



EDITED BY REMCO PIJPERS & NICOLE VAN DEN BOSCH

POSITIVE DIGITAL CONTENT

FOR KIDS EXPERTS REVEAL
THEIR SECRETS

POSITIVE DIGITAL CONTENT FOR KIDS

EXPERTS REVEAL THEIR SECRETS

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POSCON & MIJN KIND ONLINE



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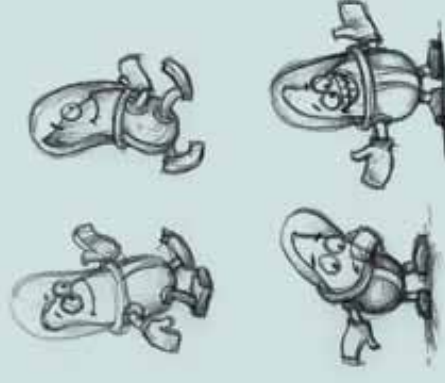


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THE INTERNET IS A FANTASTIC PLACE TO LEARN



Nowadays, most of us access online content from many different devices, such as smartphones, tablets and computers. Many of us produce online content too. Either way, the Internet is a fantastic place to learn, play, interact and explore.

My job as European Commissioner for the Digital Agenda is to ensure that all Europeans can benefit from digital technology – including kids, who are going online at a younger and younger age and for an ever-greater variety of reasons.

To create a better Internet for kids, we need to set our sights beyond protecting them. Our aim is to encourage creativity and a positive use of the Internet. This will not only help children and young people develop their digital skills but also empower them to grow and shape their world in a safe, creative way.

There is no ‘One Size Fits All’ solution. We should work on flexible solutions and concepts that are appropriate for the age of the child. A plethora of gaming, educational and interactive apps are available that successfully target children and young people. But children are also the most vulnerable consumers. We need to be able to protect young users from emerging risks, such as exposure to advertising, excessive online purchasing in virtual worlds, and in-app purchases.

Engaging industry across the value chain is central to tackling the growing challenges that are arising as the result of new technology and new user patterns. Reports from the companies participating in the CEO Coalition to Make a Better Internet for Kids show that they have made concrete progress by sharing and renewing good practices and speeding up the development and implementation of reporting mechanisms, age-appropriate privacy settings, content classification, parental tools and the effective removal of

child-abusive material. All of these contribute to making the Internet a place where children can have positive experiences.

However, progress in this area is a shared responsibility, and the POSCON network – funded by the EU Safer Internet programme – has also been very active in gathering experts from the public and private sector from all over Europe in order to exchange their experiences and devise plans for stimulating positive online content for children. Together, they have come up with ‘Golden Rules’ for developing digital products for kids, such as target group and age appropriateness, attractiveness, usability, reliability, safety and privacy issues.

The same criteria have been applied in selecting the winners of the European Award for Best Content for Kids. On Safer Internet Day 2014, I had the honour of handing out prizes to the best creators of positive content for kids (some of them actually themselves kids and young people who code) selected from over 1100 entries from all over Europe and beyond.

Now, POSCON is launching another exciting project: a compilation of best practices from European producers who create high quality digital content for children. In this new book, for example, you will discover how an app can make it easy for kids to do research at home with the family in the real world – an app that encourages kids to ask good questions and have the feeling that they can investigate things by themselves! Again, this is an important acknowledgement that we all have to work together in order to give kids of all ages across Europe access to positive experiences in an environment that guarantees trust and confidence.

NEELIE KROES

Vice-President of the European Commission responsible for the Digital Agenda for Europe (2009-2014)

CHILDREN & MEDIA

VIEWPOINTS FROM EXPERTS

SONIA LIVINGSTONE
&
PATTI M. VALKENBURG



LET KIDS CREATE AND PARTICIPATE

How do children develop, and what influence do digital media have on their development? What do producers of digital content for children need to know, and how can they contribute to the next generation? **Sonia Livingstone**, Professor of Social Psychology at the London School of Economics and Political Science, explains her views on positive content for children.

Illustrations Nozman



Can you briefly describe how children develop from birth to the age of sixteen?

