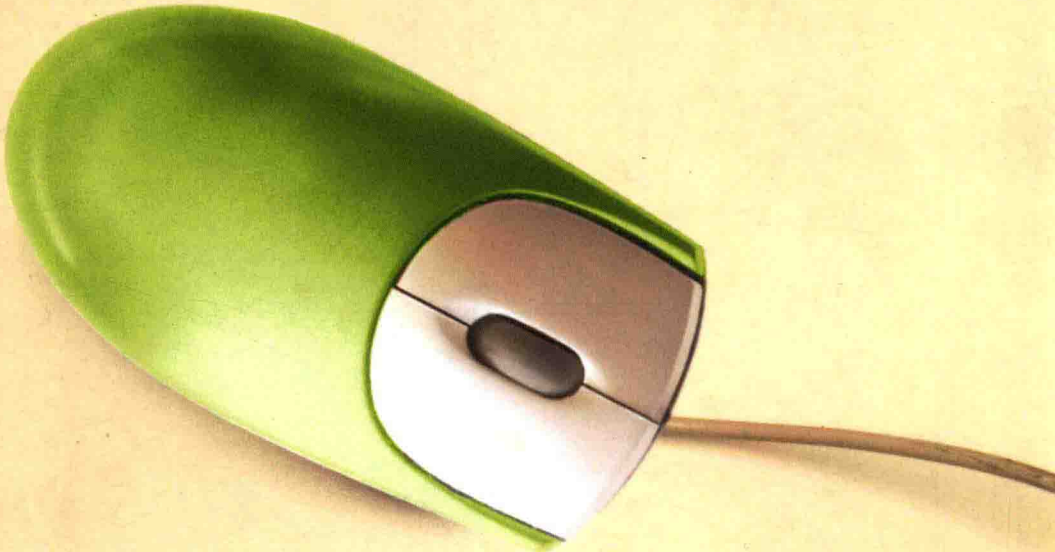

Children and the Internet

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Great Expectations, Challenging Realities

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polity

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Preface

When I was a child growing up in the 1960s, the typical British family had one television with three channels, the phone was in a hallway or street corner, bedrooms were cold and forbidden in the day time, living rooms were formal and ruled by parental wishes, books came from the library, sums were calculated with a slide rule, and computers existed only in science fiction. Many will recognize this picture. For much of the world, it is already privileged. But for today's youth, it's a forgotten history.

Nowadays, at least in wealthy parts of the world, children live wholly surrounded by media of one kind and another. In the UK, four fifths (79%) of 7–16 year olds have internet access at home, and over half (53%) of even 5–6 year olds now go online; moreover, among 5–16 year olds, 37 percent have access in their own room (this including 26% of 5–10 year olds, rising to 57% of 15–16 year olds). Further, among 5–16 year olds, 77 per cent have a television in their bedroom (56% have multi-channel), 73 per cent have a mobile phone, 69 per cent have their own DVD player, MP3 player, radio and games console, while 55 per cent have their own PC or laptop (ChildWise, 2009; see also Ofcom 2008c).

The media landscape is far more commercialized than when I was a child, and now operates more on a transnational than a national scale. Indeed, 'mass' communication may seem almost an obsolete concept, transformed by the growth of interactive, personalized, mobile and social media. Convergence is making it harder even to distinguish different media and information forms as they intersect and hybridize, converging not only texts and technologies but also everyday social habits and practices and, further, the social institu-

tions and governance structures that regulate the conditions of children's lives.

These are not just changes in technology, in the consumption of stuff – they are changes in the patterns of, and possibilities for, almost every aspect of our lives. When I went home from school, I re-entered a symbolic space defined by my parents' values, unable *easily* to stay in touch with my friends. But I could escape to my bedroom, and I could go out – the world was not a scary place.

In this book, I argue that changes in the media landscape – especially the advent of widespread internet use – have altered the opportunities and risks experienced by children and young people. And, even more importantly, I argue that changes in the social landscape alter the ways that children and young people use the media to connect and communicate with each other, with parents and other adults, and with the wider world. Also pertinent to our understanding of children and the internet are the historical and cultural shifts in youth culture, consumer culture and the growing children's market, and the domestication and privatization of leisure – consider the twentieth century transformation of the home into multiple personalized spaces of identity.

