



Children's rights in the digital age

A download from children
around the world

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Published
September 2014

YOUNGANDWELL
Cooperative Research Centre


An Australian Government Initiative



"We have to concern ourselves with listening to children...We [need to] see [their] perspectives, and those of the practitioner or researcher, as not in competition but standing together in the construction of dialogues, in which there is mutual respect, active participation and the negotiation and co-construction of meaning. Listening to children and encouraging participation in research, evaluation, decision-making and planning is important for many reasons...empowering children as learners, enabling them to make choices, express their ideas and opinions and develop a positive sense of self... the benefits of their participation to society as a whole and for the development of citizenship."

Mason and Steadman, 1996: 43

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Suggested citation:

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.

Copies of this publication can be downloaded from youngandwellcrc.org.au



*In observance of the
25th anniversary of
the United Nations
Convention on the
Rights of the Child*

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ISBN: 978-0-9925966-0-6

The Young and Well CRC

is an Australian-based, international research centre that unites young people with researchers, practitioners, innovators and policy-makers from over 70 partner organisations. Together, we explore the role of technology in young people's lives, and how it can be used to improve the mental health and wellbeing of young people aged 12 to 25. The Young and Well CRC is established under the Australian Government's Cooperative Research Centres Program.

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September 2014

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Cooperative Research Centre


An Australian Government Initiative



Acknowledgements

On behalf of the Digitally Connected Network, this project has been led by the Institute for Culture and Society at the University of Western Sydney, with support from the Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University and UNICEF. The research team is grateful to Urs Gasser and Jane Burns for their initial encouragement to undertake the project.

Participants and partner organisations

A warm thank you to all of the children aged 6-18 who participated in the workshops carried out by the following organisations and individuals:

- Access To Oral Health Foundation – Maxwell Imasuen (Nigeria)
- Anadolu University – Hatice Ferhan Odabaşı, Onur Donmez, Pelin Donmez, Sanem Odabasi (Turkey)
- Badr El-Tawayel NGO – Mohamed Youssry (Egypt)
- BasicNeeds UK in Kenya – Milka Waruguru, Joyce Kingori (Kenya)
- Catalyst – Katrina Bayog (Philippines)
- CIEM Research Group – David Castro Lotero (Colombia)
- Claire Challéat, Iñaki Ceballos Challéat, Guillem Ceballos Challéat, Alain Challéat (Italy)
- Foundation for Young Australians – Rachel Mutch, Tessa Hillgrove, Calum Lindsay-Field (Australia)
- Global Alliance for Peace and Sustainability (GAPS) – Gerald Emmanuel Kofi Hayford (Ghana)
- Gobernación del Atlántico – Carlos A Osorio de Hart (Colombia)
- ICA Teens (The Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston) – Joe Douillette (USA)
- Instituto Mídia Étnica – Paulo Rogerio Nunes (Brazil)
- Marcus Kissoon (Trinidad and Tobago)
- Olivier Lacaille, Margot, Adélie and Abel Lacaille-Aujas, Mona Maubon (France)
- Puerta 18 – Federico Waisbaum, Ezequiel Passeron (Argentina)
- Srinagrinda The Princess Mother School – Murli Menon (Thailand)
- UNICEF Malaysia – Indra Kumari Nadchatram (Malaysia)

Equally, we want to acknowledge the individuals and organisations listed above for the time and energy they spent recruiting for and facilitating the workshops with children. This commitment made this project possible.

Digitally Connected Network

Assistance with recruitment and input into research design and outputs:

- Gerrit Beger (UNICEF)
- Sandra Cortesi (Berkman Center for Internet & Society, Harvard University)
- Gabriela Dumancela (Berkman Center for Internet & Society, Harvard University)
- Varoun Gulati (Berkman Center for Internet & Society, Harvard University)
- Paulina Haduong (Berkman Center for Internet & Society, Harvard University)
- Kate Pawelczyk (UNICEF)

Young and Well CRC Youth Brains Trust

Input into research design:

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- Philip Chan
- Erin Filan

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- Susan Danta (Broadcast Designer)
- Urszula Dawkins (Writer of Digital Champion Profiles)
- Vincent Debut (Translation & transcription)
- Vicki Forbes (Layout and Design)
- Saba el Ghul-Bebawi (Translation)
- Matt Hart (Preliminary research audit)
- Silmara Passarelli Ibanhez (Translation)
- Rory Kelly (Film Editor)
- Vanessa Kutcher (Voice Over)
- Josette Liebeck (Translation)
- Mathew Marques (Translation)
- Jane McCormack (Research team support)
- Maria Mariana Mendes de Sousa (Translation & transcription)
- Ahmed Moustafa (Translation)
- Alejandro Miranda Nieto (Translation)
- Viv Stevenson (Translation)
- Emely Tuncdoruk (Translation)
- Sebastian Martin Valdez (Translation)

Young and Well CRC

- Dr Michelle Blanchard
- Kris Gesling
- Genevieve Ng
- Rebecca Philpot

Digital Champions

- Apps for Good (Debbie Forster, Adam Lee, Myrian Schwitzner, Liam Beattie, Will Gardner)
- Blockonomics (David Kinsella, Katie McConville)
- Global Teenager Project (Bob Hofman, Eliane Metni)
- Livewire.org.au online community & Starlight Children's Foundation (Kylie Johnson, Hannah Larrescy)
- Pan-EU Safer Internet Forum, and Safer Internet Centres (Luiza Shahbazy, Siana Stratieva, Mirela Gica, Janice Richardson)
- PROJECT ROCKIT (Rosie and Lucy Thomas)
- Shruti Rai, Meenakshi and Vinay Rai
- Kartik Sawhney, Nurten Yilmaz
- Rene Silva, Gustavo Anecchini
- Soronko Solutions/Soronko Foundation (Regina Agyare)
- Wapikoni Mobile (Virginie Michel, Oshim Ottawa, Jordi Torrent)
- Zambia U-Report (Priscilla Chomba-Kinywa, Frisco Henry Nshimba)

Project Advisory Board

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- Sandra Cortesi (Berkman Center for Internet & Society, Harvard University)
- Dr Maria Herczog (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child)
- Prof Bob Hodge (University of Western Sydney/Young and Well CRC Scientific Leadership Council)
- Prof Paul James (University of Western Sydney/UN Circles of Social Life Initiative)
- Assoc Prof Rey Junco (Iowa State University)
- Prof Sonia Livingstone (London School of Economics/EU Kids Online)
- Dr Tanya Notley (University of Western Sydney)
- Dr Nishant Shah (Centre for Internet & Society Bangalore)
- Assoc Prof Amanda Third (University of Western Sydney/Young and Well CRC)

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cyber.law.harvard.edu



Digitally Connected is a collaborative initiative between UNICEF and the Berkman Center building upon a multi-year partnership for analyzing digital and social media growth and trends among children and youth globally. Digitally Connected has at its core a network consisting of 150 academics, practitioners, young people, activists, philanthropists, government officials, and representatives of technology companies from around the world who, together, are addressing the challenges and opportunities children and youth encounter in the digital environment.

digitallyconnected.org



Voices of Youth is UNICEF's global digital engagement portal for children and young people. Recognizing and building on the opportunities for advancing children's rights in a digital era, Voices of Youth is a space where the voices of children and young people on issues that matter to them can be heard, and where learning, sharing, inspiration and cross-cultural exchange is actively encouraged.

voicesofyouth.org

Foreword

Some two-thirds of the world's almost three billion internet users are from the developing world, with the numbers growing every day. Many of these new users are children and young people; in fact in many countries, internet users under the age of 24 far outnumber the rest.

A growing body of evidence from across the world is also telling us that no matter where they are from, more and more children are relying on digital tools, platforms and services to learn, engage, participate, play, innovate, work or socialise.

There are already countless examples of how – when harnessed appropriately – digital tools can help promote human development, by closing gaps in access to information, speeding up service delivery, supporting educational and health outcomes, and creating new entrepreneurship opportunities.

The power of technology to jump across borders and time zones, to join the once disparate, and to foster social connectedness, has provided the means for the children and young people of today to participate in a global society in ways previously not possible.

Sadly, there are also new or evolving risks – exposure to violence; access to inappropriate content, goods and services; concerns about excessive use; and issues of data protection and privacy.

As it becomes increasingly difficult to draw the line between offline and online, it is necessary for us to examine how this changing environment impacts the wellbeing and development of children and their rights.

Ensuring that all children are safe online requires approaches that promote digital literacy, resilience and cyber-savvy. It is only in partnership that we can reach consensus on how to create a safe, open, accessible, affordable and secure digital world. Critically, children and young people's profound insight must help inform, shape and drive this goal – which needs to focus on equity of access, safety for all, digital literacy across generations, identity and privacy, participation and civic engagement.

In April of this year, the Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University and UNICEF co-hosted, in collaboration with PEW Internet, EU Kids Online, the Internet Society (ISOC), Family Online Safety Institute (FOSI), and YouthPolicy.org, a first of its kind international 'Digitally Connected' symposium on children, youth, and digital media.

The symposium sought to map and explore the global state of research and practice in this field, and to facilitate sharing, discussion and collaboration among the 150 academics, practitioners, young people, activists, philanthropists, government officials, and representatives of technology companies from around the world.

The Digitally Connected symposium raised a key question that gained special relevance given the focus of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child 2014 General Day of Discussion:

“How can we give children and young people voice in the debate that explores the impact of digital access and use and their rights?”

It is from this question, and a partnership between the Young and Well Cooperative Research Centre and partners from the Digitally Connected Network, that this project was born. The multi-media package, of which this report is one component, brings together the perspectives of more than 140 young people, aged six to 18, from 16 countries around the globe. Within this package are the rich voices of children and young people that can inform governments, UN agencies, civil society, academic, industry and others on new and innovative ways to bring the rights of children in the digital age to the fore.

Hearing the sentiments of children in eight different languages allows one truth to sound loud and clear: we need to take the necessary steps to ensure that all children can reap the opportunities of digital access, advancing their rights, while also ensuring their safety.

A digitally connected society brings with it challenges, certainly, but ones which young people can be empowered to negotiate with aplomb. Any discussion focused on better understanding how the ubiquity of digital tools impacts on children's rights, must be informed by children and young people themselves.

It is our hope that this report will be an excellent and comprehensive starting point for this important Day of Discussion.

Associate Professor Jane Burns

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Young and Well Cooperative Research Centre

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UNICEF

On behalf of the Digitally Connected Network

Main messages

01

Right of access

Children around the world increasingly think of access to digital media as a fundamental right. For children in the developing world, and for some in the developed world, access is still the biggest issue they face in relation to using digital media to enact their rights.

02

Most common uses

Regardless of the country they live in, the language they speak, or their socio-economic background, if children have regular and reliable access to digital media, they tend to use it for a common set of purposes: social connectedness; access to information; education; self-expression/creativity; and entertainment. Although children are concerned about how their digital media practices might negatively impact upon their rights, children overwhelmingly experience digital media as a positive influence in their lives.

03

Literacy is fundamental

Literacy, the tri-fold literacy of today's very user-driven digital media environment – digital, media and social literacy – is fundamental to children's capacity to use digital media competently and exercise their rights in and with digital media. Literacy provides the technical and higher order evaluative skills required to access, understand, produce and participate in digital media.

04

Risk narrative predominant

While children noted that digital media facilitates their communicative, educational and informational needs, many children found it difficult to articulate the ways that digital media enhanced their lives and their rights in more specific and precise terms. By contrast, children generally found it much more straightforward to enunciate the risks and challenges associated with their digital media practices, quite possibly because their schooling in online practice has been dominated by the risk narrative.

05

No online/offline binary

Children understand their digital rights as closely intertwined with their human rights more broadly. They do not readily distinguish between the online and the offline but regard digital spaces as just another setting in which they carry out their lives.

06

Balancing risk with opportunity

Children's safety in connected media is vital but needs to be understood in the context of the spectrum of their digital rights, for example, in balance with children's rights of provision and participation in the UNCRC. Agency is as crucial to positive, effective use of digital media as safety is. Without the agency needed to participate and exercise rights, children can neither take advantage of the opportunities digital media afford nor develop resiliency when facing risks. They must be allowed opportunities to think critically and develop their own language, views, strategies, associations and interests as users of connected digital media.



07

Self-actualisation through media use

Children increasingly see digital media as crucial to their rights to information, education, and participation. By engaging with digital media they learn new skills and develop their talents; they become informed citizens of the world who can contribute meaningfully to their communities; and they foster friendships, family ties, and a sense of community and belonging. These things are important to their resilience and wellbeing.

08

Child-centred definitions

Children worry about how their digital participation might compromise their protection rights, and they take active steps to keep themselves safe. They don't always worry about the same things that concern adults. We need child-centred definitions of children's rights, risks and opportunities associated with digital media.

09

Seeking acknowledgment

Children say that the rights they enjoy in relation to digital media come with real responsibilities. These include understanding the consequences of their engagements, being personally accountable for the ways their online interactions impact others, and knowing when to exercise self-control. They want adults to understand how and why they use digital media, and they want to be trusted to use it wisely.

10

Ongoing conversation with children

Policy makers and practitioners must engage children in an ongoing conversation about how to use digital media to support children's rights. Children want to be involved in these conversations. They want to take responsibility for making the internet a better place, and they have valuable expertise to share.



Executive Summary

In July and August 2014, 148 children from 16 countries and speaking eight different languages, participated in workshops, to share their views on their rights in the digital age.

Undertaken with the aim of providing children's views at the upcoming Day of General Discussion on children's rights in the digital age, the project was a joint effort between the Young and Well Cooperative Research Centre (CRC), the Institute for Culture and Society at the University of Western Sydney, the Berkman Centre for Internet and Society at Harvard University, and UNICEF, in partnership with the Digitally Connected Network.

