Counting children

On research methodology, ethics and policy development[34]

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Introduction[35]

One of the challenges we often face as researchers within the social sciences and humanities is to answer the question concerning how our research can contribute to society at large. What is the relevance of what we do? Can we make people's lives better? Safer? More manageable? A typical way of ensuring – or

34 This contribution is in part built on Staksrud (2011). The data that forms most of the empirical basis and experience for this chapter originally derived from the general social sciences exercise of producing quantifiable results to inform policy making, and the tension and interaction that often rapidly erupts between moral panics, policy development and academic research. The data was not originally collected for research purposes, but with the intention of informing policy and pinpointing effective practical strategies for online safety work. It was not based on a theoretical model, but developed as a co-generative study, with «everyday theorists» (Bruhn Jensen, 2002, p. 287).

35 In this paper, the distinction «quantitative – qualitative» is used literally, not derivatively.

providing – such relevance is by informing policy development. As we all know, the global nature of the Internet creates challenges for policy makers. The Internet, with its content, risks, services and users, is in essence trans-national – and even global. Its basis is not governments, but rather commercial companies, private citizens, and organizations. At the same time most societies, on a political level, need and want to keep services and businesses in line with current policy developments and to ensure the moral and legal rights of citizens, in this case users. This relates both to rights of protection from potential harm and illegal content and the right to communication and activities whose status depends on legal, societal, cultural and financial frameworks, conventions and expectations. For instance, pornography and violent content can be (legally) published in one country and accessed by users – young and old – in other countries, where the content is deemed illegal. Likewise, a paedophile can groom a child anywhere in the world, and a teen can illegally download copyrighted material from a server or network situated on the other side of the planet.

Traditionally, a practical way of solving the legal challenges that the Internet's seemingly borderless nature creates has been to implement and rely on self-regulatory agreements where commercial companies take on social responsibility (Staksrud, 2013, pp. 87–110). Thus, for the users their rights as traditionally afforded by the nation-state are transformed into user agreements for the use of the technology, typically labelled «rules of conduct» or «terms of service». However, unlike nation-states, commercial companies do not have evaluation, transparency and accountability built into their organizational structures. Consequently, independent testing and evaluation becomes the cornerstone of all self-regulatory policy efforts. With the ethical and methodological safeguards that are built into the trade and traditions, researchers can help fulfil this need for accountability and transparency, and may do so with both local and territorial/global perspectives.

Doing so, the researcher must look beyond standard modes of operation in order to fulfil obligations on all levels. Despite them being obvious points, one must actually heed the fact that online activities are cross-border, one must consider ethical aspects such as the question of whether gathering information may be problematic even if the data is freely available, and one will have to consider commercial interests to a perhaps greater degree than the usual political ones.

Building on this understanding, this chapter addresses three methodological and ethical challenges related to Internet research:

1) How can we make sure that we do not replicate standard perceptions of minors' Internet use, but rather open up the field to gain new insights?
2) How can we research communicative features and user practices in online communication services, such as social networking sites, without compromising the privacy and integrity of third party users, especially when these users are children?
3) How can we as researchers fulfil our mission of independence and critical reflection on policy development in a field where businesses rather than governments are the principal regulators?

The challenges will be addressed by making it even harder: Critical policy research in online environments is challenging in itself due to the new and complex array of stakeholders and the lack of transparent regulatory frameworks. It is even harder when the users in question are minors (children), often assumed to be «vulnerable» users, with all the added ethical complications and obligations this entails. Throughout the discussion, «children» will be used as the Internet user and informant of reference.

The right to be researched

Perhaps the biggest challenge in the quest to ensure people's right to be researched is to research underrepresented, so-called «vulnerable» groups. These are groups for which informed consent cannot be obtained directly and sufficiently, e.g. people with mental disabilities, those with financial needs that might make them vulnerable to certain types of research (having no real choice to opt out), or – the largest group of them all: children. For all of these groups there are special ethical considerations, which place a larger responsibility on the research community as a whole. For in a risk society, as described by Farrell (2005, pp. 2–3), research with children is in itself understood as a risky enterprise, and stringent legislation and policies are designed to protect children from dangerous adults – including researchers (see also David, Tonkin, Powell, & Anderson, 2005).

