



Net Children 2020 – Growing up with Media

A Roadmap of Challenges and Solutions for Media Education and Child Protection in Europe

based on the conference “Net Children 2020. Growing up with Media” in Berlin, April 16/17 in 2015.

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1 Introduction

1.1 The objective

Digital media pose new challenges to children in their roles as media users looking for content and services that meet their needs, as vulnerable human beings needing protection against potentially harmful media experiences, and as maturing citizens interested in participating in the development of the digital environment. Against this backdrop, the roadmap “Net Children 2020” sets out

- to provide an agenda for policies, research, and NGOs in Europe in order to support children’s development in these different roles,
- to draw attention to related new challenges in the field of media education and the protection of minors against negative media experiences,
- to serve as a reference framework for future stakeholder activities,
- to stimulate multi-stakeholder cooperation.

This roadmap is not a political document based on a democratic negotiation and decision process, nor is it a synthesis of the existing research evidence. It is not the “final word”, but rather one step in an on-going process aiming at good conditions for children’s online experiences in the year 2020.

The roadmap has a dedicated focus on the transnational dimension of the topic and thus builds in particular on the relevant evidence provided by comparative research and by exchanging practical experiences from different countries. At the same time, it takes into account that concrete policy actions have to be implemented within national and regional contexts and will thus have to be adapted to the respective political, social, and cultural conditions.

1.2 The process

This roadmap reflects the results of a broad discursive process: It started from existing research evidence and from policy strategies that had been developed in the framework of the EC’s Safer Internet Programme, the European strategy for a Better Internet for Children, the CEO Coalition Workplans and the ICT Coalition Principles, amongst others; other important reference points are the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child, the ITU Guidelines for Policy Makers on Child Online Protection, and the Paris Declaration on Media and Information Literacy in the Digital Era. A first

version including a proposed structure and key questions was commented on by a small number of selected experts from several different countries; based on the feedback, a revised version formed the basis for the conference “Net Children 2020. Growing Up with Media” that was held in Berlin on April 16-17, 2015. In a series of workshops and working groups, more than 230 experts, representing a range of stakeholders from more than 30 countries, discussed the challenges of today’s media environments, as well as options to improve how children will grow up with media through 2020. This roadmap represents a condensed version of the results. It will be distributed to all participants in the conference and to key stakeholders at the European and national levels. Several upcoming events within the next months will refer to this roadmap, develop it further and assess the progress that has been made in improving children’s conditions for growing up with media.

1.3 Starting points

The roadmap starts from several basic premises:

- Media are regarded as an **integral part of children’s everyday lives** and matter in many respects.
- Media education and children and youth protection are **complementary perspectives that have to be combined**.
- Good conditions for children growing up with media require a **coordinated and collective effort on the part of all relevant stakeholders**.
- Because of media convergence, efforts to improve how children grow up with media should not focus on specific media, e.g. the most recent “new” media, but rather have to consider the **overall media ensemble**.

2 Challenges concerning children’s media experiences

Current media-related, social and cultural changes are leading to new challenges concerning media education and child safety. In order to identify and structure key challenges regarding how children grow up with media, the following section applies a structure that refers to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and differentiates three main aspects: provision, protection, and participation. Before dealing with these individual aspects in more detail, one overarching issue has to be emphasised that influences all three of these aspects: the age of the child.

2.1 The issue of age

In contrast to adults, children and youth constitute a very broad and diffuse category. The early years of life are characterised by rapid developmental steps; every year, every month and even every day may matter with regard to issues of media education and child safety: “It depends on the age of the child” is one of the key phrases in this field, particularly with regard to the shift from protection to autonomy. As a consequence, debates on current challenges with regard to provision, protection, and participation need to specify the age they refer to.

In addition, age as an abstract variable is a social construct that correlates to but is not identical with individual children’s developmental status. We have to be aware of substantial developmental differences among children of the same age. Similarly, it seems problematic to take age as a proxy for literacy or expertise with regard to certain media-related activities that depend on personal experiences and practice. In these cases it is more appropriate to refer to the expertise in a specific activity and to distinguish among, for instance, ‘beginners’, ‘advanced’ and ‘experts’.

In recent debates we can observe a good deal of scepticism about any effort to define certain age groups, e.g. with regard to recommendations on the age at which a child should start using a certain medium or with regard to rules in the area of child media protection: while it is duly acknowledged that the issue of age is considered, the critique remains that the age bands are much too broad and do not reflect inter-individual developmental and literacy-related differences. Thus the key challenge here is on the one hand to carefully consider age and the developmental status of children as key factors for online experiences, and on the other, to work with meaningful categories that help to classify the diversity of prerequisites on the child's side in a practical way.