Sonia Livingstone: 'That's a huge question. Children not only develop physically but also mentally, emotionally and socially, all over varying timelines. Most current research has thus far focused on what kids understand from reading and watching television. Children learn first to focus, then to sequentialise and infer patterns, and only then do they grasp causation, narrative and characterisation. Research on drama shows that children enjoy and are afraid of different contents at different ages, and that what they say isn't always a good indicator of what they remember, understand or have nightmares about.'

Lots of research examines advertising. Here it is generally agreed that until about eight years old, children don't have a very clear concept of what advertising is for; after that, they begin to grasp the notion of persuasion but can't really apply it in their daily lives. So they will still ask for what is being advertised, even though they are aware of the advertising intent. By around the age of twelve, children's judgements become more sophisticated – they can distinguish persuasive from non-persuasive content, for instance, though

PARENTS HAVE THE MOST INFLUENCE ON CHILDREN'S BEHAVIOUR

TEST WHETHER KIDS LEARN FROM, LAUGH WITH OR FEAR WHAT THEY'VE SEEN

they might still need a helping hand, especially in relation to the news or online marketing (as might many adults!).

Children are also influenced by the context in which they live: kids in different cultures don't all grow up the same, and the resources (or barriers) which define children's developmental processes vary greatly. The main debate among academics is whether biology, psychology or society has the upper hand, but of course it has to be a mix.

The immediate social context is also vital. If there are problems at home, the compensatory potential of the media becomes all the more important, as does its power to exacerbate problems. If the

family context is supportive and communicative, however, kids can cope with much of what they find in the media, even if the media content is rather poor or problematic. Parents have the most influence on children's values and behaviour – the media will never compete with their influence. But the two can work together to help kids develop in a confident and positive way.

How should producers take this all into account?

'Audience- or user-testing is extremely important. I know this is expensive and seems ethically and practically difficult with children, but it is crucial. It is generally done more for expensive productions (television, film) than with cheaper productions (for instance, websites or games). And of course, it may not happen at all with content designed for the general public (or other market segments) even though it is also enjoyed by children. This means that children, with their specific needs and niches, may be exposed to inappropriate materials of all kinds, that haven't been tested on them as age-appropriate.

I would also urge producers to commission thoughtful interpretations of the research literature (especially psychological and socio-cultural works on what children know, understand and feel), and then to do careful audience/user testing while developing their products. By this I don't mean just testing whether children like a blue or a green background or this or that cartoon character, but whether they learn from, laugh with or fear what they've seen – even a full month or year later.



SONIA LIVINGSTONE OBE

Professor of Social Psychology and former Head of the Department of Media and Communications at the London School of Economics and Political Science



Sonia Livingstone has dedicated much of her research to children, media and the Internet. She is the author or editor of 18 books and many academic articles and chapters. Sonia's research asks why and how the changing conditions of mediation are reshaping everyday practices and possibilities for action, identity and communication rights. Her empirical work examines the opportunities and risks afforded by digital and online technologies, including those for children and young people at home and school. She is co-coordinator of EU Kids Online, which focuses on the way children use new media and the conditions which shape online risk and safety. Sonia Livingstone was awarded the title Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) in 2014 for her services to children and child Internet safety.

MORE INFORMATION

- LSE Academic Staff: stmko.nl/sonia
- EU Kids Online: stmko.nl/research
- www.lse.ac.uk

THEY WANT TO PARTICIPATE, THEY WANT TO CREATE

More fundamentally, producers need to think about their purposes. The purpose of good online content should surely include treating children as young citizens capable of learning and furthering their personal, social and intellectual development. Too many sites seem to put effort into keeping children quiet and absorbed and amused. But we should be more ambitious for them. They want to participate. They want to create.'

Digital media are evolving rapidly. How does that affect children? Is childhood also changing rapidly because of their exposure to media, or is that a silly question?

It's an interesting question. There's been a lot of speculation about children's changing skills (as so-called digital natives), their supposed loss of concentration (not to mention loss of privacy and intimacy), their ability to multi-task and their changed styles of learning ('interest-driven', 'just-in-time', 'look it up when you need it'). There's remarkably little evidence for any of these cognitive changes, it must be said. When one study is published showing a change, the next study will contradict it. We're still waiting for a solid body of evidence either way, and ideally we'd have some longitudinal studies to track changes over time.

