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Children and the internet in Ireland: research and policy perspectives

Brian O'Neill, Thuy Dinh

Summary

- **Social networking is massively popular among Irish teens:** 9 out of every 10 teenagers have a social networking profile. One third of 9-16 year olds have more than one profile.
- **Facebook is the most popular social networking service (57%)** among Irish kids. Bebo is also popular, particularly among younger users (37%)
- **There are many underage users on SNS:** One fifth of 9-10 year olds, 42% of 11 year olds and 61% of 12 year olds use SNS, in contravention of the terms of service for these platforms.
- **Parents appear to go along with their children's SNS use.** There are strong parental restrictions strong for the youngest users but parental attitudes are more mixed for 11-12 year olds. Just under half of parents do not allow 11-12 year olds to use social networking; one third allow it under supervision and nearly a quarter do allow it at any time.
- **Most young people keep their SNS profiles private (63%) or partially private (22%).** This is among the highest in Europe and suggests that education and awareness-raising efforts have paid off. Girls are more privacy conscious than boys. A tenth of 11-12 year olds, however, have their profiles set to public.
- **Most teenagers (80%) report good safety skills** but less than one third of 11-12 years old can manage privacy settings.

1. Introduction

For good or ill, the internet is now very much part of children's lifestyles today. Indeed, it is hardly possible to approach contemporary childhood – its possibilities and its risks – without understanding the degree to which information and communications technologies (ICTs) are embedded in every aspect of young people's lives. For policy makers, the fast pace of change in the technology sector represents an additional challenge and effective interventions to protect children as well as promote positive opportunities sometimes struggle to keep up an environment that continues to evolve rapidly. There is also a tension between some of the competing responses that children's use of the internet evokes: whether children are viewed as 'digital natives' or as helpless victims of online threats, there is a difficult balancing act between promoting use of the internet as something positive and beneficial for young people's futures, whilst seeking to minimize risks they may encounter in an environment that is difficult to regulate.

Internationally, the overall tendency has been to adopt a 'light touch' regulatory approach to the internet, in order to foster innovation and promote its benefits to all citizens. Children and young people, indeed, are often viewed as being in the vanguard of the digital era, effortlessly integrating new platforms and services into their everyday lives. ICTs have steadily transformed the educational environment, creating new opportunities for learning, new subject areas and skillsets. The digital economy is also of huge importance for future employment and prosperity, in Ireland as elsewhere. Yet, the digital world is also one of hazards and protection of minors has been an important priority for policy makers and legislators since the internet evolved into a mass phenomenon. Harnessing a variety of co- and self-regulatory initiatives to promote safer internet practices, as well as

legislative harmonization and international cooperation to fight illegality online, internet safety is now a priority for governments, international agencies, child protection groups and educationalists.

How, in an Irish context, to balance these competing poles effectively – to ensure that benefits outweigh risks and that protection does not undermine the empowerment of children – is the subject of this paper. Placing young people at the core of national digital strategy is, we argue, in Ireland's national interest. Ireland's digital economy is worth some 3 per cent of GDP though Ireland is playing catch up after years of under-investment.¹ New skills areas and on-going growth in the ICT sector mean that digital youth engagement is of vital national importance. However, research shows that Irish youth lag behind their European counterparts in terms of online opportunities and activities undertaken.² The purpose of this paper, then, is to set out the case for prioritising digital opportunities for youth in Ireland.

Policy in relation to children and the internet, has to a great extent been dominated by a concern to ensure that children are protected and as safe as possible in an environment that was not designed for them but in which they now routinely spend much of their time. Internet safety, then, represents one key dimension in how the policy world responds to children's use of the internet. However, it is just as important to ensure that children have access to the best possible online opportunities. Accordingly, in the following we briefly review policy under five main headings:

- a) Internet Safety
- b) E-inclusion
- c) Digital literacy and skills
- d) Education and ICTs
- e) Children's rights in the online world

Based on the available evidence, Ireland has done well in the first of these areas with low levels of risk for a country with high internet penetration. However, more needs to be under each theme to realize the full potential of the digital era for children's development and well-being. Importantly, more information is also needed about children's use of internet technologies.

For something so integral to children's lives – in education, in their social interactions, and participation in cultural life – we still know too little about children's experiences of online opportunities and risks. The paper concludes, therefore, with recommendations on advancing research knowledge in this field and identifies digital opportunities and digital skills as areas in which policy intervention can assist in enabling children to realize their potential in the digital age.

2. Internet Safety

Internet safety in Ireland

Effective provision for internet safety is an essential requirement of the contemporary internet and communications environment, requiring cooperation between a variety of stakeholders, users and providers. Keeping children safe, whether through regulation or technologies or strategies to keep out unwanted content, cannot be the sole solution, however. Safety provisions on their own are not enough: they risk creating a false sense of security that risks are eliminated and frequently serve to limit opportunities that we would like children to enjoy. As such, approaches to internet safety now draw on a wide range of techniques that seek to both protect and empower young people and combine awareness raising and education with regulatory measures to limit harm.

