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# Methodological issues in the cross-national analysis of contextual data

## Book section

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## Introduction

This chapter aims to reflect upon the methodological strategies and issues involved in conducting a cross-national analysis of a broad range of internet studies. In particular, it looks at the possible options for analysis when a study involves many countries (rather than just two or three). The type of data considered here is the background information that one might want to know about societies in order to contextualise any studies conducted in them, e.g. an overview of the national social structures, the countries' legal systems, the nature of media coverage of various issues, recent histories of pertinent events, how research is organised in these countries, etc. While, it is possible to count quantitative indices, much of what we examine under the heading of 'contextual factors', would often be considered more qualitative in nature. Hence the challenge of conducting comparative analysis using such data.

The chapter is based on two traditions. It is firstly written in the spirit of sharing insights into what goes on behind the scenes in an ICT study, where dilemmas, problems of classification and even strategies that are abandoned are not necessarily ever fully discussed in the accounts that are eventually published and thus in the public domain. Therefore, it is the same genre as writings reflecting upon the dilemmas in ICT design (Limonard and De Koning, 2005) or outlining the problems of classification systems relating to what counts as 'rural' and 'urban' for mapping the adoption of ICTs (Gilligan, 2005)[1]. This tradition of reflection on how analyses were managed and how methodological and analytical decisions have been made, and with what implications, dates back to the 1980s, although the discussion at that time was not specifically looking at information and communication technologies (ICTs) (e.g. Bell and Roberts, 1984; to some extent Roberts, 1981). The other relevant literature is the small but growing one on cross-cultural analysis (e.g. Haantrais & Steen, 1996), which has already established many of the issues, but which has for the most part not specifically looked at ICTs, with some notable exceptions (Blumer, et al, 1992;

1 On this issue, see more generally the volume Haddon, et al., 2005.

Livingstone & Bovill, 2001). For a previous appraisal of the literature on cross-national studies, see Livingstone, 2003.

## *Background: The EU Kids Online study*

The *EU Kids Online* project was a 21-country[2] study evaluating European research on children's experiences of the internet. The project, funded by the EC's *Safer Internet plus Programme,* collected and examined information about existing studies in the countries concerned (see the book from the project: Livingstone & Haddon, 2009). One sub-project identified the patterns of studies both across and within the countries participating in *EU Kids Online* and on this basis drew attention to the need for further research in certain areas (Staksrud, et al., 2007; Donoso, et al., 2009). Another sub-project conducted a methodological literature review and developed a Best Practice Guide for researching children, researching internet use and conducting cross-national comparisons (Lobe, et al., 2007; Lobe, et al., 2008; Lobe, et al., 2009). But it is two of the other strands of the project that will be re-examined here:

- a comparative evaluation of the actual data on children's experience of the internet (Hasebrink, et al., 2008).
- an analysis of factors shaping why certain types of research on children and the internet are conducted and why this varies across countries (Stald & Haddon, 2008[3]).

More generally, across the *EU Kids Online* project the various strands were simultaneously dealing with the wider methodological challenge of how, systematically, to manage cross-national comparisons[4]. Hence, some of the procedures and decisions behind two reports noted above are here re-examined not for their substantive findings, but as illustrations of some of the issues faced at the stage of data analysis. These two different reports were chosen, with different foci, because of what is of interest in the common challenges faced

2 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. For more details see www.eukidsonline.net [Accessed 29 December 2009]. The researchers involved in the coordination of the study are Sonia Livingstone, Leslie Haddon, Panayiota Tsatsou and Ranjana Das.

3 A shorter published version appeared as Haddon & Stald, 2009a.

4 The justification for focusing on nations, given that there is some debate about this strategy, is provided in Hasebrink, et al., (forthcoming).

when trying to examine the type of contextual factors noted above. We will now outline in more what these included.

The focus on the first of these sub-projects, the Hasebrink, et al. (2008) report, was on where, and to what extent, there are European commonalities or differences regarding children's online experiences, risks and opportunities. What common European responses and patterns have been identified and what factors explain these? The contextual factors that the report considered were:

- The internet's diffusion
- Internet safety tools and initiatives
- Media content for children (broadcast and online)
- Internet regulation and promotion
- The role of the government and the regulator
- The influence of NGOs
- Public discourses about the internet including media coverage of children and the internet (which was a separate empirical sub-project within the broader project – Haddon & Stald, 2009b; Ponte, et al., 2009) and the role of NGOs in shaping these discourses.
- Wider national values and attitudes
- The education system (including internet access and use within schools)
- Wider country-specific factors (e.g. social change, inequalities, urbanisation, work and social class, free speech and censorship, migration and cultural homogeneity, the role of the state, the extent to which English as a language is understood and the extent to which a children's 'bedroom culture' exists)

