to adults, especially parents, it is regarded as risky.

Although risks are particularly difficult to define in culturally-consensual ways, and they are difficult to research in methodologically-rigorous and ethically-responsible ways, a classification of 12 categories of risk was proposed by Hasebrink et al (2008) as likely to be relevant across Europe (and beyond):

This distinguishes content risks, in which the child is a recipient of unwelcome or inappropriate mass communication, from contact risks, in which the child is a participant of risky peer or personal communication, and both are further distinguished from a third category, that of conduct risk in which the child is positioned as an actor, contributing to or producing risky content or contact.

The variety of risks can be further categorised in terms of the motivations of online producers – notably commercial, aggressive, sexual and values-related motivations – resulting in the classification shown below. Although this does not address the ambiguity in distinguishing risks from opportunities discussed earlier, it does usefully organise the available research evidence on the incidence of online risk experiences into the following twelve cells.

As noted above, some of these cells contain rather little research evidence. The analysis that follows concentrates pri-

marily on the areas where research has been conducted in many if not all European countries (as shaded grey in Table 1).

### Classifying European countries by online risks for children

Our strategy was first to note the degree of cross-national similarity before addressing differences. Significantly, the overall rank order of risks appeared more or less common across the 21 countries whose findings have been compared by the EU Kids Online network. Thus, notwithstanding cross-national variations, it appears that:

- giving out personal information is the most common risk (approximately half of online teenagers);
- seeing pornography is the second most common risk at around 4 in 10 across Europe;
- seeing violent or hateful content is third most common risk (at approx one third of teens);
- being bullied/harassed/stalked affects around 1 in 5 or 6 teens online;
- receiving unwanted sexual comments is experienced by between 1 in 10 teens (Germany, Ireland, Portugal) but closer to 1 in 3 or 4 teens in Iceland, Norway, UK and Sweden, rising 1 in 2 in Poland;
- meeting an online contact offline is the least common but arguably most dangerous risk, showing considerable consistency in the figures across Europe at around 9% (1 in 11) online teens going to such meetings, rising to 1 in 5 in Poland, Sweden and the Czech Republic.

Moreover, in several countries, a degree of distress or feeling uncomfortable or threatened was reported by 15%-20% of online teens, suggesting, perhaps, the proportion for whom risk

**Table 1: A classification of online risks to children**

	<b>Commercial</b>	<b>Aggressive</b>	<b>Sexual</b>	<b>Values</b>
<b>Content</b> <i>-Child as a recipient</i>	Advertising, spam, sponsorship	Violent/ hateful content	Pornographic or unwelcome sexual content	Racism, biased or misleading info/ advice (e.g. drugs)
<b>Contact</b> <i>- Child as a participant</i>	Tracking/ harvesting personal info	Being bullied, stalked or harassed	Meeting strangers, being groomed	Self-harm, unwelcome persuasion
<b>Conduct</b> <i>- Child as an actor</i>	Gambling, hacking, illegal downloads	Bullying or harassing another	Creating and uploading porn material	Providing advice e.g. suicide/pro-anorexic chat

Source: EU Kids Online (Hasebrink, Livingstone and Haddon 2008)

poses a degree of harm. Findings from the pan-European Eurobarometer survey (2006) suggest that, according to their parents, children encounter more online risk through home than school use (though this may be because parents know little of their children's use at school). However, among those children who use the internet in an internet café or at a friend's house, these are also risky locations, according to parents (especially compared with school use).

Not all children's experiences are the same, of course. Our review of studies conducted in different countries suggested a series of demographic differences which, for the most part, are fairly similar across Europe. Specifically, use of the internet increases with age, at least up until the mid teens, when usage may peak. While this trend holds across Europe, in high use countries, children get online younger and this has implications for risk – notable since high risk countries (see later) include low and high use countries. Generally, it seems that older teenagers encounter more online risks than younger children, though the question of how younger children cope with online risk remains little researched. In almost all countries, higher SES households are more likely to provide their children with access to the internet, this resulting in greater or more frequent use among more advantaged children. It also appears that lower class children are more exposed to risk online.

The findings also suggest that boys use the internet for longer and in more places than girls do, and that girls and boys differ in the online activities they engage in: girls prefer activities that involve communication, content creation and collaboration; boys prefer competition, consumption and action. There are also gender differences in risk: boys appear more likely to seek out offensive or violent content, to access pornographic content or be sent links to pornographic websites, to meet somebody offline that they have met online and to give out personal information; girls appear more likely to be upset by offensive, violent and pornographic material, to chat online with strangers, to receive unwanted sexual comments and to be asked for personal information but to be wary of providing it to strangers; both boys and girls are at risk of online harassment and bullying.

