European Kids Online:
Minimizing Risks and Maximizing Opportunities

Renate Csellich-Ruso

(renate.csellich@aon.at)

Firstly, I want to give you a European, more precisely an Austrian, dimension of the use of the Internet by young people, especially their use of Facebook. Additionally, I will refer to the European-Kids-Online-Report 2009. For this study 21 member states have charted available data, pinpointed gaps and identified factors shaping the capability of European research institutions, to evaluate the usage of the Internet by the kids. The report surveyed 191 children aged 9 -11, 292 teenagers aged 12 – 14, and 281 teenagers aged 15 – 17. I will also draw on information from TIMESCOUT 2008, focused on 1000 people aged 11-39 in JIM[1] (wwwpfs.de).

1. About young Austrian users

1.1 Gender differences in frequency and using

In Austria you find gender differences in Internet usage. More than 42% boys but only 40% girls are online several times per day. Even here you find increasing check frequencies by migrants. An Austrian study published in 2009 was focused on 402 teenagers aged from 11 to 18 years. One of the results: Generally young Austrians check their account very often per day. Different frequencies in checking were found between migrants and natives. Migrants check their accounts more often per day than natives. Especially young boys check the account more often (per day) than girls (Jugendkultur.at, 2009, www.jugendkultur.at).

1.2 How they get in contact with each other

Young Austrians contact each other in several ways: 72 % use PA (public access) and 43 % use cell-phone. When you add public access (72%) to cell phones (43%,) you get more than a 100%. So we can say they prefer the phone to get in contact with others. Fifty-eight per cent of the young people decided to communicate by short messages (SMS) and 71% took part in chat rooms. Additionally you find gender differences. Girls preferred using public access, SMS/MMS and e-mails for getting in contact (Jugendkultur.at, 2009 (www.jugendkultur.at). This corresponds to the risks and opportunities study in 2009 wherein the authors also distinguish different use and access by gender.

1.3 Which platforms do young Austrian natives and migrants prefer?

They use "Facebook," "Netlog," and "Myspace," but in different ways. Netlog is seen as a platform for performing and expressing themselves. Many young people use Netlog for their first steps on these platforms. Lots of young Netlog users play and deal with different roles and have several identities to perform. Myspace is relatively popular for young people aged 15- to 19. Twitter is a medium that is not really popular in Austria (Jugendkultur.at, 2009, www.jugendkultur.at).

But lots of young Austrians have a Facebook account. Users interpret Facebook as a social community or social platform. But nevertheless Facebook is a virtual social "network". Who knows the American comedian Jay Leno? In his show he pretended to be astonished and cried out: "Oh, you have more than 2000 friends on Facebook? Ask one of them to help you, to move this weekend and see how many will show up?"

Normally all these social network contacts are short time relationships and involve temporary engagement, less commitment and are managed within short time.

Interestingly, migrants prefer Netlog followed by Facebook: This might be an effect of recommendations by native country friends or by socio-cultural, or socio-economic backgrounds (Jugendkultur.at, 2009, www.jugendkultur.at).

1.4 How do young people access the Internet and what are they looking for?

In the year 2009, nearly 99% used a computer to get in contact. Nowadays I believe young people prefer cell phones, because of further development like apps, or smart phones and minimized fees (Jugendkultur.at, 2009, www.jugendkultur.at).

Most of them try to look at friends' profiles or pictures, lots try to chat, have fun, post comments, look for music downloads, try to add others as friends, check or manipulate their own pictures, videos or profiles. Even here you notice gender differences. Boys prefer to play games, or they try to get in contact with a girl for having a date
(Jugendkultur.at, 2009 www.jugendkultur.at).

1.5 The risks of personal profiles

To publish personal information is the most common risky behavior for about half of online teenagers. Note that, as anonymity removes conventional constraints on communication, there are risks associated both with disclosing and not disclosing personal details. You find passwords, phone-numbers, addresses, real names and even birth-data. Normally girls are more careful with personal information. Young boys, especially, are unreflective about opening their personal profiles to everybody. But if you ask them for several kinds of misuse they have noticed, lots of young Austrians lament spam or advertising, false profiles, manipulated videos or pictures, embarrassing photos, pornography, violent, hateful, or racist contents. Many more of the victims in Austria are young boys than girls.