There is more evidence that the social and cultural circumstances of children's lives are changing. In other words, childhood itself is changing. These changes have been summarised simultaneously as 'getting older younger' (more marketing, sexual expression, and identity exploration among tweens, for instance) and, conversely, 'staying younger longer' (since it takes longer for young people to become financially independent, they have a longer period of adolescence; followed, some now say, by a period of 'emerging adulthood' in which they explore commercial culture widely, following celebrities, experimenting with social media and generally focusing on themselves and their relationships). Then there's the effect of media trends – more personalised devices, converging platforms which combine mass and social media, readings,

viewing and chatting; and more complex interfaces – with embedded marketing and complex conditions of data collection or privacy or risk.'

How do you define 'positive content' for children?

'According to the UK's 2013 Good Childhood

Report, children and young people need:

- The right conditions in which to learn and develop
- A positive view of themselves and respect for their identity
- Enough of the items and experiences that matter to them
- Positive relationships with their family, friends and school
- A safe and suitable home environment and local area
- The opportunities to take part in positive activities which help them to thrive

'So one answer is: Any media meeting these needs offers 'positive content'. Wrapped up in the first bullet point is the importance of play, imagination, creativity and being stretched (but not too far). Wrapped up in the last point is the importance of pathways or trajectories – yes, kids like repetition, but they also need to be taken on a journey, encouraged to explore and develop and progress. The end of the journey might never actually arrive, but the journey should be what kids

(not worthy or judgemental adults) find really stimulating. Educationalists call the support that this journey needs 'scaffolding' – in this case, media builds the scaffold, enabling children to climb higher and see further. But the media needn't be the sole provider of said scaffolding – the content kids engage with can also appeal to their parents and friends or siblings, and it can encourage play and discussion in front of the screen, in the living room or during supper, for example.



CREATE A CHILD-FRIENDLY WORLD IN WHICH THEY CAN PARTICIPATE

THEY NEED TO FEEL THAT THEY CAN MAKE CHANGES IN THIS WORLD

'Last but not least, the points in between are all about removing the barriers that hinder kids and giving them a child-friendly world in which they can participate – this means that they can join in with others, with respect for their own contribution, and can feel efficacious. This last point is more complex than it sounds. We too often build walls around kids which then hinder their efficaciousness – they need, slowly but surely, to feel that they can make changes in the world. Most importantly, they need not only to speak and act but also to be heard and responded to. And they need to be heard by those with the power to affect their circumstances – and, later in turn, the wider world. These are serious requirements. In a thoroughly-mediated world, they should be met, to a significant degree, by the digital media.'

How can producers implement your view into their work? What does 'good' look like?

'What do we want available for our children? We want diversity, including a diversity of aesthetics: not everything made for three year olds, for instance, should have bright colours with happy cartoon figures bouncing around. Let's diversify what is being offered. And let's also diversify our concept of children themselves, for children come in all shapes and sizes. Over and over again, you see pretty white girls, handsome white boys and then one brown face. That's so stereotypical. Where are the ordinary kids – a little bit grubby, not all nicely matching in size, not all middle class and squeaky clean, perhaps even disabled? Research shows that children want to see themselves reflected, and since children are truly diverse, so too should be their representation on screen. Essentially, kids want to feel recognised, validated and that their identity has some significance.'

