RETHINKING RESPONSES TO CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S ONLINE LIVES

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ABSTRACT

This brief discussion paper shares preliminary work to develop a practical framework for thinking about rights-respecting advocacy, policy and practice responses to support and empower children and young people in their daily encounters with the Internet and other networked digital technologies. Contemporary public service policy and practice responses to the role of the Internet in young people's lives focus disproportionately on strategies involving web blocking and filtering, restriction of access to online spaces, and safety messaging highlighting what young people should not do online. We argue that such strategies can be both counterproductive, and lead to a neglect of the role of public services in promoting young people's digital literacy and skills.

Whilst the EU Kids Online program has highlighted that "safety initiatives to reduce risk tend also reduce opportunities" (De Haan & Livingstone, 2009), alternative strategies are needed that help professionals working with young people to move beyond a conceptual model in which the 'risks' and 'opportunities' of digital technologies are set up in opposition. In exploring how to respond to the online lives of children and young people, safety must sit alongside, and be integrated with, a broader range of considerations, including promoting positive uptake of online opportunities, promoting skills relevant to a digital economy, and encouraging the development of accessible, democratic online spaces in which rights to both play and participation, amongst others, can be realized.

We suggest that the common classification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child into Provision, Protection and Participation rights (Cantwell, 1993) can provide the basis for such strategies, in which the protection of children and young people, the provision of appropriate services, spaces and support, and

the participation of children and young people in shaping opportunities and managing their own safety, are all seen as integral parts of any work relating to children and young people's online lives. We put forward a range of practical principles that can guide the design of responses to young people's online lives, including: supporting digital citizenship; empowering young people; having robust responses to risk; promoting resiliency; providing positive spaces; and allowing young people to shape services.

KEYWORDS:

children's rights, participation, protection, young people, internet policy

Introduction

> "…online opportunities and risks go hand in hand: the more children and young people experience the one, the more they also experience the other, and vice versa." (Livingstone & Bober, 2005)

This key recognition, highlighted since early UK Kids Go Online research, and reiterated in later reports, provides a basis for many recommendations concerning support for the development of young people's digital literacy, the creation of positive online spaces, and encouraging young people to engage as active content-creating participants online. Yet, policy debates and public sector practice has rarely moved on beyond taking from the above quote that there is a tension between their objectives to promote opportunity for young people, and to keep young people safe from harm[1]. In risk-averse UK public services this tension has generally been resolved by a focus on risk-reduction strategies that implicitly or explicitly accept a limit on opportunity as a result. This discussion paper argues that we need a new frame for thinking about policy and practice responses to young people's online lives, drawing on the three core areas of rights (Cantwell, 1993) set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). A shift from a language of 'opportunity and risk' to one of provision, protection and participation can offer a set of strategies to policy makers, practitioners and technology providers, and can frame new research strategies that look not at evidencing the prevalence of particular risks, but that focus on identifying and understanding the sorts of environments and interventions that promote the full realisation of young people's rights in a digital world.

History, goals and structure of this paper

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[1] For brevity throughout the document the term 'young people' is used as a shorthand for under-18s (children and young People). To refer to 13 – 19 year olds, teenagers will be used, and to refer explicitly to under-12s, children.

This paper is based on the authors shared experiences of supporting young people, youth-sector practitioners, and policy makers to engage with and respond to Internet technologies in everyday contexts. It draws upon a number of action-learning sets, workshops, open space conferences and online discussions with youth workers, social workers, educators, youth participation officers and mental health practitioners in which participants have grappled with finding individual and organisational responses to technology within a framework of opportunity and risk. The draft model put forward in this paper emerged from discussions at the 2010 Internet Governance Forum in Vilnius, Lithuania during a workshop organised by the Youth Coalition on Internet Governance (YCIG) entitled 'Beyond Risk', but in which it become clear that the discourse about young people and the Internet remained tied to a risk-opportunity dichotomy, in which risk was the concept attracting most attention. The model has been developed based on a number of workshops organised as part of the Youth Work Online Month of Action held in March and April 2011 and supported by a UnLtd Nominet Better Net grant. It remains in draft.

Whilst this paper originates in action research with UK-based practitioners and policy makers working with young people, this paper seeks to put forward a model with general applicability to a wide range of contexts. The phrases we use to frame our work (the opening plenary of the 2011 EU Kids Online conference, for example, was titled *"risks and opportunities"*) have a significant, often implicit, influence upon it. Our goal is to show that positive alternate ways of framing our responses to young people and the Internet are possible that integrate, and move beyond, the opportunity-risk relationship. We advocate for a rethinking of research, policy and practice in light of a new framing.