The differences identified across countries were also substantial. These were used to construct a classification of countries in terms of children's online use and risk. Although generally European children are gaining access to the internet, differences in access and use remain, enabling a country classification based on the percentage of children who use the internet. Also striking is the diversity of online risk figures obtained across countries, suggesting a classification of countries based on the likelihood of children's experiencing online risk. Putting these two classifications together produced Table 2.

This classification suggests the following points:

- high use of the internet is rarely if ever associated with low risk;
- low use of the internet may be associated with high risk but not vice versa;

**Table 2: A classification of countries by online risk to children**

Online risk	Children's internet use		
	Low	Medium	High
Low	Cyprus Italy	France Germany	
Medium	Greece Portugal Spain	Austria Ireland	Belgium Denmark Sweden
High	Bulgaria	Poland Slovenia Czech Republic	Estonia The Netherlands Norway UK

Source: Hasebrink, Livingstone and Haddon (2008)

- high use, high risk countries are, for the most part, wealthy Northern European countries;
- medium use, high risk situations are characteristic of new entrants to the EC;
- Southern European countries tend to be relatively lower in risk, though there are differences among them.

Putting this another way around, we might conclude that, as a broad generality:

- Northern European countries tend to be "high use, high risk";
- Southern European countries tend to be "low use, variable risk";
- Eastern European countries can be characterised as "new use, new risk".

To explore and begin to explain the implications of this classification, we now examine the specific findings in three contrasting countries.

### UK – high use, high risk

In the UK, the UK Children Go Online project surveyed a national sample of 1,511 9–19 year olds in 2004, together with 906 of the parents of 9–17 year olds, finding that the vast majority of children and young people access the internet – whether at home (74%) or at school (92%). Most children and young people use it daily (41%) or weekly (42%); and only 13% are occasional users (i.e. use it less than once a week) or non-users (3%) (Livingstone & Bober 2005). Households with

children are significantly more likely to have access than others (Ofcom 2007) and by 2008, 83% of 7-16 year olds had gained internet access at home, 25% of them having access in their bedroom (ChildWise 2008). These relatively high figures for access and use do not mean that all children are 'digital natives', for some are still inexperienced or lacking in internet literacy, this being especially but not only among the minority who lack access at home (Livingstone 2008).

So, what risks do UK children encounter online? The UK Children Go Online survey of 9-19 year olds found that, among those who used the internet at least weekly, 57% had seen online porn, 31% had seen violent and 11% had seen racist content (Livingstone & Bober 2005). Further, 31% had received sexual comments online and 28% had been sent unsolicited sexual material. A third had received bullying comments online and 8% had gone to a meeting with someone first met online. Further analysis revealed that teenagers who encounter risks related to online communication tend to be more dissatisfied with their own lives and more sensation-seeking; they also tend to describe themselves as more confident online than offline and to be positive about the value of anonymous online communication (Livingstone & Helsper, 2007). It also appears that children report mixed reactions to online risks. Of those who have come into contact with pornography on the internet, 54% claim not to be bothered by it, 14% disliked what they saw and 20% were 'disgusted', 8% wished they had never seen it, though 7% thought it was interesting and 7% enjoyed it. In short, half claim to be unaffected, but a significant minority did not like it, one fifth (especially girls and younger children) claiming to have been disgusted.

Recent years have seen increased concern in the UK with cyberbullying, as offline bullying is transferred to online bullying and harassment. It seems thus far that most bullying is still primarily offline: a 2006 survey of 4772 school pupils reported that 69% pupils were bullied in past year and that half of those were physically hurt; nonetheless, 7% said they had received unpleasant or bullying emails/IM/text messages (Bullying UK, 2006). But bullying increasing occurs online also: a survey of 770 11-19 year olds found that 20% had been bullied/ via text/internet/email and that 73% knew the person, though for 26% this was by a stranger; further, 10% had a photo taken of them that made them feel uncomfortable, embarrassed or threatened, and 17% said it was sent to others; last, 11% said they'd sent a bullying or threatening message to someone - this problem, like other online risks, is made worse insofar as children often tell no-one of these experiences (NCH/Tesco Mobile 2005).