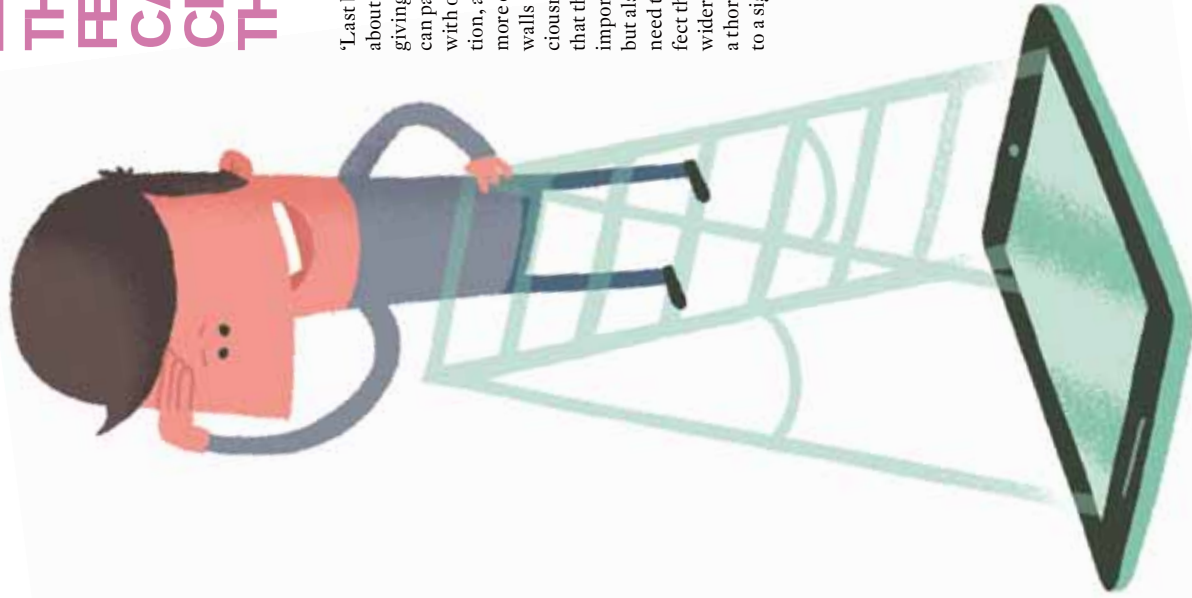
What are the biggest blunders you have witnessed in the media landscape for children? Where did the producers go wrong?

'In the long list of submissions we received when I chaired the jury of the European Commission for the European Award for Best Children's Online Content, we saw the following 'problems'. Sites where the navigation was confusing, where even the jury got lost. Sites for children where a mere click or two took you into a generic/adult world.

Sites full of invitations to buy, go to 'the shop', and advertising (not always age-appropriate advertising at that). Site after site with adult middle-class male voice-overs (seemingly) patronising kids. Sites with so much loud jingly music and jolly bright colours that we all got a headache. Sites for young children that easily led us to explicit sexual advice for older teens! Sites that had one clever idea but no progression and nothing to do once you'd done it. Sites that locked you into their simple world and never stimulated the imagination or offered a journey of development or exploration or even interest. Worthy sites to teach maths or science that were even duller than your worst teacher. Sites so complicated that I couldn't figure out the rules of play. I could go on....

By implication, of course, the sites that meet the above-mentioned conditions of positive content and avoid said blunders can be truly great. It's difficult to list these, as they vary so much depending on the child. I'd love for there to be more prominent awards celebrating great content for kids – such as we have for children's books or films and television shows. Though of course I'd love for there to be more diverse content for kids, I'm equally concerned that when it does exist, kids can't find it or simply don't know about it. As I see it, the digital network age from a child's perspective is largely a matter of both missing and missed opportunities. I hope the readers of this volume can change this! ☒

WHERE ARE THE ORDINARY KIDS? A LITTLE BIT GRUBBY, NOT ALL MIDDLE CLASS AND SQUEAKY CLEAN



THE TELETUBBIES CONTROVERSY & THE VALUE OF ENTERTAINMENT

How do digital media influence our children's development? What does recent scientific research say about the effects of media use on (young) children? Professor

Patti M. Valkenburg of Media, Youth and Society at the University of Amsterdam fills us in on the developments in her field of expertise.

Illustrations Nozzman

What has changed in your field of expertise since you started researching *Youth and Media* in 1992?

Patti M. Valkenburg: 'In a way, one could say not much has changed. There have always been claims about the negative effects of media on young children. Those claims still exist today. In the early nineties, I did extensive research with very young children when Teletubbies came out. It was the first TV programme developed solely for such a young audience and it attracted lots of criticism from experts in the field of education who didn't feel the programme had enough educational value. We received reports from America stating that children under the age of two shouldn't be watching television. During that period I discovered that these claims were largely unsubstantiated.'

WHY MUST EVERYTHING BE EDUCATIONAL?

Unsubstantiated? Could you please elaborate on that?

'American doctors tend to make rather conservative recommendations. For instance, they claim that screen use is harmful for children under the age of two. Their conclusions are based on research showing that children learn less from a television character than from real life. So what? That does not necessarily mean media is detrimental. In fact, I am not aware of any research proving that screen use is damaging for children under the age of two. In the midst of the Teletubbies controversy, we witnessed children roaring with laughter as they watched the programme.'