An unintended but yet real result of this state of affairs is that one often finds these groups less researched than others. This is especially the case when we look at issues related to the «population», the «public», or, as typically within the research field of media and communication, the «audience» or «users». Children constitute a prime example of a sub group which is often (if not always) forgotten, and in reality are overlooked when it comes to sampling and collection of data that aims to inform policy development in general, and policy related to children themselves in particular. Therefore, in policy as in research, when we refer to «the public» and its features, forms, needs and meanings, we often do not mean all people, but rather those above the age of 15 (at best), or more likely above 18.

Traditionally, to the extent that children are researched, this has typically been done by proxy, by asking their parents and guardians about how they are, what they do and how they feel. Even when comparing *children*, this is often done, explicitly or implicitly, by using adults and their behaviour and experiences as a frame of reference providing the desired standard. As noted by Livingstone (2003: 158), researchers are less likely to ask children directly about their access and use, and more prone to ask their parents. Thus, much quantitative research and surveys on children in general and their media practices in particular have not been conducted with children, but rather with their parents, who assess and report on how their children behave, feel and (to a lesser extent, see Staksrud & Livingstone (2009)) *cope* with various issues (see also d'Haenens, Vandoninck, & Donoso, 2013). Adult reports are treated both as benchmarks and as having a higher truth value than those from children, as they are perceived as more «objective».[36] However, comparative research, where both children and parents have been asked about the children's practices, has shown how parents often do not have the correct understanding, knowledge or perception of the children's activities and experiences, also, and perhaps especially, when the questions asked are about risks (Staksrud, 2003; Staksrud, 2008).[37] Issues related to children and media typically creates policy interest. Media and children often triggers strong fears in parents and other adults: the end of innocence in our children, and the uncertainty of the new, unfamiliar media and its potential negative influences (Staksrud & Kirksæther, 2013). Thus, there is also a long tradition for questions about (new) media and children creating media panics.

36 For a more detailed account of such research models and their implications see Hogan (2005, pp. 24–26).

37 There are honourable exceptions to be noted of quantitative surveys in the field of children, Internet and online safety that have had children as informants. Most such surveys have taken place during the past decade, and many have been funded by the European Commission or by national governments (see Staksrud (2011, pp. 57–59) for a comprehensive list). Some of the research projects also included conducting interviews with parents, making comparisons between children's and parents' accounts of the same online experiences and practices. Such comparisons can be seen as a sign of valuing children as informants, making their voices at least as important as their parents.

Thomson (2007, p. 207) makes an interesting point about how within methodology and methodological research there is «a tendency to employ a meta-narrative of 'children' that is based in the polarized, fixed and separate identities of child and adult», questioning the myth of the all-powerful adult and the incompetent child. This information is then used to inform policy development and regulatory initiatives – also in the field of the Internet. Could it be that as we label something as «research with children», we might automatically set a confined frame of reference for our Internet-related research as well? Or, to put it another way: is the adult-child constellation something of a sociological dichotomy within research that should be more fully discussed as such (Staksrud, 2011, pp. 54–56)?[38]

The rationale behind such research approaches *with* children, as opposed to *on* them, is that children are viewed as agents in their own life and competent and capable of answering questionnaires and participating in research. There is also an underlying belief in and respect for their ability to answer questions about their own lives, experiences and feelings – on this they are the experts. Thus, I place myself alongside Saporiti (1994), arguing for seeing childhood as a status with the methodological consequences that follow, including utilizing age as a practical device for making distinctions, but not as the only criterion for assessing the status of children and childhood (Saporiti, 1994, p. 194). This is, however, a fairly new approach. Historically there is a long and crude tradition of research *on* children,[39] where asking them directly about issues concerning

38 For an overview of other various and typical sociological dichotomies and discussions thereof see Jenks (1998).

39 Most of the documentation of this approach can be found in the field of medicine. Using children (especially those institutionalized, such as in orphanages, with little protection from authorities) for medical experiments (of which exposure to viruses and the testing of vaccines would be a typical example) have been quite frequent, as the children often were «cheaper than calves» (Swedish physician of

them would not be considered a sound methodological approach. According to Borgers, de Leeuw & Hox (2000), the first direct account of how to interview children came in the 1954 edition of *The Handbook of Social Psychology* (Maccoby & Maccoby in Lindzey, 1954), but for the most part methodological accounts of research with children were based on ad-hoc knowledge from diverse fields.