The potential risks of the internet for children were considered early on by the Irish government. In 1997, the Department of Justice and Law Reform established a working group to examine the implications of internet use for society as whole and with particular reference to its potential downsides. The *Report of the Working Group on the Illegal and Harmful Use of the Internet* (1998) recommended a system of self-regulation by the internet industry to include common codes of practice among service providers and a common approach to acceptable usage policies. It also recommended the establishment of a hotline for reporting illegal content,

¹ <http://www.siliconrepublic.com/digital-21/item/24424-id2010>

² O'Neill, B., Grehan, S., & Ólafsson, K. (2011). Risks and safety for children on the internet: the Ireland report. LSE, London: EU Kids Online.

and an Internet Advisory Board to coordinate measures to support a safer internet environment.³

The Irish hotline service was launched in 1999 and was operated by the industry through the Irish Internet Service Providers Association (ISPAI) with support from the EU's Safer Internet Action Plan. Its principal purpose is to receive and assess reports of illegal content from the public. The hotline became a member of INHOPE (Internet Hotline Providers in Europe Association).⁴

The Internet Advisory Board (IAB) was established in 2000 with the general remit to supervise the system of self-regulation by the Irish Internet Service Provider industry. The IAB was chaired by an independent chairperson and with representation from industry (ISPAI),⁵ relevant government departments, An Garda Síochána, child protection interests and the Office of the Data Protection Commissioner.⁶ In addition, the IAB commissioned some of the first research studies of internet use by children (2001 and 2004) and promoted awareness of its potential dangers for young people.

In 2008, the Office for Internet Safety (OIS) took over responsibility for online safety issues and monitoring of self-regulation of the industry. Established as an Executive Office of the Department of Justice and Equality, its objective is to strengthen departmental involvement in internet safety.⁷ The advisory function was maintained with the establishment of the Internet Safety Advisory Committee (ISAC) in 2008. ISAC acts as a national stakeholder forum for the EU-funded Safer Internet Ireland project and advises on all aspects of internet safety as it relates to children.

The Office of the Data Protection Commissioner, established under the 1988 Data Protection Act, is responsible for upholding the rights of individuals as set out national and European legislation, including EU Directive 95/46 (the 'E-Commerce' Directive).⁸ Of particular relevance to children and the internet is the role of the Data Commissioner in monitoring the data

³ DJELR. (1998). *Illegal and harmful use of the internet. First report of the working group*. See Office of Internet Safety, <http://www.internetsafety.ie/>

⁴ <http://www.inhope.org/>

⁵ Internet Service Providers Association of Ireland. <http://ispai.ie/>

⁶ Office of the Data Protection Commissioner (ODPC). <http://www.dataprotection.ie/>

⁷ <http://www.internetsafety.ie/>

⁸ <http://dataprotection.ie/>

protection and privacy policies of internet companies operating under Irish jurisdiction, such as Google and Facebook.

The National Centre for Technology in Education (NCTE) acts as the awareness node for internet safety under the EC-funded Safer Internet Programme. NCTE, now under the remit of the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST), is responsible for developing resources and programmes to raise awareness of internet safety among children, teachers and parents through projects such as www.webwise.ie. Internet safety and digital citizenship also receives attention in curriculum areas such as Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and Civic Social and Political Education (CSPE). Other initiatives under the Department of Education and Skills include the Working Group established in May 2012 by the Minister to tackle bullying, including cyber bullying as well as other forms of racist or homophobic bullying in schools.⁹

The European Policy Landscape

European policy on internet safety has been particularly important and influential. In addition to its key role in promoting the information society under the *Digital Agenda for Europe*¹⁰ – the principal roadmap to maximise the social and economic potential of ICTs and the internet – the European Union has placed a high priority on protection of minors in the audiovisual and online worlds.

Since 1999, the Safer Internet Action Plan, and subsequently the Safer Internet Programme has taken a leading role on promoting safe use of internet and other new technologies through measures to combat child pornography and other illegal and harmful uses of the internet, support for awareness raising and industry self-regulation. The current phase of the Safer Internet Programme which runs from 2009 to 2013 provides support for INHOPE, the international network of hotlines, and Insafe,¹¹ the network of awareness centres across Europe which coordinate awareness campaigns, exchange of best practice and which works

⁹ http://www.education.ie/en/Press-Events/Conferences/cp_anti_bullying/Anti-Bullying-Forum.html

¹⁰ http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/digital-agenda/

¹¹ <http://www.saferinternet.org/>

in in close co-operation with other national, regional and local stakeholders. Key areas of policy focus include content labelling and filtering technologies, support for research, and self-regulatory schemes for safer use of mobile platforms and for social networking services.¹²