Strikingly, for a wide range of risky experiences, parents systematically underestimate the frequency with which their children encounter such risks. Or, to put this rather more cautiously, for we cannot know 'the truth' of the matter, children report considerably higher levels of problematic online experiences than is recognised by their parents. For example, nearly half (46%) of 9-19 year-olds who go online at least once a week

say that they have given out personal information while only 5% of parents think their child has given out such information. Similarly, although as we saw above, 57% of these young people have come into contact with pornography on the internet, only 16% of their parents believe this to have occurred. And again, while one in three say they have received nasty or sexual comments online, only 7% of parents think that their child has received sexual comments, and only 4% think that their child has been bullied online (Livingstone & Bober 2005).

One difficulty here is that children and young people claim greater online self-efficacy than do their parents: 37% consider themselves 'advanced' or 'expert' vs. 15% of parents. Thus it seems that, even in a country where the internet is well-established in most homes, parents struggle to manage – or even to know about – their children's internet use. Indeed, parental uncertainty, combined with a rapid pace of cultural change and considerable government and educational pressure to get all children online, means that the policy challenges to keep children reasonably safe online are considerable.

### Germany – medium use, low risk

Compared to the UK, German children have been less likely to access the internet. However, given the ongoing fast diffusion of online access in all European countries this difference is going to disappear since all indicators support the hypothesis that in the near future almost all children and young people will at least occasionally use the internet. According to preliminary results from the most recent representative survey among 12-19 year olds (MPFS 2008), in 2008 more than four in five young people (84%) used the internet at least several times per week. 71% of the 12-19 year olds had their own computer – for the first time this figure was higher than for TV sets (61%) – 50% were able to go online in their bedroom.

One important difference between Germany (and Spain, see below) on the one hand and the UK on the other hand is related to the place where children use the internet. According to the Eurobarometer 2005/2006 Safer Internet survey, UK children (0-17 years) were clearly more likely to use the internet at school (58%) than at home (45%); for German children the opposite was true (at school: 26%, at home: 39%; Hasebrink, et al. 2008). This might indicate a less ambitious public policy in Germany, with less support for internet use at schools and other public places (Krotz & Hasebrink 2001). Alternatively, it might indicate that German parents are particularly interested in supporting their children's internet use. In any case, since it is likely that the places where children are online are connected with specific risks, the countries provide quite different conditions for potential harmful experiences and for political and pedagogical means to support a safer use of the internet.

Regarding the risks that German children encounter online, the empirical evidence is still quite weak since most empirical studies have focused on access, usage and online activities.

The lack of dedicated studies on online risks might be one reason for a relatively low level of online risk awareness and the classification of Germany as a “low risk country”. Another reason might be that in the last years the risk-related public discourse in Germany has been dominated by the issue of computer games and their influence on violent behaviours. Some cases of school-shootings were the driving forces of this particular public attention for games. Nevertheless, it can be stated that parents attribute a considerable risk potential to the internet in general and see the necessity of (primarily legal) protection. The younger the children, the higher the percentage of parents who state that protection of minors is needed (Schumacher 2005).

As for empirical evidence of online risks, in 2006 more than one third of the 12-19 years old users of chat rooms reported that they had met unpleasant people in a chat room several times (boys: 30%; girls: 44%) (MPFS 2006). In 2007 more than half of the users of chat rooms were asked by strangers for his/her address, phone number and name (boys: 47%, girls 59%). In this respect girls were much more careful than boys: only 11% (boys: 19%) provided the information, 48% did not (boys: 28%) (MPFS 2007). Gender differences were also stated in relation to problematic mobile content (Grimm & Rhein 2007). Boys were more aware of problematic films with violent, sexual or Nazi-related content than girls. In comparison to boys, girls were more aware of self-produced videos in which others are beaten up or shown in embarrassing situations.

Particular interest has been paid to risks linked to the use of mobile media. In 2007 87% of 12-19 year olds had already heard about brutal and/or pornographic videos on mobile phones (2006: 77%); 34% (2006: 33%) claimed they had heard that their friends had received such kind of content; and 9% (2006: 7%) stated that they themselves had received violent or sexual films on their mobile (MPFS 2006, 2007). The comparison between 2006 and 2007 indicates that there is increasing awareness of and also slightly increasing likelihood of contacts with brutal and/or pornographic content. Almost one third (29% in 2007) of the 12-19 year olds have already seen a film of a beating. This kind of experience is closely linked to level of education: whereas only 21% of those with the highest level of education have witnessed such a “happy slapping”, this figure was 30% for the medium level and 44% with the lowest level of education. These results indicate that “happy slapping” is a particular problem in the lower educated groups.