At the same time there is a need to recognize that children may be vulnerable and in need of special attention and protection throughout the research process. Additionally, one needs to pay attention to other differences such as their physical size and strength compared to adults, their general social and legal status and their dependence on others and fixed institutional position (such as in schools) (Hill, 2005, pp. 62–64). Reflecting upon and adjusting to all these issues and processes are part of levelling the power-field, not between adult and child in particular, but rather between researcher and informant, as it is thought that in all research the researcher will come from a place of authority.[40]

With the above observations as background, I now turn to two practical examples of how one might make children count when researching online environments. Both are examples of cases in which the researchers' key aim was to make children count, taking a child-centred perspective in the collection of high-quality research data related to policy evaluation and development in the area of children and online safety and risk. The first example is about being open to children's voices without providing an adult frame

late 1800 quoted in Lederer & Grodin, 1994, p. 12). Thus, the history of pediatric experiments is largely a history of child abuse (Lederer & Grodin, 1994, p. 19). Also, within the social sciences there is a historical predominance of research on children as objects rather than with them as subjects, treating children as variables rather than persons (Greene & Hill, 2005, p. 1). (For accounts from the field of developmental psychology see Hogan (2005).

40 For a critical discussion on the various positions researchers can take in relation to children as informants see for instance Lahman (2008).

of reference and definition. The second example is about how we might make children count by researching from theirpoint of view.

Example 1: Listening to the child[41]

The first example relates to the following above-mentioned challenge: How can we make sure that we do not replicate standard perceptions of minors' Internet use, but rather open up the field to gain new insights? Representative, statistical surveys constitute one of the most efficient research tools in terms of applicability to policy development. Politicians as well as journalists appreciate the value of being able to say «how many» or «how much» in identifying or presenting a problem or an issue. Using statistics to frame current events might be particularly meaningful when the numbers represent a majority or a minority view, as this speaks to political language with its rhetoric and its need to frame standpoints in a prioritized context as «more» or «less» important than other issues on the agenda. Similarly, representative statistics can help define the appropriate, financially sound or «fair» limits for state-based services to groups of the population.

So, the legitimacy of policy development and intervention in Western societies partly relies on the ability to generalize findings to the population as a whole, or to specific, demographically defined sections of it. Statistical analysis is *especially* favoured within risk analysis, management and assessment studies, as statistics are helpful when relating to laypersons, such as politicians and the public. This is because one can contextualize any given risk by reliably comparing the likelihood of the risk happening with another type of risk, and by this aid the understanding of it by putting it in perspective. A strong argument can also be made that in regard to issues of risk, where the power of definition

41 This example, including the quotes, is taken from Livingstone, Kirwil, Ponte, & Staksrud (2013; 2014).

of perception, scope and management is often in the hands of «experts» (such as academics), statistics can *counter* predictable biases that also exist among experts – since experts are also people (Meadow & Sunstein, 2001).

When using (representative) surveys as a tool for mapping the state of the art and providing policy recommendations, one generally asks closed-ended questions about areas of already-established policy interest and agendas. One of the topics high on the agenda in relation to Internet policy is the question of online content regulation and what is perceived as harmful for children. Research on such questions can either be based on what is perceived as problematic by (adult) stakeholders in the field, or by researching what children actually do online and how their activities may or may not lead to distress and potential harm.

Although some qualitative research is beginning to investigate a wider array of possible risks to children online, much of the research is done within frameworks pre-defined by (adult) researchers. While such frameworks are firmly embedded both in theory, experience and observation, there is a need to ask if we miss out on the children's perspective. This is especially critical in the field of online research, with its fairly new and continuously shifting user patterns and rapid technological service innovations.

In order to counter this, when collecting data from a random stratified sample of 25,142 Internet-using European children aged 9–16 years (interviewing them at home during the spring and summer 2010), the children were first asked one open-ended, unprompted question: «What things on the Internet would bother people of about your age?' In recognition of the methodological and ethical challenges of researching children's conceptions of risk (Görzig, 2012; Ponte, Simões, & Jorge, 2013; Staksrud, 2013), each child was asked to write his or her answer privately on a piece of paper and put it in a self-sealed envelope so neither interviewer nor parent (if present) could see how the child answered.

