Children and the Internet:

Regulations and benefits

Nicola Brace

In terms of regulation of the access, to minimise the risks, how is your research helping us understand how we should go about improving regulation?

Sonia Livingstone

Well I think I'm trying to do two things in my research. One is to give those charged with the task of regulation a proportionate sense of what the different risks are: where should they put more emphasis.

And that's leading, that kind of research, by myself and others, is for example, leading to more emphasis being put on measures to address bullying, including cyber bullying, and perhaps commensurately trying to reduce some of the panic about online pornography, which is a problem if a child spends a lot of time with it, but there's no evidence that, you know, seeing it occasionally is a problem.

So we're trying in a way to shift the agenda away from some of the things that the headlines have been panicking about, to give a sense of where it is that children themselves really report distress or harm or concern, and so put the emphasis there.

The other kind of contribution that our research hopes to make is guiding policymakers about who can do what. So regulation for children's internet use is partly a matter for law enforcement, partly a matter for governments, partly a matter for teaches, parents, children themselves. So which are the things that those different parties should do?

And one thing I'm very interested in is the way in which when you have a really difficult problem around children, many would say it's all down to the parent and make the parents responsible. And so my research tries to counter some of that by saying there are things parents are able to do, things they're skilled and understand doing, and that's, if you like, looking after the general safety of their children.

But if we're talking about very complicated websites or privacy, managing privacy settings on social networking sites and parents don't understand, then that's the point at which you say the research shows parents are struggling with this; this is something that should be dealt with by the industry. And it's the industry's job, if you like, to make the settings easier, rather than parents' job to guide their children in their effective use.

Nicola Brace

There are probably a long list of benefits from children having access to the internet, and I was just wondering, what some of those benefits are and also whether the benefits outweigh the risks?

Sonia Livingstone

Yes, where I spend a lot of time in conferences and discussions with policymakers thinking about the risks it can be easy to forget the benefits. But, of course, the benefits are huge, and the benefits are available to all children, and the risks, still we assume, affect a minority, so we have to keep things in perspective.

Probably no child now can imagine doing their homework or researching a new topic without going to Google. They don't go to the library, they don't want to look things up in books, the internet is their first port of call for information. And for them that's a fabulous resource, actually it's a fabulous resource for us as well.

There are a lot of initiatives these days from government and various kinds of public sector organisations that are trying to use the internet to encourage children and young people to become more engaged in their community or other kinds of civic participation. And the idea is that even though often children feel excluded or that their voices aren't taken into account in different kinds of civic organisations, if the internet is the medium that they feel is theirs and feel their voices can be heard in, then that might be a really good way of encouraging them to take part.