As part of its support for self-regulation, a coalition of the CEOs of leading technology companies in Europe was formed in December 2011 at the invitation of the Vice-President for the Digital Agenda, Neelie Kroes. The CEO Coalition has committed through 2012 to take positive action in five key areas of internet safety: better reporting tools, age-appropriate privacy settings, wider use of content classification, parental controls and effective take down of child sexual abuse material.¹³ Support for safer internet infrastructure is also contained within the Connecting Europe Facility, the plan to boost European telecommunications networks.¹⁴ Internet safety also features within the 'Trust and Security' action of the Digital Agenda¹⁵ and was a major topic of the Digital Agenda Assembly in 2011.¹⁶

With the current Safer Internet Programme due to close at the end of 2013, the future of internet safety policy is at a crossroads. A shift from 'safer' to 'better' policies is evident in the EC Communication adopted in May 2012, "Strategy for a Better Internet for Children".¹⁷ This strategy proposes stimulating new market demand for high quality online content for children and a scaling up of educational and awareness raising activities with a greater focus on positive opportunities and creative and educational content. It also envisages better tools to support online safety as well as more effective techniques combat

illegal content. The Commission urges Member States to match these efforts and calls on industry to play an active role in creating a better internet for kids. In distilling these policies at a national level, there is an important opportunity to engage all stakeholders in evaluating achievements to date and formulating new policies post-2014.

3. E-inclusion

E-inclusion is a key theme of European information society policy and of the Digital Agenda for Europe. Its aim is to ensure that no one is left behind in terms of access to and benefits of ICTs. E-Inclusion policy, therefore, aims at 'reducing gaps in ICT usage and promoting the use of ICT to overcome exclusion, and improve economic performance, employment opportunities, quality of life, social participation and cohesion'.¹⁸ Each of these factors bear upon children's lives.

Responsibility for information society policies and national digital strategy falls primarily under the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources (DCENR). Areas of relevant policy development include the National Broadband Plan for Ireland, which sets out commitments for high-speed broadband availability across the country,¹⁹ digital inclusion and promotion of greater digital engagement by all citizens, and support for the development of the digital media sector.²⁰

Ireland has made rapid progress in key areas of infrastructure, access and use by the general population of internet services. Improvements in broadband since 2006 have given rise to substantial increases in the numbers of people regularly using the internet (up 8% from 2011 to 2012), using the internet to interact with public authorities (up 8%), use of computers by SMEs (up 5%), and for buying goods

¹²

http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/activities/sip/projects/index_en.htm

¹³

http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/activities/sip/self_reg/index_en.htm

¹⁴

http://ec.europa.eu/transport/infrastructure/connecting_en.htm

¹⁵

http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/newsroom/cf/pillar.cfm?pillar_id=45&pillar=Trust%20and%20Security

¹⁶

http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/events/cf/daa11/item-display.cfm?id=5997

¹⁷

http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/activities/sip/policy/index_en.htm

¹⁸

http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/activities/einclusion/index_en.htm

¹⁹

<http://www.dcenr.gov.ie/Communications/Communications+Policy/>

²⁰

<http://www.dcenr.gov.ie/Communications/Knowledge+Society/>



and services online (up 6%).²¹ Yet, some persistent problems of a socio-economic digital divide remain: 93% of families of from higher social class groups have computer access compared to 78% from lower social class categories (*Growing Up in Ireland*, 9 year old cohort). OECD's PISA digital performance results (2009) also show that students from advantaged backgrounds report higher levels of self-confidence in high-level ICT tasks than students from disadvantaged backgrounds.²²

Media literacy is another aspect of policy focusing on digital inclusion. Defined as the ability to 'the ability to use, understand and create media and communications',²³ media literacy features as a prominent element of European e-inclusion policies and with broadcasting and media legislation (AVMSD). It is also contained within the Broadcasting Act (2009) whereby the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland (BAI) has the function of promoting a better public understanding of broadcasting and related electronic media, its processes, systems and regulatory safeguards.²⁴

Earlier initiatives in promoting e-inclusion began with the Action Plan (Department of the Taoiseach, 1999)²⁵ setting out the principal infrastructural, regulatory and other enabling measures required to harness the benefits of digital technologies for all. While the plan did not specifically address the issue of children online, it highlighted the importance of awareness raising, investment in education (Education Technology Investment Fund and Schools IT 2000 initiative) and future skills needs. Similarly, the Information Society Commission (ISC) (2001-2004), drawing on high-level representation from the business community, the social partners, and government itself, highlighted challenges and opportunities for Ireland presented by information society developments, as well as monitoring Ireland's performance, nationally and internationally. During its

term, it published a series of reports on infrastructure, e-society and e-government, and policies on inclusion and expanding internet participation to all.