The research team worked with members of the Young and Well CRC Youth Brains Trust to develop a content generation methodology. Seventeen partner organisations - recruited through the Digitally Connected Network - held subsequent workshops that involved children and young people aged six to 18, from the following countries:

Argentina | Australia | Brazil | Colombia | Egypt | France | Ghana | Italy | Kenya | Malaysia | Nigeria | Philippines | Thailand | Trinidad and Tobago | Turkey | United States of America

In the workshops, children and young people were asked to reflect upon the extent to which they used digital media and ICTs in their everyday lives – their motivations, their rights, and how these might be enhanced and/or challenged. As part of the workshops, children produced their own 'technology use timeline' in which they outlined their digital media use and related rights. They also responded to a series of vox pop questions on the opportunities and challenges digital media presented in enacting their rights, in addition to developing a creative piece, in a medium of their choice, to respond to a particular challenge or opportunity about which they felt strongly. The research team undertook both content and discourse analysis of the technology timelines, vox pop interviews and creative responses.

The research team found that access to digital media is far from evenly distributed across the globe, and certainly if we are to fully enhance children's rights in the digital age, this needs to be addressed. Nonetheless, regardless of the country they live in, the language they speak, or their socio-economic background, if children have regular and reliable access to digital media, they tend to use it for a common set of purposes, including: social connectedness, access to information, education, self-expression and creativity, and entertainment.

Further, when children don't have access to the latest technologies, they develop innovative workarounds and use the available technologies with high degrees of inventiveness and efficacy. This confirms that ultimately, digital media and ICTs are only as powerful as the ideas, ideals and efforts that drive them.

Although children are concerned about how their digital media practices might negatively impact upon their rights, children overwhelmingly experience digital media as a powerful and positive influence in their everyday lives. Children see digital media as crucial to their rights to information, education and participation. By engaging with digital media, they learn new skills and develop their talents; they become informed citizens of the world who can contribute meaningfully to their communities; and they foster friendships, family ties and a sense of community and belonging. These things are important to their resilience and wellbeing.

However, in general, while children noted that digital media facilitates their communicative, educational and informational needs, many children found it difficult to articulate the ways that digital media enhanced their lives and their rights in more specific and precise terms. By contrast, children generally found it much more straightforward to enunciate the risks and challenges associated with their digital media practices. This is quite possibly because their schooling in online practice has been dominated by the risk narrative. If we are to support children's rights, we must find ways of fostering children's right to protection from harm whilst simultaneously empowering them to maximise the benefits of connectivity for their education, health, social connection, economic participation, civic engagement, and so on, both as individuals, and as members of their communities.

Digital, media, and social literacy is key to enabling children to leverage the benefits of digital media to enact their rights. Literacy provides children with the technical and higher order evaluative skills required to access, understand, produce and participate in digital media. Because children develop digital literacy via both formal and informal means, they do not always understand their digital competencies as a discrete skill set.

In regards to children's right to education and participation, children reported that being online enabled them to participate meaningfully. They valued the possibility offered by digital media to broaden their horizons, gain awareness of other cultures and be informed global citizens. They regularly used some form of digital technology in relation to schooling, and to satisfy curiosities. Children acknowledged that digital media was sometimes a distraction from studies, but noted that learning how to manage that tension was part of learning how to engage with digital media responsibly.

While children and young people embrace digital media, with many stating that it has improved their lives, they identified a range of risks and challenges associated with their practices. However, the challenges identified by children may not always be the same as those that dominate adult discourses, or those targeted by public policy and regulations. This highlights the need to generate child-centred definitions of children's rights, as well as the opportunities and risks associated with children's digital media use.

In contrast to anecdotal beliefs, children articulated accountability and understanding of the consequences of what they did online, not seeing themselves as vulnerable victims but as sharing the responsibility for making the internet a safe place for themselves and their peers. It is therefore important to support digital literacy initiatives that encourage and empower children to take further responsibility for their online safety.

Overall, this report finds that policy makers and practitioners must engage children in an ongoing conversation about how to use digital media to support children's rights. Children want to be involved in these conversations. They want to take responsibility for making the internet a better place, and they have valuable expertise to share.

The 'digital champion' profiles featured in the supplement to this report evidence some of the achievements that are possible when the potential of digital media is harnessed in the service of children's rights. These feature pieces showcase young individuals and youth-focused organisations who are maximising the possibilities that digital media offer for children in different parts of the world to live better lives. As a collection, these stories reveal a message that runs through both the developing and the developed world—digital media and ICTs are fostering children's rights by allowing them to be both agents of change, and creators and receivers of innovative approaches to community, health, wellbeing, education, safety, inclusion and civic participation.

Introduction

‘The Governments of all countries shall ensure that a child who is capable of forming his or her own views should have the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting that child and that the views of that child should be given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.’

Article 12: *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*

Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child codifies children’s rights to express their views and to participate in the decision-making processes that will impact their lives.

With digital media¹ becoming an increasingly ubiquitous feature of children’s everyday lives around the world, the global community has an unprecedented opportunity to deliver on this promise for children everywhere. Digital media has the potential to open up new possibilities for increasing children’s awareness of their rights, and promoting their views and insights about how to improve their lived experience of their rights. Further, under the right circumstances, digital media can be mobilised to support children to enhance the ways they enact their rights in their daily lives.

However, the global community is a long way from acknowledging and realising the potential of digital media to support children’s rights. For example, for children in many parts of the world, consistent and quality access remains a challenge. Equally, many other children cannot access online resources in a language they can speak, and where this is possible, children consistently report that they have limited access to age-appropriate and quality information and entertainment (Livingstone and O’Neill, 2014). Many have not been provided the opportunity to reflect upon what their rights are, and how they might be implicated in the rise of digital media.

Whilst we must continue to address the myriad material and structural barriers to leveraging digital media to positively impact children’s capacity to enact their rights, we must also learn to understand digital media through children’s eyes. This is necessary if we are to develop credible and effective ways for children to harness digital media in the service of their rights.

Although there are increasingly more examples of child-centred initiatives that embed children’s insights and experiences at their core, current debates in many parts of the world continue to focus almost exclusively on the risks associated with children’s digital media engagements. Such

¹ In this report we use the term ‘digital media’ as shorthand to refer to both digital media (the digitized content that can be transmitted over the internet or computer networks, and which includes text, audio, video and graphics – Source: Penn State University, “The Fourth Amendment Relating to Technology,” <https://wikispaces.psu.edu/display/IST432SP-11Team14/Definition+of+Digital+Media>) and information and communication technologies (the telecommunications technologies that underpin the networked world, including telephony, cable, satellite and radio, as well as digital technologies such as computers, information networks and software – Source: Center for International Development at Harvard University, Information Technologies Group, <http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/readinessguide/glossary.html>)

debate results in an overwhelmingly protection-oriented approach to children's use of technology. There are, indeed, very real and potentially serious risks associated with children's use of digital media, particularly for those children who are most marginalised or vulnerable in their communities (Livingstone and Helsper, 2010). However, a narrow focus on risk and safety can negatively impact children's right to participation and undermine their ability to access the benefits of digital media. A growing evidence base shows that risk does not equate with harm and, moreover, that some level of exposure to risk enables children to develop the digital literacy that is necessary to both minimise the potentially negative impacts of their online engagements, as well as unlock more of the benefits (see for example, Third, 2014; Green et al, 2011; Livingstone et al, 2010). Thus, what is needed are approaches that can **foster children's right to protection from harm whilst simultaneously empowering them to maximise the benefits of connectivity** for their education, health, social connection, economic participation, civic engagement, and so on, both as individuals, and as members of their communities.

The task of balancing children's digital participation with their protection is enormously complex. However, it must not be overlooked that children themselves are an enormous resource in rising to this challenge.

In July and August 2014, with the support of organisations affiliated with the Digitally Connected Network, 148 children aged six to 18 from 16 countries around the globe participated in workshops in which they undertook a series of activities to reflect on their rights – as children – in the digital age. The aim of these workshops was to provide children with a space to reflect on the ways their digital media practices intersect with their rights. In particular, the research team wanted to document children's views about the ways in which digital media might challenge their capacity to enact their rights, and also how digital media might provide opportunities to enhance their rights.

It is thus in the spirit of Article 12 of the Convention, that this report synthesises what children have told the research team so far.

Background

Children's rights in the digital age

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) was adopted unanimously by the UN General Assembly in 1989. It has since become the most universally recognised international treaty, and that which guides the work of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). The UNCRC is the result of a 10-year collaborative process during which the rights and the wording of articles were proposed and debated by 80 countries. The result was a UNCRC comprising 54 articles outlining the rights of all children.

The UNCRC encompasses a broader range of rights than any other human rights treaty, from humanitarian to economic, and socio-cultural to civil and political rights. The heavy involvement of non-governmental organisations in both the drafting and the implementation of the UNCRC sets it apart from other international treaties. It is also unique in that it specifies the obligations of State Parties in implementing children's rights, and provides the Committee with tools to monitor compliance. Articles of the UNCRC also delineate the responsibilities of parents and carers, the community, the media, and other agencies and organisations in promoting and protecting children's rights.

While the UNCRC is not the first international treaty to protect children's rights¹, it stands apart from previous declarations in that it enshrines the idea of children as rights-holding individuals. Previous debates and declarations mostly focused on protection and provision rights, addressing children's 'vulnerability' by asserting their developmental needs for health and social care, education, and protection from harm. By contrast, the UNCRC constructs children as people with the right to express their opinion in matters that concern them, thus adding participation rights to those of protection and provision. Participation rights imply a degree of self-determination, albeit in accordance with the child's age and maturity, which is much closer to the notion of civil and political rights previously reserved for adults. Article 12 – the right to be heard – is recognised as one of the four guiding principles underpinning the implementation of the UNCRC.

The complex interrelation between the media, children and their rights has regularly been the subject of attention and debate about the UNCRC in the last two decades. In 1996, the Committee recognised the essential role of the media in the implementation and promotion of the UNCRC during a Day of General Discussion on 'the child and the media' focusing on child participation, protection against harmful influences, and respect for the integrity of the child. A working group was subsequently set up to further explore the relationship between media and young people, with a particular focus on how child participation in the media might contribute to the better implementation of the UNCRC.

In 1999, 10 years after the adoption of the UNCRC, young people, media professionals and child rights experts gathered in Oslo to discuss the role of media in the development of children's rights throughout the world. From their discussions emerged the Oslo Challenge, which recognised that "the child/media relationship is an entry point into the wide and multifaceted world of children and their rights - to education, freedom of expression, play, identity, health, dignity and self-respect, protection - and that in every aspect of child rights, in every element of the life of a child, the relationship between children and the media plays a role."

¹ A Declaration of the Rights of the Child was adopted by the League of Nations in 1924 and later reviewed and adopted by the United Nations in 1948 and 1959.

Children's participation in research, policy and decision-making processes

In the 25 years since the inception of the UNCRC, the world has undergone significant cultural change, of which the rapid development of digital media is one defining aspect. As we celebrate the 25th anniversary of the UNCRC, digital media is fast becoming ubiquitous in every aspect of many children's everyday lives. The question of access to digital media resonates far beyond Article 17 of the UNCRC on the right to access information, and has become a key factor in the implementation of the UNCRC as a whole, including each and every right but also the promotion of those rights (Article 42), and the Committee's role in examining the progress made by State Parties (Article 43).

The challenge today is thus to rethink the rights enshrined in the UNCRC in light of the digital age.

At least as far back as the 1970s, there has been scholarly interest in seeking children's views on their rights (Casas et al, 2006). However, the 1989 adoption of the UNCRC and its enshrinement, in particular, of children's right to be heard, firmly placed the need to listen to children's views on their rights on the agenda.

In the early days of the internet, public policy debates around children were mostly concerned with identifying risks and putting regulations in place to protect children from inappropriate content and online grooming. It is now widely accepted that digital media potentially present tremendous benefits for children and the community. While this does not deter from the fact that protection rights are vital to address potential harms that may be exacerbated by new technologies, a shift of focus towards the beneficial impact of digital media may well contribute to improving the management of the associated risks.

Even so, attempts to listen to children have not always translated into their genuine participation in the policy and decision-making processes that affect them. Fitzgerald and Graham note that "progress in establishing a rationale or case for children's participation has not been matched by evidence of change for children in their everyday lives. As one of the most governed groups... children continue to have little, if any input into the policy, research and practice decisions made about them" (Fitzgerald & Graham, 2008: 56). And despite an acknowledged need and efforts to involve children in discussions relating to internet policy, Davies et al argue that, for the most part, these deliberations have had a narrow focus on online 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" (Davies et al, 2011).

The 25th anniversary of the UNCRC is an opportune moment to renew the commitment to listening to children and embedding their insights and experiences at the heart of discussions about children's rights. Children's participation in the decision-making processes that affect them is vital. When children are provided with opportunities to participate in policy and decision-making processes, they develop skills, and their contributions grow more meaningful as trust in their competencies grows over time. In turn, these contributions lead to better decisions with more likelihood of impact, because they incorporate the specific knowledge and perspectives that children have on matters pertaining to their lives (Lansdowne, 2011). Beyond this, children's participation can foster a robust "community of practice" (Wenger, 2000) which "provides for shared understanding and co-construction of meaning – the meaning that the world holds for [children] and its implications for the policies, programs, and decisions that impact them" (Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, 2011: 15).

Children's participation demands constant vigilance about the extent to which children's voices are being actively listened to and activated in policy making and related areas. One-off consultations are not sufficient to understand children's perspectives; they must be actively integrated into the ongoing conversations that constitute decision-making processes. Children must be heard and reheard. They must be asked what needs to change, and then how effective those changes have been. They must be part of an ongoing, iterative and collaborative dialogue.

Livingstone and Bulger recently outlined a global research agenda for children's digital rights in which they identified four key priorities:

1. Generation of evidence about how to support and promote online opportunities;
2. Identification of the conditions that render particular children vulnerable to risk of harm online
3. A focus on generating an evidence base about children's digital practice and its relationship to their rights in the global South
4. The evaluation of existing policies and programs, and the generation of comparable baseline data (Livingstone & Bulger, 2014: 4).