The paper starts by painting a picture of the current environment, before explaining how a model based on the mutually reinforcing nature of UNCRC rights might look, and offering six principles to support the application of this in practice.

Current contexts: risk-based responses

In the 40+ years since the Internet was invented, the 20 years since the World Wide Web, and over the last decade expanding broadband and mobile Internet access, the online realm has become an integral part of daily life for both young people and adults. The potential of the Internet to support learning, innovation, creativity and collaboration has been shown repeatedly. Through social media platforms and online gaming, children and young people are able to access informal learning opportunities, pursuing hobbies and interests, and even becoming international experts in their fields (Ito et. al. 2009). Through online spaces young people can extend their social networks and broaden their horizons. Through social networks young people can collaborate, organize and become politically engaged. Movements for democracy, freedom and community action both across the world, and in our local communities are

increasingly supported by young people's use of social technology: with children and young people often using technology to engage in intergenerational collaboration on shared causes. Not only will the jobs of the future need a digitally skilled workforce, but the workforce today demands not just technical competence, but flexible workers able to learn new technologies and use digital networks for collaboration, networking and business development.

As an increasingly central part of our societies, the Internet has also been a space where risks and harms to young people and adults have played out. A wide range of risks associated with harmful content, conduct, contact and commerce (Hasebrink, Livingstone & Haddon, 2008) have been highlighted by the EU Kids Online project. Extensive attention has been devoted in the media, in legislation, in education systems and in public policy to questions of Internet safety. Whilst some of the more sensationalized concerns about the impacts of the Internet on young people can be categorized as classic forms of moral panic about new technology, the Internet does present a range of new or changed risks and potential harms that policy makers and practitioners need to respond to (Livingstone, 2010).

It is in this context, of new opportunities and new risks (or risks presented as 'new' in order to gain policy attention) set up in tension, that voluntary and statutory sector agencies working with young people, parents, policy makers, service providers, and young people themselves, have had to identify their responses. Within a notably risk averse public culture, many voluntary and statutory actors in the youth sector have frequently opted for responses based on limiting risk, and have significantly limited their engagement with digital technologies. Whilst there are some exceptions, a large number of charities, local authorities and advocacy groups working to promote a better life for young people have tended to focus their Internet-related activities on narrow definitions and understandings of online safety, adopting strategies and policies based around keeping clear of the Internet, restricting access to online spaces, or promoting simple safety messages rather than digital skills. Concerted efforts to promote digital literacy skills, and to modernize services and support so that they take full account of the integral role that Internet and other digital communications play in children and young people's lives have been lacking policy support.

A similar bias can be seen in international discussions, such as those of the Internet Governance Forum, where even in discussions within a 'risk and opportunity' framework, considerably more attention is given to managing risks of harm from technology, than to promoting the uptake of digital opportunities by young people, or to addressing digital divides. Although EU Kids Online research, amongst others, has highlighted that not all young people are benefiting from the Internet equally, and that promoting uptake of opportunities can be helpful in building young people's resiliency to navigate risks, such points are lost in contemporary policy and practice responses.

Particular problems in the current context include:

Counterproductive blocking and restrictions

It is, in many ways, a natural response when faced with a situation that seems to present risk to people that one cares about, to try and keep them from encountering the risky situations. However, strategies based solely on blocking access to certain content, or denying young people access to certain technologies, can have a range of unintended consequences. Blocking can enable adults to ignore their responsibility to support the development of young people's digital literacy by suggesting Internet safety issues are 'solved', and it can remove pressures to find or create appropriate online services for young people. Given the widespread availability of unfiltered Internet access (e.g. via mobile phones and devices, home connections, open WiFi etc.) and the extent to which restrictions, whether content-filtering or age-limits on services, will always be easily circumvented by some children and young people, restriction-focused strategies can leave some young people at increased risk.

A lack of recognition of the full range of children's rights
Rights to protection from physical and emotional harm are enshrined in the UNCRC. However, the UNCRC, as all rights frameworks, also sets out a range of further rights that have to be balanced effectively with protection rights. These include rights to freedom of expression and access to information across frontiers (Article 13, 17), rights to freedom of association (Article 14), rights to preparation for responsible life in a free society (Article 29) and rights to protection of privacy (Article 16) amongst others. The development of the Internet presents new contexts for the realisation of these rights - as potential access to information is dramatically increased, and young people are able to explore new opportunities for self-expression and association across frontiers. However, these broader rights are frequently neglected - with young people's access to information on key topics of health, politics and sexuality limited by Internet filtering - and with a lack of critical formal and informal education supporting young people to gain the skills to live creative and responsible lives in increasingly digitally mediated societies.