1.6 Data protection and how to delete data

In Austria there is a public debate about data protection and the unsolved problem of how to delete some data from the worldwide web. Until now it is fruitless and with no result.

1.7 Comparing online risks

The EU-Study shows that in Europe common risks are: to give personal information, see pornography online, see violent or hateful contents, being bullied, and lastly, meeting an online contact. Bullying may take several forms:

> *Gail Eliott Pursell described 'mobbing as group bullying. It is ganging up on someone using the tactics of rumor, innuendo, discrediting, isolating, intimidating, and above all making it look as if the targeted person is responsible. As is typical of many abusive situations, the perpetrators maintain that the victims deserved it'*
> *(www.selfgrowth.com./articel/Elltiott9.html).*
>
> *Bullying: You don't have to be physically beaten up or hurt to be a victim of bullying. Teasing, being threatened and name calling by mobile phone or social networks can all be classed as forms of bullying*
> (www.direct.gov.uk/en/YoungPeople/.../DG10031370).

1.8. Who encounters online risks and where?

Findings from the pan-European Eurobarometer survey suggest that, according to their parents, children encounter more online risk through home than school use (though this may be because parents know little of their children's use of the Internet at school). But since children use the Internet at home for longer periods and often with less supervision, this is also likely to increase risk. Further, among those (relatively few) children who use the Internet in an Internet café or at a friends' home, the absence of supervision makes these risky locations.

In most countries, household inequalities and socio-economic status have consequences for risks as well as for opportunities in the use of Internet. Specifically, even though higher status

parents are more likely than those of lower status to provide their children with access to the Internet, enabling more use among children of advantaged families, it seems that lower class children are more exposed to risk online.

There are also gender differences in risks. Boys are apparently more likely to encounter (or create) conduct risks and girls are more affected by content and contact risks. Specifically, boys appear more likely to seek out offensive or violent content, to access pornographic content or be sent links to pornographic websites, to meet somebody offline that they have met online and to give out personal information. Girls appear more likely upset by offensive, violent and pornographic material, to chat online with strangers, to receive unwanted sexual comments and to be asked for personal information, though they are wary of providing it to strangers. Both girls and boys appear to be at risk of online bullying.

It seems likely that these gender differences are the (mainly) unintended consequences of the choices that girls and boys make in regard to preferred online activities. Lastly, it appears that older teenagers encounter more online risks than younger children, though the question of how younger children cope with online risk remain little researched.

2. How can we minimize risks and maximize opportunities?

The following chart shows opportunities and risks that European children have in the dimensions of content, contact, and conduct. In the discussion that follows, I will examine these factors further.

		Content: Child as recipient	Contact: Child as participant	Conduct: Child as actor
OPPORTUNITIES	**Education learning and digital literacy**	Educational resources	Contact with others who share one's interests	Self-initiated or collaborative learning
	Participation and civic engagement	Global information	Exchange among interest groups	Concrete forms of civic engagement
	Creativity and self-expression	Diversity of resources	Being invited/ inspired to create or participate	User-generated content creation
	Identity and social connection	Advice (personal/ health/ sexual etc)	Social networking, shared experiences with others	Expression of identity
RISKS	**Commercial**	Advertising, spam, sponsorship	Tracking/ harvesting personal information	Gambling, illegal downloads, hacking
	Aggressive	Violent/ gruesome/ hateful content	Being bullied, harassed or stalked	Bullying or harassing another
	Sexual	Pornographic/harmful sexual content	Meeting strangers, being groomed	Creating/ uploading pornographic material
	Values	Racist, biased info/ advice (eg, drugs)	Self-harm, unwelcome persuasion	Providing advice eg, suicide/ pro-anorexia