It is imperative that children's views and insights guide the implementation of this ambitious but necessary research agenda. As Mason and Steadman state:

"We have to concern ourselves with listening to children... We [need to] see [their] perspectives, and those of the practitioner or researcher, as not in competition but standing together in the construction of dialogues, in which there is mutual respect, active participation and the negotiation and co-construction of meaning" (Mason & Steadman, 1997: 47).

Aims and Methodology

This project was undertaken by a team of Young and Well CRC researchers based at the Institute for Culture and Society at the University of Western Sydney, Australia, with the support of the Digitally Connected Network, from May to August 2014.

The project aimed to document and analyse the ways that children themselves, in different locations around the world, conceptualise and enact their rights in relation to their digital media practices. In particular, the project asked children to reflect upon the extent to which they use digital media in their everyday lives and the motivations for their use; what their rights are in a digital age; how their rights might be enhanced by their engagements with digital media; and what kinds of challenges digital media pose to their capacity to claim their rights.

This project was undertaken with the explicit aim of providing a mechanism for children's views to inform the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's deliberations when they meet to consider the Convention on the Rights of the Child in the context of the digital age in Geneva on 12 September, 2014.

Drawing upon participatory research and design methodologies, this project deployed the methods outlined below to capture, analyse and present children's insights into their rights in a digital age. These methods resulted in three project outputs:

- A short film that documents children's insights into, and experiences of their rights in the digital age using footage crowdsourced from children via the project's partner organisations.
- A scholarly report analysing the content generated by children who participated in the project in relation to the existing scholarship on children's rights in the digital age.
- A set of 'digital champion' stories showcasing how children, or organisations working with children, are using technology to enhance the rights of children in different locations around the world.

THE RESEARCH PROCESS

01

Methodology design workshop

The research team held an all-day workshop with two Sydney-based members of the Young and Well CRC's Youth Brains Trust to co-design a content generation methodology that could be rolled out by partner organisations in workshops with children aged six to 18 from around the world to capture their insights and experiences of their rights in the digital age. Given the diverse contexts in which the project would be implemented, the methodology needed to be flexible and inclusive.

Prior to the workshop, participants were asked to familiarise themselves with selected sections of the Convention on the Rights of the Child with relevance to the rise of digital media, and to research how technology is used in two countries of their choice. In the workshop, the research team and the Youth Brains Trust members discussed in depth the opportunities and challenges associated with children's rights in the digital age in different parts of the world. Participants then worked with the research team to design and trial activities that could be used to gain young people's insights into their digital rights.

02

Recruitment of partner organisations

Partner organisations were recruited through a call for Expressions of Interest (in English, Spanish and French) sent out via the website, email distribution networks, and social media channels of the Digitally Connected Network and the Young and Well CRC. In order to achieve representation from all continents, the call for expressions of interest was followed up with organisations affiliated with the above networks by representatives from the Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University and UNICEF. Expressions of interest were collected using [surveymonkey.com](https://www.surveymonkey.com).

See Figure 1 for a summary of the locations in which participating organisations are based.



A total of 17 organisations in 16 countries ran workshops with 148 children in eight languages (English, Arabic, French, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, Malay, and Turkish).

03

Development of project resource kit

Drawing on the methodology design workshop with the Youth Brains Trust members, the research team produced a project resource kit that could be provided to partner organisations so that they could run workshops with children aged six to 18 to generate creative content about their rights. The resource kit provided ethical standards relating to the recruitment for and conduct of the workshops with children. It also contained detailed explanations of the suggested workshop activities and details on how to submit content back to the research team. As long as the ethical standards were maintained, partner organisations conducting workshops with children were given freedom to adapt the guidelines as appropriate to their participants and/or resourcing.

A draft version of the resource kit was circulated to the Youth Brains Trust methodology design workshop participants and the Project Advisory Board for feedback; trialled with a partner organisation; and then finalised and made available to partner organisations in English, French and Spanish.

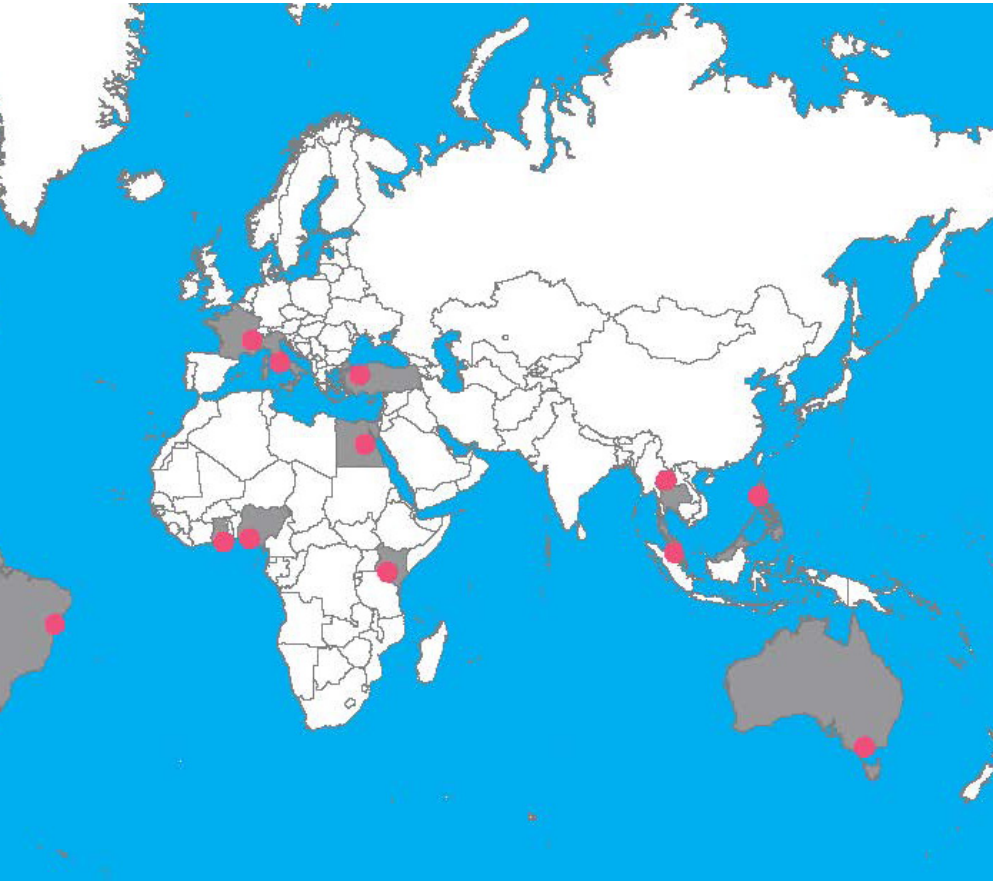


Figure 1: World map showing the locations in which the 17 project partner organisations and 148 child research participants are based.

Accra
Ghana

Barranquilla
Colombia

Benin City
Nigeria

Boston
United States of America

Buenos Aires
Argentina

Eskisehir
Turkey

Kuala Lumpur
Malaysia

Melbourne
Australia

Nairobi
Kenya

Pereira
Colombia

Phayao
Thailand

Port of Spain
Trinidad & Tobago

Rome
Italy

Saint Jean de la Porte
France

Salvador
Brazil

San Jose
Philippines

Saqlta
Egypt

04

Conduct of workshops with children aged 6-18 by partner organisations

In July and early August 2014, participating organisations each recruited between one and ten children between the ages of 6 and 18 to participate in a three hour workshop at their premises or another safe location convenient for the child participants. In the workshops child participants engaged in three activities:

Technology timelines: children plotted their daily, weekly or monthly digital media use and related it to their rights as a child.

Short vox pop interviews: children responded to camera to a series of questions about the opportunities and challenges digital media present them in enacting their rights.

Creative responses: children were invited to choose and explore a dimension of their rights in the digital age using one of six mediums (video, audio, photographs, drawing/painting, flip book, or written response).

Each workshop activity was designed to build on the preceding one. Please see below for a detailed description of the workshop activities in which children participated. A total of 17 organisations in 16 countries ran workshops with 148 children in eight languages (English, Arabic, French, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, Malay, and Turkish). See Figure 1 for a summary of the locations in which participants are based.

05

Data analysis and production of project outputs

Content received in languages other than English was translated and the research team worked from English transcripts. All audiovisual content (vox pops and creative responses) received from partner organisations was then viewed and analysed over a period of five days using visual and discourse analysis methods. The research team simultaneously conducted a content analysis of the children's timelines to identify key themes, commonalities and differences. In conducting these analyses, the research team was very mindful that the project's key aim was to keep children's views at the core of the reporting. The results of this analysis formed the basis of both the short film and this scholarly report.

06

Production of digital champion stories

In a separate process, a professional writer (Urszula Dawkins) was engaged to produce a set of 12 'digital champion' stories to complement the content of the scholarly analysis. These stories aimed to showcase the ways that children, or organisations working with children, are using digital media to enhance the rights of children. A call for nominations for digital champions was sent out via the websites, email distribution networks and social media channels of the Digitally Connected Network and the Young and Well CRC. Project Advisory Board members were also invited to make nominations. The call for nominations was distributed in English, Spanish and French, and the resulting nominations were collected using surveymonkey.com. Nominations were assessed and a selection made to ensure that all continents were represented, and that a diverse range of issues, experiences and viewpoints could be foregrounded. Once the list was finalised, the research team provided the professional writer with basic background research on each of the nominees. The professional writer then formulated and conducted email, telephone or Skype interviews with each of the nominees and developed the stories, which are featured in this report. Translation was provided as required.

PROJECT SUPPORT

The research team's work was supported by three entities:

1. Two members of the Young and Well CRC **Youth Brains Trust** participated in the Methodology Design Workshop, and another sat on the Project Advisory Board. All three Youth Brains Trust members provided ongoing, critical feedback across the life of the project.
2. Seventeen individuals and organisations affiliated with the **Digitally Connected Network** kindly agreed to recruit children aged 6-18 to participate in workshops to generate data/content for this project. These individuals and organisations ran the workshops with children and sent the content – electronically or via the post – to the research team for analysis and inclusion in the research outputs.
3. An international **Project Advisory Board** was established to leverage the collective wisdom of the project partners, and to assist in meeting the short timelines associated with this project. The Project Advisory Board provided high-level input on the project design via a short online survey (surveymonkey.com). Their responses were used to tighten the methodology and frame the analysis. Members of the Project Advisory Board also played an invaluable role in recruiting partner organisations and digital champions, and feeding back on the project outputs at strategic moments in their development. The Project Advisory Board comprised the following members:

- **Regina Agyare** (Soronko Solutions/Tech Needs Girls Ghana)
- **Gerrit Beger** (UNICEF)
- **Philip Chan** (Young and Well CRC Youth Brains Trust)
- **Anne Collier** (connectsafely.org)
- **Sandra Cortesi** (Berkman Center for Internet & Society, Harvard University)
- **Maria Herczog** (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child)
- **Bob Hodge** (University of Western Sydney/Young and Well CRC Scientific Leadership Council)
- **Paul James** (University of Western Sydney/UN Circles of Social Life Initiative)
- **Rey Junco** (Iowa State University)
- **Sonia Livingstone** (London School of Economics/EU Kids Online)
- **Tanya Notley** (University of Western Sydney)
- **Nishant Shah** (Centre for Internet & Society Bangalore)
- **Amanda Third** (University of Western Sydney/Young and Well CRC)

*The Young and Well CRC
Youth Brains Trust
(youngandwellcrc.org.au)*

The Youth Brains Trust is a group of enthusiastic and committed young people from around Australia, who are passionate about improving their own wellbeing and that of their peers. They play a pivotal role in advising the Young and Well CRC Board and shaping the Young and Well CRC's research agenda.

*The Digitally Connected Network
(digitallyconnected.org)*

The Digitally Connected Network is a collaborative initiative between UNICEF's Voices of Youth Citizens, the Innocenti Research Centre teams and the Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University, which builds upon a multi-year partnership for analyzing digital and social media growth and trends among children and youth globally. The Digitally Connected Network has at its core a network consisting of 150 academics, practitioners, young people, activists, philanthropists, government officials, and representatives of technology companies from around the world who, together, are addressing the challenges and opportunities children and youth encounter in the digital environment.

WORKSHOPS WITH CHILDREN: ACTIVITIES IN DETAIL

01

Technology use timelines

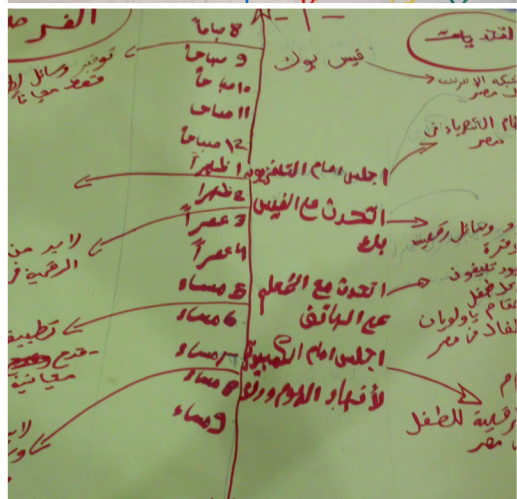
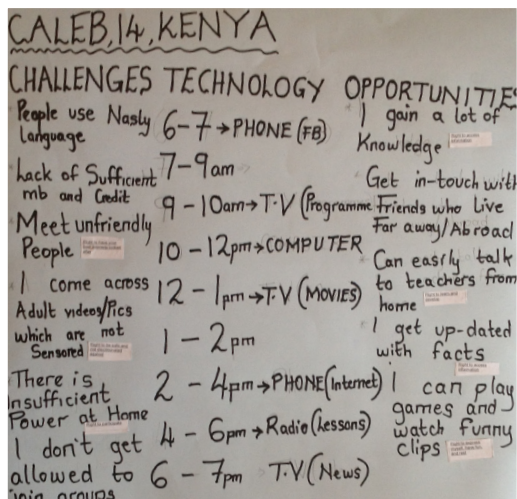
The aim of the first workshop activity was to gain a better understanding of how, when and to what extent children use technology in various parts of the world and how children see this as connected to their rights.