Services are failing to modernize and recognize digital dimensions of young people's lives
Policies and practices that discourage professionals and volunteers from exploring the online world with young people - or restrict discussion of the Internet to giving 'safety messages' mean that services are unable to engage with a significant part of young people's lives. Health practitioners, educators, youth workers, social workers and participation workers who recognise the need to integrate an awareness of online spaces into their practice find they are prevented from doing so by organisational culture and restrictions, and by a lack of support and training.

A focus on organizational risk rather than risk and opportunities for young people
When we discuss risks and opportunities of the Internet we could be discussing both risks and opportunities for young people, and risks and opportunities for organisations. Reducing the risks to an organisation (reputational risk, liability etc.) can be in tension with reducing the likelihood of young people coming to harm, or duties to promote young people's opportunities.

Young people are excluded from the debate or their contributions ignored
Whilst some positive efforts to involve young people in discussions around Internet policy have been undertaken, many have narrowed their focus to Internet safety, prejudicing the outcomes of youth engagement. Where young people do speak up, locally and in international fora, on the need for action on online freedoms and access to support to make the most of online opportunities, their voices have been frequently ignored by policy makers.

The list above is far from exhaustive, simply drawing on common observations from practitioners we have worked with. Whilst we do not argue that all these weaknesses of current policy result solely from the current 'opportunity and risk' frame, we do find that it plays a role in their creation. Practitioners seeking to engage with young people online, or to explore aspects of young people's online lives with them will frequently be asked to work through a consideration of the risks involved, or to complete a risk assessment. This generally proceeds via an identification of individual risks, and an identification of responses to each risk in turn – which can cumulatively lead either to the project being discarded entirely as the weight of restrictions that get added to what could be done become too much, or they lead to ineffective projects that become divorced from the reality of young people's online lives by supposing that all risks can be managed or kept away from the project. Similar processes play out in policy responses at the macro level.

Moving beyond the current situation is challenging. Any change must take into account the validity of concerns about potential harms to young people in online environments, and the dynamics of transitioning from responses based on control, to responses based on respect for young people, and on a full understanding of rights. Advocacy for a broader set of responses to the online lives of children and young people will also require addressing the negative influence of some elements of an 'E-Safety' industry who have vested commercial interests in perpetuating a culture of fear and providing products that promise risk-reduction through controls and restrictions.

In the next section we set out our proposed conceptual model to help in rethinking practice and policy.

A new model
The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) provides an internationally agreed foundation for policy and practice with respect to young people. It has been ratified in 194 countries, and was ratified in the United Kingdom in 1991. Although not contained in the text, commentators commonly divide the 41 substantive rights enumerated in the convention into three main categories: provision rights; protection rights; and participation rights. Cantwell (1993) suggests these are "three elements to be necessarily taken into account in formulating policies on any issue", such that any policy response to young people should not adopt a pick-and-mix approach to convention rights, but should seek to find a balance between them. Badham (in Willow, 2002) has gone further in highlighting that UNCRC rights can be understood as mutual reinforcing, focusing on participation rights as a 'keystone' which ensures the others rights are interpreted and implemented in ways that recognize the whole

vision of the UNCRC. A similar understanding of the relationship of UNCRC rights can be found be presenting the three categories of rights as sides of a triangle (Figure 1.). With any side removed, the triangle collapses – each set of rights is essential to support the full realization of the others. No set of rights are prior to the others in the triangle: the framework is as much a participation, provision, protection model, as one for protection, participation and provision. The insights generated by this model can be adopted independently of its foundation in the UNCRC, although the Convention's elaboration of a rich set of rights in each category (for example, highlighting that protection involves both protection from abuse, and protections to young people's privacy), strengthens and deepens any model built on it.
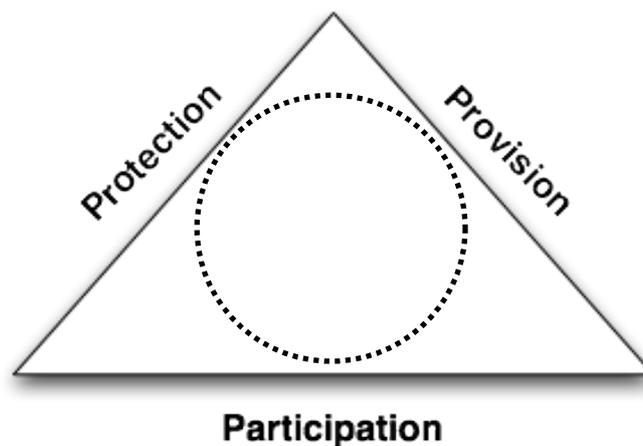