In addition, a particular challenge with regard to the age category is the finding that the existing empirical evidence on younger children between 0 and 8 years is still quite vague compared to older children. Given the fact that the use of online services, e.g. via tablet computers, is beginning at an ever younger age, more research with younger children and their families is needed.

2.2 Challenges in particular areas

2.2.1 Provision

With regard to positive content for children, the exact definition of what can be considered "good for children" is strongly disputed. Parents and teachers usually have a very different view than their children do: while parents tend to emphasise the social and cultural values of media content, children look for media that directly meet their individual preferences in terms of entertainment and relevant social information. Media companies have their own perspective: they are good at identifying children's preferences and certain niche markets while creating commercialised online environments that serve their business objectives. Because all these perspectives are legitimate and each of them fulfils an important aspect regarding the provision of positive content, the challenge here is to combine them in a balanced way.

A general issue regarding appropriate online services relates to the concrete design and affordances of services that shape children's online practices and, consequently, their literacies. We need a careful discussion on the question of to what extent online services make sense to children, whether they are fair and interesting, and whether they are desirable from a societal perspective.

Media are one option for children to develop, apply, and express their creativity. There are many positive experiences throughout Europe with projects that try to encourage children to use media to express themselves and tell a story, to remix media or even to break the rules of how media is intended to be used. From this perspective it is often stressed that copyright-free content is an important prerequisite for creative media use. In addition, more resources, skills and equipment are needed at schools to foster curiosity.

One of the major opportunities provided by media is their potential to contribute to formal and informal learning. It is important here to understand that children's use of media technology is not a learning outcome in and of itself, but that media are a useful tool for becoming involved in producing content, as well as in cognitive and social learning.

Children use media in order to build their identity and foster their social relationships. In this respect, the development of social media services has dramatically changed children's media environments. One of the challenges of these environments is that social media are fairly homogeneous places. If children always meet people like themselves, the question arises what this implies for their identity formation and how more diverse spaces can be offered.

2.2.2 Protection

Potential risks that are linked with media environments can be classified according to different user roles that may result in different risks for children and teenagers. Children and teenagers can be considered as

- recipients of pre-produced media content who may be disturbed or affected by inappropriate content or forms of expression (“content”),
- market participants and contracting parties for media providers who can be misled by, e.g., unclear contract terms (“contract”),
- participants in individualised communication processes during which they can be hurt, pressured or offended (“contact”),
- agents who themselves produce or spread inappropriate content that is offending, bullying or insulting others (“conduct”).

Current trends in the field of media and communication devices and services as well as in the field of media usage lead to the finding of a technical convergence that poses a challenge for protective measures that are based on specific technical devices or media products/services: since a wide range of devices and platforms are being used for services nowadays, such technology-related measures are in danger of becoming obsolete, while at the same time potentially limiting the opportunities linked to other content distributed on the same technological platform or device. In contrast to the process of convergence on the technical side, the development is divergent on the user side. The variety of contents and services provided emerges in a variety of individual usage patterns that lead to specific protection requirements.

With regard to a modern framework for the protection of minors, these developments lead to the following challenges:

- the multiplication and expansion of risks children as well as the origins of these risks, calling for specific regulatory approaches,
- the differentiation of the risks and their different age-related risk variance,
- the acceptance of decreasing protection levels in cases where children and teenagers are intentionally transgressing limits,
- the multiplication of content providers, their organisational forms and their underlying structural backgrounds,
- the possibilities to (re-)empower parents to take parental responsibility, e.g. by providing them with information and technical safety tools,
- the possibilities of the digitalisation of protective instruments, and
- the transnational characteristics of today’s media products, content and communicative services and, as a consequence thereof, the necessity for supranational cooperation.

2.2.3 Participation

The global discourse on children’s rights regarding media and communication emphasises children’s right to actively participate in and shape their – strongly mediatized – social contexts. Again, with regard to the concrete range and forms of participation, the age of the child is a crucial factor. In addition, several aspects of participation are particularly challenging with regard to how children grow up with media.

Research on children’s media experiences and media-related interests and need has to include children not only as objects (research *about* children) but also as subjects or actors of research (research *with* or *by* children). In recent years an increasing number of projects have applied different

forms of participatory research in order to complement the empirical evidence that has been collected from an adult perspective. Due to the pace of innovation in technology and media content and the rapid adoption of new services, these research approaches focussing on the children's perspective are particularly important; it is increasingly difficult for adults to maintain an overview of these services and children's practices of use and to properly understand their meaning to children. On the other hand, participatory research approaches are linked with a number of methodological and organisational problems; in addition they sometimes pretend to manifest a participatory character—while actually being very close to mainstream approaches to research *about* children. Thus, the challenge is to develop procedures for how to conduct up-to-date solid research *with* children.

