Chapter 1

e-Society and Children’s Participation: Risk, Opportunities, and Barriers

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ABSTRACT

Children constitute an important group within policy discussion on information society issues, particularly in the context of digital learning opportunities and e-inclusion. However, their participation in e-society is also a cause for some public and policy concern. With ever-earlier adoption of new internet technologies and services by children, questions arise as to how to best ensure their protection whilst seeking to encourage positive online opportunities. A delicate balancing act is required to manage risks they may encounter while promoting greater participation online. To better inform this policy field, EU Kids Online conducted a pan-European survey of children’s use of the internet, resulting in the first fully comparable evidence base of children’s use of the internet in 25 European countries. Drawing on its findings, this chapter examines children’s participation in e-society and addresses the nature of online opportunities, the kinds of digital skills required and evidence of the risks young people may face on the internet. The chapter argues that greater attention to children’s perspectives on e-society is needed to foster greater online trust and participation.

INTRODUCTION

Children’s participation in e-society is a topic of policy interest for governments and educationalists the world over. While the internet was not designed with their needs in mind, children and young people have been to the fore in both developed and developing countries in adopting new information technologies and services. The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) declared that the participation of all young people was of crucial importance and that the development of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and online services should be operationalized in a way that respects children’s rights and protects their well-being (WSIS, 2003). Extensive efforts
have been made globally to promote the use of internet technologies in both formal and informal educational settings (Ito, 2008; OECD, 2012).

Harnessing the potential of ICTs to make the process of government more accessible and accountable to its citizens is one of the key features of the Information Society (Marsden, 2000). The focus of this chapter is on efforts within a European context to make the Information Society a reality for younger people (Commission of the European Communities, 2009). E-society, encompassing the full spectrum of society’s information and services, offers a vision of how citizens’ lives may be enhanced through the application of ICTs. Children, while an important constituency within this policy framework, often appear in incomplete and sometimes inconsistent ways. There is sometimes an assumption that all children are ‘digital natives’ (Prensky, 2001) – an influential trope wherein children born into the digital environment are assumed to have a greater facility for technological approaches to learning and networked communications, apparently effortlessly outpacing ‘digital immigrants’ who struggle to adapt to a fast changing technology-saturated environment. Equivalent accounts of the ‘net generation,’ ‘millenials,’ or ‘screenagers’ provide powerful images of how tomorrow’s adult citizens will supposedly benefit from immeasurably improved processes of government, decision making and support for community needs (Calvert, 1999; Rheingold, 2002; Tapscott, 1999).

This chapter takes a more critical look at children’s relationship to e-society by examining the evidence about how they access, use and engage with opportunities online. Children are the subjects of many policies in relation to information society issues and as the adopters of new technologies are often seen in the vanguard of new modes of learning, engagement and participation in e-society (Rice, 2006). Yet, their participation is also subject to restrictions, and too many of the social, cultural and economic constraints that impact also on the adult world. In addition, children’s use of internet technologies is also the subject of considerable public anxiety and societal concerns about the implications of unrestricted access to information and services that were not necessarily designed for them (Livingstone, 2003). As such, children’s participation in e-society is a contested area, caught between the policy pillars of promoting the evident opportunities for learning, educational performance and communication and the need to protect young people against a host of online risks.

To date, children’s engagement with the information society has more often than not been the subject of idealized accounts of how it may enhance young people’s lives but with relatively patchy empirical knowledge of how much young people do, or do not, participate in the online world. Arguably, the policy priority, particularly in the first decade of the internet’s existence, has been to enhance children’s access to the online world and to avoid the dangers of a digital divide (Becker, 2000; Bolt, 2000). Now, with growing awareness of the complexity of digital inclusion (Livingstone & Helsper, 2007) and a better evidence base concerning children’s use of internet technologies, there is greater appreciation of the need for evidence and ongoing research to support the potential that ICTs offer children and young people. In this context, the objectives of this chapter are to firstly, examine through analysis of findings from the EU Kids Online project how children access and use the many digital opportunities available to them; and secondly, to outline recommendations for policy regarding the quality of young people’s access to and experience of the internet. An evidence-based approach to policy, it is argued, is needed not just for addressing some of the more persistent problems associated with this domain but also essential for ensuring heightened digital participation in the future.