4. Digital Literacy and Skills

The 2006 European Recommendation on Key Competences recognized digital literacy as one of the 8 key competences for Lifelong Learning by the European Union. Digital competence is defined as the confident, critical and creative use of ICT to achieve goals related to work, employability, learning, leisure, inclusion and/or participation in society. It is also a key component of the Digital Agenda Scoreboard, marking progress towards attainment of goals of the Digital Agenda (European Commission, 2011).²⁶

Similarly, the European Commission is also responsible under the Audiovisual Media Services Directive for reporting on levels of media literacy across the European Union from 2011 on.²⁷ The indicators developed to measure media literacy include qualitative and quantitative aspects assessed at both the individual and national level. UNESCO likewise has developed a framework for measuring media and information literacy (MIL) and is currently developing guidelines to assist countries in promoting effective MIL policies.²⁸

While measuring digital literacy remains a challenge, the Digital Agenda Scorecard for 2012 shows Ireland at the lower end of the EU27 in terms of digital skills. Ireland is at the bottom of the ranking with less than 9% of high-skilled people in terms of high internet skills and close to 40% of the adult population reporting low to medium level skills.²⁹ EU Kids Online data (section 8 below) shows that Irish children, aged 9 to 16 years, are close to the European average for internet and safety skills but low in terms of online activities,

²¹ http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/digital-agenda/scoreboard/docs/2012/scoreboard_progress_report.pdf

²² OECD. (2009). PISA 2009 Results: Students on Line: Digital Technologies and Performance (Volume VI). Retrieved from <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264112995-en>

²³ <http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/market-data-research/media-literacy/>

²⁴ See www.bai.ie also http://www.bci.ie/news_information/press214.html

²⁵ Department of the Taoiseach. (1999). *Implementing the Information Society in Ireland: An Action Plan*. Dublin: Department of the Taoiseach.

²⁶ http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/digital-agenda/scoreboard/pillars/skills/index_en.htm

²⁷ http://ec.europa.eu/culture/media/literacy/index_en.htm

²⁸ <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/resources/publications-and-communication-materials/publications/full-list/towards-information-literacy-indicators/>

²⁹ http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/digital-agenda/scoreboard/docs/2012/scoreboard_digital_skills.pdf



essential for building better, more advanced digital skills.

The 2009 PISA module on digital reading performance (OECD) showed above average scores for digital reading performance among Irish 15 year olds. The study focused on how young people evaluate information on the Internet, assess its credibility and navigate webpages. The survey also highlighted the dramatic increase in opportunities for 15 year olds in accessing the internet from just over 40% to over 90%, between 2000 and 2009. Irish students, however, were below the OECD average in their attitude towards the use of computers and had somewhat lower levels of self-confidence in performing high-level ICT tasks, though were.³⁰

5. ICTs in Education

Equipping students and schools with the technology and the resources to face the challenges of the information age is a major policy priority. School is the second most important location for children's internet use after home: 66% of Irish 9-16 years access the internet at school while 87% go online at home (EU Kids Online). Just 10% of 15 year olds use laptops in schools however and use computers much less frequently than other OECD countries for schoolwork (OECD, 2009). Marshall (2008) also shows that usage of ICT in educational setting, especially primary level, falls well behind international standards.³¹

Much emphasis has been given to integrating ICT in the curriculum and to the teaching of digital skills. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA)³² in 2007 developed a framework for ICT across the curriculum at both primary and second level, outlining the kinds of learning experiences with ICT that could be developed within the educational system. The ongoing review of the junior and senior cycle has given particular priority to 'ICT-proofing' with provision for

³⁰

<http://www.oecd.org/pisa/pisaproducts/pisa2009/pisa2009resultsstudentsonlineanddigitaltechnologiesandperformancevolumevi.htm>

³¹ Cosgrove, J., & Marshall, K. (2008). *ICT Access and Usage in Irish Primary Schools: Identifying the Gaps*. Dublin: The Liffey Press.

³² <http://www.ncca.ie/>

special technology short modules and the use of e-portfolios in assessment.

Since 2004, under the Broadband for Schools Initiative, the Government has worked with the telecoms industry with the aim of ensuring the rollout of broadband to every school in the country. As part of its policy on Next Generation Broadband, the government in 2009 gave a commitment to roll out 100Mbit broadband to all schools under the supervision of the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources.³³ The ICT Strategy group, set up by the Minister of Education and Science, in its *Smart Schools = Smart Economy* action plan, advised the government's investment plan to provide every classroom with a teaching laptop, software and a digital projector at a minimum.

The early background to these initiatives was laid in the late 1990s. The *IT 2000 - A Policy Framework for the New Millennium* (DES, 1997) set out the objective that all children would have the opportunity to achieve computer literacy to gain the benefits of participation in the information society. It provided for a technology infrastructure for schools, training of teachers in the use of ICT and a support infrastructure for ICT-led innovation in education. The National Centre for Technology in Education (NCTE, now PDST), established in 1998 continues to act as the lead agency for the national implementation of the ICT schools policy.³⁴

6. Children's rights

Recognition of the rights of the child in all matters that affect them, including ICTs and online access, is an increasing feature of discussion and debate regarding children's use of the internet.

