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Sonia Livingstone on Children and the Internet

David Edmonds - Never work with children or animals is good advice for movie directors, what about for social scientists? Sonia Livingstone is head of the department of media and communications, at the London School of Economics and has overseen an enormous study on what risks the Internet poses for kids.

Nigel Warburton - Sonia Livingstone, welcome to Social Science Bites.

Sonia Livingstone - Thank you for inviting me to talk today.

Nigel Warburton - We're going to talk about children and the Internet. Now, obviously that's an interesting topic, but why as a social scientist did you go into the question about the relationship between children and the Internet?

Sonia Livingstone - Well there are several reasons why I got into the topic, but probably the main one is that it seems like, for the last ten years, everyone has been talking about the way in which the internet might be changing childhood, changing children's educational prospects, changing the way they relate to each other and possibly bringing all kinds of risks. So, it just seemed like a really lively topic that people wanted to understand better.

Nigel Warburton - And, how did you approach it?

Sonia Livingstone - One way of coming at this particular topic, is to listen to the kinds of popular discourses, the sometimes moral panics, the media headlines kind oa screaming about all the things that could be bad about the Internet and start to ask well what would a careful social science analysis show if we were to go interview children, interview parents.

Nigel Warburton - I suppose we should start by saying what counts as a child in this context?

Sonia Livingstone - That's a really great question, it's not obvious actually what 'a child' or 'Internet' means and both we could say are changing. It's important to me to think about the history of childhood and to think about the way in which our conceptions of a child have changed. And for many people it means quite a small person, under about let's say ten. But, from the point of view of many of the policies that are there to both provide for and protect children, many would point to the UN Convention on the Rights of a Child as the really key framework. And that defines a child as anyone under the age of eighteen, recognising that they have different needs and somewhat qualified rights, depending on their capacity. So, there's always a careful question about age, about context and about what kinds of needs and abilities they have at different ages.

Nigel Warburton - And how young do children start using the Internet?

Sonia Livingstone - When I began my research people were really talking about children at secondary school and it's been getting younger and younger. Now, children are using the Internet as soon as they can sit up and sit on a parent's lap. In my research though, I've been tending to focus on children from the age of about nine, which is not especially when they start using the Internet, but

when I can start surveying them and talking to them in a more interesting way about what they do with it.

Nigel Warburton - How do you go about collecting data in this context?

Sonia Livingstone - Well the classic social science way is to begin qualitative, move into quantitative work, and then kind of revert back to qualitative. Because you don't know the terms, you don't necessarily know what's interesting or what's important to ask and it is important to many who work on children to take a child-centred perspective, so that you get children's own accounts. Especially in a domain where there's so many ready to speak for children and to tell us what they think, what they are worried about and what they should be worried about. So I tried to begin with qualitative work, but for the last couple of years I've been doing a pretty large survey of children and one of their parents, across Europe. So I have done a survey of 25,000 children and parents, which was kind of a major organisational enterprise actually. And now I'm just moving back into the qualitative phase, which is to say the survey throws up all kinds of puzzles. Some findings, some analysis which I can be confident of, but some puzzles that make me want to go back and talk to children again and say 'well what do you think is going on here?' or 'what's important in this?' I have a huge database, a thousand children each in twenty-five countries, aged between nine and sixteen. And what we wanted to do was to interview the child and one of their parents, the parent who was most involved with the Internet use, so that we could precisely look at the relation between what the child says has happened to them, what the parent thinks has happened to them, what the parents says they are doing to try and keep their child encouraged or enabled or safe and what the child says. So we wanted to get that pairing.

Nigel Warburton - Does that mean you are just looking at what they say, or what they actually do?

Sonia Livingstone - We're just looking at what they say. That's one of the tough restrictions on survey research; even though I send a researcher into all of those homes to interview the child and the parent, that doesn't mean that I can sit and kind of look at exactly what they are doing. In qualitative work I can, and one of the things I do in my qualitative work is I will sit with a child and say 'show me your Facebook' or 'why have you uploaded these pictures' or 'let's have a look at how the Internet is set up for certain purposes'. And I can see not only what they want to tell me, but also what they don't want to tell me. But in a survey it does have to be a standardised methodology and it has to be something that I can give as a set of instructions to researchers who went into 25,000 homes in 25 languages. I mean there are a set of techniques where you try to do your best to make sure what they say is not wildly far from the truth. We try to ask children what has happened to them in the past month, or in the past year. But not what has happened to them ever, because children's memories aren't very good. We tried to ask children about things that had happened or things that they do, rather than their judgments or their perceptions or their attitudes. So we keep it, if you like, as factual as possible.

Nigel Warburton - I'd imagine there would be quite different results in different countries and actually different age groups as well, from research like that. Was that what you found?