	Age (years)											
Risk type	**0-5**		**6-8**		**9-11**		**12-14**		**15-17**		**18+**	
Content	11%	3	24%	23	33%	62	33%	95	32%	89	25%	48
Contact	7%	2	18%	17	33%	62	35%	102	35%	98	29%	56
Conduct	7%	2	18%	17	28%	53	30%	90	31%	86	27%	51
N		27		95		191		292		281		192

Percentage (and number) of all studies conducted that address each type of risk by child's age (multicoded for risks and age)

EU Kids Online Final Report, 2009, 10

2.1 Classifiying children's online opportunities and risks

To analyse the available research findings, the EU classified children's online opportunities and risks as follows:

The horizontal axis reflects three modes of online communication:
One-to-many (i.e. child as recipient of mass-distributed content);
Adult-to-child (i.e. child as participant in an interactive situation predominantly driven by adults); and
Peer-to-peer (i.e. child as actor in an interaction which s/he may be initiator:
Despite acknowledged difficulties of definition and overlap, for analytic and practical reasons the vertical axis categorises risks and opportunities each according to four research themes. (Not included: physical/health consequences of Internet use, including addiction (EU-

Kids Online, Final Report, 2009, 10 also see Widyanto/ Griffiths 2007, 127-149).

After having classified available research, it was clear that there is more research on access and use than on online risks, with risk addressed in up to a third of all studies. The most researched topics are children's online access and usage, followed by lists of online interests and activities. Nonetheless, across Europe, a fair body of research evidence finds that children use the Internet as an educational resource, for entertainment, games and fun, for search for global information and for social networking, sharing experiences with distant others.

EU Kids Online analytic framework looked for online activities of children. It assumes that risks and opportunities are influenced by access, use, attitudes and skills in a mutually reinforcing way. To examine this, the research field was divided into an individual (child centred) level of analysis and a country (macro-societal) level of analysis:
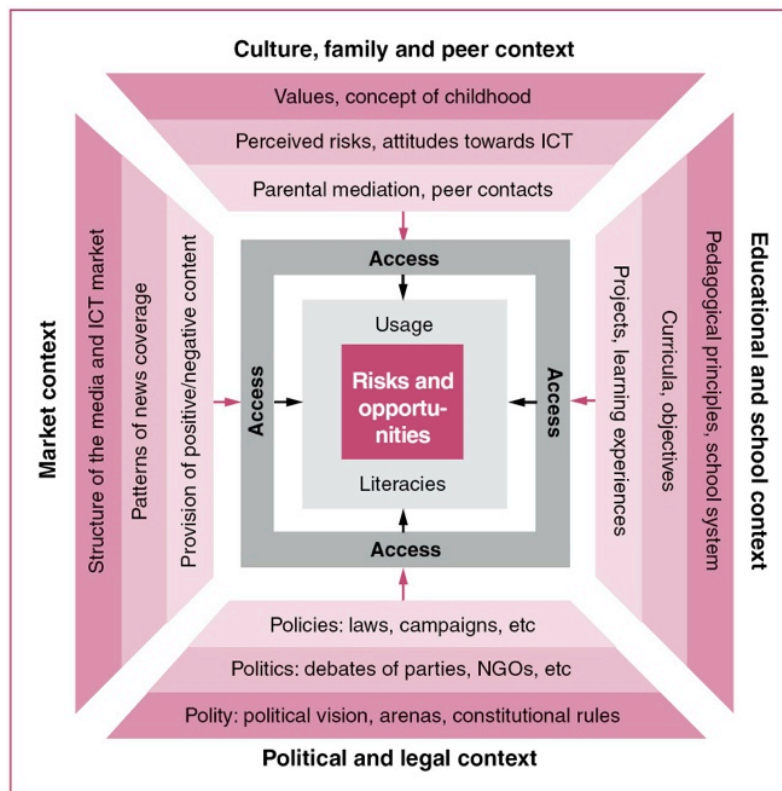