The focus of the second sub-project, in the Stald and Haddon (2008) report, was on the social shaping of research: what social factors influence why certain research on children and ICTs takes place and, as the comparative element, why do different amounts of research exist in different countries and why are some research questions followed up in some countries more than others? The contextual factors considered were:

– The size of the national research base, the activities of different disciplines
– Institutional processes (e.g. the national histories of social science and related research in general)
– Funding sources (e.g. Government, commercial)
– Political initiatives (e.g. internet awareness campaigns, education initiatives)
– Public discourses (e.g. media coverage of children and the internet; whether there had been specific and important events in this field)
– Particular debates (e.g. about the commercialisation of childhood).

## *Steps in the analysis*

In both sub-projects, the way in which the material was organised was the same (see Hasebrink, et al., 2009, forthcoming for a more detailed outline and reflection on procedure). The above areas of interest were organised into a set of questions to be answered for each of the countries participating in the *EU Kids Online* project. For both parts of the project, each of the national teams then wrote their national reports answering the questions related to the issues outlined above. Subsequently, there was a division of labour such that different researchers looked at the different contextual factors across countries. For example, one person or a group of people would specialise in looking at all of the material on, say, the role of government and the regulator in the first sub-project, or funding sources in the second sub-project.

It is useful to reflect a little further on the processes at work here. Setting up a template for the national reports is something akin to writing an international questionnaire (with many open-ended answers). Arguably one can ask for reasonably sophisticated answers, and the teams do have time to consult with colleagues, mobilise supporting evidence, etc. Nevertheless, one has to find a form of words in the template that enables somewhat comparable answers. The questions were discussed by the groups involved in the two respective sub-projects and in this sense were piloted. While many of the questions tried to be as specific as possible in order to 'manage the theoretical diversity' represented with the project (Swanson, 1992, p.25), the national teams had to decide how to address the questions as regards their own countries, which introduces some variation when deciding how to answer. Those project members analysing the various national commentaries and evidence relating to the different contextual factors then had to work out what strategies they would use to manage the feedback they received within these national reports.

The final point to make by way of scene setting relates to the two main approaches at work in conducting this data analysis and presenting the material. Both work packages, in their different ways, used Kohn's (1998) framework for cross-national analysis. Specifically, they used two out of his four modes on cross-national comparison: his notion of nations as units of analysis versus nations as contexts for study. In the case of countries as units of analysis, the aim was to try to explain similarities and differences between countries – i.e. this was the comparative element noted above. But at times, both sub-projects looked at nations as case studies, pooling the data from the different countries in order to have sufficently rich material to describe a particular phenomenon of interest. For example, the Hasebrink, et al. (2008) report brought together studies from the different countries (not specifically the contextual factors outlined above) in order to evaluate more general hypotheses about the relationship between children and the internet (Hasebrink, et al., 2008). In the Stald and Haddon (2008) report for some of the topics the aim became to show

how a particular process worked, say, within research institutions, where examples pooled from the different countries could illustrate how this could operate in a variety of slightly different guises. In the Hasebrink, et al. (2008) report this was a more explicit, intentional strategy from the start for some issues. In the Stald and Haddon (2008) report, this strategy emerged given the nature of the information that the national teams could supply – i.e. while it was insightful, it was sometimes not possible to use this material to compare countries.

## Stratgies in the analysis

### *The continuum from quantitative to qualitative*

The first observation about the analytical process comes from Stald and Haddon (2008) report, more specifically relating to the institutional influences shaping what research takes place. Different questions produced answers that, especially at the point of data analysis could be used more of less quantitatively or qualitatively, almost on a continuum,

Amongst a range of questions asking about traditions and histories of research (e.g. about the degree to which qualitative traditions were established in different countries, the dates when mass media were first researched), one question asked when the first internet studies appeared. The list of dates, or at least periods, was tabulated and it was found that the national differences in the timing of research roughly correlated with country levels of usage by children, one of measures being used for other parts of *EU Kids Online* analysis (but which we know, in turn, reflects general internet penetration rates). Hence here was an example where one could tentatively suggest that it looks as if the timing of research on children and the internet more or less reflected the actual take up of the internet. Here was a case of comparing nations as units.

