

Is there a ladder of children's online participation? Findings from three Global Kids Online countries

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WHAT DOES SOCIETY HOPE CHILDREN DO ONLINE?

There is broad agreement that internet access is important for children and provides them with many opportunities. Yet crucial questions remain about what we hope children will do online and if the opportunities provided are translating into clear benefits. What do children actually need to be able to benefit from the opportunities that the internet brings?¹ Is there a gap between expectations and reality? The answers to these questions matter to:

- Governments striving to provide connectivity for families in homes, schools and communities;
- Parents and educators who must overcome problems of cost, risk, or lack of skill, so that children may benefit from online opportunities;
- Child rights advocates and practitioners who call for resources to empower and protect children online²;
- Children themselves, many of whom want to take advantage of online opportunities for personal benefit.³

METHODOLOGY

- The Global Kids Online network has developed a research toolkit to expand the evidence base in a growing number of countries on children's internet access and use, opportunities and skills, risks and safety.⁴ In this research brief, we draw on findings from Bulgaria,⁵ Chile⁶ and South Africa.⁷

These countries have been selected on the grounds of maximizing cross-national difference, given the exploratory nature of this analysis and the fact that the likely extent of and explanation for similarities and differences are yet to be fully understood.⁸

Although the countries are very different, the measures used are cross-nationally comparative, revealing cultural factors that shape children's digital participation.⁹

Based on measures of learning, creativity, community and civic participation, relationships, entertainment and personal benefits, the Global Kids Online survey asked children whether they had undertaken a series of activities online in the past month (see Appendix for question wording).

The coloured cells in the country tables that follow suggest 'steps' on the ladder of online participation. In summary, these steps show that:

- 9-11-year-olds do just a few of the available activities;
- 12-14-year-olds do rather more activities;
- Older teens do the most, including some of the more advanced civic and creative activities.

Each country table shows:

- i. The percentage of children in each country who do each activity at least weekly, in rank order of frequency;
- ii. The frequency with which children in three age groups do these activities, recognizing that societies may have different expectations of children's online activities depending on their age;
- iii. The activities practised by upwards of around half the children in each age group (in colour).

i. The authors are members of the Global Kids Online network and thank its members for their collaboration on the project. See www.globalkidsonline.net for further information. We also thank the anonymous reviewers for their comments on an earlier version.

FINDINGS FROM BULGARIA

What do Bulgarian children do online?

- Most child internet users in Bulgaria engage in a mix of mass entertainment and communicative activities.
- Older children tend to engage to a greater extent in activities such as talking to distant family or friends, posting online content, and doing schoolwork.
- It is only really the older adolescents who pursue a range of civic and informational interests.
- Few, of any age, use the internet for civic purposes or to create their own content.

Table 1 Bulgarian children's online participation

Online activities practised at least weekly	Age group (N=1000)			
	9-11	12-14	15-17	ALL
Involved in campaign or protest	2	4	6	4
Discussed politics with others	3	4	12	6
Created blog, story or website	5	8	10	2
Looked for health information	5	9	21	11
Searched for resources about their neighbourhood	7	14	19	13
Created video or music	9	15	20	14
Talked to people who are different	9	21	35	21
Looked for news online	10	27	51	28
Used website for interests or hobbies	13	31	47	29
Looked for work or study opportunities	14	32	45	29
Used the internet for schoolwork	40	56	58	50
Talked to distant family or friends	41	58	60	52
Posted photos or comments online	33	64	73	55
Learned by searching online	50	74	86	68
Played online games	78	76	65	73
Used social networking sites	49	82	94	73
Listened to music	59	83	87	75
Watched video clips	83	91	96	89

Note: Percentage of children who do each activity at least weekly, by age, ranked by frequency. The coloured cells mark the activities practised by roughly half the age group or more.

Relating Bulgarian children's online participation to potential benefits:

- The Bulgarian education system lacks a structured approach to developing children's digital and media literacy, which restricts their use of the internet for school purposes (only around 50% of all children use internet for schoolwork). This might hamper their skills development, which in the long run could make it more difficult to engage in advanced online activities and limit children's opportunity to benefit.
- There may be a lack of incentive and opportunities for Bulgarian children to engage in high-quality online content creation (55% posted photos or comments online, but only 14% created their own video/music; 7% created a blog/website), possibly impeding the development of skills needed for creative and personal expression.
- Very few Bulgarian children engage in civic participation activities online, indicating that they do not benefit from the potential of the internet to facilitate children's civic participation.

