A global perspective on children's rights as media change

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Throughout the world, children[i] are using media and communication technologies at ever younger ages. As technologies increasingly fill families' "time, their houses, their children's bedrooms and pockets" (Livingstone & Das, 2010:1), it seems that almost every experience – of play, learning, participation, work, and socialising - has an online dimension. Yet parents, teachers and policy makers do not always understand the associated risks or opportunities.

In our report for UNICEF, *A Global Research Agenda for Children's Rights in the Digital Age* (Livingstone & Bulger, 2013), we recommend the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child as a framework for considering children's rights of provision, protection and participation in relation to digital media use. Even in regions with high technology adoption – with nearly all children having multiple sources of internet and mobile access in the global North – children's provision, protection and participation in relation to digital and online technologies is still *ad hoc*, inconsistently implemented, or overlooked. This is even more the case in developing countries, where awareness of children's needs and rights in the digital environment is often low and resources are particularly stretched. Early studies in developing countries suggest that children are often very much on their own in the digital world, without an infrastructure of support within their families or communities, or a regulatory environment that ensures their rights to safe use and access to opportunities (Gasser, Maclay & Palfrey, 2010; Livingstone & Bulger, 2013; UNICEF, 2011).

Without implying, naively, that research (and the experiences of policy and practice) can be imported wholesale from the global North to the global South, we suggest that to neglect the possible relevance of insights already obtained in Europe and North America would be wasteful. We first review these, to see what may be learned of wider applicability, before turning to considerations that arise specifically in the global South, raising new questions for researchers, practitioners and policy makers.

Digital use in the global North
A particular focus of research in the global North has been the relationship between family dynamics and children's rights. In Europe, the EU Kids Online network has

examined children's uptake of online opportunities, parental mediation of children's internet use, and how both children and parents respond to the risk of harm online. A parallel body of research has been conducted in America, especially by Pew's Internet & American Life Project, and by the Crimes Against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire. The trends that these studies reveal over time are, perhaps, the most useful to developing countries, insofar as they reveal the diffusion processes that countries variously undergo at different rates.

For example, when media and communication technologies first reach the mass market, children and young people tend to use them well before their parents and teachers, producing a gap in use and understanding that is initially large, but which reduces over time as adults 'catch up.' ITU (2013) reports that in developing countries on average, twice as many youth aged 15-24 use the internet than the population as a whole (Figure 1). The ratio of child to adult internet users decreases in developed countries and as internet use among the general population increases (Figure 2).

[Figures 1 and 2 appear at the foot of the article]

Relatedly, the digital skills gap between children and parents is generally found to be higher in areas of emerging technology use and to lessen over time. Thus in Europe, 37% of children believed they knew more about the internet than their parents (Livingstone, et al., 2011a). By contrast, 53% of Brazilian children live in homes where no adults use the internet, and fully 73% believe themselves more capable than their parents (Barbosa, et al., 2013). Not only does the expertise of parents matter in supporting their children, but children's digital skills are themselves insufficient to address risk of harm. Research shows that higher internet use and skills increases both risk and opportunity, and it remains unclear whether frequent use (or parental support) also builds resilience to problematic experiences.

In terms of opportunities, findings from the EU Kids Online studies in Europe, Australia, and Brazil support a "ladder of opportunities" hypothesis according to which most internet users engage in basic online activities but fewer progress to undertake more complex activities, especially those which are creative or participatory (Livingstone, et al., 2011a: 33). Parent education levels, socioeconomic status, internet use and mediation strategies all affect children's exposure to risk and take up of opportunities (Livingstone, et al., 2011a).

Parents' familiarity with media and communication technologies affects family interactions around technology, from choices regarding safety to points of access. For example, children who report any parental mediation of their internet use show a lower incidence of risk experiences (Livingstone, et al., 2011a). While such research may be useful in anticipating global trends, unique cultural, religious, political, and economic contexts must be considered when making comparisons or predictions across countries (ITU, 2013). The nature and role of family or parents, children's relation to school, even the internet itself are likely to vary considerably by country and culture.