There were then various questions about university procedures when applying for research, including whether national regulations exist about what cannot be researched as regards children, whether there are some fixed stages that all research proposals have to go through, and whether proposals have to be checked by the applicants' institution/department before they can proceed. These questions aimed to explore how complicated it is to organise research and whether national variation might exist. These could be tabulated because the answers were often 'yes' or 'no', even if national teams frequently added a few further qualifications and exceptions. In practice, these questions produced a picture of what was common practice (e.g. few 'hard' rules, but some 'soft' ones), showing a little country variation but nothing that could be systematically related to particular patterns of national research.

The same type of analysis emerged from questions asking whether Government Ministries ask for certain types of research to be conducted (e.g. via research councils) and whether there were pressures to collaborate with industry (both of which might in principle have directed research in certain directions rather than others). What might have been anticipated but was certainly discovered in practice is that in comparison to questions about procedures these generated far more wordy explanations. Tables of answers were supplied in the Stald and Haddon (2008) report, points were made about common patterns and trends (when analysing nations as units). However, on balance it made more sense to use this material in the form of nations as case studies, combining the descriptions to develop qualitatively a more complete understanding of different levels on which, or manner in which these same type of pressure were experienced (Stald & Haddon, 2008).

The last example was a question about whether there was general pressure on university employees to conduct research? This clearly proved to be an invitation for national teams to explain the myriad ways in which such pressures operated from those related to the way in departmental budgets worked, through factors affecting an individual's career progression to departmental expectations about the number of academic publications one was supposed to produce. Hence the decision was made not to try to count these 'pressures', but instead use the material, including quotations form the national reports, to explore this set of contemporary social incentives to conduct research than in the past.

The point of these four examples is that they illustrate how this contextual material could be used in a combination of quantitative and qualitative ways, and the logic of using the nation as unit or as context of study depended partly on the form of the question (e.g. asking for a date, asking for a yes/no answer, inviting longer answers) but partly also on what national teams actually wrote.

## *Counting issues*

One initial area of interest was whether the amount of research on children and the internet reflected the overall amount of research that takes place within a country: i.e. do countries that in general have a good deal of research also have a good deal specifically on children and the internet? But at the planning stage it was clear that it would be difficult to measure this overall level of research. As a proxy, the only measurable unit where data might be available in all the countries related to the size of what was termed its 'academic base' (i.e. the

number of academic institutions)[5]. Since the interest was in research institutions (rather than purely teaching ones), this was operationalised in terms of counting the number of universities, since the latter are often listed somewhere for each country. That said, the figures have to be taken with caution and the aim was to give an idea only of relative size of the academic base – the only example where we had some figures to demonstrate this point is Estonia, which had 11 universities but 75 registered academic research bodies.

In practice, even mapping the universities was not straightforward. Apart from bodies called 'universities' in France there are various Grandes Écoles and Grandes Établissements, which are universities except in name –so these were included. In contrast, the final British figures excluded the 'university colleges' (more teaching oriented), while the numbers had to be expanded to account for bodies like 'London University' because this is an umbrella organisation that effectively includes a number of universities in their own right (like the London School of Economics). In other words, if there was a reasonable rationale the base figures could be adjusted. There proved to be a high correlation, by and large and with some exceptions, between the number of universities in a given country and the size of the population base, which could in this case be demonstrated graphically. Of more interest for the project, although the correlation was less strong, and with more exceptions, the larger the academic base the more studies there were of children and the internet.

The problems of counting worsened in the case of disciplines. The first *EU Kids Online* report, on research gaps, had already noted that sometimes it was difficult to decide the discipline informing a specific piece of research, especially when research was interdisciplinary or, in many cases, market research (Staksrud, et al,. 2007). Nevertheless, it was decided to experiment with some potential lines of analysis, if only to see whether they looked productive. From that first report it was clear that there is a fair amount of research conducted within Education and Psychology departments, but these disciplines as well as Sociology are established in most universities in most European countries and so counting these would not differentiate counties for comparative purposes – the result would more or less replicate the figure for the academic base. One possible hypothesis was that Media Studies and Communication Studies might be disciplines more likely to conduct research in this field, but as newer disciplines they might not be so established in all countries – and this

5 The main single alternative source to academic research was commercial research, accounting for only 18% of all studies, varying by country, and problematically this research is not always publicly accessible.

would be even more true of newer subjects like 'New Media', 'IT and Society' and 'Informatics'. In other words, one can ask at least whether the prevalence of these departments could help to explain some country variation in the amount and type of research.