FINDINGS FROM CHILE

What do Chilean children do online?

- As in Bulgaria (and South Africa, see later), most Chilean child internet users, even the youngest, engage in entertainment and communication activities online but, unlike Bulgarian children they also frequently use the internet for schoolwork.
- Older Chilean children tend to play games a bit less than younger children, but engage more in a greater variety of social activities, such as using social network sites, talking to distant family or friends and instant messaging.
- Relatively few of the youngest Chilean children visit social networking sites regularly.
- Looking for news online is the only civic activity done by most teens. In younger age groups less than one third of the children report doing this activity frequently.

Relating Chilean children's online participation to potential benefits:

- Most child internet users in Chile, in all age groups, use the internet for schoolwork, likely a result of an ICT for education policy implemented for more than 20 years. While this is positive in terms of their access to education and information, 23% of children do not use the internet for schoolwork, and just under two-thirds report learning by searching online. Recently, the Ministry of Education has promoted some improvements by including digital skills in the school curriculum and designing ways to measure student learning online, hopefully reaching those children who do not benefit as much from the learning opportunities the internet affords.
- Child internet users in Chile mostly engage in entertainment and social activities. Although creative and civic activities are slightly more common amongst older children, take up is rather low - for creative activities, it is less than half compared to 15- to 17-year-olds in Bulgaria and South Africa. However, older Chilean children are on par with Bulgarian and South African children in terms of civic activities. It may be that teens that engage in political activities have different motivations from those that engage in creating videos or music, necessitating support for diverse - and more attractive - paths to digital inclusion, personal or political expression, or civic participation.
- Most Chilean children play online games, which can support social interaction and in theory benefit children's mental health, pointing to the potential to develop apps and games to address bullying, discrimination and participation. On the other hand, games may not always be beneficial, and it is important also to consider the associated risks of online gaming and other online activities.

Table 2: Chilean children's online participation

Online activities practised at least weekly	Age group (N=1000)			
	9-11	12-14	15-17	ALL
Involved in campaign or protest	1	2	7	3
Created a blog, story or website	3	3	3	3
Discussed politics with others	0	5	11	5
Created video or music	9	6	8	8
Searched for resources about their neighbourhood	10	15	25	17
Looked for work or study opportunities	13	18	30	20
Talked to people who are different	12	19	28	20
Used website for interests or hobbies	7	18	37	21
Looked for health information	17	28	34	26
Looked for news online	16	27	48	31
Talked to distant family or friends	32	55	53	47
Posted photos or comments online	33	52	78	55
Learned by searching online	45	59	73	59
Played online games	77	62	54	64
Visited social networking sites	38	80	93	71
Used the internet for schoolwork	65	80	86	77
Used instant messaging	54	86	96	79
Watched video clips	81	91	92	88

Note: Percentage of children who do each activity at least weekly, by age, ranked by frequency. The coloured cells mark the activities practised by roughly half the age group or more.

FINDINGS FROM SOUTH AFRICA

What do South African children do online?

- For the youngest South African internet users, the focus of their use is on relatively basic tasks: schoolwork, social network use and playing online games. Online gaming is an especially popular activity among this age group, with its use declining relative to other activities in older adolescence.
- The activities of 12-14-year olds is more diverse, as they not only engage in social networking but also contribute content to social networking sites and use these sites to seek out social connections with people they know.
- In the oldest group, children's interests expand to include seeking content that is unfamiliar to them or looking for resources to secure future work or study opportunities.
- While watching video clips is the most common activity for children of all age groups in both Bulgaria and Chile, just over half of South African children do this weekly.
- As was found in other countries, relatively few South African children use the internet to learn more about and contribute to their immediate offline community and few contribute original content to the internet.