This activity was designed as a practical starting point that would prompt workshop participants to think about the relationship between their digital media practices and their rights, setting the scene for the following activities. Facilitators were encouraged to use this exercise to generate discussion about children's rights in the digital age.

Participants were asked to draw a daily, weekly or monthly timeline (choosing the timeframe most relevant to their circumstances) and map their media and technology use onto this timeline. To make this activity as inclusive as possible, workshop facilitators were asked to use a broad definition of media and technology so that children would be encouraged to also map their mass media engagements (radio, television, newspapers and so on). Participants were then asked to identify the challenges and opportunities associated with their media and technology use and map these onto their timeline. In the final stage of the activity, participants were encouraged to identify how their technology practices intersected, or not, with their rights by cutting out the relevant rights from a template provided by the workshop facilitator and matching them up to the challenges and opportunities identified on their timelines. Children were also invited to invent their own rights, where they felt the existing rights did not capture their experience, and stick them on their timelines.

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child identifies twelve articles of the Convention as relevant to a consideration of children's rights in relation to the rise of digital media in their 2014 Day of General Discussion (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2014). In addition to these, the research team identified two further articles (Article 16 on the right to privacy and Article 42 on making the Convention widely known) worthy of consideration. To simplify the timeline activity and make it child-friendly, the research team grouped these rights into seven broad themes in plain language. The rights children chose from in the timeline activity were thus:

- Right to have my best interests looked after
- Right to access information
- Right to express myself, have fun, and rest
- Right to be heard and respected
- Right to learn and develop
- Right to be safe and not discriminated against
- Right to participate



Examples of timelines received from Kenya, France and Egypt.

02

Vox pops

The second activity aimed to gather audiovisual content in which participants responded to a series of questions about how they see the opportunities for and challenges to their rights associated with digital media.

These vox pops could be filmed on a digital camera, flip-camera, or mobile phone. Where these technologies were not available, or where participants were reluctant to be filmed, children were asked to write short written responses to the questions. The following questions were used as a guide for the vox pops.

- What is your first name, how old are you and what country do you live in?
- What is the single best way digital media enables you and those around you to live well?
- What is the biggest challenge digital media poses to your ability, and the ability of those around you, to live well?
- Has gaining access to and using digital media made your life harder? If so, how?
- If digital media disappeared how would your life change?
- If you could choose to have any digital media at all, what would it be and how would it change your life?



Behind the scenes footage from Malaysia and Turkey.

03

Creative responses

The aim of this third activity was to encourage participants to provide a space to creatively reflect upon their rights in the digital age.

Participants could choose to explore and share the ideas or issues they see as most important, using one or more creative mediums (video; flipbook; drawing or painting; written response; audio or photography).

The following questions were suggested as a guide.

- If you could tell the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child one thing about how digital media give you opportunities to live a good life, what would it be?
- If you could tell the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child one thing about how digital media challenge your ability to live a good life, what would it be?
- How does digital media enable you to enact change in your life and/or your community?



Using different mediums to creatively respond (in Australia, Brazil, Colombia and Malaysia).

ETHICS APPROVAL

Ethics approval to work with children to design a content production methodology for this research project, and to roll it out via organisations affiliated with the Digitally Connected Network, was obtained from the University of Western Sydney's Human Research Ethics Committee (Approval numbers H10709 and H10724) in July 2014.

All child participants were required to sign consent forms, and to gain consent from their parent or legal guardian, before participating in the project. Partner organisations were required to adhere to the ethical standards outlined in the Project Resource Kit when recruiting for and delivering the workshops with children.

LIMITATIONS OF THE METHODOLOGY

Conducted between May and August 2014, this research project has unfolded against an extremely tight timeline. Whilst the research team implemented measures to ensure the rigour of the scholarship (For example, establishing an international Project Advisory Board to review all facets of the project), the short timelines imposed some limitations on the study.

At the Expression of Interest stage, 97 organisations worldwide were sent the project resource kit. However, ultimately only 17 organisations were able to commit to the short timeframes associated with the project, signalling that longer timelines would have broadened the sample considerably. The urgency at nearly every stage of the research process meant that the project's short timeline was also imposed on our partners, with some partners organising and delivering a workshop in a matter of days.

The recruitment of partner organisations via the Digitally Connected Network proved very efficient in the project's timeframe. However, it is likely that using this method, in combination with the short timeline, biased the sample of organisations that joined the project and recruited young participants. It remained a challenge to achieve representation from all continents. The project rolled out at the peak of the summer holiday break in Europe and North America, in part explaining the lower representation from these continents. The research team was also reliant on the partner organisations to gather the data. As a result, there were inconsistencies in the way data was generated.

Varying levels of access to and familiarity with digital media had a direct impact on whether organisations were able to participate and to share the results of the workshops. When they were able to provide the research team with content, the varying levels of production quality made it difficult at times to use the content to its full potential in the short film. Nonetheless, all data has been analysed for this written report.

The calls for expression of interest and the project resource kit were made available in English, French and Spanish. However, the majority of correspondence with partner organisations took place in English. The need for English speaking intermediaries to communicate with the research team added a layer of complexity to the project but this was managed very capably by our partner organisations. Provision was made for children to participate in workshops in the language of their choice and, where partner organisations were not able to provide translation, translators were engaged to provide English transcripts. Due to budget limitations, some of this translation was undertaken by volunteers.

In light of the above limitations, the research team emphasises that the findings of this report are indicative rather than conclusive. The content children generated has provided the team with a deep understanding of the ways children in different locations are using digital media to learn about and enact their rights. We hope to continue this work into the future by sending out further calls to children globally to contribute to an online content sharing facility dedicated to their views on their rights in the digital age.

Key findings

When given the opportunity to think about how digital media enhance or impede their rights, children embraced the task enthusiastically. Children repeatedly insisted that digital media was becoming, if not already, a more central part of their everyday lives. When they spoke about digital media in relation to their rights, they did so in a way that signalled that they understood their digital rights as closely intertwined with their human rights more broadly. In conversation with children, it emerged that they conceive their rights in broad terms that acknowledge the integrated part that digital media play in their everyday lives. That is, they did not readily distinguish between the online and the offline, unless they were talking about the risks associated with digital media engagement, in which case they often made sharp delineations between the online and offline worlds. This echoes the growing body of evidence that suggests that, in contexts where children have ready access to and use a variety of digital media, children do not readily distinguish between the online and the offline (Ito et al, 2010).

Although children were well-versed in the potential risks associated with engaging online, and were concerned about how their digital media practices might negatively impact upon their rights, children overwhelmingly experienced digital media as a positive influence in their lives: “Digital media made life easier than before” (Philippines, f, 14).

Indeed, some children had high aspirations for a world facilitated by digital media. They lauded the potential for digital media to connect cultures globally. An Argentinian participant stated that, “for me, it unites the world” and an Australian participant noted that “it connects us all on another level.” Some saw technology as a potentially uniting force in promoting a spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality and friendship among all peoples. And others noted that digital media had an important role to play in the development of nations: “I think technology is a key element regarding the development of a nation” (Colombia, m).

“[If everyone had equal access to digital media] this would help various people in various parts of the world to learn about different cultures, about the people. This would help with the advancement of people and society.”

Trinidad & Tobago, f, 16

All quotations in this section are verbatim. Spelling and grammatical errors have not been changed. The country of origin, the gender and, where the information is available, the age of the participant quoted has been provided for each quotation.

HOW CHILDREN CONCEPTUALISE THEIR RIGHTS

01

Children clearly value the possibility offered by digital media to broaden their horizons and gain an awareness of other cultures and people. They reported that digital media enables them to be informed citizens of the world who are better prepared to participate meaningfully in the lives of their communities, and they talked at length about the positive impact of digital media on their right to education.

In general, children found it much more difficult to articulate the opportunities digital media offers them to enact their rights. Indeed, higher levels of access appear to have implications for children's capacity to both imagine life without digital media, and to enumerate the opportunities this level of access affords them both in the present and in the future. Many children had a perception that the internet made their lives easier and, when asked to imagine what the world would be like without the internet or digital media, stated that their lives would be more difficult: "If digital media disappeared... it would obviously be harder" (Australia, f, 16). However, beyond noting the informational, communicative and educational possibilities of digital media, children generally struggled to conceptualise the benefits of digital media for their rights in any detail.

By contrast, children found it much easier to identify and discuss the risks digital media pose to their ability to realise their rights. As we discuss in further detail below, this raises questions about the kinds of discourses that shape children's understandings of their digital media practices globally.

Nonetheless, children from all parts of the world, when given the opportunity to reflect on the ways digital media both enhances and impedes their rights, grappled admirably with the complexity of the interrelationship between their rights. Children could recognise that their rights sometimes conflicted with one another when it comes to digital media. For example, having improved means of communication is perceived by children as an opportunity to enhance their right to freedom of expression and their right to have fun, which overall is an enhancement of their right to have their best interests looked after. But they perceive 'too much' digital communication, or digital communication at the detriment of other forms of social interaction, as a challenge to those very same rights. Children also often recognised that their rights could clash with the rights of others. Children did not necessarily have ready answers about how to handle these tensions but, as we discuss further below, they did demonstrate a readiness to tackle these questions and a desire to take responsibility for their rights online. And throughout the project, children expressed a strong desire to be trusted, and for adults to value their digital media practices. We unpack these issues in further detail below.

ACCESS TO DIGITAL MEDIA

02

Whilst the uptake of digital media is proceeding at a rapid rate in many parts of the world, access to digital media is far from evenly distributed across the globe. (Nielson, 2013)

The children in this study reported vastly different levels of access to both hardware and connectivity, evidencing some of the challenges associated with digital media access that have been well-documented elsewhere (see for example, Kleine, 2014; Livingstone and O'Neill, 2014). Nonetheless, strong evidence emerged in this project to suggest that, even in places where children do not have access to the latest technology, children, along with organisations that work to support their rights, are using the available technologies with high degrees of inventiveness and efficacy. The U-Report in Zambia and the initiatives being run by Soronko Solutions in Ghana that are featured in the Stories of Digital Champions supplement to this report are just two examples of this. While we must be wary of sugar coating the very real challenges children face in relation to digital media access in the developing world, it is also important to acknowledge when initiatives are working well using technologies that are perceived as dated in the developed world. Indeed, the work of the U-Report is a powerful reminder that, whilst smartphones might be desirable, many of the benefits they offer can also be achieved using analogue technologies. As Bob Hofman of the Global Teenager Project (see Stories of Digital Champions supplement to this report) notes, children are powerful actors in developing innovative workarounds using technologies that adults often perceived as outdated and limited:

“We [adults] tend to think in terms of problems, but students say, let us worry about [how to use the available] technology. We have our cellphones, we have our connections, just guide us in learning and let us solve the technology.... We have students from Liberia, Freetown, where they had to walk – we paid them ten dollars per week to buy airtime in an internet café, and they delivered a higher level of work than a school in [a developed country] who literally tumble over the latest technology.” (Bob Hofman, Global Teenager Project)

If we are to harness the potential of digital media in ways that minimise the negative impact of economic, political, socio-structural contexts, we must look to such examples that are already underway and achieving significant success, and engage with them in further refining their impacts.

Developing countries definition: According to the World Bank classification, developing countries are those “countries with low or middle levels of GNP per capita... Several countries with transition economies are sometimes grouped with developing countries based on their low or middle levels of per capita income, and sometimes with developed countries based on their high industrialization. More than 80 percent of the world’s population lives in the more than 100 developing countries” (The World Bank Group, 2004).

Access in developing countries

Where children have access to digital media, then the quality of this access is an important factor shaping their capacity to leverage digital media and connectivity to enhance their rights. Children in developing countries highlighted both poor infrastructure and low quality connectivity as major challenges that hinder their rights to access information, to education, to participation and to freedom of expression online. Children in the Philippines, for example, highlighted “slow internet connection” and “low signal” as key impediments to their digital media access. Similarly, participants from Kenya highlighted that key challenges they face include:

- having limited access to hardware and/or networks: **“I lack access most of the time” (Kenya, m, 14)**
- unstable or weak networks: **“low/meagre connectivity” (Kenya, m, 14)**
- unreliable power sources in their communities: **“there is insufficient power at home” and “power breakdown” (Kenya, m, 14)**

A young boy in Nigeria noted that “there is not enough power so the computer is not working” (Nigeria, m). Video footage submitted by another boy in Nigeria shows him powering up a diesel generator in order to charge his computer and mobile phone, evidencing the kind of infrastructural challenges children face in accessing digital media in the developing world. Children in several countries, such as Egypt and the Philippines, stated that governments have the responsibility to provide better infrastructure in order for the population to have access to digital media.

In the same way, although to a lesser extent, children in the developing world reported that the unavailability of devices and the cost of access to the internet impacts their rights to provision. Children in Kenya reported that “insufficient credit for usage”, a lack of “modern communication devices such as phones” and “limited use of computer” characterised their experiences. Similarly, a child from Egypt reported that “there is no computer at home”, and others from Egypt reported that “there are no computers at school”. Again, children perceived a role for governments and other institutions in rectifying these challenges. An Egyptian participant, for example, argued that “the government should provide communication devices at our school” (Egypt, m).

A few children in developing countries proposed that, as a minimum, schools should provide quality access to digital media, in terms of connectivity, supply of devices, and digital literacy education. However, such ambitions must be balanced with the other demands on educational institutions in developing contexts.

The infrastructural challenges narrated by children from developing countries in this study are a stark reminder that the project of resolving issues of access to digital media for certain populations needs to be pursued within a holistic framework that can accommodate cultural specificity and infrastructural, logistical and political factors. This is necessary if the introduction of widespread digital media access is not to exacerbate existing economic, political, and social divides.