Participation
Figure 1. Provision, Participation, Protection

Applied to consideration of young people's online lives, we can see how the tri-partite model can capture research insights into the relationship of opportunity and risk. Whilst risks may give rise to a focus on protection, evidence suggests that protection is frequently best realized by ensuring young people gain experience of the online world through positive engagement with it: protection may be best served by putting some of the efforts of a project into promoting online participation, or providing educational opportunities to explore and reflect on online spaces. Similarly, a focus on promoting online opportunities may lead a project to create online spaces: for example, providing a Facebook group where young people can interact and discuss local issues. Before establishing such provision, a project will need to consider it's obligation to protect young people, and their rights to safe opportunities, and in doing so, it should not ignore principles of participation – young people as actors involved in their own protection: for example, adopting co-moderation strategies, and empowering young people to report and discuss any safety concerns they have.

In our first discussions with practitioners around the application of this model to young people's online lives, it became clear that, whilst it has an intuitive appeal and simplicity, in practice, different settings place very different interpretations on each of the terms, with provision, participation and protection all having specific meanings in some contexts. It is important then to provide some additional context to the use of these terms with respect to the Internet and

young people, and to highlight what their combination means – particularly at their intersections on the points of the triangle. For example, what does it mean to adopt a response that addresses both protection and provision? And how do participation and protection fit together. In the current draft of the model we have attempted to address this by suggesting six broad principles flowing from the model, and fitting these into the triangle as in Figure 2 below. Further work is required to detail and expand the evidence base for each principle and to refine their contents based on further empirical work. However, we believe the current draft offers a useful complement to the tri-partite framework to illustrate what a focus on protection, provision and participation involves in practice.
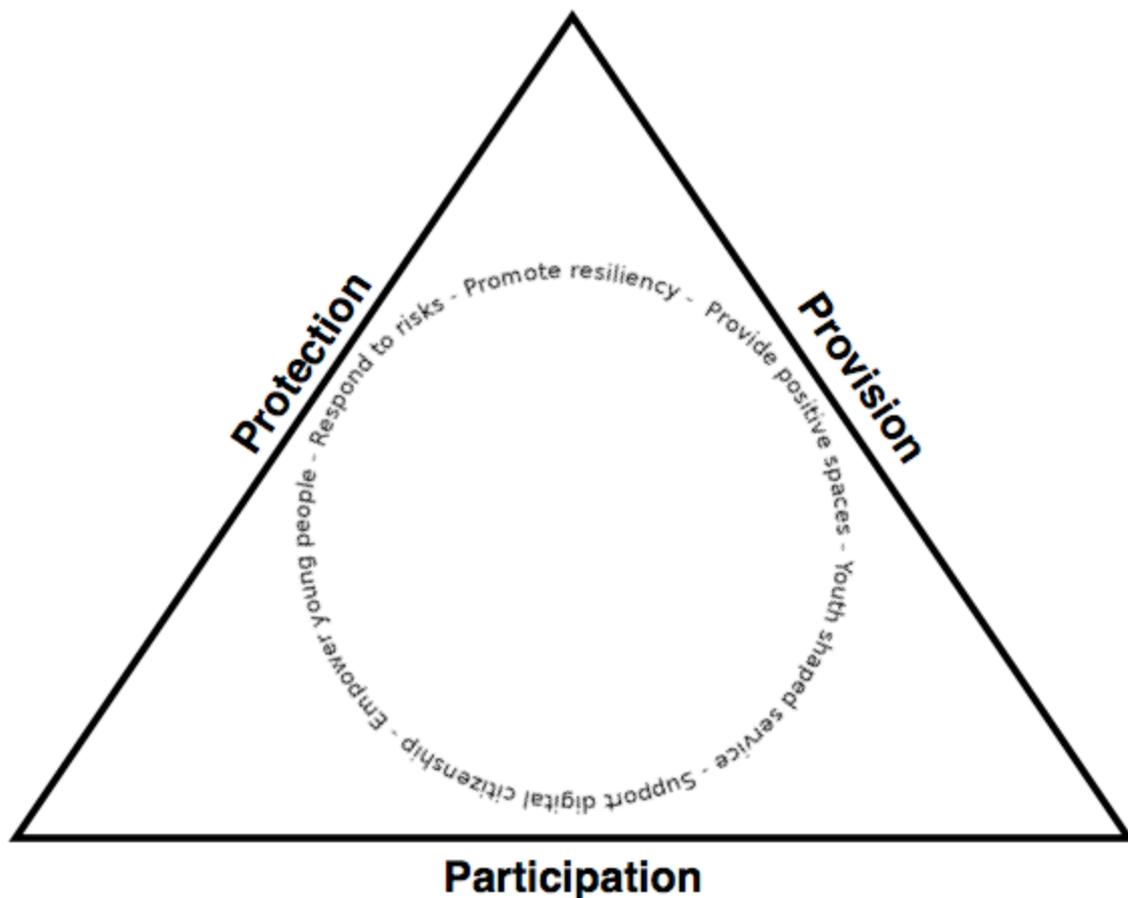