Relating South African children's online participation to potential benefits:

- South African children enjoy a greater breadth of opportunities than children in other countries by the time they reach 15 to 17 years, which means they are in a position to potentially enjoy a wider range of benefits.
- However, the opportunities accessed by the youngest children are still quite limited, which undermines the potential benefits for this group. This may, in part, be due to the fact that parents tend to take a protective stance with young children in South Africa, restricting internet use because they don't feel confident in ensuring their children's safety online.
- The challenges that some South African children face in accessing affordable and fast internet has implications for the degree to which they are able to explore online opportunities and develop their digital skills. For example, our data showed that fewer South African children watched video clips and listened to music weekly, compared to children in Bulgaria and Chile. Streaming videos and music can incur high data costs and as such South African children may be limited in what they can do online due to socio-economic conditions. This could lead to poor children or children in rural communities falling behind as they cannot use the internet as freely as their urban counterparts, due to existing inequalities.

Table 3: South African children's online participation

Online activities practised at least weekly	Age group (N=1000)			
	9-11	12-14	15-17	ALL
Involved in campaign or protest	4	2	6	3
Searched for resources about their neighbourhood	6	11	25	16
Discussed politics online	7	10	26	17
Created a blog, story or website	2	10	31	18
Looked for health information	10	20	43	29
Created video or music	15	29	43	33
Used website for interests or hobbies	11	22	50	33
Looked for news online	12	21	54	35
Talked to people who are different	16	36	61	44
Looked for work or study opportunities	25	32	64	45
Watched video clips	25	44	69	52
Posted photos or comments online	19	52	79	58
Played online games	64	59	63	61
Listened to music	44	61	72	63
Talked to distant family or friends	34	58	80	64
Visited social networking sites	26	56	86	64
Use the internet for schoolwork	63	63	78	70
Learned by searching online	59	73	86	76
Used instant messaging	68	82	96	86

Note: Percentage of children who do each activity at least weekly, by age, ranked by frequency. The coloured cells mark the activities practised by roughly half the age group or more.

INTERPRETING THE FREQUENCY OF CHILDREN'S ONLINE ACTIVITIES

Comparing across the three countries, the rank ordering of children's online activities is fairly similar, suggesting a 'ladder' running from commonly to rarely practised activities. While we cannot say from these cross-sectional data whether children begin at the bottom and climb the ladder to a certain point, we suggest this is a plausible interpretation of the findings, and a hypothesis worth testing in future research.

This raises questions about country differences, and the significance of these differences. For example, why do only half as many children in Bulgaria, compared to those in Chile or South Africa seek health information online? This could indicate that Bulgarian children are less likely to benefit from health information online, though this also depends on other factors beyond internet access. Is there high-quality health information available online? Is it available in local languages? Is it appropriate and accessible for children? While our data show that a considerable percentage of children look for health information online, we have a long way to go before we can judge whether this is truly beneficial to them. This is partly because more research is needed on whether and how children judge the quality of the information they find online.

The findings also reveal age differences among children: in all countries, younger children participate less in the educational and informational activities. Does that mean younger children are losing out on potential benefits? The question for policy makers and practitioners to consider here, is whether this is to be expected of younger children? There may be reasons – of evolving capacity or interest or need – why younger children engage less frequently in these activities. Since opportunities and risks often go hand in hand, it may also be safer for younger children to do less online. On the other hand, it might be judged a matter of equity or potential for improved provision that greater efforts should be focused on this group – through interventions at school or at home – to increase their uptake of online opportunities.

Analysis by EU Kids Online¹⁰ shows that older children, those with more internet experience and those with more digital skills engage in a wider range of opportunities, which should in theory provide them with more benefits. Initial analysis of these Global Kids Online data shows a similar pattern. The 'ladder' thus reveals the possibilities for children – with activities

towards the top of the tables requiring investment if children are to attain these. It also suggests inequalities – with children with less internet experience and fewer skills not gaining the opportunities enjoyed by their better-off peers, which could result in the former missing out on possible benefits. This is another important area for future research.