Society is positioning the internet as providing new routes not just to entertainment but also to education, workplace skills, civic participation, global connection and more. Children's uses of the internet have, therefore, wider implications than for any previous medium, even television, since the advent of the printed book and the rise of mass literacy. The commensurate rise of media and internet-related literacies will prove a major theme in my account of the opportunities afforded by the internet.

While academics and policymakers deliberate over the best way to maximize opportunities and minimize risk, children and young people are simply getting on with it – for them, these are welcome changes. The media are with them all the time – on their person, in their pockets and their ears, embedded – or part of the wallpaper – in most spaces they enter, whether public or private. And they are delighted that it is so – they could not imagine life without the media, turning on the television or internet the minute they wake up or come home, falling asleep with their iPod or mobile phone by their pillow. For the 'always on', 'constantly connected', 'digital' generation, it seems that few experiences now go unmediated, whether in the sphere of leisure or education, relations with peers or connection with their neighbourhood and beyond.

To ground my analysis, I hope to convey the enthusiasm, the richness and diversity, indeed the very texture of children and

young people's experiences with the internet. For the past fifteen years, I have been researching – interviewing, observing, listening to, surveying – children and young people about their engagement with old and new media. Most of the empirical work included in this book draws on the ESRC-funded 'UK Children Go Online' (UKCGO)[1] project I directed, though I began working on children and the internet when British Telecom commissioned my in-depth study of thirty British families between 1999 and 2001. I next directed the 'EU Kids Online' project (2006–9), funded by the European Commission's Safer Internet *plus* programme.[2] And Knut Lundby's 'Mediatized Stories' project at the University of Oslo provided the opportunity for the social networking study – interviews and observations with teenagers in 2007.

Beyond listening closely to children's voices and experiences, a critical framework is also vital. One starting point is to observe the considerable anxieties associated with children's internet use which are widespread among social scientists, policymakers, the mass media and, of course, among the public. In the academic literature, such moral panics have been roundly critiqued for scapegoating new media so as to deflect public attention from the real problems in society and for attempting middle class control over working class pleasures, thus denying the agency, responsibility and general good sense of the public – including children.

It seems that when the debates over children's media get polarized and emotive, it is because 'the child' or 'childhood' has become a stand-in for something else – a means of articulating anxieties about Western capitalism. Often, these are debates about tradition, authority or respect for shared values, or about the balance between individualism and participation. In some circles, questions about children's protection and human dignity are 'heard' as elitist or moralizing or as an argument against adult freedom of expression and hence a covert move towards censorship, and given worldwide moves towards state control of the internet, of course one must recognize the force of this position.

But where does this leave children? What media and communication environment can and should be provided for them? Clearly, a critical rejection of both moral panics and the technological determinism they imply does not permit us to conclude, as some misguidedly do, that the media play no significant role in children's lives. But asking such questions demands engagement with a normative agenda, a direction not all researchers would follow, perhaps depending on the political climate in which they work. Recently, it seems that academic research has taken a normative turn, that evidence-based

policy is expected and respected, and that academic collaboration with diverse stakeholders – including government, policymakers, industry, regulators and civil society actors – is cautiously welcome. In the UK, the wide-ranging deliberations that informed the UK Government's review of children and new technology (Byron, 2008) illustrate the point. Arguably, then, being 'expert' on children and the internet, it is incumbent on the research community to ensure that good research reaches those stakeholders who might act on it, especially if the outcome supports children's interests. Readers may judge whether the evidence I present justifies my conclusions, to which end I have sought to distinguish one from the other in writing this book.

My guiding principle, as signalled by the book's subtitle, is to understand why, so often, empirical findings suggest many children are not, or are not yet, enjoying the great expectations held out for them. I do not advocate that the internet represents the solution to all their problems – indeed, a theme running through this book is the identification of the many other factors shaping children's opportunities. But, to the extent that society appears willing to invest in online provision for children, whether through public investment or the market, it is surely worth thinking through how this provision could benefit children, bringing their actual experiences closer to the high hopes that many, rightly, have for them.

Every few years the newest trend attracts headlines, reshuffles expectations, wrong-foots adult observers and revives perennial anxieties. One constant is that it is children, young people and their families who tend to be in the vanguard of these new online activities, and so popular and policy interest in children and the internet remains intense, as does the need for rigorous empirical research. The result is an unfolding and fascinating interplay among technological innovators, ambivalent governments, big business, creative children and worried parents, as well as academic researchers seeking to track and interpret these unfolding trends.