The relationship between children and the media environment is a fundamental one, recognized by the Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) to be of crucial significance for children's well being. The right to protection from all forms of sexual exploitation and abuse (Article 34); the right to privacy (Article 16); the right to an education (Articles 28 and 29), and to play

³³

<http://www.dcenr.gov.ie/Communications/Communications+Development/Schools+Broadband+Access+Programme/>

³⁴ <http://www.ncte.ie/>

and recreation (Article 31) all underpin basic protection and provision rights of the Convention. Participation rights are especially relevant and highlight dimensions in which children's active participation requires support. So, for example, Article 12 (the right to be heard in all matters affecting the child), Article 13 (the right to freedom of expression), Article 14 (the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion), as well as Article 15 (freedom of association and assembly) and Article 17 (the right to information) encapsulate the variety of ways media and information play a role in children's lives.

In 2006, the Council of Europe adopted a recommendation on empowering children in the new information and communications environment³⁵ with the key message that internet technologies and services should be regarded as positive tools to be embraced rather than feared, and that digital literacy – the acquisition of practical and critical skills – is essential to exercising children's rights and responsibilities on the internet.

The *EU Agenda for the Rights of the Child* aims to reinforce the European Union's commitment to promote, protect and fulfil the rights of the child in all relevant EU policies and actions.³⁶ Children's rights are promoted as an integral part of human rights with an equal focus on "duty-bearers" (states and governments, to meet their obligations) as well as of "rights-holders" (children, to enjoy and claim their rights).³⁷ In its strategy for a better internet for children, the Commission cites the importance of a rights-based perspective in policies affecting children, including those relating to children's particular needs and vulnerabilities on the internet.

Other international reference points emphasizing children's rights in the online world – both from a protection and participation aspect – include UNICEF's *Child Safety Online - Global challenges and strategies*³⁸ and its Digital Safety and Citizenship

project,³⁹ and the International Telecommunication Union child online protection initiative.⁴⁰

The National Children's Strategy (2000) supports the key goals of ensuring that children will have a voice in matters which affect them, that their lives will be better understood and that they will receive quality supports and services to promote all aspects of their development. In this respect, children's participation in the online world is an important platform for recognising and realising children's rights in a very positive way and provides a vital benchmark in supporting balanced and sustainable information society policies.

7. Research Environment

Despite its importance, the subject of children and the internet remains an under-developed area of research in Ireland. In a study of data availability across Europe in 2007, EU Kids Online identified just 15 national studies on children and the internet in Ireland.⁴¹

Two early studies commissioned by the Internet Advisory Board provide a baseline for national research.⁴² Subsequent data on young people's use of internet technologies was augmented by the SAFT (Safety Awareness Facts and Tools) project including Denmark, Sweden, Iceland, Norway and Ireland,⁴³ later added to by NCTE as the main educational agency responsible for internet safety.⁴⁴ The Office of the Minister for Children commissioned research into the

³⁵ <https://wcd.coe.int/ViewDoc.jsp?id=1041181>

³⁶ http://ec.europa.eu/justice/fundamental-rights/rights-child/eu-agenda/index_en.htm

³⁷ *EU Guidelines for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of the Child*

³⁸ <http://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/650>

³⁹ <http://www.digitalcitizenshipandsafety.org/>

⁴⁰ <http://www.itu.int/osg/csd/cybersecurity/gca/cop/>

⁴¹ Livingstone, S., & Haddon, L. (2009). *EU Kids Online: Final report. EC Safer Internet Plus Programme Deliverable D6.5*. LSE, London: EU Kids Online.

⁴² *Research of Internet Downside Issues* (2001) and *The Use of New Media by Children* (2004) both conducted by Amarach Consulting), Dublin: Internet Advisory Board.

⁴³

http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/activities/sip/projects/completed/awareness/saft/index_en.htm

⁴⁴ Webwise. (2006). *Webwise Survey of Children's Use of the Internet 2006*. Dublin: National Centre for Technology in Education.

Ipsos MORI / NCTE. (2009). *2008 Survey of Children's Use of the Internet in Ireland*. Dublin: National Centre for Technology in Education.



area of play and technology in 2007⁴⁵ and has commissioned a number of postgraduate scholarships on subjects including mobile communications and social media use among young people.

Growing Up in Ireland, the national longitudinal study of children designed to contribute to effective policies relating to children and families, is the most significant development in recent years in Irish children's research.⁴⁶ The study includes research on the role that ICTs play in young children's lives (child cohort at 9 and 13 years). While an important and valuable resource for research, the number of items included on ICT use is too limited and is also restricted by its approach to children's use of the internet as a leisure or out of school activity.