Although we lack longitudinal data, it may be suggested that the steps on the ladder map out a pathway to online participation as follows:

- The first step on the ladder reveals the entry-level activities for children aged 9-11 in a given country. Most children take their first steps by engaging in social activities and gaming. Across three fairly different countries, these appear the attractive and accessible activities that encourage early internet use. It is worth considering what children gain from these activities, and whether these activities provide encouragement to progress and advance in online experience and expertise. One possible benefit of these entry-level activities is that they may build the initial skills of children so that they can climb further up the ladder.
- Online gaming is the only activity that is more common amongst the youngest children than the older across all three countries, so could be used as a gateway to constructive educational and participatory activities online, as well as to support digital skills development. This would be facilitated by creating games that provide learning opportunities while still being entertaining enough to keep children playing.
- Learning activities are also found as a first step on the ladder in all three countries, though in Bulgaria using the internet for schoolwork comes only as children deepen their online engagement. This may be because in Bulgaria children go online at home before they use the internet in school and because they are not taught digital skills systematically at school. This might explain why fewer Bulgarian children of all age groups use the internet for schoolwork compared to children in Chile or South Africa. Chile has long-standing policy support for ICT in Education, which might explain why more Chilean children use the internet for schoolwork compared to children in Bulgaria or South Africa. This reveals how governments and policy makers can potentially enable children to benefit from the internet, by providing learning opportunities

within the formal education system that can compensate for inequalities at home and, in the longer term, may lead children to use the internet increasingly for educational purposes.

- The higher steps reveal activities that children lack the motivation, skills or support to engage in, such as civic and creative activities. It is worth considering why this is the case and whether the education system and/or specific policy or programme interventions can make a difference.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY, PRACTICE AND RESEARCH

The findings show that while most children in the three countries are already enjoying some of the opportunities of internet access in sizeable proportions, most children do not reach the point where they commonly undertake many of the civic, informational and creative activities online that are heralded as the opportunities of the digital age.

The country comparisons suggest that children travel somewhat different pathways to online opportunities, influenced by their life context and skills. While the reasons for country differences need further exploration, the fact of the differences suggests that there is scope to design these pathways differently, depending on national goals and values, and possibly with some countries learning from the experience of others.

Can further efforts be made to increase the proportion of children which benefits from the civic and informational opportunities that the internet and mobile technologies provide? Many countries face challenges regarding how digital skills are taught, and in integrating out-of-school learning into the school curriculum. These findings show some of the popular activities that children engage in on the internet and suggests how further and deeper use could be encouraged, for example by promoting ICT in Education policies in schools and reducing data costs. While we are not committed to any definitive list of what children should or should not do online, we hope these findings help policy makers and practitioners consider what we might expect children of different ages to do online. How far should they climb the ladder of online participation, and to what end?

The present research is exploratory in nature. We suggest that the next steps for research on children's online participation include:

- Qualitative research to explore with children in different contexts and countries which online activities they most value and why, and the skills and resources that are required for them to achieve their goals.¹¹
- Evaluative research to examine the concrete benefits, short and long term, that result from children's online participation, in order to explore the pathways through which these are obtained.
- Multifactorial and multidimensional analysis to explore the risks associated with pursuing online participation; these risks can concern exclusion and inequality (if some children lack opportunities to participate) or harm (if more online activities lead children into problems they are unable to cope with or avoid).¹²
- Confirmatory research to explore whether and how different online activities that children engage in may improve their digital skills, thereby providing pathways to additional opportunities.

We end on a cautionary note. Hart rightly cautions against taking the 'ladder' metaphor too literally. Many factors influence how high children may 'climb' the ladder of online participation, and there are different opinions about whether some online activities are more desirable than others. More practically speaking, the list of online activities examined here are not exhaustive and likely to change over time. They may also be regarded differently by different groups of children, or by the adults tasked with supporting their rights and online benefits. Yet while the normative dimension of this research is arguably the most difficult¹³, we believe it is important that children's online activities are examined from a normative perspective, as society must set expectations for children's activities in order to justify provision and then evaluate outcomes and inequalities.