To sum up, the empirical evidence of online risks and related coping strategies among German children and adolescents is rather weak. A shift from studies on online access and usage to research on effects and issues of literacy is urgently needed. The existing findings point to the fact that online use is rapidly increasing. Therefore the online risks, which are known from other countries with higher internet diffusion rates, are becoming a normal part of children’s everyday life.

### Spain – low use, medium risk

According to the Networked Readiness Index (NRI) of 2007-2008, Spain occupies the 16th place out of 19 Western European Countries. ICT penetration rates in Spain are consistently lower than the average for EU countries (45% vs. 66% for all households; 55% vs. 66% for households with children), except in broadband internet access, where its penetration rate is higher and closer to the EU average (39% vs. 42%) (Eurostat 2007). With usage varying by age, research shows that 7% of 11 year olds, 26% of 14 year olds and 58% of 17 year olds use the internet (Red.es, 2007).

In 2007, 62% of children between 10 and 15 years of age accessed internet at home, 56% accessed internet at school, 33% accessed internet at a friend’s house or a relative’s house, 21% accessed it in public places, 16% in a cyber-café and 4% in other places (INE, 2007). The average amount of time spent online is fairly high – among 12-21 year olds with internet access at home, average daily use is 163 minutes (or 17 hours a week) and two in three report going online every day. Intriguingly, much of their use, especially among 15-17 year olds is after 11 pm. Among users, 37% use the internet for social interaction, 21% use it for playing and entertainment, 19% use it in order to look for information, 14% for consumer activities (purchasing goods or downloading music or games) and 8% use it in order to obtain information about employment or to look for a job. Most (70%) of these 12-21 year olds claim to have their use of the internet under control, but 21% say that they probably use it too much and 4% confess to being addicted to it (Fundación Sistema 2006).

The evidence for risks online is fairly sparse in Spain. However, research shows that although most (78%) say they would never arrange to meet in person someone they had contacted on the internet, 18% said that they would go to such a meeting. Most (91%) also say they would never send a message to someone to make him/her feel uncomfortable) or use a private data base to obtain private information, 85% claim never to visit pornographic websites, and 83% say they would not enter someone’s e-mail account or private website. Overall, only 11% express fear regarding online (Fundación Sistema 2006).

In general, sexual or violent content is not regarded by children as a potential risk, although they tend to avoid pornographic content as it is often connected to viruses. Violent content is not seen as shocking for children as they do not feel material online is any worse than the images shown daily on television. Bullying is basically understood in terms of face-to-face abuse rather than something associated with the internet. Thus children’s concerns about the internet centre less on harmful content or contact and instead on potential attacks by virus. Older children also worry about having their password stolen. However, contact with strangers provides the third perceived source of risk, especially for younger children, as they fear being misled by someone who is pretending to be some-

one else, and girls aged 12 to 14 are aware of the risk they may expose themselves to when using a webcam.

Parents are far more aware of the risks which their children may encounter whilst using the internet and it is they who impress upon their children not to give personal information or to make contact with strangers online. However, parental levels of computer literacy are quite low. Although some research suggests high use of filtering technology by Spanish families (45% of households with children aged 10-15, according to INE 2007), other research suggests much lower figures – among six focus groups with 12-17 year olds, only one teenager had a filter (Garitaonandia & Garmendia 2007). Most parental control centres on restricting the amount of time children are allowed to spend on the computer, because it is perceived as distracting them from their homework – not because parents are concerned about the nature of children's online activities.

### Implications for research and policy

In Western thinking about childhood, risk anxiety has become 'a constant and pervasive feature of everyday consciousness' (Jackson & Scott 1999: 88). Such anxiety is undoubtedly reflected in European parents concerns about their children's use of the internet and this in turn potentially undermines the aim of European policy regarding the Information Society, namely to encourage greater use of the internet by everyone.<sup>3</sup> Thus the issue of internet safety awareness and risk prevention is becoming more prominent on the public policy agenda across Europe. This in turn must be grounded in empirical research, as this provides a realistic assessment of the degree and nature of actual risk facing children and young people as they go online.