Many of these trends, on close reflection, turn out to concern not only changes in technology but also, more fundamentally, changes in contemporary childhood. These, too, are now attracting widespread public attention. In the UK, the past year or so saw the Risk Commission's report on 'Risk and Childhood' (Madge and Barker, 2007) and 'The Good Childhood Enquiry' (Layard and Dunn, 2009), this latter following up on the huge international interest attracted by UNICEF's (2007) report, 'Child Poverty in Perspective: An overview of child well-being in rich countries', which placed the UK – closely followed by the USA – at the bottom of a league table of twenty-one wealthy countries. Concerns over children's wellbeing periodically

reach the top of the agenda in many countries worldwide, bringing into focus another series of changes since the childhood of today's adults, those who are making the decisions about, worrying about, the lives of children today.

When I was a teenager, most teenagers in Britain left school aged 15 or 16 and began earning; few went to university. Now nearly all stay in school till 18, nearly half go to university, and they're still living at home through their twenties. In other words, it would appear that childhood is lasting longer. Further, as adults are fond of recalling, forty years ago, children packed their cheese sandwiches and headed off on their own for the day. Today, faced with anxieties about streets, parks, even the swimming pool, home seems safer. To occupy children at home, many parents – rich and poor – seek to fill their homes with media. To give children and parents some privacy, ever more media are located in children's bedrooms. To keep them in touch with friends, parents provide mobile phones and domestic internet access. If they are worried, guilty, rushed for time or flush with cash, the media – in one way or another – provide a ready answer, seemingly less the problem than the solution.

It is the conditions of childhood, and the ways they are changing, then, that demand critical attention before we can ask how the internet is fitting into children's lives, for these shape the meaning and consequences of internet use. This, therefore, is where chapter 1 begins. In the chapters that follow, I address key themes regarding children's relations to the internet, drawing on my recent writings and research findings. Thus I integrate and rework published and new material so as to offer a coherent and multifaceted analysis of children's engagement with the internet.[3] Since this book is empirically grounded, I acknowledge that it reflects the UK experience more than others, but the analysis is informed as far as possible by an international though still largely Western research literature.

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Contents

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Changing Childhood, Changing Media

In the past decade or so, almost every question long asked about society – about the nature of work, education, community, politics, family and identity – has been asked of the relation between society and the internet. Whether the internet is seen as the instigator or the consequence of social change, and whether it is seen as offering the potential for societal improvement or as introducing a new agenda of problems, the very breadth of questions asked and the multidisciplinary expertise already applied to answering them sets a daunting challenge to any attempt to review the present state of knowledge. The same may be said even for that subset of this emerging field of inquiry concerned with children and young people. For it is also the case that almost every question ever asked about children and young people – how they learn, play, interact, participate, encounter risks – has also been asked of the relation between childhood and the internet.

To focus on children may seem a specialized enterprise, even one that is somehow optional for the wider effort to understand the relation between society and the internet. Many pronouncements about 'the population' or 'society' and the internet turn out to refer to adults only, as if children constitute an exception. Yet not only do those younger than eighteen years old comprise one in five of 'the population' in developed countries (and nearly half of those in developing countries), but also every one of tomorrow's adults is a child today. Children's experiences, needs and concerns matter in their own right, requiring a critical analysis in the present. And, requiring an equally critical but also a more normative lens, they matter for the future. Since they are, with some justification, popularly dubbed the 'digital generation', it is also likely that understanding children's use

of the internet can provide a richer insight into that future than could equivalent attention paid to adults.

At the same time, research on children and the internet is indeed a specialized enterprise. Children should not be 'lumped in' with the adult population, though nor should differences between children and adults be routinely presumed. Thus, research must attend carefully to questions of age and development; it requires methodological sensitivity if it is to explore children's experiences, and it should address some specialized questions regarding parenting, schooling, identity expression and risk-taking. Yet the same broad, multidisciplinary framework required to understand society and the internet is also required to understand children and the internet. In seeking to understand how children learn, laugh, interact, participate and encounter risks online, this book must draw on theories of learning, leisure, communication, participation and the risk society – just as is the case when investigating adults' use of the internet. The payoff is that one may then understand the continuities and differences between adult and child experiences, in empirical and theoretical terms, and one may identify the implications of the activities of this so-called digital generation both for children in particular and for society in general.