Developed countries definition: According to the World Bank classification, developed countries are industrially advanced, “high-income countries, in which most people have a high standard of living. Sometimes also defined as countries with a large stock of physical capital, in which most people undertake highly specialized activities. Depending on who defines them, developed countries may also include middle-income countries with transition economies, because these countries are highly industrialized. Developed countries contain about 15 percent of the world’s population. They are also sometimes referred to as ‘the North’” (The World Bank Group, 2004).

Access in developed countries

In stark contrast to the above children, those who live in developed countries reported extensive access to digital media. This reflects research findings that, in many parts of the developed world, the rates of children and young people under the age of 18 accessing digital media on a regular basis are reaching saturation point (Burns et al, 2013; Livingstone and Bulger, 2013; Madden et al, 2013). Indeed, when asked to identify what kinds of digital media devices or applications they would like to have if they could choose, many of the participants from developed countries responded by saying that they had adequate access to the necessary technologies, a wide range of platforms, and stable points of connectivity: “I’ve got a phone, a laptop and a TV so I don’t think I really need anything else... I’m happy with what I got, I don’t really need anything” (Australia, f, 16).

For participants from all parts of the world with easy access to digital media, it has become so embedded in their everyday lives that it is perceived as a fundamental right. Many find it hard to imagine a world without it. For example, an older child from Malaysia said, “Wow. I don’t know what I would do without it because I was born in the internet era... I cannot imagine a life without the internet because I use it every day, for my studies, I use it for all my needs. And... I need it very much” (Malaysia, m, 16). There was a certain level of taken-for-grantedness about the ways in which children from the developed world talked about their digital media practices. As we discuss below, this has implications for the ways they are able to imagine digital media in relation their rights.

Access to digital media was frequently described by developed world participants as necessary to the sense of community, belonging and inclusion that increasingly underpins children’s capacity to enact their rights to participation in the contemporary era. Where access is already, or is becoming, dominant, forms of participation that are facilitated via online and networked engagements are also becoming the norm; digital media are becoming a primary channel for participation, and a thread that is perceived to bind communities. As a participant from the United States explained, “This is the world we live in.” Thus, in a context where the majority has ready access to digital media, not having access is perceived as exclusionary. As another participant said, “You feel like you have to be connected ‘cause everyone else is, and if you’re not you can feel excluded.” (USA, m, 15).

Indeed, it appears that children without regular or reliable access to digital media are more likely to experience a more acute sense of exclusion if the majority of children in their communities do have access. Within developed countries, many children still experience limited access to digital media due to persistent socio-structural inequalities. The idea that digital media can exacerbate inequalities by further excluding those who

are most vulnerable and do not or cannot benefit from modern technologies is well established in the literature (Kleine et al, 2014; Livingstone et al, 2013), but usually in a context where access to digital media is particularly difficult or where there is low digital literacy. Here, in a context where more comprehensive levels of access and literacy are both in place, children say that exclusion can result from having no choice but to use digital media as a way to comply with new social norms. As one participant noted, “I do feel like there’s a pressure of, like, you have to have some form of it... you have to have a Facebook maybe, and it’s, like, kind of frowned upon if you don’t have Instagram or Snapchat... or Twitter.” (USA, m, 15)

Thus, where there are established levels of access to digital media, some participants reported feeling considerable peer pressure to engage online, particularly using social media, otherwise one becomes at risk of isolation and exclusion. For these children, their use of social media is about adapting to their environment and the terms of the new cultural order. In this context, some participants expressed a desire, alongside their right to participate via digital media, for the right to not participate online, or to disconnect. For some children, this included taking periodic breaks from their technology (for example, during exam periods at school, or during homework time), or blocking out dedicated moments during the day in which to engage online.

HOW CHILDREN ARE USING DIGITAL MEDIA

03

Although there are marked discrepancies in access to digital media around the world, those children who do have regular access reported that they use digital media for a remarkably common set of purposes.

These purposes include:

- Social connectedness
- Access to information
- Education
- Creativity
- Entertainment

Similarly, regardless of the country they live in, the language they speak, and their different socio-economic backgrounds, when children engage with digital media, they tend to participate in remarkably similar activities. The top digital media activities children identified were:

- Participating in social media
- Playing games
- Completing school work
- Emailing
- Watching films and television

Amongst the children in our sample, there were some differences between the ways that younger children (aged seven to 12) and older children (aged 12 to 18) engage with digital media. Younger children tend to use digital media for much shorter periods of time and are less likely to make use of the social dimensions of being online. They reported that their favourite digital media activities are watching television and playing games.

By contrast, older children use digital media primarily to communicate with one another and with their families, taking advantage of the full social functionality of digital media. Social media – in particular, Facebook, followed by WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram and similar platforms – is by far their preferred mode of communicating with friends. Older children also reported that they “send messages”, “text my friends”, “check my emails”. This trend towards using digital media primarily for communicating is consistent with broader trends in digital media use globally, which show that communication is superseding information-seeking as the primary use of online and networked media (Third et al, 2014).

Children also commonly mentioned using digital media to conduct internet searches (with an emphasis on school-related activities); watching television and feature movies; listening to music. These uses occur mostly within a set period of time (usually late afternoon and early evening) whereas communicating typically occurs several times a day; in the early morning, at lunch time, and through the late afternoon and evening until sometimes late at night, if not throughout the entire day.

The explosion of mobile access to digital media is beginning to have something of a levelling impact, although it must be noted that children living in remote areas in both developed and developing countries reported that mobile networks in their regions were often limited or non-existent. Both analogue and smartphones are receiving strong uptake in developing countries, while in the developed world, smartphones are increasingly dominant. It appears that factors of cost are the primary driver of the shift to mobile access. In our sample, it appears that factors of cost of mobile and smartphones, as compared to computers, has led to increased usage, both by people who already had access but who are now connected throughout the day, and by people who previously did not have access due to the prohibitive cost of a computer. Most children use a mobile or smartphone and/or a laptop computer. Children in our sample also commonly mentioned using desktop computers, tablets and, to a lesser extent, game consoles.

DIGITAL LITERACY

04

If digital media are becoming increasingly integrated into the everyday lives of children globally, then digital literacy is essential to children's ability to both imagine and enact their rights in the digital age. Digital literacy comprises the technical and higher order evaluative skills required to access, understand, and participate in or create content using digital media. In order for digital literacy to support children's meaningful participation, it must encompass three kinds of literacy:

Technical literacy – being able to successfully navigate technologies with technical skills

Media literacy – understanding the opportunities new technologies can open up; working knowledge of available platforms; capacity to make judgments about the quality and reliability of online sources

Social literacy – an understanding of the social norms that apply in online settings (Collier, 2012)

As Anne Collier writes, "in a media environment that's both digital and social, where media are incoming (consumable), outgoing (producible, spreadable), and often collective or expressive of community (shareable, remixable) – literacy has to include technical, social, and information-handling skills. It's truly a 3-legged stool, not very useful without all three legs" (Collier, 2012).

As might be expected, children in this study demonstrated levels of digital literacy commensurate with their access and exposure to digital media. Some children used the workshops as a platform to demand more digital literacy education.

For example, a group of Argentinian students lamented the fact that digital literacy is not taught enough, nor understood well enough, and that it is a major challenge to inform oneself about the implications of engaging with digital media and to make informed decisions: "One of the biggest problems is the lack of information about the internet in general" (Argentina, f).

By contrast, most children, whilst they sometimes alluded to the skills, competencies and conceptual frameworks that comprise digital literacy when they were talking about their digital media practices, did not necessarily see digital literacy as a distinct skill set. Children acquire digital literacy via a combination of formal and informal learning (Ito et al, 2013). For the majority of children who participated in this study, this process of accumulating digital competencies is naturalised to the extent that they don't often have an objective view on their digital literacy. Even so, children from diverse contexts spoke about their digital media practices in ways that often betrayed a well-rounded and nuanced sense of digital literacy.

For example, many participants talked about the necessity to critically evaluate the content they come across online, which is an essential part of digital literacy. For example, a child in Colombia asserted that: "You shouldn't trust all publications because they might be fraudulent" (Colombia, m, 12). Children noted that, in amidst the volume of information available via digital media, it is sometimes difficult to establish the reliability and credibility of sources. In conversation about her right to education and to access information, a student from Argentina expressed frustration at finding conflicting information on the internet: "It's annoying that there is all sorts of information that can be contradictory" (Argentina, f). Some reported that they had taken specific actions to minimise misinformation. For example, a 16 year old participant from Turkey stated: "I stopped following accounts that disseminate misinformation" (Turkey, f, 16). Other children reported that, in response to the challenges associated with verifying information, they have developed a general suspicion or cautiousness when using digital media for accessing information.

Similarly, many children demonstrated a deep understanding of the social norms that shape digital media interactions. They talked about how digital media etiquette was important if one's social media interactions were not to impinge on the rights of others: "If you're in a group or something, there'll be one person who is always on their phone while you're talking to them and it's kind of very rude so that's not helping us to live well" (Australia, f, 16). Children also talked about the differences between communicating online and offline. Many children reflected on the fact that they had to be careful how they communicated using digital media due to the fact that mediated communication is missing many of the social cues that are there in face-to-face interactions: "You can communicate but it's a different form of communication, we know what people express with words, but we don't see the facial expression. It's a good thing, but you can't fully communicate" (Argentina, f). For these children, being literate about the differences shaping online communication was connected with their responsibilities to ensure they didn't infringe upon the rights of others to be protected from harm.

Children also demonstrated an ability to think critically about the ways that digital media might be implicated in the transforming social and cultural landscape. For example, children expressed concern that the increasing presence of digital media – and, in particular, the phenomenon of social media and the need to constantly update one’s online presence – might be diverting attention away from enjoying life in the present:

“I think a lot of us try to portray something on the internet or in social media... a persona, and it can affect our normal everyday lives... because we’re mainly focusing on improving our media personalities rather than actually living our own lives” (Australia, f, 16).

They were also concerned about the ways digital media might be responsible for shifts in the ways people interact with one another. This most often took expression in the idea that digital media were responsible for a decline in face-to-face social interaction:

“The biggest problem... that would be socialising, because if everyone is online these days, no one is interacting face to face” (Philippines, f, 13).

Children were concerned not only about the ways that this was affecting peer-based interactions, but also with how it might be transforming familial ties:

“When my family gets together for dinner there is no communication. We’re all on tablets, phones. This is a problem” (Malaysia, m, 17).

These concerns that digital media are potentially antisocial sit at odds with young people’s claims that they use digital media primarily to extend their interactions with friends from school and other face-to-face social settings. Further, at times, children expressed a level of nostalgia for a time when face-to-face relationships prevailed that is not commensurate with the fact that they have grown up in a digitally mediated society. This suggests that these discourses about the potential for digital media to undermine face-to-face sociality are borrowed from the framings of digital media provided by the adult world.

The profound influence of adult-normative perspectives on children’s sense-making about digital media became even clearer in relation to another important aspect of their digital literacy; namely, their capacity to conceptualise the opportunities new technologies can potentially open up for them. An important part of being digitally literate is having a well-developed enough understanding of digital media to know what it can potentially offer

by way of supporting one’s growth and development. While children frequently noted that digital media facilitates their communicative, educational and informational needs, many children found it difficult to articulate the ways that digital media enhanced their lives and their rights in more specific and precise terms. By contrast, children generally found it much more straightforward to enunciate the risks and challenges associated with their digital media practices.

There appear to be two factors shaping this phenomenon. Firstly, amongst our sample, this tendency was more pronounced for those children with the most regular access to digital media in their daily lives. This suggests that, for those children with ready access, digital media has become such an integral part of their everyday lives – so hegemonic – that they find it difficult to identify the opportunities digital media potentially offer them to live better lives and enact their rights as children, even while they are certain digital media does indeed offer them benefits to which they would not otherwise have access. Secondly, in combination with the taken-for-granted presence of digital media, the other factor that appears to limit children’s ability to explicate the opportunities offered up by digital media is the lack of an appropriate language for conceptualising and talking about them. That is, the discourses available to children currently focus almost exclusively on risk and protection, and this is potentially undermining their capacity to imagine, and articulate, the benefits digital media offers them in realising their rights.

COMMUNICATION

05

Children consistently rated digital media's capacity to facilitate communication as the single most important way that digital media facilitates their rights. The communicative dimensions of digital media provide children with ways to nourish their friendships, their family ties, and their broader social networks. These things are fundamental to their wellbeing. They also enhance children's participation in their communities.

Children most commonly said that they used online social interactions to sustain their offline friendships. They described the ways they use digital media as a communication tool to facilitate face-to-face interaction; for example, to find out where people are, where they can meet, who is available at a certain time, or to simply organise an event that others are invited to join. Children say that communicating with their network of friends is closely linked to several rights such as the right to be heard and respected (there is a dialogue), the right to express myself (I can contact others), the right to have fun and rest (network of friends, organise leisure activities), and the right to have their best interests looked after (it allows me to maintain friendly relationships, which is essential to my happiness).

While children emphasised that the opportunities offered by digital media allow them to stay in touch with friends and family and thus maintain a close-knit network that already exists offline, some also highlighted that their online social interactions sometimes broaden out to include a greater network of online contacts. Children say that digital media is a way to make new friends, or to find other people with similar interests.

The concept of virtual friendship was outlined as an opportunity to find people who might share the same interests and therefore the possibility to create a sense of community, be it around a common interest, cultural background, etc. Children take seriously the idea of online friendship. Many talked about the ways that meeting people online, that they have never met face-to-face, has facilitated the deepening of an interest, or led to meaningful social connections. Evidence shows that online friendships can often have particularly positive impacts for children who are otherwise socially marginalised, such as children who live with chronic illness or disability (Third & Richardson, 2010).

"Communicating with people I normally wouldn't."

USA, m, 16

"Using Skype so I can contact my family overseas, in Malta, and be able to talk to them and keep them updated with what's happening in our country and what's going on in theirs."

Australia, f, 15

"For me the biggest [challenge] would be not to be able to skype or facetime with my aunt, she travels a lot for work and we're very close but I don't get to see her much."