Digital use in the global South

Children in the global South encounter more infrastructural, cultural and environmental challenges in their access and use of mobile and communication technologies. A study conducted by Plan International of girls aged 12-18 in 13 countries found that provision of rights in the digital space were impeded by basic rights violations: obstacles to using technology included child labour, early pregnancy, lack of access to quality education, and inadequate transportation (De Pauw, 2011). Most report that their schools do not have computers and for those who do, computers are not connected to the internet.

In most of Africa, mobile phones are more common than home computers. Internet cafés, rather than libraries or other public spaces, serve as an access point for many children in the global South. ECPAT found that in Latin America, some cafés attempt to teach internet safety via posters on the walls, but for the most part globally, internet cafés have limited supervision for children (Garcia de Diego, 2012).

These preliminary snapshots create a picture of unsupervised use, frequently outside the family, with minimal or no parental support. Although research is limited, emerging patterns suggest that where parents and teachers have less training and support in internet use, children engage in more risky behaviours online, such as contacting strangers, sharing pictures with strangers and providing personal information (Livingstone, et al., 2011b). Who do children turn to for advice or to report a negative experience? Studies in the global South consistently find that children turn first to peers and siblings for guidance in using technologies.

For some children, their basic rights and struggle for survival necessarily precede concerns about digital engagement. Access and rights in the global South vary dramatically. In places where diffusion is low, a wide gap is evident between child and parent internet use and children seem unsupported. In countries such as Uruguay and Brazil, where a stronger infrastructure supports children's use, the distribution of their online activities is similar to that of Europe, with the largest proportion of time spent on homework (Barbosa, et al., 2013).

Conclusions

Much research on children's digital media use is focused on the global North. On the one hand, commonalities in children's development and life contexts result in similarities in youthful risk-taking and socialising practices, regardless of geography. On the other hand, it is vital to understand how the different cultural and support contexts in which they use the internet shapes the particular opportunities and risks that arise. Consistent, comparable research is necessary to gather baseline measures as technology diffusion occurs in the global South. Global studies undertaken by Plan, ECPAT, and UNICEF provide a starting point to understand and intervene in contextual differences among and between countries, but many questions remain.

Who is vulnerable online and why? Research in the global North indicates that children who are traditionally vulnerable offline are vulnerable online. Further, children whose parents or teachers have limited technological skills are likely to have low digital skills as

well. Are children who are traditionally not vulnerable offline becoming newly vulnerable online? What infrastructure is in place to address and potentially reduce vulnerability? In the global South, it seems especially important to address questions of gender inequality, of generational change and difference, and of the particular configurations of access and use between homes, cybercafés and other public or private locations.

Is it possible to improve progression to more participatory and creative use? Current research indicates that the ladder of opportunities hypothesis holds wherever it has been measured. But there are too few evaluations of interventions made at the family, school, or national level to be sure what is effective in encouraging broader and deeper online engagement. Further, current research shows that increased use does not result in decreased risk. Can improved digital skills reduce risk experiences, or will increased exposure to online media always equal increased exposure to risk?

Research in the global North is progressing beyond individual surveys and aggregate use data to better understand family relationships and how they affect children's risk encounters and take up of opportunities. Finding out – especially in developing countries – who children can turn to if they experience problems, who can encourage and resource engagement with beneficial dimensions of internet, and how does the cultural/religious context affect parental mediation, would be an important step in better focusing policy and educational initiatives that can support parental, school and community efforts.

We have proposed the UNCRC as a framework to be applied to children's rights in the digital age cross-nationally. Too often, children's rights are not a priority when governments and industry push for greater technological diffusion. Rights need to be a priority, with clear guidelines for children's rights embedded in discussions of access and technology. To advance this agenda, evidence is greatly needed.