APPENDIX

Table 4: Global Kids Online survey questions on children's online opportunities

- | | |
|--|---|
| 1. I learned something new by searching online [learned by searching] | 11. I visited a social networking site [social networking] |
| 2. I looked for information about work or study opportunities [information about work] | 12. I talked to family or friends who live further away [talked to distant family] |
| 3. I used the internet for schoolwork [used for school] | 13. I used instant messaging (IM) ([add local examples e.g. Viber, WhatsApp) [Used instant messaging] |
| 4. I looked for resources or events about my local neighbourhood [resources about neighbourhood] | 14. I played online games alone or with others [online gaming] |
| 5. I used the internet to talk to people from places or backgrounds different from mine [talked to different people] | 15. I listened to music online (by downloading or streaming) [listened to music] |
| 6. I looked for news online [looked for news] | 16. I looked for health information for myself or someone I know [health information] |
| 7. I discussed political or social problems with other people online [discussed politics] | 17. I participated in a site where people share my interests or hobbies [site for interests or hobbies] |
| 8. I got involved online in a campaign or protest [campaign or protest] | 18. I posted photos or comments online (e.g. on Facebook or a blog) [posted photos or comments] |
| 9. I created my own video or music and uploaded it to share [created video or music] | 19. I watched video clips (e.g. on YouTube, add local examples) [watched video clips] |
| 10. I created a blog or story or website online [created blog or story] | |

NOTES

¹ Livingstone, S., and Bulger, M. (2013) *A Global Agenda for Children's Rights in the Digital Age: Recommendations for Developing UNICEF's Research Strategy*. Florence: UNICEF Office of Research. Available at <https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/702-a-global-agenda-for-childrens-rights-in-the-digital-age-recommendations-for-developing.html>

² Third, A. (2016) *Researching the benefits and opportunities for children online*. London: Global Kids Online. Available at <http://globalkidsonline.net/tools/guides/opportunities/>

³ Third, A, Bellerose, D, Dawkins, U, Keltie, E & Pihl, K 2014, *Children's Rights in the Digital Age: A Download from Children Around the World*, Young and Well Cooperative Research Centre, Melbourne. Available at <https://www.unicef.org/malaysia/Childrens-rights-in-the-digital-age.pdf>

⁴ For the toolkit, see www.globalkidsonline.net/toolkit; for the full survey, see www.globalkidsonline.net/survey and for all participating countries and national findings, see www.globalkidsonline.net/countries.

⁵ Kanchev, P., Hajdinjak, M., Georgiev, E. & Apostolov, G. (2017). *Are Digital Natives Digitally Literate? Insights from a national representative survey*. Bulgarian Safer Internet Centre. Available at <https://www.safenet.bg/images/sampled/2017/06/Digital-and-Media-Literacy.pdf>

⁶ Cabello, P., Claro, M., Lazcano, D., Antezana, L., Cabello-Hutt, T., and Maldonado, L. (2017) *Kids Online Chile: study of the uses, opportunities and risks in the use of ICT by children and teenagers*. Available at <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/gko/chile-a-third-of-children-do-not-use-the-internet-at-school/>

⁷ Phyfer, J., Burton, P. & Leoschut, L. (2016). *South African Kids Online: Barriers, opportunities and risks. A glimpse into South African children's internet use and online activities. Technical Report*. Cape Town: Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention. Available at <http://globalkidsonline.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/South-Africa-Kids-Online-Report.pdf>

⁸ Livingstone, S. (2003) On the challenges of cross-national comparative media research. *European Journal of Communication*, 18(4): 477-500. Available at <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/403/>

⁹ Livingstone, S., Stoilova, M., Yu, S-H., Byrne, J. and Kardefelt-Winther, D. (2018) *Using mixed methods to research children's online opportunities and risks in a global context: the approach of Global Kids Online*. In: Sage Methods Cases (Sociology). SAGE Research Methods Cases. London: Sage. Available at <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/84711/>

¹⁰ See Livingstone, S., Haddon, L., and Görzig, A. (Eds.) (2012) *Children, Risk and Safety Online: Research and policy challenges in comparative perspective*. Bristol: The Policy Press.

¹¹ Banaji, S., Livingstone, S., Nandi, A., and Stoilova, M. (2018) Instrumentalising the digital: Findings from a rapid evidence review of development interventions to support adolescents' engagement with ICTs in low and middle income countries. *Development in Practice*, 28(3): 432-443. Available at <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/85891/>

¹² See Byrne, J., Kardefelt-Winther, D., Livingstone, S. and Stoilova, M. (2016) *Global Kids Online: children's rights in the digital age: synthesis report*. Global Kids Online, London, UK. Available at <http://www.globalkidsonline.net/synthesis>

¹³ Carpentier, N. (2016) Beyond the Ladder of Participation: An Analytical Toolkit for the Critical Analysis of Participatory Media Processes, *Javnost - The Public*, 23:1, 70-88. Available at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/13183222.2016.1149760>