This article reports on the classification of types of online risk developed by the EU Kids Online network, using this to overview the available empirical evidence. This reveals, first, that some kinds of risk that merit policy attention have been very little researched – commercial risks, for example, or the risks associated with self-harm or suicide websites. These neglected risks, plus newer risks associated for example with the spread of mobile technology and the emergence of cyberbullying, are all priorities for the future research agenda, along with the imperative of updating existing evidence regarding risks of aggressive or sexual content and contact. In countries where evidence is sparse – including Germany and Spain – this is a particular priority.<sup>4</sup> Second, it can be concluded that, for the cases in which research has been conducted in most countries, there are some common features of the online experience across Europe. The rank ordering of risks presented above – ranging from the very common experience of disclosing personal information to the relatively rare experience of going to a meeting with a contact first encountered online – is similar in each country. Third, it appears that there are some significant

cross-national variations in the experience of online risk, this inviting detailed examination of the conditions of internet use in different countries.

This article has presented the UK as a society where high use leads both to considerable online opportunities for children but also the experience of relatively high levels of online risk. It seems that, given an established culture of going online, the experience of risks has become commonplace precisely because so many have gained confidence in exploring the contents and services afforded by the internet. The UK Children Go Online project found that the more opportunities they take up, the more risks, they encounter and vice versa (Livingstone & Helsper, in press). Several factors explain this picture: first, a vast amount of material is available online in the English language beyond that produced by the UK; further, by comparison with many other European countries, the UK education system has long and vigorously promoted internet access and use in all schools, often ahead of home access (Krotz & Hasebrink 2001).<sup>5</sup>

If such a positive correlation between opportunities and risks exists in other countries also, this will complicate policy interventions, since attempts to increase online opportunities (education, participation, creativity, etc) may increase risks, while attempts to prevent risks often work through limiting use and thus restricting opportunities (Livingstone & Helsper, in press). However, at present, levels of online risk are lower in many European countries, including Spain and Germany. As the classification of countries presented in Table 2 shows, there is no necessary relation between amount of use and amount of risk, though it may be predicted that as levels of internet use increase in Spain and Germany, among others, children's encounter with online risk is likely to increase.

Striking as an absence in our review of empirical research is the question of coping: although there is some sporadic information available about the array of coping strategies children employ when faced with online risk (Eurobarometer 2007), these are not yet systematically studied and nor, significantly, is their effectiveness evaluated (Staksrud & Livingstone, in press). One fairly common response, for many children, is to turn to friends when something goes wrong on the internet; turning to parents for guidance is characteristic only of young children. One reason children report is their fear that parents will restrict their use of the internet if they reveal any problems.

Cross-national research also reveals differences in parental strategies of mediating their children's use of the internet. Analysis of the Eurobarometer survey also showed that, across countries, those in which a higher percentage of parents claim their children have encountered harmful content tend also to be those in which parents estimate their children to have a lower ability to cope with these potentially harmful encounters (Hasebrink, Livingstone, & Haddon 2008).<sup>6</sup> This suggests that, as national experiences with online risk rise, parents become less confident that their children are prepared for such risks. This clearly suggests that awareness raising and guidance on

appropriate responses to risk – for both parents and children – remains a requirement even when the internet has become more familiar.

On the assumption that the degree of television mediation practiced reveals parents' willingness to mediate domestic media, the gap between parental mediation of television (where they feel competent) and the internet (where they may feel unskilled, even though the risks are greater) is revealed by research to be as follows. In Austria, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia and Spain, parents of internet users set rules for television more than they do for the internet. In Denmark, Estonia, Netherlands and Sweden, parents set more rules for the internet than for television. In Belgium, Germany, Greece, Ireland and the UK, parental rules are more or less equivalent. In short, in many high use countries, parents mediate the internet more than they do television. In low use countries, by contrast, they are more likely to mediate television – suggesting a regulation gap in low use countries (i.e. parents are evidently willing to mediate, since they do so for television, but lack either awareness or skills to mediate the internet to a similar degree).

Adding to the public agenda regarding children's internet use is the recent recognition that children are not only, on occasion, victims of risky encounters but that they may also be the perpetrators. Cyberbullying especially has risen fast up the agenda of concerns among parents and politicians. In the UK, a body of empirical research already informs and guides the policy interventions underway in schools to attempt to raise awareness and reduce cyberbullying. In Germany, with its relatively lower diffusion of online access and usage, the public discourse on potential risks is still dominated by content risks, especially those related to violence (- again a contrast with the UK, where the content risks that capture public attention are primarily concerned with pornography). Here European policy can usefully learn from research in America where recent findings reveal that perpetrators of online bullying or harassment are, themselves, often also the victims of abuse (Ybarra, et al, 2006); it would be false to draw a sharp line between victims and perpetrators.