When trying to ascertain the number of Media or Communications Studies departments there were in each country there were a number of practical issues. The first one, relatively straightforward, related to names. In France, the subject matter of Media and Communications Studies is usually researched under the heading 'Science de l'Information et de la Communication' while in Denmark what is in effect Communication Studies is sometimes called 'Information Studies'. In these known cases, it was possible to allow for this when making calculations. More problematic was the fact that many Media Studies and sometimes Communications Studies departments were very practically oriented (e.g. in Germany, and very often in the Czech Republic), teaching production skills or journalism. Up to a point this could also be allowed for, not counting departments whose name indicated that they were clearly oriented to, say, journalism, or where the *EU Kids Online* national teams knew how particular departments worked.

However, more detailed comments made in national reports showed the weaknesses in even the adjusted data. First, media and communications may be studied and researched in departments not using that name. For example, in Spain Media and Communications Studies do not exist, while empirical research on audience behaviour, for example, is likely to appear within Sociology and Social Psychology[6]. Meanwhile within Belgium, in Flanders, Media Studies is a discipline in own right whereas in French speaking Wallonia the subject matter is often taught within Social and Political Sciences. Second, when separate Media and Communications Studies departments exist their orientation can then depend on the larger faculty within which they are located. For example, in Denmark, if they are located in the Humanities they have a more philosophical, literary and aesthetic orientation but when located within the Social Science faculties they are more empirically oriented (which is of more interest for our examination of internet research). In Germany Communication Studies is more often located in the social sciences whereas Media Studies is more often linked with film analysis and positioned in the humanities. In Portugal Media Studies is more oriented to textual and visual analysis rather than 'reception studies' (the

6 Moreover, the internet tends to be studied by academics based in philosophy, discussing more general effects on society than conducting empirical studies of internet behaviour

empirical studies of interest in this report). In Italy Media Studies can be taught within the Humanities, Arts, Social Sciences or Education.

From the figures it was only possible at best to demonstrate that some of those countries where Media and Communication Studies are well established in universities appear to produce more studies on children and the internet – such as Belgium, Sweden and the UK. But while it had been important to ask the question about the influence of disciplines, in this case the chief discovery probably related to the difficulties of counting[7]. In fact, that problem proved to be even worse when trying to count Mew Media, IT and Society and Informatics departments and so that particular strand was abandoned altogether in the light of the feedback in the national reports.

## *Grouping countries*

Given the large number of participating involved, one strategy adopted was to organise the countries involved into groups when considering how to evaluate them in relation to any particular question (e.g. internet diffusion, media coverage and educational levels in the Hasebrink, et al. (2008) report; funding sources and how many Media and Communications university departments they had in the Stald and Haddon (2008) report. In fact, this was addressed more systematically in Hasebrink et al report, because those responsible for the analysis of different contextual factors were specifically asked if it was possible to create meaningful clusters of countries pertinent to the interests of the *EU Kids Onlin*e project. That said, occasionally there were discussions of exceptional individual countries, sometimes outliers on some scale, if this was useful for raising issues. For example, Denmark had strikingly different media coverage from most other countries taking part in a 14-country press analysis (see below) and so it was a useful case study for discussing the processes that might be at work. UK and German research had substantially more commercial funding compared to other countries, which was noted since it played a part in boosting the number of studies in those countries.

Although this chapter has stressed the point that much of the contextual information was qualitative, it did at times draw on existing pan-European (or even global) statistical sources as a basis for comparison, especially in the Hasebrink, et al. (2008) report. For example, the section discussing internet diffusion drew on Eurostat figures and the one charting the success of

7 There is a related discussion of comparing European official statistics, in this case of employment categories, when the terms used mean different things in different countries - see Desrosières, 1996.

Governments in promoting ICTs could use one of the measures from the Network Readiness Index. A section looking at whether laws were well developed and enforced could cite the results of the Executive Opinion Survey used by the World Economic Forum. Researchers examining the social values prevalent in different countries could utilise the European Values Survey, (in this case re-analysing the data using factor analysis) and educational attainment figures came from the OECD. Material from some existing reports was also used where they had already complied information e.g. countries had been grouped by the age limit at which pornography is considered to be 'child pornography'.

Since there was an absence of suitable material showing media coverage in the field of children and the internet, *EU Kids Online* conducted its own media content analysis of press stories in this field. This provided the basis for the further clustering of countries, e.g. according to the degree to which they covered the different types of risks related to online content (e.g. agressive content, sexual content), contact with strangers online and the conduct of children themselves on the internet (e.g. cyberbullying).