Australia, f, 16

INFORMATION

06

Although there is a shift towards using digital media primarily as a communication tool, this is not to say that information-seeking is a dwindling feature of children's use of digital media. Children consistently rated communication as the most important opportunity afforded by digital media. However, the opportunities arising from digital media as a source of information came a close second in children's answers about the positive impact of digital media in their lives.

Children and young people identified a direct correlation between their access to digital media and their right to access information as stipulated in Article 17 of the UNCRC. Online technology allows quicker and easier access to information than other traditional mediums, for example one child from Trinidad and Tobago mentioned the advantage of not being bound by the local library's limited resources or restricted opening hours.

However, it also brings to users an enormous amount of additional information that they would never have been able to access without digital media. As an Australian participant acknowledged, "sometimes there is too much information available" (Australia, f, 16). Many children said they sometimes experienced "information overload," underlining the importance of digital literacy in enabling children to navigate, sort and utilised large volumes of information.

Children were generally aware that access to information was not equally available to everyone. Some narrated this as a 'rights' issue that needs to be rectified:

"If the internet disappeared, we would not be able to do research on the internet for school projects, we would have to go to the library and that is a problem because some people don't have a library in their village so it is a lot more difficult, especially since there are libraries that do not have a lot of books on specific topics or don't have the money to buy more" (France, f, 10).

The need to access information featured strongly in children's discourse, from being an integral part of recreational activities, to becoming responsible citizens who are able to form their own opinions and participate in their community. Children often explicitly connected the idea that digital media enables their right to information, with their right to participation, and their right to education.

"[Digital media] enables us to live well by allowing us to access more information from the internet and other sources that we would not have directly in our hands."

Australia, f, 16

PARTICIPATION

07

Children talked about digital media's role in their participation in two key senses. They understand digital media as playing a vital role in:

- enabling them to be informed citizens who can participate meaningfully in their communities; and
- enabling them to participate in friendship and broader community networks.

As such, when children talked about participation, they most often connected to the informational and communicative capacities of digital media.

In terms of information, digital media were often presented as an opportunity to know and learn about the rest of the world and participate as an informed citizen. Many children, including younger ones, expressed how important it is for them to gain an awareness of what happens in other countries, both near and far. Students in Ghana agreed that "researching what's happening in other parts of the world" was one of the main positive uses of the internet. Children cited recent events in Gaza, the Ebola virus or the war in Mali as issues they had learned about via digital media. As an Australian participant said, "[digital media] helps a lot of children know about the news and what is going on, we're more knowledgeable in a way." This idea was echoed by a young boy in Nigeria who said, "I like to listen to news to know more. I want to know what is happening" (Nigeria, m). For those who have no or less frequent access to digital media, the inability to access information and current affairs was seen as a major

disadvantage. Some participants also raised the issue of censorship of digital media restricting their right to access information. This highlights the fact that, while digital media opens up a range of opportunities for some, in other parts of the world, children are not afforded the same rights.

Several children noted that the opportunities that digital media provides to stay in touch with world affairs can also have their downsides. Many participants noted that it is very easy to come across age-inappropriate content online: 'Kids these days have easy access and there's a lot of inappropriate things out there that they should not be seeing' (Australia, f, 16). However, interestingly, these children were not necessarily referring to the kinds of inappropriate content that is commonly targeted by cybersafety education; namely, sexual imagery, gaming violence, and so on. As a boy from the United States attested, there have been times when his right to protection from violence and harm has been inadvertently compromised simply by watching breaking news online. "You're going to learn about more gruesome things and the harsh realities of the world younger... I've had to learn about things I wouldn't have wanted to know by going on BBC and CNN" (USA, m, 15). This highlights the importance of working with children to develop child-centred concepts of protection.

Another boy from the United States captured the complexity of the decision making processes children navigate online – sometimes on a moment to moment basis – when he talked about inappropriate content as a challenge to his right to freedom from violence: "Videos people post on YouTube and Facebook about very graphic content: The struggle is wanting to know what it is... There might be a video of two kids fighting. You might have the urge to want to see the actions but you know the actions aren't very positive" (USA, m, 18). This boy articulates very clearly the tension between wanting to know (and being able to know because it is there on your screen) and taking responsibility for one's wellbeing. For this kind of moment-to-moment decision-making, children rely on having developed digital literacy, underlining the importance of children acquiring digital literacy to enable them to protect their right to freedom from violence and other inappropriate material.

For a minority of participants, participating in digital media networks enabled them to engage in broader processes of social and cultural change. For example, a participant from Trinidad and Tobago noted that, by engaging with digital media, "you have access to politicians who can play a significant role in the community" (Trinidad & Tobago, f, 16). An Australian participant noted that her digital media practices meant that "it's a lot easier to get involved in projects and... things" (Australia, f, 16). There are clear opportunities for decision-making entities to more actively engage children in their processes using digital media. The Blockanomics initiative in the United Kingdom is one good example of the ways that children might be encouraged to participate meaningfully and more consistently in the lives of their communities, whether that be at a local, national, regional or global level.

RISKS, HARM AND SAFETY

08

As many commentators, such as Sonia Livingstone and collaborators, have recently pointed out, the relationship between risk, harm and safety for children in online settings is enormously complex. In amidst the online safety literature, there are three key insights that are beginning to impact policy and practice, creating something of a shift in the ways online safety is addressed.

These are:

1. Exposure to risk does not equate to harm, and most children benefit from experiencing some degree of risk because it enables them to develop the resilience to deal with risks online (Livingstone and O'Neill, 2014)
2. Some children are more vulnerable to experiencing harm as a consequence of exposure to online risks than others, and online safety efforts need to focus more precisely on supporting these children (Livingstone and O'Neill, 2014)
3. Attempts to protect children can impede on the possibilities available to children to realise their right to participation, or as De Haan and Livingstone express it, "safety initiatives to reduce risk tend also reduce opportunities" (De Haan & Livingstone, 2009).

The internet does indeed present a range of new potential risks and harms, which require measured responses from policy makers and practitioners. As Davies et al note, "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 realised" (Davies et al, 2011).

There have been recent calls for policy and practice responses to seek to develop online safety approaches that can foster children's right to protection from harm whilst simultaneously empowering them to maximise the benefits of connectivity. Evidence gathered from children around the globe as part of this project only underscores the importance of pursuing more balanced approaches to cybersafety as a matter of urgent priority.

Indeed, our evidence shows that children in many parts of the world today have inherited a popular discourse that is characterized primarily by fear – if not moral panic – and that this potentially inhibits their capacity to imagine and articulate the opportunities digital media affords them in realizing their rights. In general, while children struggled to narrate in detail the ways that digital media potentially supports them to exercise their rights, they found it much easier to talk at length, and often in significant detail, about the risks and challenges to their rights that they face online. This suggests that, while cybersafety has achieved success in raising children's awareness of the potential risks, it has not achieved the equivalent in relation to the opportunities digital media provides.

Children who participated in this project talked knowledgeably about the range of risks they might potentially encounter online. For example, many children reported "seeing things they did not want to see" or learning about things that they would rather have not known about until later on in life. The risk of seeing inappropriate content was often expressed in relation to violent content or disturbing footage from real life situations such as scenes of war, school yard fighting, poverty and starvation. For example, a participant from Thailand reported that "a challenge is violent content" (Thailand, m, 14). Other children also expressed concern at seeing adult content, and more specifically nudity and pornography. There was a strong recognition from children that some content is more or less appropriate depending on age or maturity. Children generally recognised that, when it came to their right to protection, this could be at odds with their rights to access information.

Similarly, children spoke at length about the need to keep one's information safe online, and the potential problems associated with one's 'digital footprint'; namely, the permanence, searchability, and traceability of one's information online. Children – and particularly girls – also talked about the risks associated with sexting, and a small minority talked about the possibility of sexual grooming. Children addressed the risk of cyberbullying through a couple of powerful creative responses, talking about it as a challenge to their right to be safe and not discriminated against. For example, a Malaysian boy created a short video to raise awareness of cyberbullying with succinct information on the proportion of the population affected by cyberbullying and the fact that it can affect anyone irrespective of race. Children's direct references to cyberbullying nevertheless remained few and far between, which suggests that cyberbullying does not preoccupy children to the same extent that it often features in public and policy debates. This is not to suggest that cyberbullying is not a serious issue that needs to be addressed by policy and practice. Rather, it underlines the necessity for research that can better identify which children are more at risk of experiencing particular harms, so that resources "can be used to more precisely target those who experience harm" (Livingstone and Helsper, 2010: 1).

Notably, children frequently spoke about risks in the very same terms that characterise cybersafety campaigns. The risks they identified were not necessarily ones of which they had either direct or indirect experience (e.g. through a friend). Children often talked about the risks and potential harms in hypothetical terms, as risks that other people encounter. For example, one female participant noted that "there are girls that upload nude pictures of themselves, so other people can take those photos and make trouble". And a male participant noted, for example, that "people don't know that they shouldn't put their personal information up online". Children, and particularly young children, also frequently resorted to superlative illustrations of the potential risks they face online. For example, one 10 year old noted that "some people have committed suicide because of insults posted on the internet", and several other older children recounted that people had been abducted or been the victims of violence because they failed to protect their personal information online.

Children also talked about the risks associated with digital media in more abstract terms; for example, digital media participation as a risk to their physical health and wellbeing. Again, these renderings tended to be dominated by adult-normative discourses. In particular, the use of digital media was described as an activity that 'makes us lazy', with children noting that it is unhealthy to look at a screen for long periods of time, and that digital media produces the tendency to stay indoors. Some children admitted that if digital media disappeared one of the good things would be that they would go and play outside more, echoing the discourses that are prevalent in the developed world about the health issues associated with sedentary lifestyles and obesity. Children noted, that while digital

RESPONSIBILITY

09

media potentially stop them from taking part in other activities, the more embedded digital media become in their everyday lives, the less children are likely to contemplate participating in activities that do not involve digital media. These narratives signal that there is scope for organisations invested in promoting children's wellbeing to shift children's thinking around how digital media might support and promote physical wellbeing.

Our evidence shows that risk and safety tends to dominate children's sense making about their digital media practices. As much recent research has shown, awareness of the risks, and an ability to articulate them, does not necessarily translate into behaviour change that enables children to navigate risks safely (Third et al, 2014).

Further, the dominance of risk and safety discourses in children's thinking about their digital practise raises the question of whether or not children are being given adequate opportunity to develop the alternative ways of thinking about digital media that are necessary for children to be able to conceptualise their rights not only in terms of protection, but also in terms of participation. Children must be allowed to formulate and express their own (collective) framings of technology and its impacts on both their everyday lives and the social world more broadly. They must be able to conceptualise themselves as having agency in their digital engagements.

As the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare has asserted, "a rights-based approach to participation requires that children are assisted in not only expressing their views but also in forming them." (Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare Inc., 2011: 20). Children's right to form their own opinions must guide our approaches to developing online safety initiatives that can balance the minimisation of harm with promotion of children's right to participation.

In the context of their discussions about rights, a surprising number of children – especially older children – talked about the interrelationship between rights and responsibilities.

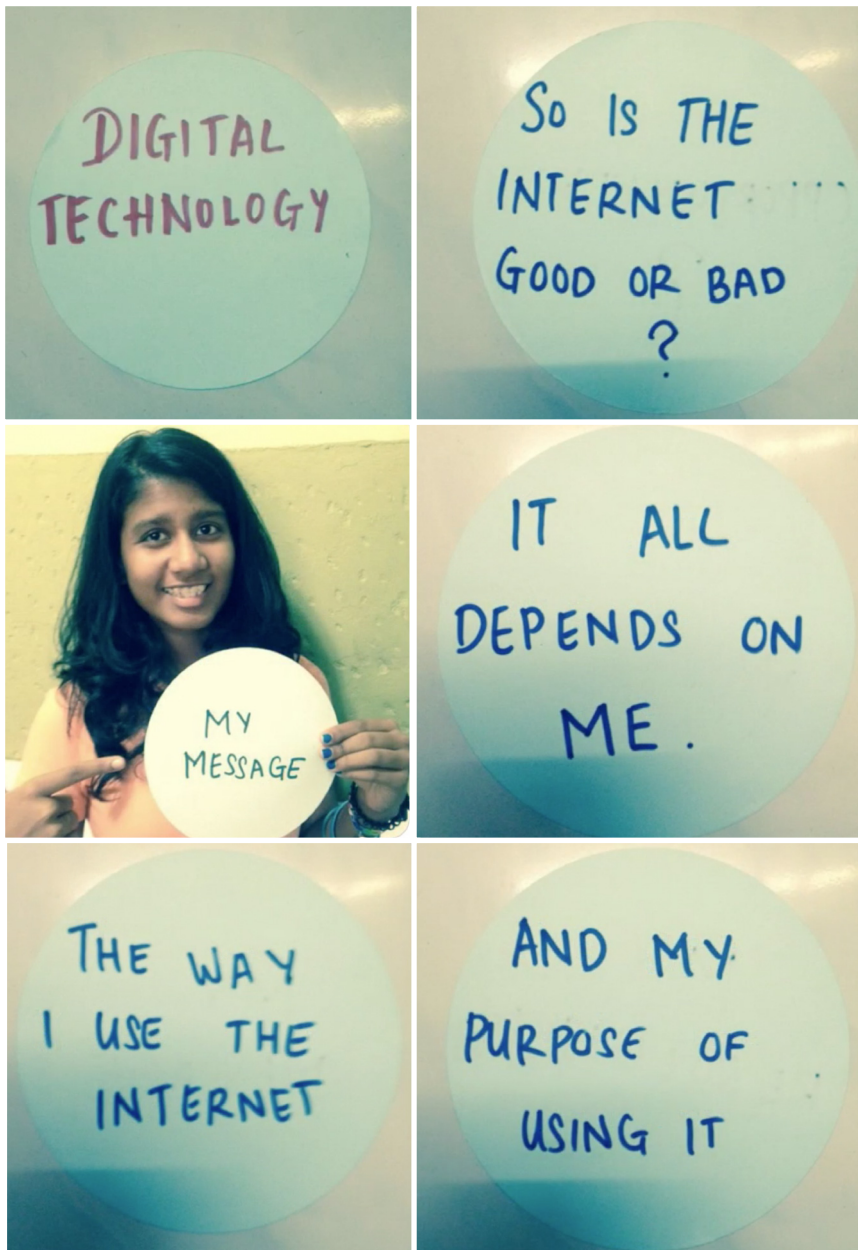
Many children highlighted that the rights they enjoy in relation to digital media also come with real responsibilities, which include "understand[ing] the consequences" of their engagements (Argentina, Malaysia), being personally accountable for the ways their online engagements impact others, and knowing when to exercise self-control:

"The most important thing is... knowing your limits"
(Malaysia, f, 14)

The kind of reasoning these children articulated around personal responsibility runs counter to arguments that sometimes circulate in the popular domain that suggest that technology enables, or even encourages, children to abandon responsibility for their actions. Participants overwhelmingly suggested that, as an Argentinian participant stated:

"Technology is not simply good or bad. It is how you use it. That is the point that we should reflect on" (Argentina).