EU Kids Online Final Report, 14
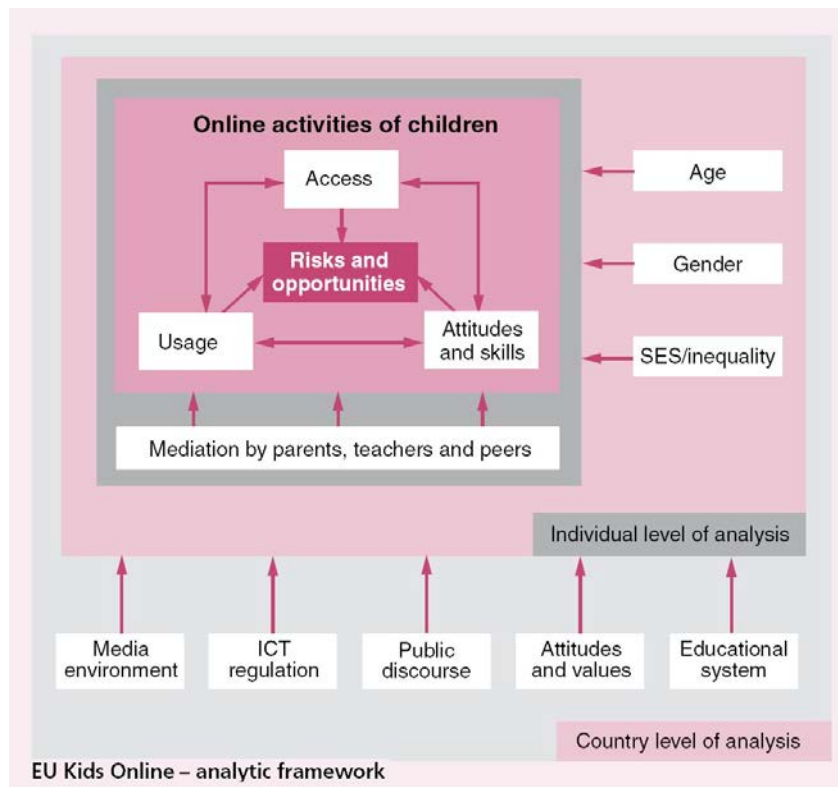
The individual level of analysis (darker grey) examines whether and how opportunities and risks vary according to a child`s age, gender and socio-economic-status. This level of analysis also examines the mediating role of parents, teachers and peers. Their conservative assumption would be that these factors influence children's opportunities and risks similarly across Europe as explained above the graphic.

However, contrary to this assumption, actual findings reveal cross-national differences. Hence a second level of analysis is required. This compares countries according to relevant contextual factors, (i.e. their media environment, ICT[2]). This country level of analysis allows the explanation of observed differences in children's opportunities and risks across Europe.

2.2 EU-Kids-Online tries to explain cross-national differences

The absence of sufficient comparable data, and limitations on the network's resources and time was a challenge and so the original dimensions were collapsed into four overall areas of comparative difference. This shows the different contexts that shape children's online activities, and the different levels (from cultural through discursive to local/domestic) through which they work and interact together. In addressing these factors in what follows, the EU-Kids-Online authors stress that their interpretations are tentative, suggesting rather than establishing explanations as a guide for policy and research.

Contextualising children's internet use

EU Kids Online Final Report, 2009, 20

2.2.1 Market context

Since differences in diffusion and, therefore access, across European countries are still large, this is an obvious and crucial factor influencing children's experience of the Internet in Europe. With access develops familiarity, interest and expertise. It also results in both online opportunities and risks.

In some countries, the Internet is a normal part of people's daily lives; in others people must make a specific effort to possess particular resources not available to all. In countries where access has become commonplace, it appears that gender and socio-economic status differences across households are reducing. However, these differences (or inequalities) remain significant, especially where access cannot (yet) be taken for granted. There are some indications that the presence of a strong public service broadcaster or other public content provider(s) for children plays a role in encouraging online opportunities.

English language proficiency tends to be higher in Northern Europe, where both use and risks tend to be average or high. It is possible that greater access to English language content may bring risks as well as opportunities.