Also distinctive to the focus on children is the high degree of public attention, speculation and contestation that the particular combination of children, media and social change attracts. Children and young people are widely perceived, on the one hand, as the youthful experts or pioneers leading the way in using the internet and yet, on the other hand, as peculiarly vulnerable to the risks consequent on failing to use it wisely. This book draws on a range of original empirical sources to examine how young people are striking a balance between maximizing opportunities and minimizing risks as they explore the internet. As we shall see, despite considerable enthusiasm for going online and becoming 'youthful experts', children and young people (like many adults) are finding that access and motivation are necessary but insufficient for using the internet in a complex and ambitious manner. First, there is only qualified evidence that the internet is bringing about any of the changes anticipated; the great expectations are not always met. Second, the emerging picture stresses the variable and complex social conditions that influence how we fit the internet into our lives, these strongly mediating any consequences for work, education, community, politics, family and identity; the realities of internet use can be genuinely challenging.

The polarized public debate that surrounds questions of children and the internet – does the internet make for any change at all or

not, does the internet make things better or worse, are children media-savvy experts or newly vulnerable and at risk – inevitably invites a plethora of empirically grounded qualifications of the 'it depends' or 'both/and' variety. The result is an explosion of empirical studies which are largely descriptive, charting first access to the internet and then use of the internet across countries and, within countries, by age, gender, class and so forth, in a wide variety of circumstances. Arguably, this initial agenda has run its course (Lievrouw, 2004; Livingstone, 1999, 2003; Wellman, 2004). Now the challenge is to theorize people's, including children's, engagement with the internet more thoroughly, asking, for example, not who lacks access to the internet but whether it really matters; not simply noting who participates in online forums but identifying whether and how this contributes to civic participation; not simply worrying about the risks children encounter online but asking what is meant by online risk and how it relates to offline risk; not simply asking whether children have the skills to engage with the internet but whether these enable them to engage with their society in all its manifestations – local and global, public and private, serious and playful, enchanting and dangerous.

But clearly, this emerging set of questions widens the focus considerably, encompassing not only children as internet users but also the internet as a mediator of children's participation in society. What do we hope for children in this regard? The following two contrasting quotations, the first from the UK's media and communications regulator, the second from an academic critic, pinpoint my starting point in this book:

> Through confident use of communications technologies people will gain a better understanding of the world around them and be better able to engage with it. (Ofcom, 2004b: para 3)

> Despite the growth in the numbers of internet users, a rather small minority of these users has the capability to use the internet in ways that are creative and that augment their ability to participate effectively in today's knowledge societies. (Mansell, 2004: 179)

As I shall argue, it is vital both to frame ambitious expectations for society and the internet, including for children and the internet but, also, it is vital to draw on rigorous empirical research to assess and critique claims that these ambitions are being realized. In other words, although as we shall see there is a considerable and growing body of evidence pointing to a substantial gap between the great expectations held out for the internet and the present realities of people's

experiences, it is not my intention to use the latter simply to dampen the ambitions of the former. Of course, to the extent that the internet is mooted as a quick technological fix to solve endemic problems in society, such hopes can only be disappointed. But, after the first decade or so of theory and research investigating the social shaping and social consequences of the internet in the lives of children, families and communities, we can surely identify some lessons from the recent past and some guidance for the future regarding how best to reformulate society's ambitions for children and the internet and, thereby, better meet some of its present challenges.

To undertake this task, one could begin in either of two places. Many start with 'the internet'. Here, one may discern that research, especially that conducted in developed countries, is shifting its focus from questions of access and diffusion to questions about the nature and quality of internet use, recognizing the diverse ways in which people are struggling to come to terms with this complex and changing bundle of technologies that, supposedly, can deliver new opportunities for information, communication, entertainment or even, more grandly, 'empower' them in relation to identity, community, participation, creativity and democracy. This starting point has produced much valuable research that I shall review in the chapters that follow. But it also leads us into difficulties. 'The internet' tends to be positioned as the key agent of change, encouraging questions about its 'impact' on society as if it had recently landed from Mars, masking the crucial importance of other ongoing changes in society, including those that are shaping the internet itself. As society expects more and more of the internet, the notion of 'using' the internet has become so unclear as to be wholly unhelpful as a description of an everyday activity. Moreover, this approach tends to position children as 'users', a new category of person with little history or cultural meaning, to be understood for itself and thus inadvertently divorced from such rival categories as family member, school pupil, young citizen or new consumer.