The results[42] (as reported in Livingstone et al., 2014) were as refreshing as they were surprising. First of all, the children expressed a considerable variety of risks that concern them on the Internet, for instance:

> The things that bother people about my age are the influence of bad websites such as how to diet or lose weight so you could be known as the pretty one; like vomiting things. (Girl, 15, Ireland)

> To take a photo of me without my knowledge and upload it to an inappropriate website. (Girl, 10, Bulgaria)

Yet, pornography (named by 22 % of children who mentioned risks) and conduct risk such as cyber-bullying (19 %) and violent content (18 %) were at the top of children's concerns online. Both surprising in its own right and a methodological reminder was the extensive priority given to violent content. This is noteworthy insofar as this area tends to receive less attention than sexual material or bullying in safety and awareness-raising initiatives and policy discussions. And, not only did a considerable group of the children mention violent content, they also elaborated on this as being realistic content from the news – typically accessed through

42 A standard coding scheme was used. Children's responses, written in 21 languages, were then coded by native speakers. One in three (38 %) identified one or more online risks that they think bothers people their age on the Internet (N=9,636 children: 5,033 girls and 4,603 boys). Response rates ranged from 73 % of children in Denmark to 4 % of those in Spain (with below 30 % also in Austria, Slovenia, Hungary, Bulgaria and Czech Republic). This variation may be due to genuine differences in children's level of concern, or it may have resulted from differences in fieldwork methodology. Of the 9,636 children who identified risks, 54 % identified one risk, 31 % identified two risks, and 15 % identified three or more risks. Up to three risks per child were coded, when applicable.

video-sharing sites such as YouTube. And many felt disgusted and scared:

> Some shocking news like terrorist attacks. (Boy, 12, Finland)
>
> I have seen what life was like in Chernobyl. People were suffering from physical deformities. I was upset to see the pictures and it made me sad. (Girl, 9, France)
>
> I was shocked seeing a starving African child who was going to die and a condor waiting to eat him. Also, news about soldiers who died while serving [in] the army, Palestine and Israel war scenes upset me very much. (Girl, 13, Turkey)

Thus, tweaking the methodology to let the digital users, in this case children, be heard gives direct and practical implications for future policy priorities. This procedure also connects online user research to traditional media user research both theoretically and empirically. In addition, it is a reminder of why and how children should be consulted also when the foundation is laid for policy development and solutions for protection are being sought (Livingstone et al., 2014).

So, an answer to our first challenge might be that in order to make sure we do not replicate standard perceptions, but open up our field to gain new insights, we need to actually ask the users – in this case children – themselves. Allowing them to freely reflect upon their own situations showed how policy and awareness work in the field of Internet safety was not on par with the actual worries of many children.

Example 2: Becoming the child

As stated in the introduction, researchers can and perhaps should have a key role in the evaluation of Internet self-regulatory initiatives. This second example therefore relates to the two challenges of 1) How can we research communicative features and user practices in online communication services, such as social networking sites, without compromising the privacy and integrity of third party users? and 2) How can we as researchers fulfil our mission of independence and critical reflection on policy development in a field where businesses rather than governments are the principal regulators?

In 2008, as part of its Safer Internet Plus Programme, the European Commission gathered 18 of the major online social networks active in Europe as well as a number of researchers and child welfare organizations to form a European Social Networking Task Force to discuss guidelines for the use of social networking sites by children and young people (Staksrud & Lobe, 2010, p. 10). As a result, «The Safer Social Networking Principles for the EU» were developed as a self-regulatory scheme. The aim was to «provide good practice recommendations for the providers of social networking and other user interactive sites, to enhance the safety of children and young people using their services»[43] (European Commission, 2009), answering the challenge of providing regulation in a field where the single nation-state has limited capacity and options.

The guidelines were adopted voluntarily by the major online social networks active in Europe, and signed on Safer Internet Day,

43 Within the context of the principles, «social networking services» are defined as services that combine the following features (Arto et al., 2009: 3): a platform that promotes online social interaction between two or more persons for the purposes of friendship, meeting other persons, or information exchange; functionality that lets users create personal profile pages that contain information of their own choosing, such as the name or nickname of the user, photographs placed on the personal page by the user, other personal information about the user, and links to other personal pages on the service of friends or associates of the user that may be accessed by other users or visitors to the service; mechanisms to communicate with other users, such as a message board, electronic mail, or instant messenger; and tools that allow users to search for other users according to the profile information they choose to make available to other users.