The overwhelming focus of media coverage on online risks rather than opportunities may increase parental anxiety. Since there is a correlation between national levels of parental Internet use and parental anxiety about children's Internet use, the combination of low parental use and media panics may exaggerate parental anxiety in some countries.

2.2.2 Cultural family and peer context

Cultural conceptions of childhood are often reflected in national media coverage. For example, in Norway there is a notion of a 'natural childhood', where sexuality is less of a risk while at the same time discussions of children's rights is strong. Such underlying conceptions will help to shape the nature of how media engage with the topic of children and the Internet. Little is known of how peer culture mediates children's Internet use, though previous research has pointed to cross-national variations in the balance of family and peers as children grow older, to the constraints on friendships in cultures where outside play is highly restricted and the growth of media-rich bedrooms in individualised cultures" (EU-KidsOnline Final Report 2009, 20).

The European Values Survey permits a classification of countries according to the dimensions of individualism and collectivism. Analyses reveal a relationship between national values and the ways in which parents mediate their children's use of television and the Internet. Countries where parents put more emphasis on the mediation of television use belong to "Catholic Europe," whereas in "Protestant Europe" parents apply rules for online use.

2.2.3 Political/legal context

Broadly, it seems that where the Internet is less common, more efforts are made in promotion of Internet use. Once the Internet becomes more common, risk awareness and then literacy initiatives gain priority on the policy agenda.

Specifically, where national Internet access is greater, self-regulation by the industry, including provision of safety information provided by ISPs (Internet Service Providers) to complement that provided by government and NGOs, appears also greater. It also seems that Anglo-Saxon, Northern and Central European countries have a greater tradition of self-regulation than Latin and Southern European countries; here legislation plays more of a role than self-regulation.

2.2.4 Educational and school context

Cross-national differences in children's online use can be partly explained by different levels of general education. The higher the general education of members of a country is, the higher is also its children's online use.

The technical infrastructure of schools throughout Europe has increased substantially in

recent years. Certainly, it seems likely that greater educational provision will aid both children and parents in developing online skills. However, as several national reports point out, Internet penetration in schools is not the same as actual use by pupils. Most pupils are not permitted to use Internet at school without some kind of control by adults, and only in a few countries is it thoroughly integrated into education as a cross-curricular subject.

It also appears that, in many countries, teachers provide little in the way of safety awareness and training to guide pupils' Internet use, though the range and adoption of new initiatives is now spreading. "Greater Internet use is associated with higher levels of education, at both country and individual levels. Schools are also best placed to teach children the digital and critical literacy skills required to maximise opportunities and minimise risks. There are gaps in provision of insufficient/outdated provision of ICT (Information and Communication Technology) in schools" (Eurydice 2005, www.okm.gov.hu/doc/upload/200601/key_data_2005.pdf).

3. What is needed?

3.1 Awareness raising

Awareness raising described by the European Commission as actions that can contribute to the trust and confidence of parents and teachers in safer use of the Internet by children is a central focus of its safer Internet action plan. At the individual level, the priority now must be awareness-raising among younger children (and their parents and teachers) as they are the fastest growing user group and little is known of their activities, skills or risks online.

Additionally, research finds that although girls and boys use the Internet to a similar degree, strong differences in patterns of use and, therefore, patterns of risks persist, suggesting that awareness raising and strategies to encourage coping and resilience should address girls and boys differently. Furthermore, since it seems as if children of lower socio-economic status whose parents may have less resources to support them disproportionately experience online

risks, there is value in specifically targeting less privileged families, schools and neighbourhoods.

Society must also address the question of how children cope with risk once encountered. In short, anticipating risks so as to prevent them is necessary but insufficient, since children also need guidance on what to do after they have experienced a problem online.

3.2 Advising parents

The EU-Kids Online Final Report offers advice to parents concerned with Internet safety:

No one doubts that parents are responsible for their children's Internet safety, as outlined by the European parenting group CO-FACE. Arguably, the more parents mediate the Internet activities of their children effectively, the less government, schools, industry or regulators need do. On the other hand, parents act within a broader social, economic and cultural context that is shaped by factors not of their making, and it is here that other stakeholders play a central role.

