

*Children and the Internet: Great Expectations,
Challenging Realities*
by Sonia Livingstone

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This work provides a broad summary of a variety of issues surrounding children's internet engagement with regards to the formation of social and educational policy. It summarizes research conducted by the author from 1994 through 2007, presenting relatively balanced views of various critical issues. It does not assert strong conclusions except that children and their needs should be considered particularly with regards to the formation of political, educational, and social policy initiatives.

Each chapter provides an in-depth introduction to a particular area of interest, with various viewpoints considered and explained, but leaving the reader to draw their own conclusions. A very thorough citation of sources points the interested researcher to more detailed information regarding the areas investigated. Specifically, this book examines: philosophical differences between psychological and sociological understandings of childhood; the common perception that youths are expert users of digital technologies; the effects of various educational programs upon children and their technology learning and use; the role technology plays in youth identity construction; the possibility of encouraging youth civic engagement; media and technology literacy as a social practice rather than merely a skill to be acquired; and the balance which must be struck between risk and opportunity when developing educational, legal, and social policies concerning children's use of the internet.

Sonia Livingstone is Professor of Social Psychology at the London School of Economics and Political Science, Department of Media and Communications. She has conducted research for a wide variety of governmental bodies concerned with the formation of educational, legal, and social policy. The research included in this work centres around children and their relationship with the internet and digital technologies and was conducted on behalf of a variety of governmental and non-governmental agencies, including ESRC, OFCOM, British Telecom, the European Commission, and the University of Oslo.

The stated goal of *Children and the Internet* is to provide a careful presentation and advocacy for both strong research and for children themselves. Livingstone makes every effort to place all conclusions on a sound foundation based in both qualitative and quantitative, peer-reviewed research. The author's stance regarding social research of children's experience is best stated as follows,

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 (p.2).

It would be a mistake to enter into this work with the belief that it will provide answers to the issues under consideration; one would certainly learn about the issues and their complexities, but Livingstone has made every effort to only present conclusions which are research-based, leaving the reader to posit possible solutions. Livingstone consistently presents her research as advocating for children and their lives to be considered from a position which

is strongly-grounded in empirical research methods, which refuses to adopt a particular normative or political agenda, and which carefully considers all dimensions of a particular issue. The work hesitates to put forth definitive recommendations as to social or educational policy formation – sometimes quite frustratingly resisting the final connection between the evidence the author herself has just presented and a seemingly-obvious direction forward.

That Livingstone stops short of making conclusions regarding educational and public policy formation by governmental and regulatory bodies should not be taken as a lack of criticality with regards to previous and existing policies, nor as a lack of depth in her understanding of the current state of society with regards to children and the internet. Indeed, many of the research findings presented are quite damning towards such agendas as universal internet access or ‘a computer in every home,’ and also towards educational policies such as those which have pushed computers into classrooms without necessarily considering their impact or what role they would play in the curriculum. Livingstone paints a bleak picture with regards to the societal effects of these policies. She points out that most children lack basic computer and internet skills and that,

The use of computers in educational settings undermines creativity, isolates children from face-to-face communication, increases social inequalities, and distracts educators' attention from children's needs by focusing instead on technology (p.65).

Further, Livingstone claims that public reactions to the perceived threats found on the internet are disproportionate, are due to ‘an endemic cultural fear of the new’ (p.151), and moreover that these reactions are disproportionately invasive to and controlling of girls. For Livingstone, the inclusion of computing technology in educational settings does not seem to convey the benefits touted

by its proponents – instead, such a change is detrimental to both the educational process and to the healthy psychological progression of children.

In addition to pointing out where educational and social policies advocating the adoption of computer and internet technologies have failed to make good on their aims, *Children and the Internet* downplays some of what have been regarded as high points in rhetoric surrounding the ‘digital generation’. For example, the author points out children who have found a particular creative outlet may ‘for the most part’ be demonstrating ‘creativity they would have engaged in anyway, with or without the internet (p.60).

The book does not provide an entirely negative view of the ways in which educational programs and public policy agendas have contributed to society; rather, it emphasizes very clearly that the mere presence of new technologies within classrooms and homes will not magically benefit society. Livingstone tells us that multimedia literacy skills must be taught just as other literacy skills; that multimedia literacy is ‘part of a social practice, not just a cognitive skill;’ and that such skills are increasingly necessary to learn, communicate, and to participate in civic activities (p.65).

Children and the Internet is arranged topically, which may be of most use to researchers considering a particular dimension of educational and social policy. Livingstone would have the researcher consider children’s experiences with regards to technology adoption from a balanced perspective, taking into account the complexities of children’s experiences and the different dimensions which must be considered in formulating social and educational policy. For example, Livingstone perceives significant differences between children and adults in technology use and adoption, the effects of parenting and demographic features on skills acquisition, identity-expression and risk-taking practises of young people, etc. In terms of examining the outcomes of a particular initiative, however, researchers may wish to consult Livingstone’s

original source reports which form the basis of this work, or to use the sources cited by *Children and the Internet* as a resource from which to begin investigation.

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