February 10th, 2009.[44] The principles are meant as a guide for providers of social networking sites (SNS) providers when they seek to minimize potential harm to children and young people (Arto et al., 2009: 1). They recommend a wide range of good practice approaches, allowing for the diversity and internal judgment of the social networks themselves in terms of relevance and implementation. To honour their commitment the signatories regularly reported on their adherence to the rules and the implementation of information and technical tools that would make the use of social networking services safer for children.

As part of its extensive encouragement and support of the self-regulatory initiative of the SNS providers, the European Commission did commit to monitoring the implementation of the principles as part of its extensive encouragement and support of the self-regulatory initiative of the SNS providers by supporting independent researchers to assess the services. But how could this be done? The self-reporting from the services on their adherence to the principles would be the first place to look.[45] But can one accept self-evaluation at face value?

Another method could be to look at and investigate the respective social networking sites as a user, making sure that the described information and services were there and could be found. But would this guarantee a *safer* social networking site for *children*? And how could researchers, with their pledge to produce ethically sound and verifiable knowledge, contribute to this?

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44 Please refer to the original report (Staksrud & Lobe, 2010) for more detailed information on the signatories and the relevant SNS services they offer.

45 Self-declaration reports were submitted by the social networks between April 10th and June 17th 2009. All these reports are public and can be downloaded from the European Commission's website: http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/activities/social_networking/eu_action/selfreg/index_en.htm#self_decl (link valid as of August 2009).

As many Internet researchers have learned, social networking sites are complex to review and research, as they usually contain and host a wide range of different (connected) services. This again makes them hosts of a range of (potential) online risks in terms of content, contact and conduct. This situation also raises a range of ethical issues, as the relational aspect means that you as a researcher, if you were to study children's (actual) use of the SNS by observing or engaging, would also study the communication and behaviour of *third parties* – other people the child is in contact with.

For instance: a commonly discussed problem high on the policy agenda related to children and media in general and to Internet services in particular is the potential for underage children to access inappropriate services. Many SNS's have age restrictions, e.g. Facebook has a 13-year-old age limit to sign up. If Facebook were to allow access by younger children, it would also have to comply with stricter rules of parental consent and handling of personal information as laid out in the US Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) (United States Federal Trade Commission, 1998). According to the Safer Social Networking Principles, SNS's should ensure age verification mechanisms to prevent under-age users from signing up. However, when asking children about their SNS practices, researchers have found that a substantial number of under-aged users have profiles on these sites in general, and on Facebook in particular (Livingstone, Ólafsson, & Staksrud, 2013; Staksrud, Ólafsson, & Livingstone, 2013). What is the explanation for this state of affairs? Do children lie about their age? Or is it that the services are not sufficiently tailored to prevent unwanted users from signing up? In order to verify whether such preventive measures are in place, you would have to actually test the services in question. So why not use children? Would that not provide valid research results? Yes, but if «real», under-aged users were to be used in the testing of the SNS features, either by observing underage children going online or by asking them to perform the equivalent of the test instead of adult experts, we would also knowingly have to:

- Ask them to do something illegal or in breach of terms of service and codes of conduct;
- Ask them to lie;
- Potentially expose them to new risks they might not be ready to cope with by making them sign up with services they have not previously used;
- Give the child an implicit or explicit acceptance of defined deviant behaviour;
- Teach children how to circumvent technical restrictions (and get away with it);
- Potentially ask children to do something they really do not want to do, but feel they must comply with;
- Potentially expose other underage children (third parties, e.g., «friends») as liars;

… to mention only some of the ethical challenges such a strategy would entail. In addition, of course, come the ethical dilemmas of ensuring informed consent from the child's parents or guardians as well as from the child him- or herself in order to do something that is illegal or at best a breach of the «terms of service» (but yet accepted practice by many parents, see Staksrud, Ólafsson, & Livingstone, (2013)).