Sonia Livingstone - We wanted to focus on Europe, partly because the research was funded by the European Commission, partly because it's actually quite difficult to compare countries where the cultures are completely different and the ideas of childhood, of parenting and indeed of the internet are all really very diverse. So the idea was to compare countries where the ideas were fairly similar, but have some kinds of gradations of difference, particularly if you think of the range from let's say Norway and Sweden, where the Internet has been kind of thoroughly embedded for quite a long time down to Spain and Portugal, on the one side or Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Poland

where the Internet is much newer. And there are, of course, European differences in the religion, in culture, in approach of education and so on. So yes, there are lots of differences but within a framework that also allows us to draw some generalities about what children enjoy doing. So even though there are those differences it's still possible to say children are taking up social networking across Europe really rapidly, parents are generally worried about what their children are doing and even though their worries continue, they do less as their children move into teenage years because they want to give their children independence, there are surprisingly few gender differences, apart from the fact that boys play games more then girls. So one can also say you know, in terms of age, gender, parenting, children's interests, there are big commonalities across Europe.

Nigel Warburton - Many people who talk about children's use of the Internet are worried, they think there's something incredibly risky about allowing their children loose in a world that they don't fully understand. The children don't understand it, the parents often don't understand the risks, but they feel there's something out there that is potentially really harmful. Is that true?

Sonia Livingstone - Well, yes and no. There are all kinds of risks out there and whatever exists in the offline world is there online, in a more intensified form often and more accessible. So some of the things we worry about online are quite hard to find offline, like certain kinds of extreme pornography or certain kinds of very violent images or very racist content. They are much easier to find if you're looking for them online then offline. So in the project we spent quite a long time thinking about what kind of risks people are worried about and then trying to get some kind of good social science data on how common those risks really are. And we've also spent quite a long length of time thinking about the relations between risks and harm. Because children can sometimes be exposed to pornography, they can come up against pro-anorexia sites, they can receive hostile messages bullying them online and they may or they may not be upset by them. They may or may not be harmed by them. The findings

that we have generally show that most children are using the internet with a relatively low exposure to risk and it is reasonable then to encourage them to find the good things on the internet, and to communicate, have fun, learn and so on. We've been trying to pinpoint which are the children that do encounter some more of the risks and whether there are factors in their everyday life that make them particularly vulnerable. And then we've been trying also to understand what are the occasions in which exposure to all those kinds of risks that people worry about actually does lead to a child being harmed. And again we're back to the self-report problem because I can't go and discover if a child really is harmed, all I can say is 'were you upset?', 'did you feel threatened?'.

Nigel Warburton - You mentioned exposure to pornography, to racism, to cyber-bullying, is that the limit of risk for a child online?

Sonia Livingstone - Among the most common risks are exposure to pornography and cyber-bullying, though those remain relatively low level. The other risk that people really worry about, it the risk that strangers, paedophiles, 'weirdos' (as kids call them) will locate a child, especially a vulnerable child and will exploit and abuse them. And we spent quite a while thinking about firstly how to ask children about that, if they are not aware of those risks, because there are ethical issues in the research we are doing. And then, how to decide what is a risk, because many children go online precisely to meet new people and make new friends. And a 'new friend' before you get to know them is a stranger. So, working out which are the strangers who are going to become good friends and which are the ones who are going to harm you is a really subtle judgment that we are asking a child to make. Many children do the kinds of things that allow them to make new friends, like they post their personal information, and they add contacts to their social networking or their instant messaging that they don't otherwise know, they put out all kinds of information about themselves. But, mainly, they don't meet strangers and they certainly don't meet weird strangers out to sexually abuse them.

Nigel Warburton - 'Mainly' may not be enough to allay the worries of parents in that respect because the potential harm to the child is so severe that you might not want to take any risks at all with that child and actually ban then from using the Internet.

Sonia Livingstone - Some things could be very common, but very mild. And some things could be very rare but very severe when they happen, so a paedophile grooming a child is if you like, the most rare and yet also the most severe. Children saying unpleasant things to each other on Facebook is very common, and very mild. Still, some of the mild common risks can be verypainful to an individual child, so we need to recognise that without panicking about the majority. Dealing with some of the rare severe risks, one might say needs other kinds of solutions then stopping children using the Internet. There are various kinds of industry-strategies for identifying who people are online, or what a paedophile approach to a child might be online. – some of which are quite technically sophisticated. And what does a social scientist do? I guess what we do is we try to say these are the risks that we judge in terms of their incidents and their severity, make that available and then it is for society to make that kind of risk assessment about what action to take.

Nigel Warburton - You mention that you might be able to predict who might be at risk in certain contexts here, was there anything specific that would allow you to identify the particular risks and the particular children?