This sentiment was also captured succinctly in a creative piece generated by a child in Malaysia (f, 14), as shown at right.



Stills from a creative piece to camera by a 14 year old Malaysian participant.

Importantly, some participants suggested that they found idea of taking responsibility enabling, in that it allowed them the opportunity to shape the internet, digital practices, and their life worlds more broadly. For some participants, their individual sense of responsibility had, over time, grown into a sense of social responsibility. For example, a Malaysian 14 year old reported that learning more about taking responsibility for her own actions online had led her to become involved in an informal peer support initiative to educate younger children about digital literacy: "In my neighbourhood, I am educating younger children, aged eight to 12. They also have internet access, so we can also create awareness in them too" (Malaysia, f, 14).

This example is a powerful reminder that, by empowering children to take responsibility, more opportunities potentially open up for children to support one another's digital practices.

There is an opportunity here for advocates for children's rights in the digital age to work with children to foster their sense of responsibility for their rights as they play out in digitally mediated settings. Promoting this sense of responsibility amongst both individual children and children collectively potentially enables children to take a more active and empowered role in mitigating the risks of online engagement, and leveraging the benefits.

Children from all over the globe told the research team that they want to be trusted by the adults in their lives,

FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING

10

and to have adults understand how and why they use digital media. As a Malaysian participant said, “the biggest challenge is that adults don’t trust us” (Malaysia, m, 16). In her ethnographic study of the digital practices of young people living in the United States, danah boyd found that young people see digital media as a key part of their lives, and that they want their parents and other significant adults to understand why they place value on online interactions. It appears that children around the world share this sentiment.

A couple of our participants noted that the adult-child relations shaping children’s digital practices are aggravated by the perception of a generation gap: “A generation gap prevents teenagers to communicate effectively with parents and grandparents” (Trinidad & Tobago). This generational prejudice cuts both ways. That is, although children frequently took issue with the fact that parents think children are often unaware of the consequences of their actions online, children articulated what is potentially an equally limited conception of adult’s understanding of, and capacities to use, digital media.

Research from around the world is only just beginning to emerge on the differences between children’s and parents’ perceptions of children’s digital practices (Hart Research Associates, 2012; Green et al, 2011; Third et al, 2011). However, this emerging evidence base suggests that we need to invest in educating parents about how children use digital media, and why, if we are to enable parents to adequately support their children to leverage the benefits of their digital media practices for their rights.

Articles 28 and 29 of the UNCRC underpin the right to education and participants clearly expressed how digital media allow them to better claim those rights. Children reported that the internet has made it easier for them to undertake schoolwork and to engage in the education process. They consistently made strong statements about how closely interrelated their rights to information and education are:

“I think that digital media contributes to education too. Imagine all that is there in front of you on the net, to research, to learn” (Brazil, f).

With regards to formal education, it was apparent from the technology timeline activity that the majority of participating children regularly use some form of digital technology in relation to their schooling.

“When I use the computer at school, I do something that older kids do because those at preschool could not do it. I go every Thursday [to the computer class] so I can learn” (Italy, m, 7).

The use of computers in the classroom is fast becoming the norm in developed countries, either as a complementary resource to more traditional teaching and learning tools, or when computers and other digital technologies are integrated in the curriculum.

Children described at length how they use the internet to research information and increase their knowledge of topics raised at school, as part of their homework. A participant from Colombia stated “I am already used to doing my homework on the internet. It helps me a lot” (Colombia, m, 14), and an Australian participant stated that “to find out information made [home]work a lot easier, it’s right there” (Australia, f, 16).

While the ability to research information is not a new feature of the school curriculum, some children consider that not being able to access the internet would directly hinder their capacity to complete schoolwork: they would no longer be able to research projects or create slides to present to their peers, and would struggle to meet the required milestones to successfully progress through their education. As a 13-year old from the Philippines explains, without the internet “everything would be harder, schoolwork, projects, assignments, I use digital media to get information so, without it, it would become harder for me” (Philippines, f, 13). This highlights the fact that digital media is to some extent becoming an integral part of education and that, as access to digital media increases, so too does the expectation that digital media can and should be used to some extent within the formal education process. However, this in turn raises questions about maintaining equitable rights to education for those children who do not have ready access to digital media at home or at school. It also underlines the idea that digital literacy education must be a priority for

children everywhere, because digital literacy is essential to leveraging the benefits of digital technology as an educational tool.

Digital technology is used as a means to receive instructions and send homework back to the teacher, to extend beyond the 'standard' level of homework for those who can go a step further or on the contrary, for those who may need some additional support, to explore themes or practice skills through games, etc. New technologies also allow for an extension of the teacher/student relationship outside the classroom, with many children reporting that they contact their teacher outside school hours to answer questions or to discuss topics raised in class.

Similarly, digital media can provide solutions in the event of 'traditional' schooling being interrupted due to travel or sickness. As a participant from Trinidad and Tobago suggested:

"If you're sick, you can get homework... So you don't really miss a day at school, because of technology you can just ask a friend or even a teacher" (Trinidad and Tobago, f, 16).

There are clear benefits here for the educational rights of children living with chronic illness or disability that prevents them from attending school regularly.

Children also noted that digital media provide an invaluable opportunity to expand their learning beyond the school curriculum: "It helps me to learn new things" (Colombia, m, 12). The internet allows children to research, discover and pursue topics they are interested in, or curious about.

"I have learnt how to bake, various baking techniques" (Trinidad & Tobago, f, 16).

"I learnt to make these clay dolls on YouTube" (Colombia, m, 8).

For children with regular access to digital media, it allows them to take the learning experience into every moment of everyday life. Children demonstrate new skills they had learned through the internet, such as craft activities or cooking skills, or to explain how they increased their knowledge of a specific subject of personal interest such as film making. In this instance, children articulate the opportunity to learn with their right to engage in recreational activities and participate in cultural life and the arts (Article 31).

"It keeps me moving forward in all the things I enjoy doing" (USA, m, 16).

For some, the in-depth and self-directed learning that becomes possible on the internet has led them to develop skills that position them for careers. Several participants from Malaysia had learned to write code and create apps using digital media, and are in the process of exploring opportunities to convert these skills into a career in the technology industry:

"I like creating apps, what I like is that we can create new things" (Malaysia, m, 16).

Children report that there is a tension between the right to learn and the right to rest and play:

"Has digital media made my life harder? Yes somewhat because my attention could be easily distracted. I would be working on an assignment and the next second I would be watching animes" (Philippines, f, 13).

The fact that social media sites can be blocked in a school setting was often highlighted as a challenge that hinders their right to access information. However, a couple of children also recognised that it was an opportunity to enhance their right to have their best interests looked after because it removed the distraction of social media and helped them to focus on their studies.

ENTERTAINMENT, LEISURE, FUN AND RELAXATION

11

Children consistently reported that digital media allowed them to exercise their right to fun, play and rest. As a 14 year old from the Philippines states:

“[Digital media] made life easier than before, it helps a lot with assignments, homework, research, [but] it can also be a medium for having fun, relaxation and much more” (Philippines, f, 14).

The timelines children completed demonstrated that children use digital media for wide range of leisure activities; from listening to music or watching television and movies, to playing games with others and participating in social media. For many children in places with regular and reliable access to digital media, engaging in online entertainment was a routine activity.

“The best thing about digital media is entertainment. When we get bored we can connect to the internet” (Turkey, m, 15).

In line with trends of user-generated content, children reported engaging in creative content production in their leisure time. By providing an avenue for children to create content and share with others, digital media may be seen to be fostering their right to expression. Beyond this, as previously mentioned, children also use digital media to learn new skills as part of their leisure time activities. Children submitted audiovisual footage in which they demonstrated the interests they had developed and the skills they had learned on the internet. For example, a nine year old girl from Colombia had learned to make paper windmills and other paper constructions online, and an eight year old boy showed the figurines he had learned to make using online tutorials. Children generally reported that the content available online had enabled them to pursue leisure time activities they would otherwise not have exposure to in their communities.

Some children noted that digital media’s role in enabling them to enact their right to fun, play and rest sometimes conflicted with other rights, such as the right to education. For example, some children spoke about the ‘lure’ of digital media as a distraction away from time that could be better spent studying.

“It’s very distracting, you can go on there for hours and not even realise” (Australia, f, 15).

However, they also noted that they had become better at managing the tension between the need to study and the desire to ‘play’ online as they grew older, and that this was part of developing responsibility in the context of digital media.

PRIVACY

12

Whilst they did not necessarily talk about privacy directly, the children who participated in this study were generally well-informed about the need to ensure that their privacy was protected, particularly as relates to ensuring the security of their personal information.

Children from countries where children's access to digital media is the norm talked easily about the steps one can take to ensure one's information is secure. For example, a Malaysian participant related:

"Privacy settings are important. When it comes to social networking, you should set your privacy settings in a way that you don't search for trouble. If you set your privacy settings to 'public', post too much information on yourself, that's searching for trouble. My mum has played a big role in creating this awareness in me" (Malaysia, f, 14).

Similarly, children also demonstrated a good understanding of the permanence of their digital footprint. As a French participant noted:

"You can post a photo on the internet but then everybody can see it and it is difficult to remove it. It can go anywhere in the world and this can be an issue for some people... There is the issue of photos or documents that cannot be deleted" (France, f, 10).

In short, many children in the study expressed reasonable levels of awareness about issues relating to privacy and were aware of ways they could protect their right to privacy.

However, alongside the definitions of privacy that frequently underpin cybersafety education, a different concept of privacy emerged from children in this study. For example, when children in Kenya were asked to identify challenges to their capacity to realise their rights in the digital age, they singled out "nosey parents", "overprotective parents", and "parents who spy", signalling that they have a strong desire for privacy, but that privacy often means having a space of their own beyond the adult gaze. This confirms the findings of a recent study commissioned by UNICEF and conducted in Kenya (Intermedia, 2013). This sentiment was echoed by children from numerous other countries in the study, highlighting that stakeholders with an investment in protecting children's rights need to work with children to develop child-centred definitions of those rights if the resulting initiatives are to respond to children's stated needs.

PHYSICAL AND MENTAL WELLBEING

13

Responses received from children in this project indicate that children in most parts of the world do not yet readily think about digital media as a phenomenon that might support their right to both physical and mental health and wellbeing.

Indeed, digital media were more likely to be seen as an impediment to their physical health. For example, a couple of older children speculated in passing that, if digital media disappeared, they “would be healthier because I would get outside more often” (Australia, f, 16).

There is an emerging evidence base that suggests that, under certain circumstances, digital media can foster positive approaches to eating, exercise, sleep, and a range of other physical and mental health practices (see, for example, Cummings, 2013). Further, researchers are evaluating a range of apps and biometric devices for their benefits for both physical and mental health (Hides et al, 2014). Once the evidence is in, it will be important to engage children in developing initiatives to encourage children globally to exercise their right to a healthy life (Article 24).

Whilst participants in this project did not talk explicitly about the potential benefits of their digital media practices for their mental health and wellbeing, they made frequent references to the fact that digital media and, in particular, social media helped them connect to friendship, family and community networks in ways that they find enjoyable and rewarding, and which help them engage as informed citizens, all of which have proven benefits for children’s mental health and wellbeing (Collin et al, 2011).

Some children also spoke about how digital media provided more introverted or socially challenged children the opportunity to participate in peer relations and social life on their own terms and exercise their rights to be heard and respected, express oneself, and have fun:

“I am more comfortable with electronic communications. I can express myself better in electronic chat” (Turkey, f, 16).

This gestures toward the potential for the mental health and wellbeing of more children globally to be fostered using digital media (For further information, see the work of the Young and Well Cooperative Research Centre, <http://www.youngandwellcrc.org.au>).

Such approaches to supporting children’s physical and mental health provide a good example of the ways that we might leverage children’s digital media practices in a holistic way to enable them to enact their rights. This is potentially as important in the developed world as it is in the developing world, and especially where communities have experienced severe levels of trauma (Lala, 2014).

However, digital media initiatives that work with the world’s most vulnerable children must be underpinned by investment in the generation of an evidence base (Livingstone and Bulger, 2014) of rigorous interdisciplinary research that can account for medico-scientific, as well as economic, political, social and cultural factors, to ensure that children’s vulnerability is not exacerbated.

LEGAL PROTECTIONS

14

Whilst this study did not directly seek children's views on the legal protections relating to their rights, where participants did mention them, they expressed much confusion about how regulatory frameworks operate to protect them. Research has consistently shown that children are confused about the legal protections available to them in relation to digital media (see for example, Katz et al, 2014).

Children from Argentina who commented on this issue, generally understood that there is a tension between national and international legislation, and the global scale and reach of the internet. However, at least one child was under the impression that the internet is outside the safeguard of legislation:

“The worst is that, despite being the technology that we use the most, the law does not apply to [digital media]” (Argentina, f).