Within a mediatized world, children's abilities to apply, to critically reflect and to develop digital services and contents build a core prerequisite for active participation in social, political and professional contexts. In this respect digital literacy goes far beyond the area of media use; accordingly, media education has to go far beyond teaching children how to use media.

3 Options to improve children's media experiences

Many concrete options and instruments have been proposed in recent debates on media education and child safety; throughout Europe, we find highly ambitious and innovative initiatives that have the potential to improve how children grow up with media. However, many of these initiatives lack sustainability, a systemic perspective of risks and opportunities, and substantiated evaluations of their actual impact. In order to meet the challenges and requirements involved with children's media experiences, this roadmap starts from the understanding that concerted societal action is needed, where all relevant stakeholders are actively involved in developing joint activities. Such concerted action should include measures on the following levels:

- Evidence: How can the different relevant stakeholders contribute to knowledge and empirical evidence in order to support evidence-based media education and children and youth protection?
- Action: How can specific measures and instruments be implemented in order to support media education and youth protection? What is the role of the different stakeholders in implementing these actions?
- Context: How can the different stakeholders build social, political and regulatory contexts that contribute to media education and children and youth protection?

3.1 Evidence

Solid empirical evidence is a key requirement in order to develop concrete strategies to further media education and child protection and the general governance framework. The following steps will help improve the knowledge base for evidence-based policies and concrete actions.

3.1.1 Enriching the evidence base

While there have been an increasing number of studies on children's media experiences in many countries, there is a need to extend and enrich the evidence base in the following directions:

- *Longitudinal studies* that are able to monitor relevant changes in the media environment, in children's experiences and in parents' and other actors' contributions to how children grow up with media.

- *Comparative research* across countries, cultures, and social groups that is sensitive to the contexts that shape children's media experiences.
- *Research on structural media-related changes*, e.g. personalisation, intimization and datafication, in order to overcome the trend to investigate only the latest technologies and services.

Initiatives in these directions are needed from a wide range of stakeholders. With regard to identifying research questions that are relevant for developing evidence-based policies, all of them are in the position to initiate consultations and multi-stakeholder meetings about the most urgent questions. Researchers should support this process by providing overviews of the state of research and by identifying research gaps. Public administration, foundations and NGOs have a particular role to play when it comes to funding.

3.1.2 Sharing data

A substantial amount of the existing data on children's media experiences does not become part of the public or professional discourse. The reasons for this are manifold: commercial considerations, data protection, a lack of reciprocal knowledge about data collected by other stakeholders, a lack of trust among different groups of stakeholders, and a lack of capacity to process and synthesise the vast number of studies and data. The following steps will help overcome these barriers in order to make a more productive use of the data already existing:

- Roundtables with different stakeholders, particularly industry, NGOs and academic research, for an exchange on existing data and how it can be used.
- Bilateral meetings between industry researchers and academic researchers to identify mutual expectations and common interests, leading to rules for exchanging data for secondary analyses.
- Implementing and sustaining monitoring services that collect, compile and structure the multiplicity of findings and help provide an overview of "what can be known".

3.1.3 Dissemination of the existing evidence

What is regarded as empirical evidence is a discursive construction. Issues related to media education and child protection are often strongly debated depending on the cultural, social and political context, the ideological premises, and the different stakeholder roles. In this respect, media coverage about media education and child safety can substantially shape the public understanding of these topics – and often fails to come to grips with the full complexity of the topic, particularly when a perspective of moral panic meets established news values. There are several options to improve this situation:

- increased efforts of academic research to develop new formats of presenting and disseminating results by using a wide range of channels, particularly social media and well-structured information resources that can inform practitioners from different areas as well as journalists;
- active involvement of NGOs and researchers in contributing to a balanced and deliberative discourse about children growing up in digital environments;
- public or semi-public events with different stakeholders where empirical findings and best practices are presented and discussed with regard to their implications for policies and practical actions.

3.2 Action

Based on empirical evidence concrete actions are needed to actually improve how children grow up with media. The following fields of action are particularly important in a European agenda for media education and child media protection.