As with a number of smaller European countries, EC-funded research has shaped the available knowledge by including them in pan-European studies of all member states. European studies have included successive Eurobarometer studies on illegal and harmful content on the internet (2004/2005), a qualitative study on children's internet use (2007), parents' perspectives (2008) attitudes to data protection (2011) and cybersecurity (2012).⁴⁷ A European Commission study of new media use by young people (Mediappro) was undertaken in 2006 but did not include Ireland.

The EU Kids Online survey of internet use among young people aged 9 to 16 in 25 countries across Europe provides the most important recent source of data at a national and is the most comprehensive survey of children's internet use across Europe.⁴⁸ Funded under the EC Safer Internet Programme (2009-11), the aim of the study was to enhance knowledge of European children's and parents' experiences and practices regarding risky and safer use of the internet and new online technologies in order to inform the promotion among national and international stakeholders of a safer online environment for children. A report drawing on the national dataset for Ireland was published in 2011.⁴⁹ The Digital Childhoods research project at Dublin

Institute of Technology, funded by the Research Council of Ireland, seeks to extend research into the subject, through building on EU Kids Online, new data analysis and dissemination.⁵⁰

The *National Strategy for Research and Data on Children's Lives 2011-16* seeks to coordinate and mobilise research and data across a range of important bodies in order to achieve a better understanding of children's lives.⁵¹ Children's engagement with the online world impinges on each of the five priority areas identified in which enhanced knowledge will lead to better outcomes for children. Thus, themes of children's physical and mental health, engagement in active learning, safety and security, and participation in positive networks all have crucial internet- and media-related dimensions and need to be better understood.

8. What the evidence tells us

Aren't all children online?

On the face of it, internet use would appear to be very embedded in young people's lives. The vast majority of Irish children are now online (Eurobarometer). *Growing Up in Ireland* found that 86% of all nine-year-olds have a computer in their home; 82% of teenagers and 35% of 9-12 year olds have a social networking profile (EU Kids Online). Irish children also spend at least one hour per day online and three quarters of 15-16 year olds use the internet everyday.

Yet, in a comparative context, Ireland is among that group of countries classified by EU Kids Online as 'lower use, some risk'.⁵² This is despite the fact that use of the internet at home is above average (IE 87% vs. EU 62%); mobile internet access is also high (IE 46% vs. EU 31%); as is going online via gaming consoles (IE 44% vs. EU 26%). However, fewer children in Ireland access the internet from their own room compared to their European counterparts (IE 37% vs. EU 49%). Daily use of the internet is also

⁴⁵ Downey, S., Hayes, N., & O'Neill, B. (2007). *Play and Technology for children aged 4-12*. Dublin: Office of the Minister for Children.

⁴⁶ <http://www.growingup.ie/>

⁴⁷ http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/index_en.htm

⁴⁸ www.eukidsonline.net

⁴⁹ <http://www.webwise.ie/article.aspx?id=12506>

⁵⁰ <http://www.dit.ie/cser/cserexpertise/digitalchildhoods/>

⁵¹ <http://www.dcy.gov.ie/viewdoc.asp?fn=%2Fdocuments%2FResearch%2FResearchDataStrat.htm&mn=natc&nID=1>

⁵² Livingstone, S., Haddon, L., Gorzig, A., & Ólafsson, K. (2011). *EU Kids Online Final Report*. LSE, London: EU Kids Online, p.41.

lower and children spend 50% less time online than their counterparts in the United Kingdom (61 minutes compared to 99 minutes per day). There is also evidence of a digital divide: 93% from higher social class groups have computer access compared to 78% from lower social class categories (*Growing Up in Ireland*).

Irish 'digital natives' lag behind

One of the key areas in which Irish children lag behind is in terms of the opportunities they avail of online. According to EU Kids Online, young people are at the lower end of the 'ladder of opportunities', a sequence of stages that children progress through from the most basic activities to more advanced and creative uses of the internet. Over half of Irish 9-16 year olds don't go beyond the second of five stages of online activities. Their activities are confined to popular, entertainment-based areas: '*watching video clips*' and '*playing internet games*' (76% each), followed by schoolwork and social networking (58% each). *Growing Up in Ireland* also found that among nine year olds, the most frequent activities were *playing games* (86%), *surfing the internet* (for both school projects and for fun) – both reported by just under 50% of children. *Watching movies* (29%) and *doing homework* (25%) were also important uses, with less frequent use of *chat rooms* (13%), *email* (13%), and *instant messaging* (6%).

Children's activities in Ireland are also fewer in number. The average number of online activities per child is just 5, out of a total 17 asked about in EU Kids Online. This compares to an average of over 7 reported by children across Europe. Even teenagers, who use the internet more, are below their European counterparts: teenage boys across Europe reported on average 9 activities and girls cited 10, nearly double the findings for girls and boys in Ireland, aged 13-16. Most Irish children have 'a low use, low risk' profile (39% of the total sample) followed by a "moderate-use, entertainment and communication-oriented" use of the internet (25%).⁵³

⁵³ O'Neill, B., & Dinh, T. (2012). Digital Literacy, Digital Opportunities. *Digital Childhoods Working Paper Series* (No. 2).