This suggests that much more could be done to engage children in a conversation about what kinds of legal protections would enable them to best realise their rights, and to use participatory research and design methods to design initiatives that will raise their awareness about the legal protections available to them.

DISABILITY

15

This study was not able to engage children living with a chronic illness or disability due to the short timelines. This remains one of the outstanding limitations of this study.

Research evidences that digital media can play a particularly powerful role in connecting such children with their peers, minimising their social isolation, enabling them to develop the necessary social and technical skills to engage with the social world (Third and Richardson, 2010), and to foster their economic participation in ways that give substance to the fuller expression of their rights (Article 23). This is supported by the stories of children like Kartik Sawhney and the practice-based knowledge generated by partners of this project, such as Soronko Solutions in Ghana and Livewire.org.au in Australia (see Stories of Digital Champions supplement to this report), suggesting that organisations working in the disability and chronic illness support sectors should be encouraged to work with such children to further explore how to implement digital media initiatives that enhance their rights.

Conclusion

In this project, children were asked to reflect on their rights in a digital age, and to identify the various opportunities and challenges that shape their capacity to use digital media to understand and enact their rights. From the responses children generated to the tasks set for them by the workshop facilitators, a very diverse and complex picture of children's digital media practices around the globe emerged; or, as danah boyd might say, "it's complicated" (2014).

Evidence generated by this project overwhelmingly showed that children's greater levels of access to digital media does not imply a greater awareness by children of their rights in the digital age. Rather, if we are to support children to better realise their rights using digital media, then this will require a concerted effort. To date, it appears that children are not necessarily being given the opportunities to consider how digital media might positively impact their rights, although it is clear that most children have a clearer conception of how digital media might infringe on their rights in the digital age.

This suggests that it is worthwhile for organisations with an investment in promoting children's rights – however broadly they may be defined – to revisit existing digital literacy, digital citizenship, digital resilience and related initiatives, in partnership with children, in order to find ways to foster children's awareness of and capacity to enact their rights in the digital age. We must actively work with children to instigate conversations in which they evaluate the ways that their digital media practices intersect with their rights, and operationalize strategies to leverage digital media to better support their wellbeing.

These efforts must be complemented by more research on the role of digital media in children's lives globally, so that initiatives on the ground can be evaluated and sustained in light of a strong evidence base. This research must, as Livingstone and Bulger (2014) assert, address the need for baseline data on young people's digital practices; evaluate existing policies and programs; and generate much-needed evidence about digital practices in the global South. However, we must also better understand the factors that render certain children more vulnerable to harm online, as well as how to harness the potential opportunities of digital media for enhancing children's rights. This kind of work will enable the field to move well beyond a focus on risk and safety, and to develop policies and programs that genuinely respond to the complex role digital media increasingly play in children's lives.

We began this project with a commitment to listening to what children have to say about their rights in the digital age. Our hope is that, from here, the conversation with children can become broader and ongoing, and that children's voices can be activated ever more powerfully in relevant policy and practice settings, and used to develop new responses and approaches to children's rights, or to refocus existing ones.

The 150 academics, practitioners, young people, activists, philanthropists, government officials, and representatives of technology companies from around the world that make up the Digitally Connected network, along with the growing network of children they work with, stand poised to play a key role in continuing this conversation into the future. United, with a commitment to participatory methods, and with an unfaltering belief that children should be the authors of their futures, we can seize the opportunities, and mitigate the risks, that digital media offer children to conceptualise and enact their rights – both individually and collectively – into the future.

It would obviously become harder to learn new things. **USA 16**

I'd spend more time doing things outside, not watching TV or my phone or anything, I'd find more productive things to do.

Australia 16

If digital media disappeared? ...Wow! What would life be without digital media? **Trinidad & Tobago 16**

If there is no internet life would be hard because you don't have much access to whatever you need.

Malaysia 14

It would not do any harm. In the end we are not hard wired to digital media. We are not controlled by digital media. **Turkey 15**

It would make other people more confident to be able to talk to other people face to face, not over the internet, actually be able to have conversations with them.

Australia 15

Stoneage, writing on the walls, hunting animals. **Malaysia 14**

I really would not like this to happen because digital media are very important for all of us.

Colombia

If I don't have any digital media then I would read story books.

Thailand 14

WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF DIGITAL MEDIA DISAPPEARED?

If the internet disappeared, we would not be able to do research on the internet for school projects. We would have to go to the library and that is a problem because some people don't have a library in their village so it is a lot more difficult.

France 10

It would be very boring. **Turkey 10**

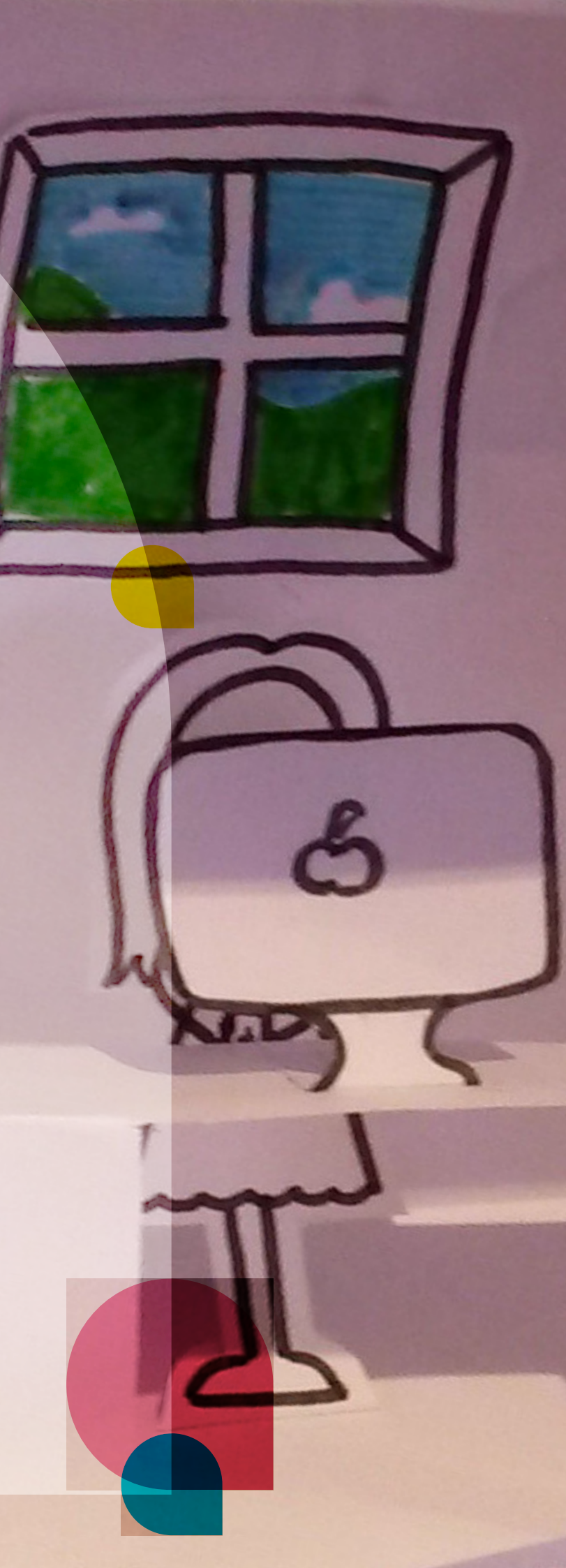
I'd lose contact with friends, I'd feel a bit isolated, but it would also be a good thing because I probably would have to get outside, and be healthier. **Australia 16**

I think that would affect us a lot because technology has become part of our everyday life. It's like saying to a footballer that he cannot play anymore because he is injured. That would be very frustrating.

Colombia

It wouldn't be that difficult... certainly not the end of the world, but...it would just be a little harder.

Brazil 9



[Without digital media] my life would change drastically. Everything would be harder, schoolwork, projects, assignments, I use digital media to get information so without it it would become harder for me.

Philippines 13

In terms of research for school purposes, it would be so much harder. Instead of googling we would have to go back to the libraries, go to the old fashion method of the books. In terms of communication, we might have to start back using the drums.

Trinidad & Tobago 16

It would be harder and different. But I believe it would facilitate interpersonal communication.

Turkey 11

At first it would be very hard just to get used to it, but since everyone would not have it, everyone would get over it. It'd be better as well 'cause everyone would be able to talk more, to work harder for friendship **Australia 15**

People would learn to live with other things, using other ways.

Brazil

I couldn't be instantly informed as much. I wouldn't be able to search for what I like. I wouldn't be able to interact as before. **Colombia**

Key considerations

Acknowledging that, for growing numbers of children around the world, digital media are fast becoming a condition of everyday life, and recognizing that children's digital rights cannot be easily separated from their rights more broadly, this report recommends considering the following:

01

Actively engage children in an ongoing conversation about how to best leverage digital media to support children's rights in different parts of the world and embed the insights of this process in policy and practice.

02

Develop child-centred definitions of children's rights in relation to digital media in close partnership with children, and work with governments to implement them.

03

Work in close collaboration with children and other stakeholders to improve children's access to digital media in ways that are responsive to the cultural, political, economic and social contexts that shape their everyday lives, and which are user-led but supported by appropriate governance and regulatory frameworks.

04

Promote balanced public debate, policy making and education that acknowledges the benefits of digital media and connectivity for children's rights, and avoids overstating the risks.

05

Actively support children to develop resilience by promoting and supporting digital literacy initiatives for children that foster their technical, media and social competencies.

06

Foster opportunities for children to identify how digital media might support them in enacting their rights, to develop ways of talking about their digital media practices that reflect their own experiences, and to imagine ways of using digital media to help solve problems in their communities.

07

Empower children to take responsibility for their online safety and their digital practices, and to participate online as global citizens by teaching them to know their rights and to respect the rights of others.

08

Where the appropriate social, cultural, economic and infrastructural conditions are in place, develop strategies to engage and skill children as creators of digital media so that children's technological engagement may open up new opportunities for themselves and their communities.

09

Generate high quality, child-centred, participatory research into children's digital practices globally, with a focus on contexts where evidence is lacking and the policy development imperative is most urgent.

10

Support parents and professionals to learn about and use digital media to ensure children can be supported to maximise their technological engagements to enact their rights.

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Notes

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Associate Professor Amanda Third (PhD) is Principal Research Fellow in Digital Cultural and Social Research in the Institute for Culture and Society, at the University of Western Sydney. Assoc Prof Third has a longstanding research interest in young people's everyday use of online and networked technologies and the potential for new technologies to support young people's wellbeing. She has conducted several large-scale externally-funded projects with organisations using technology to support young people. Since 2010, she has led the Young and Well Cooperative Research Centre's Research Program 2: Connected and Creative, which investigates how to better connect vulnerable young people with their communities by enhancing and leveraging their technology practices and their creative engagements. She is also Lead Investigator on an Australian Research Council Industry Linkage project entitled 'Young People, Technology and Wellbeing Research Facility'. Assoc. Prof. Third has been a member of the Technology and Wellbeing Roundtable since 2008, and in 2009 she was awarded the Murdoch University Medal for Early Career Research Achievement.

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Delphine Bellerose is a Research Assistant in the Institute for Culture and Society at the University of Western Sydney. Delphine has a background in social policies management and extensive experience in community research and quantitative data analysis. While working on a national health system project in the Republic of Ireland, she authored/co-authored publications on trends in treated alcohol and drug problem use. Prior to joining the Institute in June 2014, Delphine worked for the Australian Communications and Media Authority where she was involved in several large community research projects about customers' experiences with telecommunications providers, and children's awareness of cybersafety education programmes and parental concerns. She provides research support to the Young and Well Cooperative Research Centre's project 'Transforming Institutions and Community Perceptions', which is part of Research Program 2: Connected and Creative.

Urszula Dawkins

Urszula Dawkins Urszula Dawkins is a journalist, editor and creative writer. She was co-writer of Melbourne's successful UNESCO City of Literature bid, and has produced feature articles for Melbourne Festival, the Barbican (UK), Murdoch University, Arts Centre Melbourne, Art Monthly Australia, Canberra Times, Arts House and Dance Massive, among others. She writes regularly for RealTime magazine, and is regularly commissioned to write catalogue essays and narrative documentary pieces. Urszula has edited books and theses in disciplines including cultural studies, philosophy, sociology, psychology and health sciences. Her creative writing appears in anthologies in Australia, the UK and the USA, and she has performed her work widely. Recent projects include the limited-edition artists' book *What She Wants*, created with artist Peter Lyssiotis and acquired by institutions in Australia and the USA; and *Solitude*, a spoken-word performance with electric violin, co-created with Melbourne Symphony violinist Sarah Curro.

Emma Keltie

Emma Keltie is a Research Assistant at the University of Western Sydney's Institute for Culture and Society working on the 'Engaging Creativity' project as part of the Young and Well CRC. Emma has recently completed and submitted a PhD for examination at the University of Canberra. Her thesis explores participatory culture and digital media practices within the broader structural framework of industry and government regulation of the Australian media sector. Emma's research interests include participatory culture, digital storytelling, and media convergence. Prior to joining UWS, Emma worked as a lecturer at the Qantm SAE Creative Media Institute in Sydney and as a tutor at University of Canberra. Not only has Emma a passion for study and academia but she is also an independent film director who has presented her work and spoken at film festivals around the world.

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Kari Pihl is a Research Assistant in the Institute for Culture and Society at the University of Western Sydney. Kari has a background in public awareness campaigns with a social inclusion agenda, as well as the organisation of large-scale public celebrations and events. Prior to joining the Institute in March 2014, her most recent position was with the NSW Department of Family and Community Services, managing the NSW Seniors Week and Don't DIS my ABILITY ambassador programs. She provides research support on a part-time basis to the Young and Well Cooperative Research Centre's project 'Transforming Institutions and Community Perceptions', while also undertaking studies in Psychology.

"A rights-based approach to participation requires that children are assisted in not only expressing their views but also in forming them."

Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare Inc., 2011: 20

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