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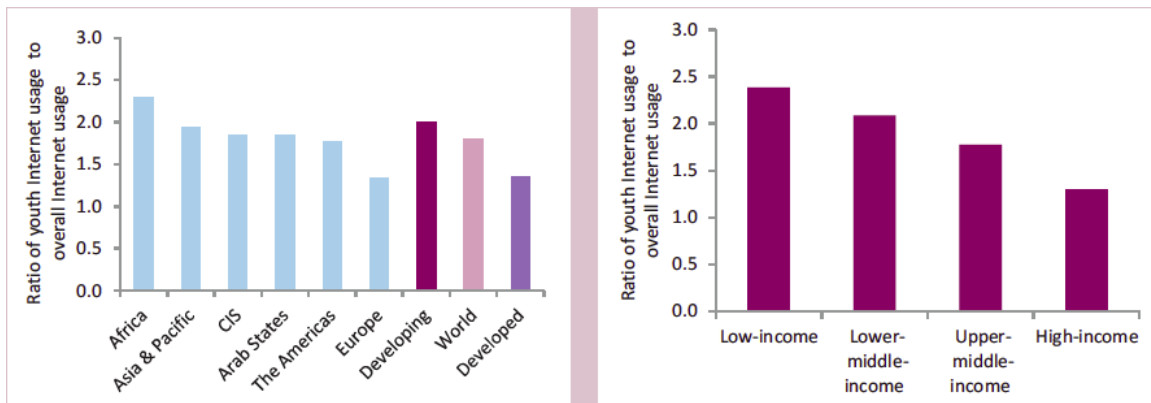
Figures

Figure 1 Ratio of youth (15-24) internet users to overall internet users, 2012
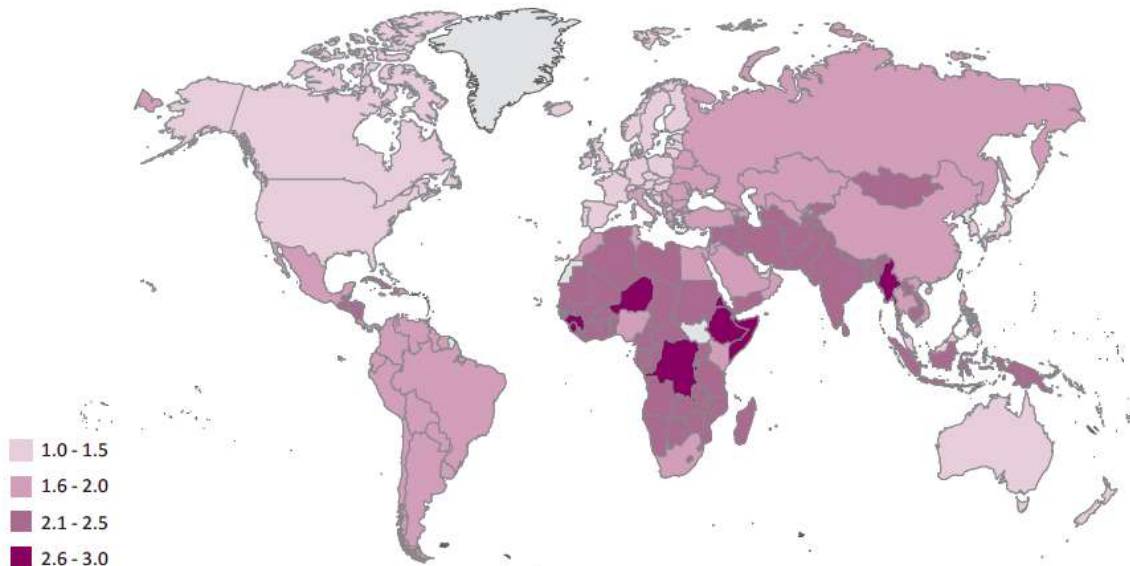
Source: International Telecommunications Union (2013) *Measuring the Information Society:* 152.

Figure 2 Ratio of youth (15-24) internet usage to overall internet usage, by region and level of development (left), and by income group (right), 2012

Source: International Telecommunications Union (2013) *Measuring the Information Society:* 150.

Endnotes

[i] *Children* are defined here as all those under the age of 18, in accordance with the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*.