Sonia Livingstone - Well one of the things I'd say is that there is a different story to be told from the data for the different kinds of risks that we are looking at. The account that I'd give of who is at risk of being bullied is different from that of meeting strangers and different again from that of exposure to pornography. But one of the broad tendencies we can see, which

is not a surprise, but is important to say, is that children who have various kinds of psychological, social difficulties offline - poor relations with friends, not supported by parents, lonely and so looking for other people or intimacy online – those are the kinds of factors that lead children to take offline vulnerability and extend it online and become more at risk. And those who are already dealing with children who are vulnerable offline, whether they are doctors or clinicians or social workers or teachers should also have an eye to how that kind of vulnerability might be extended online. And often they don't, because the immediate problems are so great that they don't start thinking 'and what is that child doing on Facebook?' or 'who do they know on their phone?'

Nigel Warburton - If you were looking at a topic, like children's reading habits. That's a relatively slow moving target, but the Internet changes almost daily. Isn't there a risk that you do research and then it becomes solidified and that's the orthodoxy on the relationship between children and the Internet and then the Internet has changed and all the findings are brought into question again next month?

Sonia Livingstone - Well I wish my findings became orthodoxy, regrettably completely opposite is the case. You do a survey one year and by the time you've published it people say 'well it's all out of date why should I pay it any attention?' The challenge as a social scientist is to try to identify what indeed is changing really fast and what is not changing so fast. So parental anxieties or parents' strategies for managing children's internet use or indeed what children want to do, you know, fundamentally they want to be able to talk to their friends, upload some photographs and listen to music they like - and that hasn't changed dramatically in the last five or perhaps even twenty years.

Nigel Warburton - You've mentioned the importance of social science research for governmental policy, now it seems to me that in the public realm, most

discussions about children and the Internet is conducted at the anecdotal level. How do you get to a position where governments take seriously social science research, that this is a contribution to a debate about the public good?

Sonia Livingstone - That's an interesting question; there are two kinds of anecdotes that worry me, one is the child who something bad happens to, who becomes the headline in the popular press and the other is the privileged son or daughter of the politician or policy maker I'm talking to. What do I try to say? I would keep trying to say the importance of a large representative sample where questions have been asked neutrally of all children in the same way, so that one could begin to say these are the patterns, these are the differences and it's a sound basis on which sometimes findings contradict popular perception. So yes something bad might happen to one child, but that's a very small minority of children or yes your child might be terribly clever at the internet but other children are still struggling with managing search engines or privacy settings.

Nigel Warburton – It seems to me this fits in with a broader question about the respect for science and data; as it were there are really serious questions in our society about whether politicians are taking seriously scientific research. What chances are there for social science findings to have an impact on policy?

Sonia Livingstone - I think when we sit in the university and look out at the kind of multi-stakeholder policy community there are all kinds of possible groups to speak to. And politicians might not be the most open door. In the field of children's Internet use, there are lots of policy makers and practitioners who are really very keen to understand better what children are doing with the Internet. Parents groups, those designing e-safety policies in schools, children's charities wanting to understand what kind of help-lines to provide or what services to provide for children who get into difficulties online. So there are

some listening ears, of course they all have their own agenda and they don't necessarily agree with each other, so it's difficult terrain to navigate.

Nigel Warburton - Now if I were playing devil's advocate, I would say that you've got an agenda: to calm people down - there is this moral panic but actually research shows that there aren't really such severe dangers attached to children's use of the internet, and there are many beneficial effects of the social connections that people make through Facebook and whatever. Now some people claim that social science should aim for a degree of neutrality.

Sonia Livingstone - You're talking to me at the point where I've spent quite a number of years doing the research on children. When I began I actually had no idea what they were going to say and it was perfectly possible to me that I would have walked into groups of children at school or walked into family homes and children would say 'oh my god, there's all this horrible stuff coming at me, I don't know what to do, I'm really upset' and it just didn't happen! So my desire to calm down the moral panics comes after an awful lot of interviews. The Internet is not quite the fearsome Wild West that sometimes it's made out to be. And children have a lot of positive things to say about it, which I'm trying to reflect in the research. But sometimes, under some circumstances, there are some real causes for concern and the question is how to get resources focused on those moments without people saying 'let's stop kids going online'.

Nigel Warburton - The type of research you've been doing is a combination of qualitative and quantitative research; presumably that requires different sorts of skill sets. What sort of qualities do you think a social scientist working in this area needs?

Sonia Livingstone - It has become kind of widely felt, especially in relation to children, that we need to triangulate different research methods in order to understand their perspective and their experience. You need a kind of empathetic approach to children so that you can let them speak freely, in their own terms. And at the same time you don't want to base big research claims and certainly policy recommendations on a small number of children, so you also need the survey techniques and statistical analysis methods that would require you to deal with a much larger number of children and make claims about the population. So I guess I do try to bring those different skills together and in doing that I sometimes work with people who are differently specialised, so I might sometimes work with people who are very good at interviewing children but who have no idea about surveys. And I certainly work with some people who know a lot about data analysis and don't necessarily do the empathetic work with children. But I do like to do a good number of interviews myself and I do like to get stuck into the survey analysis. So I just have to be very stretched in terms of skills.

Nigel Warburton – Sonia Livingstone, thank you very much.

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