Figure 2. Principles to guide responses

Six principles

Any project addressing young people's online lives should seek to consider it's contribution to:

- **Supporting digital citizenship:** recognizing that the Internet has great potential for young people to connect with each other (and across generational divides) to actively participate in all forms of online and local communities. Supporting digital citizenship involves helping young people to develop skills to engage online and effect change, as well as facilitating

opportunities for such engagement and actively role modeling innovative and ethical online interaction.

- **Empowering young people** to work individually and collectively for safe and positive online experiences. Understanding that young people should participate in their own protection: given awareness of their rights, confidence to speak up about concerns, and opportunities to shape protection policies and responses. Supporting young people to look out for each other in online spaces. Encouraging young people to see themselves as creators and contributors in a quickly evolving knowledge economy.

- **Responding to risks** by having clear and proportionate policies and processes in place. As with most offline risk assessment, a mixture of proactive and reactive measures will be appropriate. Reputational risk to an organisation does not justify ignoring the online spaces young people are using, and potentially leaving young people in dangerous situations as a result. Specific attention should be paid to supporting the young people who evidence shows are most at risk of actual harm, understanding that different policies are right for different ages, stages and needs.

- **Promoting resiliency:** recognising that the vast majority of young people will encounter risky situations online without coming to harm. In many cases, overcoming risks is fundamental to personal development. Ensuring all young people have access to resiliency and resources needed to thrive in a diverse, complex, exciting and ever-changing networked world is important in the development of online initiatives for young people.

- **Providing positive spaces:** including developing age-appropriate online spaces, and offering young people opportunities to experiment with and explore digital media in different ways. Services working face-to-face with young people should create safe spaces for young people to discuss their online lives: for example, opportunities to establish group norms about how content is shared online. Service providers should take into account the specific needs of children and young people when developing online spaces, addressing issues of consent, privacy and security in the design of social software or devices.

- Involving young people in creating **youth shaped services.** It is essential that provision and protection are both informed by young people's active participation. Without young people being involved in the design and development of positive spaces they are unlikely to have sustained relevance. Youth-adult partnership in setting priorities for digital-era services, protection and provision is essential to its efficacy.

The tripartite model, and these six principles can be used to identify specific guidance for different sectors involved in responding to young people's online lives. Whilst some sectors will have specific responsibilities or interests in relation to some principles (e.g. protection responsibilities of government agencies, or service provision interests of Internet companies), the model suggests that they best realize specific goals (safeguarding, service provision

etc.) by also taking into account the other principles. The principles can also support identification of creative responses to young people's online lives which are compatible with, rather than in tension with, other policy and practice responses.

Summary

At present many responses to young people and the Internet implicitly or explicitly adopt a frame of the form "We have to manage the balance between opportunity for young people, and their exposure to risk". We argue this framing does not make for evidence-based, effective or well-integrated policy making and practice across sectors and levels of decision-making and practice. We have put forward a draft model that attempts to resolve an opportunity-risk dichotomy by encouraging responses to ask "What are we doing to address the young people's protection, the provision of positive opportunities, and the participation of young people, with respect to their online lives?". We offer this as a discussion starter, and a challenge to research, policy and practice to engage with the key task of rethinking responses.

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