3.2.1 Empowering children

A core objective of all actions should be to empower children to use as many online opportunities as possible, to avoid harmful experiences or, if they occur, to cope with them. Throughout Europe, many projects have been initiated and implemented of a local, regional, national or even transnational scope, organised by a wide range of stakeholders including educational institutions, public administration, regulatory authorities, media companies, and NGOs. Learning from previous experiences, the following objectives and actions are needed to empower children:

- Younger children in particular need safe spaces or “virtual testing rooms” where they can experiment with different online opportunities, develop basic skills and start thinking critically about online risks and opportunities. As several successful cases have shown, these spaces can best be implemented by broad coalitions of actors able to jointly solve the requirements of these spaces with regard to technology, algorithms, design, editing and curating content.
- While the exact role of media education within school curricula is much debated, there is broad agreement that educational institutions need to contribute to furthering children’s media literacy.
- While basic technical skills are a prerequisite for children to make use of online opportunities and avoid risks, activities related to children’s digital literacy should also emphasise the development of a creative approach to online media, as well as a critical attitude towards media content and media practices and their cultural and social implications. In this respect, adults in general and parents in particular have an important role to play as role models. NGOs and public institutions should intensify their efforts to provide guidance and to support parents and educational institutions in furthering digital literacy.
- Targeted messaging and support for specific groups of interest is an important factor in empowering children. Research should provide empirical evidence on the needs and interests of particular groups. Based on that policy, players and NGOs should develop tailored information resources and guidelines with regard to online opportunities and risks.

3.2.2 Empowering facilitators

The way children grow up takes place within certain social contexts, particularly family, peers, and educational institutions. These contexts can be more or less supportive with regard to children’s online experiences and should be improved accordingly.

- Media education presumes the integration of media literacy education into teacher training. While this statement has been repeated very often and in many different contexts, the underlying objective is still far from being realised.
- Informal learning can be improved by involving teachers and parents in the development of projects to give them the opportunity to provide feedback on and/or refine initiatives. There are already good examples of how parents can develop and share digital expertise by evaluating social media trends.

- One option to empower parents in fulfilling their educational duties can be different technical options, such as youth protection software (see below) that enables parents to regulate the risk level they find appropriate for their children.

3.2.3 Designing child-adequate services

As outlined above (2.2.1), positive content for children has been and still is a particularly important objective. In the early years of the internet there was only very little content for children. Since then, this has changed to a certain degree, but given the fact that children are starting to use the internet at an ever younger age, there is an urgent need to develop age-appropriate content for younger children.

- Safety-by-design and, correspondingly, opportunities-by-design are highly promising approaches to improving children's online experiences, but they are still underdeveloped. Stakeholder forums with media companies, designers, educational experts and children themselves can help to develop positive content for children.

3.2.4 Developing technical safety tools

There is no agreement among experts when it comes to technical options that are dedicated to helping parents play an active role in media education and child protection. On the one hand, these tools are clearly rejected because they are regarded as violating cultural and educational values. On the other, they are strongly supported as one of the very few options to implement at least some level of protection of children and young people against a wide range of online risks. The following steps can help exploit the potential of technical tools.

- There is much to do in terms of improving existing software tools. While media companies as well as specialised start-ups are best equipped to develop software solutions, researchers and NGOs can contribute empirical evidence and "children's and parents' voices" with regard to specific features and functionalities of these tools.
- All stakeholders involved in the area of children using online media should contribute to raising the level of awareness, knowledge, and critical reflection regarding technical tools. An important argument here is that these tools must not be treated as in opposition to media education or to encouraging children to make use of the range of online opportunities, but rather that they can serve as a complementary aid in implementing the media education approach desired by educators and/or parents.
- The mere availability of technical safety tools does not imply that they are used in a way that actually protects children and young people. Policy makers or NGOs should commission research on the question of how the target group uses software tools and with what kind of impact.

3.3 Contexts

Ideas and measures can only have the desired impact if they take place in fertile environments. Political, social and regulatory frameworks and values are therefore important context factors when it comes to creating evolving spaces for the implementation of Net Children 2020. But how can policy makers, educational institutions, NGOs, companies and users develop frameworks that help promote media education and child safety?

3.3.1 Aggregating knowledge and providing it for knowledge-based policies

Stakeholders in media education and child safety often act under uncertainty due to highly dynamic markets and changing patterns of media use. Knowledge here is of central importance to future approaches, and thus one important context factor is collecting the knowledge, experiences and lessons learnt from all relevant stakeholders, i.e. companies, policy makers, media educators, parents and children. Sharing expertise and information across all affected parties provides the optimal context for developing and implementing new knowledge-based ideas or measures, for instance on the basis of better future-oriented impact assessments of ICT developments. Such sharing also helps in overcoming different levels of expertise in the implementation of measures and in putting one's topic forward publicly, which can result in unequal opportunities due to knowledge gaps. The BIK (Better Internet for Kids) platform, organised by the Insafe network, can be regarded as an important node within the emerging network of actors dealing with how children grow up in digital environments.