High levels of parental anxiety regarding their children's Internet use occur across Europe. Many parents are not anxious enough, regarding the children's Internet use, as they use it themselves regularly. But these parents try to mediate their children more because they knew the Internet for all the good reasons. Given that more parents should be encouraged to explore and understand the Internet

Use of filtering technology has increased in recent years but filters remain difficult to choose and use and much problematic content (eg. user generated) is inadequately dealt with. Cultural differences mean that social and technical tools may be preferred by or more useful to parents in some countries compared with others. Generally, it seems clear that many parents find it difficult to know where to obtain guidance on supporting their child online, choosing a filter, assessing a website, reporting a problem, or setting rules. Therefore a well-promoted, reputable, easy-to-use, publicly founded

'one-stop-shop' or parent portal in each country is greatly needed. First, roles and restrictions do not fill well with the ethos of modern parenting, especially in some countries: parents prefer to use social mediation (talking to, sharing the online experience with children), and wish to trust their children and not invade their privacy (especially as more children gain access in their own room) (EU-Kids Online, Final Report, 2009, 24).

However, the most recent work of the EU-Kids Online suggests that different styles of parental mediation may be more effective in different cultural contexts, depending in part of parental values and preferred styles of parenting (Kirwil 2008). Thus, when designing parental awareness-raising mediation strategies, local contexts matter.

3.3 Online opportunities are a matter of right

The EU-Kids Online Final Report recognized the need for balancing the desire to protect children with the desire to give them freedom to explore and to grow:

One temptation is to seek all means of keeping children safe. But it is inherent to childhood and especially adolescence to take risks, push boundaries and evade adult scrutiny, - this is how children gain resilience. On the one hand, genuine and unacceptable risks should be addressed and where possible prevented, but on the other hand children learn to cope with the world through testing their capacities and adjusting their actions in the light of lessons learned. Balancing all these rights can be demanding, but all should be borne in mind to prevent safety proposals restricting children's rights and to prevent the promotion of online benefits neglecting possible risks.

Balancing empowerment as protection is a crucial task. Research suggests that increasing online access, use and opportunities tends also, if inadvertently, to increase online risks (EU-Kids Online Final Report 2009, 22).

Similarly, strategies to decrease risks can restrict children's Internet use of opportunities more broadly, even at times contravening children's rights to communicate.

3.4 Education and the role of schools

Greater Internet use is associated with higher levels of education. Improving educational achievement in general may therefore be expected to increase the extent and sophistication of Internet use. Beyond this, and to encourage the wider adoption of online opportunities, media education should be recognized and resourced as a core element of school curricula.

Schools are the best place to teach children the digital and critical literacy skills required to maximize opportunities and minimize risks. Schools are also the best places to reach all children, irrespective of socio-economic status and other forms of inequality. For both these reasons, schools have a key role to play in encouraging and supporting creative, critical and safe uses of the Internet, crucially throughout the curriculum but also at home or elsewhere. Especially data protection and the impossibilities to delete data should be focussed on too.

Maybe that this is not an actual problem for young people but it might become a problem when they start their career. Human resource managers use the WWW to get some information and sometimes the results influence a decision.

In Austria, there are gaps in provision or insufficient/outdated provision of ICT in schools. In addition, there are difficulties in ensuring that digital literacy in general, and Internet safety in particular, are addressed across the curriculum by teachers who have been recently and appropriately trained, and with adequate re-sources at their disposal.

3.5 Recommendations for policy makers

The 2006 Ministerial Riga Declaration on ICT for an inclusive society promotes a broad definition of E-inclusion, but makes no specific provision for children. E-inclusion policy for children is largely focused on schools, and here considerable progress has been made. But,

many children lack sufficient, flexible access to ICTs at school to explore the potential of the Internet. So while many measures have been taken, but there is still a lot to do to maximize opportunities while minimizing risks in European children's experiences on the Internet.

Notes

[1] JIM = Youth, Information (Multi-)Media 2008, on 1.208 young people

[2] ICT = Information and Communication Technology regulation and so forth

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