How can children be protected online when the internet has been designed for adults?

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Sonia Livingstone examines how policies and tools which evaluate digital rights and freedoms can be more inclusive of children.

There is growing momentum behind the idea that children's rights need renewed support and fresh thinking in today's digital age. How can children's right to privacy be respected when anything and everything seems to be online, permanently? How can they be protected, when the internet has been designed for adults and doesn't even know which of its users are children? How can they be free to explore, express themselves and participate when a risk-averse society wants to keep them in walled gardens or monitor their every message?

Right now, national and international organisations are commissioning new reports and spawning initiatives centred on the idea of digital rights. Parents and children themselves are increasingly anxious about the significance of the digital transformations they are living through: ever more of our time and money devoted to digital platforms; ever more of our once-public activities (think of learning, playing, even just chatting with friends) now mediated by transnational proprietary services whose terms and conditions few of us fully understand.

Is the result more opportunities or more risks? More expression or more exploitation? Most likely the answer is "both". But where do children fit in? Perhaps a focus on human rights is enough?

But where do children fit in? Perhaps a focus on human rights is enough? But children are often the digital pioneers – trying out new opportunities before most adults catch up. Arguably, they are the canaries in the coal mine, encountering the problems before child protection services have caught on. Certainly, they may not have developed the understanding – technical, legal, social – that is assumed (wisely or not) of adults.

So above children's heads, but supposedly with their best interests at heart, a struggle is being played out among educators, governments, industry and policymakers about just who is responsible for what in relation to children's rights in the digital age. And while many are stepping up to the plate, the digital landscape changes fast, with new players entering the field and old solutions becoming outdated.

For this piece, I was asked whether one particular initiative, an independent audit of digital rights, could be extended to include children's rights. Ranking Digital Rights is a non-profit initiative which launched its inaugural Corporate Accountability Index in November 2015. The index evaluated 16 top internet and telecommunication companies on 31 indicators "focused on corporate disclosure of policies and practices that affect users' freedom of expression and privacy." The purpose is to "encourage companies to develop, deliver and manage products and services in a manner consistent with international human rights norms" by ranking performance, identifying barriers to good practice, and keeping the public informed. And while the report tries to be encouraging, some of the findings are pretty damning of the big platforms.

UNICEF is the monitoring body for the internationally-ratified UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which specifies children's fundamental rights to provision, participation and protection. In principle if not always in practice, the convention applies as much online as it does offline. UNICEF itself is developing a child rights self-impact assessment tool, for companies to self-assess their performance – mainly but not exclusively in relation to child online protection. Some companies argue that self-assessment is the way to go, enabling them to head off trouble by building in design solutions from the outset, but many public and civil society bodies prefer an independent and external audit of the big corporate players – especially for something as important as human rights.

Could that be done by the Ranking Digital Rights initiative? While conscientiously conducted, transparent in its methodology and generally respected, this non-profit is already at capacity. As its director Rebecca MacKinnon explained to me, it's currently worried about raising funds for the next audit of service provision for adults' freedom of expression and privacy. I say "for adults", because even though the audit has been concerned with human rights, it's more specialised than it might sound. Thus far, it seems there has been little or no thought to the specific requirements of child users. For example, evaluating companies in terms of their "user-friendly" terms and conditions or accessible forms of redress would look very different if we assume those users are adults only, or if it is recognised that they include children.

So if policies and tools implicitly assume users are adult, where does that leave children? Often in a different department or group of specialists, the companies audited by Ranking Digital Rights have, in parallel, invested in recent years in child online safety policies of one kind or another, coordinated for example by the UK Council for Child Internet Safety. Here too, real progress has been made, not least because it is in companies' interests to avoid the reputational damage of children being harmed through their services.

All these initiatives can only work if companies take them seriously and if independent bodies monitor progress over time, and with this proviso they are surely all to be welcomed. Those I spoke to for this article from CSR departments are clear – the more tools and indexes the better, to give them leverage within their company to support child rights better. But it seems that, at present, the digital landscape is being evaluated in terms of the efforts of companies and NGOs to defend adult freedoms online, on the one hand, and protecting children online, on the other.

The result is that such initiatives appear to be generating two disconnected forms of expertise, each separately evaluated. As a result, child freedoms online – particularly important for teenagers around the world – may be obscured.

Why technology companies should tackle their impact on children

By Viktor Nylund

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The ICT sector has the potential to have a positive and negative impact on children. UNICEF is working with businesses to help them place children's rights at the heart of their operations.

Children represent one third of the world's population and in some countries, especially emerging markets, children and youth can make up almost half of the population. They are consumers, they are the children of employees and customers and they are young workers, future employees and business leaders. Today's children and youth have been born into a digital world; they are exposed to technology and innovation and are avid users of new information and communication technologies (ICTs).

Technological innovation has advanced in unprecedented ways over the past decade. Although access to information and communication technology is not equal across different countries, regions and socioeconomic groups, the landscape is changing rapidly. On the one hand the rise of social media and mobile technology can provide powerful networking platforms for peer to peer education and can empower young people to express their views and demand their rights. On the other hand digital technology creates security risks for children and young people: it can threaten their right to privacy; children and youth are reached with inappropriate content; and they are the victims of online exploitation, harassment and bullying.

The ICT sector has a wide range of potential positive and negative impact on children's rights and that is why this sector is of particular importance to UNICEF in an effort to consider the impact of business behaviour on children's rights and aim to harness the resources of this industry to promote the rights of children.