Findings for digital skills were found by EU Kids Online to be close to the European average. However, they dispel the myth of the 'digital native': just one third of children say it is very true of them that they know lots of things about the internet; just over half say it is a bit true and less than a fifth say it is not true. One third of 9-16 year olds (34%) also say they know more about the internet than their parents: one third (31%) say it is 'a bit true' and one third (36%) say it is 'not true' of them. Teenagers are somewhat more confident, but less than half say "they know lots of things about the internet". Just over half of teenagers claim to know more about the internet than their parents. Younger children (9-12 years old) are far more likely to say they don't know as much as their parents. Children's online safety skills (11-16 years old) were slightly below the European average and at the lower end of the European spectrum, i.e. 7th lowest of EU25.

What are parents worried about?

Accessing pornography, being a victim of online grooming, or being bullied online are the biggest worries that parents have about their children's use of the internet (Eurobarometer, 2008).

As a result, parents in Ireland tend to adopt quite a restrictive approach to their children's internet use. In fact, restrictive mediation among Irish parents, in terms of the setting of rules about what children can do online, was found by EU Kids Online to be highest in Europe. While this has the effect of reducing risks and potential harm for children, it also restricts young people's opportunities, curtails their acquisition of skills and hampers prospects for greater participation and digital engagement. Most children say that such forms of mediation limit what they do online and 20% say it limits their activities a lot.

Despite high levels of restrictive mediation, most parents believe that the things they do relating to their child's internet use helps to make their online experience better (38% a lot; 36% a bit better). The vast majority of parents/guardians (85%) also feel confident they can help their children deal with anything on the internet that might bother them. Most also feel (79%) that their child will be able to cope with anything they may encounter online. At the same time, over half of Irish parents also feel they should do more (27% a lot more; 37% a bit more). Younger children

would also like parents to take more interest (22% of 9-12 year old boys; 25% of 9-12 year old girls).

What are the risks?

A large proportion (67%) of children aged 9-16 think that there are things on the internet that will bother children of their age. This is slightly more for teenagers than for younger children. Yet, just 11% of children say that they have themselves been bothered by something on the internet. Younger children are less likely to have been bothered by something online (9%) compared with older teenagers (16%).

In fact, children in Ireland are more risk averse than most European countries: just 39% of children on average have experienced one of the risk factors asked about, placing Ireland very much on the lower end of the spectrum for experience of risk.

- Having contact online with someone they have not met face to face before is the most common risk (28% of all children; 43% of older teenagers)
- Coming across harmful user generated content is the next most common risk, encountered by a quarter of all children and 42% of older teenagers.
- Personal data misuse is the third most prevalent risk encountered by children and has been experienced by 12% of children overall and by 15% of older teenagers.

One in five (23%) say that they have seen obviously sexual images in the past 12 months, whether online or offline. This is broadly in line with the European average. Around half have seen this at least once or twice a month, while half have seen it less often. Nearly half of 15-16 year olds (45%) have seen such images compared with just 8% of 9-10 year olds; teenagers also see such images more often.

Ireland is relatively low, compared to many countries, both in terms of overall exposure to online pornography and in terms of the degree to which children are bothered or upset by what they saw when they were exposed to online sexual images. In Ireland, one in three of those that had seen sexual images (4% of all

children) was bothered by this experience. Older teenagers are also more likely to be bothered by what they saw (10% of 15-16 year olds who had seen such images).

Of more immediate relevance are risks associated with some of the most popular online activities such as social networking. Nine of ten teenagers has a social networking profile, as might be expected, but there are also very large numbers of young users (42% of 11 year olds and 61% of 12 year olds use SNS). Less than one third 11-12 years old can manage privacy settings, however, raising further concerns about whether young people's skills match their ambitions to be active online.⁵⁴

Cyberbullying has received particular attention as a risk for many young people. Some 26% of secondary school students and 22% of primary school students said they or someone they knew had been bullied (ISPPC). While more bullying occurs offline, it increasingly has an online dimension, particularly among older teenagers (9% internet and 10% mobile phone, EU Kids Online).

9. What needs to be done?

Recommendations for policy

Overall, a robust infrastructure exists for internet safety in Ireland, particularly in relation to monitoring of industry self-regulation and minimising online risks. The international Family Online Safety Institute (FOSI) has described Ireland as 'an excellent example of a country which promotes the Internet safety message to all its citizens in a comprehensive and easily accessible manner'.⁵⁵ Yet, we argue, this has been achieved to some extent at the expense of online opportunities and that there is substantial scope for promotion of wider and better use of the internet among children.