Instead, I shall start with 'children', understood both socially – through their positioning within and engagement with societal structures of home, family, school and community – and historically, for childhood is itself changing, and these changes have a far longer provenance and more widespread implications than any changes associated with the recent mass adoption of the internet, notable though these may be. My purpose in this chapter to identify the key currents of thought and debate that can contextualize a critical analysis of children and the internet so as to overcome the limitations of a technologically determinist approach and to open up a richer account of how and why the internet has come to occupy so much of

children's time and attention by understanding what else is going on in their lives.[1]

Change and crisis in the post-traditional family

In popular discourse, children are staying younger longer, yet getting older sooner. It seems to many that, in some ways, they leave the safety and privacy of the home and enter the public and commercial world 'too soon'; in other ways they delay taking on adult responsibilities for 'too long'. While the sense of golden-age nostalgia in these discourses, along with the moral criticism of young people thereby implied, may be questioned, it is the case that historians and sociologists of childhood report strong evidence for significant social changes in childhood over the twentieth century. Following an earlier shift away from children having a productive role in the household and the wider economy (Cunningham, 1995; Cunningham, 2006), in recent decades Western industrial societies have seen the extension of formal education from early to late teens and a commensurate rise in the average age of leaving home, this pushing back the start of employment and delaying the traditional markers of adulthood. In many countries over recent decades, post-16 education has expanded while the youth labour market has remained stagnant, altering the school-to-work transition (France, 2007).The result is an unprecedented period of 'extended youth' in which young people stay at home and remain financially dependent on their parents for longer.

These historical changes to childhood over the past century or more have themselves been shaped by a series of profound social changes in, notably but not only, the structures of employment, the education system, increased urbanization, relations between commerce and the state, the growth of affluent individualism, the transformation of gender relations, the ethnic diversification of national populations and the reconstruction of household and family. These structural changes are repositioning children within society and altering, even impeding, their passage to adulthood (Hill and Tisdall, 1997; James, Jenks and Prout, 1998). As Coontz observes:

> In some ways, childhood has actually been prolonged, if it is measured by dependence on parents and segregation from adult activities. What many young people have lost are clear paths for gaining experience doing responsible, socially necessary work, either in or out of the home, and for moving away from parental supervision without losing contact with adults. (1997: 13)

At the same time, these same structural changes have also enabled the world outside the home to make increasing incursions into what was once a private, largely non-commercial space defined by tradition and community norms. Ever younger children are now immersed in a consumer culture which emphasizes choice, taste and lifestyle as considerations not just for adults but also for children. The growth and scale of today's child and youth market is equally unprecedented, being not only highly lucrative but also creative in its specialized targeting of young people and, moreover, highly sexualized in its framing of identity and sociality (Kenway and Bullen, 2001). As shown in research by the UK's National Consumer Council (Nairn, Ormond and Bottomley, 2007), 34 per cent of 9–13 year olds would 'rather spend time buying things than doing almost anything else' and 46 per cent say, 'the only kind of job I want when I grow up is one that gets me a lot of money'.

As youth culture has come to fill the growing space between childhood and adulthood, the result is children and young people's growing autonomy in the realms of leisure, consumption, sexuality, appearance, identity, rights and participation (Osgerby, 1998).[2] Pressures towards independence and dependence are, in short, in tension with each other psychologically (hence the 'discovery' of adolescence and the teenager as fraught life-stages in conflict with adults; Abrams, 1959; Erikson, 1959/1980; France, 2007), socially (hence the notion of the 'generation gap' and its associated social conflicts) and historically (hence the sense that these are new problems and the adult nostalgia for the established traditions of hierarchy, authority and respect for one's 'elders and betters'). Further tensions also exist – the new youth market is largely funded by parents rather than by any growth in youth employment; efforts to increase youth participation now anticipate the voting age; protections for legal minors seem to constrain teenage rights (in relation to sexual experience, for example). In this new period of 'extended youth', children and young people are betwixt and between, caught in a series of cultural shifts whose effects are at times contradictory rather than complementary.

The economic and legal hiatus that opened up around teenagers over the past fifty years between dependent child and independent adult, exacerbating tensions between the discourses of needs and rights, is partly redressed by the new child-centred model of the family, for the task of tension resolution is transferred from society to parents. Parents must tread the difficult path between providing for their children economically for an extended period of time while simultaneously recognizing their independence in terms of sociality and culture. And it is mainly they who must oversee children's phased