As should by now be clear, there is also a difficult line to be drawn between encouraging media and public panics regarding online risks and a degree of complacency, sometimes evident among both parents and children as well as policy makers in some countries. For example, the tendency of Spanish youngsters to worry only about viruses or stolen passwords suggests the need for greater awareness of content, contact and conduct risks. On the other hand, the high anxiety of some British parents, stimulated by the tabloid press, could usefully be reduced, perhaps by raising awareness of constructive coping strategies and encouraging open conversation between parents and children. Not only is more empirical research needed, but so too is an up to date and contextually-specific awareness programme in all countries. Last, we note that in some countries<sup>8</sup> and at a European level also,<sup>9</sup> discussions are

underway by industry and regulators so that risk reduction is not left entirely to children and parents; the degree to which the online environment can itself become less risky to children has yet to be determined.

## Notes

- 1 This paper draws on the work of the 'EU Kids Online' network ([www.eukidsonline.net](http://www.eukidsonline.net)), funded by the EC Safer Internet plus Programme. We especially acknowledge network members who contributed to Work Package 3: Verónica Donoso, Cédric Fluckiger, Jos de Haan, Leslie Haddon, Lucyna Kirwil, Yiannis Laouris, Bojana Lobe, Jivka Marinova, Helen McQuillan, Kjartan Olafsson, Pille Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt, Katia Segers, José Alberto Simões, Vaclav Stetka, Liza Tsaliki, Anna Van Cauwenberge and Thomas Wold.
- 2 The EU Kids Online network examines research findings from 21 member states into how children and young people use the internet and new online technologies. This three year collaboration aims to identify comparable findings across Europe and to evaluate the social, cultural and regulatory influences affecting online opportunities and risks, in order to inform policy. It is charting available data, identifying best practice in research methodology, pinpointing gaps and identifying factors that shape the capability of European research institutions.
- 3 Married with children under 18, 34.3% use internet almost every day and 51.2% at least once a week. "Encuesta de Hábitos y Prácticas culturales en España 2006-2007", Spanish Ministry of Culture, <<http://www.mcu.es/estadisticas/index.html>>
- 4 See also "Estudio sobre seguridad en el uso de las nuevas tecnologías de la información y la comunicación entre los menores", Centro Tecnológico de la Información y la Comunicación (<<http://internetyfamilia.asturiastelecentros.com>>).
- 5 See the 2006 Ministerial Riga Declaration on ICT for an inclusive society, signed by 34 European countries, available at <[http://ec.europa.eu/information\\_society/events/ict\\_riga\\_2006/doc/declaration\\_riga.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/events/ict_riga_2006/doc/declaration_riga.pdf)>
- 6 In fact, one of the studies mentioned above (Fundación Sistema, 2006) asked some questions about risk related to patterns of behaviour, but the question was formulated in such a way that it probably led to an underestimation of the real figures. The statements which began with "I would never do ...." probably encouraged children to hide some of their behaviour whilst using the internet instead of being truthful.
- 7 In 2006, virtually all schools were online, with an average of 231 connected computers per secondary school (BESA, 2006); the current policy is to provide financial and technical support to encourage the remaining quarter of households with children to get online.
- 8 As discussed in Hasebrink et al (2008), high ability to cope is claimed for children in Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Denmark, France, Germany, and the UK; low ability to cope is claimed in Bulgaria, Estonia, Greece, Portugal and Spain (intermediate countries are

Czech Republic, Ireland, Poland, Slovenia and Sweden). Across countries, findings for coping are negatively correlated with parents' perception that their child has encountered harmful content on the internet, indicating that high risk countries tend to have low perceived coping skills and vice versa. Note that this correlation does not hold at an individual level (i.e. it cannot be said that if a parent claims their child has encountered harmful content, that parent is also more likely to think their child can cope).

9 For example, see :

<[http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/pns/DisplayPN.cgi?pn\\_id=2007\\_0212](http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/pns/DisplayPN.cgi?pn_id=2007_0212)>

10 In the UK, for example, 2008 sees the introduction of a new UK Council for Child Internet Safety; see:

<[http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/pns/DisplayPN.cgi?pn\\_id=2008\\_0215](http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/pns/DisplayPN.cgi?pn_id=2008_0215)>

11 See EC Safer Internet plus Programme, at:

<[http://ec.europa.eu/information\\_society/activities/sip/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/activities/sip/index_en.htm)>

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