Ireland is an outlier compared to other EU Kids Online countries with a low average number of online activities for a country of reasonably high usage and a low

⁵⁴ O'Neill, B., & Dinh, T. (2012). Social Networking Among Irish 9-16 year olds, *Digital Childhoods Working Paper No. 3*. Dublin: Dublin Institute of Technology

⁵⁵ <http://www.fosigrid.org/europe/ireland>

exposure to risk. Therefore, promoting wider opportunities for all children online, teaching digital literacy and skills at the earliest possible age and supporting policy through more and better research are the key priorities a national children's digital strategy.

9.1 Promote children's digital opportunities

- **Government and other stakeholders should cooperate to promote digital opportunities for young people in Ireland**, ensuring they gain more benefits from the internet. Multi-stakeholder cooperation is needed, bringing together the different agencies and industry partners together with civil society with a focus on promoting digital literacy initiatives that target both skills development and also encourages the broadening of online internet activities is a priority. Given the importance of the IT sector to Ireland's economy, there is an urgent need to support digital opportunities for all.
- **Promoting digital opportunities is a matter of children's rights.** Children need the *protection* of a secure and safe online environment and there is a responsibility on all stakeholders – industry, education, child protection, and parents – to ensure that young people's online experience is as safe as possible. *But children also have the right to the communication and participation opportunities that the internet affords. They have the right to be heard and to be taken seriously; to free speech and to information; to maintain privacy; to develop cultural identity; and to be proud of their heritage and beliefs.* The digital sphere offers a valuable opportunity to realize these rights in a meaningful way.
- **Efforts to promote better parental awareness and digital literacy are important.** As in many other countries, public debate is often informed by sensationalist media reporting and by a lack of understanding of children's rights in this area. The current high levels of restrictive mediation suggest that parents feel ill-equipped to support young people online. Here, the media, including public service broadcasting, can play a strategic role in supporting positive content and a better public

understanding of the possibilities and benefits of the internet.

9.2 Develop children's digital literacy skills

- **Schools are uniquely positioned to reach all children.** Emphasising digital learning opportunities in the curriculum, therefore, can be a crucial driver in developing digital literacy skills, minimising digital divides, increasing safety and fostering better online participation. Ambitious objectives have been outlined to give all schools high-speed connectivity and to integrate ICTs more fully into the curriculum. The mainstreaming of digital technology is therefore needed across the curriculum. Moreover, initiatives developed at secondary school level should be extended to primary school to take account of the ever-younger ages at which digital technologies become part of children's lives.
- **Managing risks and promoting internet safety is best achieved through improving children and young people's digital literacy skills.** Encouraging children to a wider diversity of online activities while teaching critical literacy and safety skills enhances online benefits, digital citizenship and resilience to harm, and so should be encouraged; particular efforts are needed for less privileged and younger children.
- **Greater coordination between the various public agencies and non-governmental organisations** is required in order to successfully bridge the skills and knowledge gaps such as those revealed in the EU Kids Online Survey and OECD PISA findings. The role of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs in coordinating and harmonizing policy approaches could be crucial here. Initiatives for promoting media literacy, for instance, currently vested in the broadcast regulator needs to be expanded to encompass the online world. Digital literacy, as promoted by the National Centre for Technology in Education and NCCA's ICT Framework, needs to be adequately resourced to provide the necessary expertise, infrastructural development and leadership in developing initiatives in an area of strategic national importance.

9.3 Develop the knowledge base

- **Children's digital lives need to be better understood.** On-going research of both a qualitative and quantitative nature is needed. There is too little data about children's use of ICTs and the internet in Ireland. Given the pace of change, on-going research is needed to identify developing trends, emerging risks and new areas of opportunity. Higher education departments, including education, media and communication can play a role by supporting research in this vital public area. Growing Up In Ireland offers a valuable opportunity to build a longitudinal understanding of the impact of digital technologies on children's lives. However, much more detailed research is needed and future phases of GUI should provide greater scope for studying this aspect of children's lives. More targeted research should be commissioned by relevant agencies, including the Office of Internet Safety, NCTE/Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) as well as by civil society and by industry both to give children a voice and to better understand their lives. Industry partnerships in supporting research, as an aspect of corporate social responsibility, should be fostered.

10. Conclusion

Ireland's policy response to children's use of internet technologies has been a robust and effective one in promoting concepts of internet safety and security in the online world. In line with international trends, it has emphasized protection, with a range of supports and mechanisms in place to deal with the most prominent internet risks. Arguably, online child protection struggles to keep pace with change in technology and user trends and in this context digital literacy becomes all the more important in empowering the user to be the principle agent responsible for safer and better internet use.

An assessment of the rights of the child in the contemporary media and communications environment – balancing protection with adequate provision and enabling of participation – is a valuable opportunity for policy makers in Ireland. Promoting children's communication rights supports children's wellbeing through enhanced safety and more effective

participation, securing children's futures through a positive and forward-looking realization of their creative potential.

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