Lastly, the qualitative material could itself sometimes by used as the basis for scales by which countries could be classified. For example, in one section countries were grouped according to whether national Internet Service Providers (ISPs) played an active role in safeguarding safety online, whether they simply offered safety packages or whether they provided (almost) no warnings or advice. And in another section, countries were grouped according to whether their NGOs had been active and influential, active but not influential or not very active at all. Although allocation to such groupings required a substantial amount of subjective judgement, it was based on evidence cited in the national reports.

Meanwhile, since the *EU Kids Online* project had developed a database of entries describing the various European studies, in the Stald and Haddon (2008) report it was possible to chart their funding arrangements and organise classifications of countries accordingly (e.g. building typologies according to different combinations of funder, such as countries where public funding of research predominated).

At one level, these clusters were useful descriptively for drawing attention to where patterns existed, especially ones that might be pertinent for the area being studied. To develop some of the examples listed above, it became clear from the clustering process that there are different degrees to which laws are developed and enforced in the different countries, that media coverage of risks varies by country and that national NGOs can be more or less active and influential, all of which, in principle, could be relevant for understanding country variation in risk perceptions and behaviour.

However, the next stage involved using the clusters more analytically, asking to what extent the classification of countries on a particular dimension related to some other pattern that had been examined, such as the take up of the internet by children, the degree of risk in certain countries, or whatever. Occasionally there were links, if we now take some examples from the Hasebrink et al (2008) report. There was a high correspondence between cultural values dominant in countries and the overall country classification based on children's internet use and the degree of online risk. Another clustering process showed that the higher the general education of a country, the higher its children's internet use. In general, in countries where the internet is less common, more efforts are made to promote internet use, while once the internet becomes more common, risk awareness and then literacy initiatives become more prevalent. Finally, the more internet users countries have, the more legislation they have regulating activities on the internet.

We can take comparable examples from the clustering process in the case of the funding analysis in the Stald and Haddon (2008) report. The balance of funding sources varied across European countries, but in general various 'public financiers', especially national governments and the EC, were the most important sources of research money. That said, very different national funding arrangements were capable of generating large amounts of research – in this sense, there was no one type of funding structure, or balance of funding from different sources, which produced the most research. And as another 'negative' finding, or lack of correlation, the sources of funding did not appear to affect the topics being researched either For example, countries with a large amount of public financing did not necessarily produce much research on risks issues, and those with substantial commercial funding, did not produce research limited to such things as access and usage. It seems that different types of funder can actually have quite diverse interests, varying by country.

This process of clustering countries also provided ideas for further hypotheses, again more systematically developed in the Hasebrink et al (2008) report because those conducting the analysis of the various contextual factors were specifically asked to propose possible hypotheses (which might be tested in future research). For example, having noted different types of risk get more and less coverage in different countries' press, one hypothesis would be that in countries where there was more press coverage of content risks online (i.e. what problematic content children might encounter online), there would be more parental concerns about this issue (and the equivalent for contact and conduct risks). The point is that once the media variation is recognised, one hypothesis will be that, depending on country, national media will sensitise the public to different issues. Of course, even if this process were to be occurring, this may simply be reflected in data about parental attitudes since the media provide just

one public discourse; awareness raising campaigns may work in a different direction, for instance. To take another example, one hypothesis that emerged from this process was that the presence of information and guidelines about online safety in ISPs' websites may well have a positive effect on children's behaviour and attitudes regarding online safety issues.

## Conclusion

It is appropriate to remember the particular conditions under which this analysis took place, as specified at the start. Although at times particular narrow hypotheses were explored, this was in general a very ambitious project often exploring what factors might have a bearing upon the objects of study in the two sub-projects: children's internet experience and the shaping of research. Hence the contextual questions asked were often very demanding, requiring national teams to search for evidence. It is perhaps not surprising that in many cases there were at least two and sometimes several team members per country given the nature of this workload. In that respect, the procedures by which the material was assembled was not necessarily akin to that followed in some other cross-national studies. But in addition we have to take into account the sheer number of countries involved. In fact, there was a 'pilot report' involving just three countries – Poland, Portugal and the UK – whose aim was to establish some of the principles of analysis to be rolled out in the full 21-country study (Hasebrink, et al., 2007). While it achieved this goal, it was also clear that comparing three countries is a very different exercise, a very different form of analysis, from comparing many countries – for example, not involving the clustering process outlined above which suits the larger study. With these qualifications in mind about the generalisability of the points raised to other cross-national research, this chapter has shared some of the challenges the were faced in the analysis of contextual data within the *EU Kids Online* project, to indicate the basis for decision-making during data analysis and to illustrate the types of analysis generated in this process.

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