The solution reached in this case was to develop a method that allowed for testing the SNS services from a child's perspective without the substantial ethical complications of involving actual children. Thus the researcher had to become the child.[46] This was

46 The author recognizes that the idea of «becoming» the child by setting up a social networking profile with a different persona carries with it problems and theoretical implications of its own.

done by developing a methodology[47] that directly tested the SNS features in question by using the often cited problem of social networking sites – you never know who is *really* on the other side of the profile or communication – to our advantage.

Addressing the ethical considerations relevant to testing such sites in the manner described, 13 carefully chosen national researchers were asked (while testing the sites) to choose imaginative nicknames/usernames for testing purposes and to set up a minimum of three profiles. In this way, the test avoided including any real underage children and the potential risks that such actions could have resulted in. Why three profiles? Because many of the features of SNSs extend from communication with other individuals. There is a need for «a friend» to communicate with, «like» and comment. The main testing profile was set up to be an 11-year old-girl (if possible, if not, a 15-year-old girl) with an «ordinary» name, all localized versions of «Maria». In addition, a peer-friend profile was established, as well as a profile of an adult. The latter was to be able to test whether adult «strangers» could access personal information about the minors, as well as if they would be able to contact them directly through the social networking site services.

The national experts were given detailed instructions on how to perform the testing in order to ensure as much consistency in the testing process as possible. The testing was meant to give a comprehensive and clear view of the extent of implementation of the principles in terms of compliance between what has been stated in the self-declarations *versus* how children experienced the sites in terms of online safety, help and information. It should also be

47 The test and methodology was been developed by the two lead experts Dr. Bojana Lobe, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia and Dr. Elisabeth Staksrud, University of Oslo, Norway. In the draft stage, the testing questionnaire was submitted to the Social Networking Task Force for comments and suggestions. The European Commission approved the final version. The test has later been used in subsequent testing initiated by the European Commission.

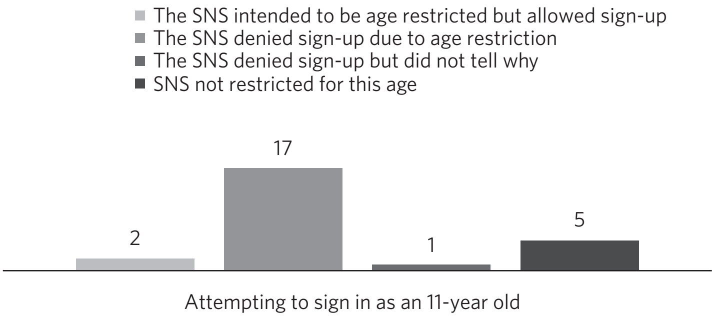

Figure 1 Attempts to sign up to age restricted sites

noted that all companies in question were told about the testing and evaluation in advance, and informed consent was ensured via the European Commission. The testers then tried to sign up for the service using the under-aged profile (Staksrud & Lobe, 2010, p. 26).

So, can 11-year-olds get access to a restricted site? When the results were collected it became clear that all services tested asked for information regarding date of birth as part of the registration process. On four services the users had to state that they were above a certain age (e.g. by ticking a box), while e-mail verification/address for e-mail verification was required by 20 services. Out of those 20 services, the testers were able to sign up without verifying over e-mail on seven of them.

On three services intended to be age-restricted for 11 year olds, sign-up was not allowed. 17 services denied sign-up, explicitly referring to the age restrictions on the site.

But children are people, and as people they might also employ strategies to circumvent restrictions. Thus it becomes important also to test if the services hold when children do something active to get access, such as changing their age.

Accordingly, for services that restricted signing up, another attempt was made *with the same profile*, but with the date of birth of a 15-year-old girl. On seven services changing the date of birth/age was enough to grant access. On two additional services this could be done after a cookie was removed. *All* testers were later able to sign up *with a new profile* as an older user adhering to the age-requirements of the service on the same computer/device, regardless of previous failures.

Another example pertains to the principle of «Provide easy-to-use mechanisms to report conduct or content that violates the terms of service» for children (principle no.4 of the SNS self-regulation agreement). This was specified as:

- Providers should provide a mechanism for reporting inappropriate content, contact or behaviour as outlined in their Terms of Service, acceptable use policy and/or community guidelines. These mechanisms should be easily accessible to users at all times and the procedure should be easily understandable and age-appropriate.
- Reports should be acknowledged and acted upon expeditiously.
- Users should be provided with the information they need to make an effective report and, where appropriate, an indication of how reports are typically handled. (Arto et al., 2009, p. 8)

In order to test principle 4, the social networking sites were sent the following message from the expert testers on their service(s) if at all possible.[48]

> «I am writing to you because someone is sending me scary messages. What should I do about this? Please help me.»