To share and gain better knowledge across all stakeholders, we need ways to get outside the current (limited) thinking boxes: we need to overcome traditional competencies, contribute to discussions with other perspectives or agendas, and find ways to document and provide insights to third parties in an easily accessible manner.

3.3.2 Supporting central infrastructures for companies, parents and children

Often, media education and child safety are stories of opportunities not taken due to barriers posed by the academic codes of communication. To considerably improve capacity building of companies, media educators, parents and children, central infrastructures are needed that provide guidance to those entities that want to act in a socially responsible manner but don't know how to do so.

A one-stop shop is needed on either the European level or – at least – the national level to provide information about the right players to approach, adequate forms of media education, implementation strategies of protection measures or participative opportunities. Such nodes need to consider the different information interests and skills of companies, parents and children, as well as media educators, when offering information. New forms of feedback procedures will be needed to get to know the users of such information better.

3.3.3 Implementing governance frameworks that provide legal certainty *and* flexibility

Current legal frameworks and policy debates manifest a dilemma: on the one hand, cross-border or even global policies and the desire for legal certainty are deemed driving forces for industry compliance and engagement. On the other hand, in practice a wide range of different sector-specific regulatory systems can be observed. This fragmentation has advantages, since creating solutions within narrow systems is easier than inventing a one-size-fits-all framework. Especially in governance structures of child safety, a great range of different patterns of regulatory approaches can be observed. Good practices can be identified and marketed by making visible hidden connections between self-regulation and traditional command-and-control, and by using modern and inclusive forms of multi-stakeholder approaches, e.g. co-design of policies.

What is needed is a "toolbox" with a set of potential best practice approaches depending on what needs to be achieved in a specific governance structure – and regulatory culture. Where cultural values cannot be harmonized, cross-border approaches independent of values can be used to build modern policy frameworks.

Providing policy makers – including self- and co-regulatory players – with positive and negative experiences and examples while providing them with potential solutions is deemed a way to support

regulatory alignments of small systems while considering national or regional peculiarities. Benchmark studies can be used as a tool to gather the information on the relevant experiences and insights needed. Such benchmark studies might provide a strategy to achieve better compliance in general, too: European monitoring is already deemed a resource to control, even in areas where no strict legal EC provisions apply.

3.3.4 Bringing together the right stakeholder pairs for specific measures

Unlike bringing all stakeholder groups together to share knowledge and expertise, it will be important in the future to bring the right combinations of stakeholders together for achieving specific measures. While systematically interconnected stakeholders already exist, e.g. parents and schools, new and synergetic forms of partnerships will be needed in the future. Examples for such innovative new co-operations are, inter alia, building bridges between techies and policy makers at policy hackathons or legal design jams and supporting user and policy representation towards companies by “lobbying the lobbyists”. Moreover, alternative forms of control may have advantages, e.g. using NGOs as facilitators when it comes to debates within self- or co-regulatory systems. Other potential “new” collaborations can be seen in combining NGOs and research or educational institutions and companies.

3.3.5 Sustaining relevant initiatives

Throughout Europe there have been lots of initiatives and projects that pursued the objective of improving how children grow up in digital media environments. In many cases these activities are organised as fixed-term projects. When they reach an end it is difficult to sustain the expertise of the people involved. Therefore an important issue with regard to supporting concrete activities in favour of children in 2020 is to identify relevant existing initiatives that have acquired a particular expertise and have established efficient networks and thus should be sustained. In Europe the networks that have been established within the Safer Internet Programme (later Better Internet for Kids) – e.g. Insafe for awareness raising, Inhope for helplines, EU Kids Online for research – are good examples of the advantages of well-established cooperation networks that systematically bundle expertise from different countries and are able to provide services, advice and empirical evidence for the European level as well as for specific countries.

4 A platform for Net Children 2020

Co-operation, collaboration and exchanging information are deemed the most important aspects in creating fertile contexts for Net Children 2020 measures. Many experts therefore demand the establishment of a multi-stakeholder forum on sustainable and trust-based grounds – a platform. While the function of coordinating policy usually lies within governments, the platform itself should be set up in an apolitical way, open and focussed on the coordination of actions and measures, public and (confidential) internal communication, providing orientation and delegating in case of questions, and disseminating gathered information in an easily accessible manner.

Its procedures and work forms have to be set up in a way that prevents agency loss that might occur as a consequence of cultures of representation that have developed over time in long-term forums, e.g. by implementing new feedback loops and a decentralised governance structure.