

Developing Social Media Literacy: How Children Learn to Interpret Risky Opportunities on Social Network Sites

Aims

The widespread use of social network sites (SNSs) by children has significantly reconfigured how they communicate, with whom and with what consequences. This article analyses cross-national interviews and focus groups to explore the risky opportunities children experience online. It introduces the notion of social media literacy and examines how children learn to interpret and engage with the technological and textual affordances and social dimensions of SNSs in determining what is risky and why. Informed by media literacy research, a social developmental pathway is proposed according to which children are first recipients, then participants, and finally actors in their social media worlds.

Key Findings

- The findings suggest that SNSs face children (aged approximately 9–11) with the fundamental question of what is real or fake.
- By around 11–13, they are more absorbed by the question of what is fun, even if it is transgressive or fake.
- By age 14–16, the increasing complexity of their social and emotional lives, as well as their greater maturity, contributes to a refocusing on what is valuable for them.
- Furthermore, children's changing orientation to social networking online (and offline) is shaped by their changing peer and parental relations, and has implications for their perceptions of risk of harm (in terms of deciding what to trust, how to test what/who they are interacting with, how to participate, where to turn for support).

Policy Context

As the teaching of media literacy is debated and implemented in schools, and in the PSHE and Computer Science curricula, it is vital to consider how children develop a socio-cognitive understanding of the social media environment with which they increasingly engage.

Other stakeholders from parents to industry also need to attend to the nuances and contexts of children's efforts to critically evaluate the social networking interface, what it offers and where the risks may lie. It is also helpful to recognise that children themselves are actively engaged, with each other, in working out how to use social networking sites according to their understandings, concerns and motivations.

Methodology

Following a pilot phase, interviews and focus groups were held during 2013 in a range of schools (public/private, city/suburban/rural). The open-ended topic guide was designed to capture children's perceptions of online activities, including their perceptions of and responses to online risk. Every effort was made to ensure a comfortable and confidential discussion, without teachers present insofar as this was possible. Individual interviews lasted around 40 minutes and focus groups lasted around 80 minutes. They were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Focus groups were drawn from one or two adjacent school year groups, so findings are categorized in three slightly overlapping age groups: 9–11, 11–13 and 14–16 (see Smahel & Wright, 2014).

Fieldwork was conducted in nine European countries, but to limit the volume of material, the present analysis is based on data from four. These were selected for diversity according to the EU Kids Online's classification of countries into four groups: "protected by restrictions", "semi-supported risky gamers", "supported risky explorers" and "unprotected networkers" (Helsper, Kalmus, Hasebrink, Sagvari, and de Haan, 2013). The nine countries included only countries in the first two categories, so two were selected from each. In "protected by restrictions" countries (Spain and the UK), children encounter relatively fewer online opportunities and risks because their parents take a restrictive approach compared with the European average. In "semi-supported risky gamers" countries (Romania and the Czech Republic), children benefit from more opportunities and fewer parental restrictions, but encounter more risk.

Background

This research is part of the EU Kids Online project funded by the European Commission's Better Internet for Kids programme (see www.eukidsonline.net).

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