This message was carefully designed and worded to be a general request, and would in most cases be sent from the profile of a

48 On a few services it was not possible to send a general request asking for help, but rather requests pre-defined by the SNS. In these cases the tester was asked to send the pre-defined report that resembled the original message the most.

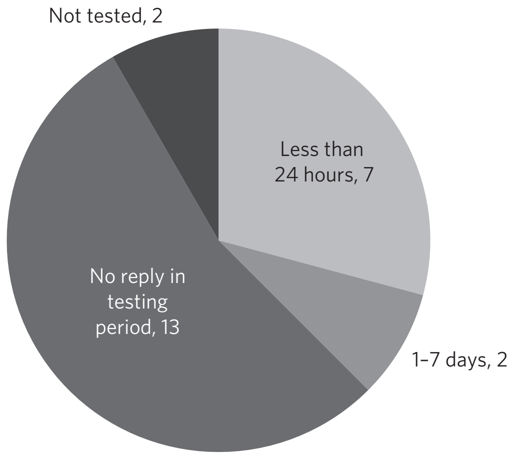

Figure 2 Response time to users of Social Networking Services when asking for help[49]

registered, underage user of the site (in most cases an 11-year-old, in a few cases a 15-year-old, depending on the overall age restriction of the SNS). In this message, the SNSs were asked to give specific advice on how the users themselves should handle the situation. Please note that the message did not mention the SNS in particular. It was a general cry for help.

As the signatories are very diverse in the services they provide, this message might not be fully relevant to all the 20 social networking sites that at that time committed to the principles. However, it was deemed that an underage user asking for advice and help from a professional party should receive some sort of feedback, preferably with information relevant to the request sent. The way the message was worded should also prompt a personal response. So, did they get one?

Figure 2 gives an overview of the response time of the SNSs. Only relevant feedback was listed as a response, hence automatic

49 Figure adapted from Staksrud & Lobe (2010, p. 33).

responses only stating that the message has been received and will be reviewed are not deemed sufficient to be listed as a full «reply».

Of a total of 22 services tested, 13 did not give any reply to the message asking for help during the testing period of about 6 weeks, two replied within a week (3–4 days), while seven replied within 24 hours.

From a policy point of view, the results were discouraging and signalled a failure to commit to the practical implementation of the SNS principles. As such it serves as a reminder that in terms of policy, including those implemented to protect user rights and safety, there is a distinct difference between the stated state of the art and the reality as experienced by the user.

From a research and methodological point of view, however, the undertaking was a success, in that it ensured quality data without compromising the integrity of the users.

One answer to challenge no. 2, then, «How can we research communicative features and user practices on online communication services, such as social networking sites, without compromising the privacy and integrity of third party user?», is that we sometimes need to go undercover. As observational research on the use of social networking services inevitably will involve not just one informant, it is vital that third parties also are protected according to ethical standards. This is especially critical as you might never really know who is on the other side of the interaction. Your primary informant might be interacting with a minor.

This example is also a reminder that if we as researchers are to fulfil our mission of independence and critical reflection on policy development in a field where businesses rather than governments are the principal regulators (challenge no.3), we need to take a critical approach and avoid relying on self-reporting as the (only) tool of assessment. The example also highlights the need for in-depth, real-world use and testing. This is particularly important with services offered in several countries and languages, where the risk of differences between «versions» is present. It is the end-user experience that should be evaluated, not their guardians' report on it, nor the service provider's own account of their system and routines. When said out loud this seems self-evident, but the history of research on children's use of online digital media says differently.

Conclusion

Unlike other places in life, where the mismatch between parental perception and children's activities can often be observed, not only by researchers, but by the individual citizen, the online lives of children and the features of the digital services they use slip beneath most people's radars. It is the researcher's trade and obligation to provide critical, quality research to inform policy. In the online field our job might be harder, but no less important. However, we might take some comfort in the fact that new technologies do not necessarily mean new methodologies, simply new approaches.

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