
Towards a Better Internet for Children? Policy Pillars, Players and Paradoxes, edited by Brian O’Neill, Elisabeth Staksrud, and Sharon McLaughlin, offers 16 chapters that contribute evidence-based insights into ongoing European policy debates regarding Internet regulation and child online safety. Smartly divided into three complementary parts (policy pillars, players, and paradoxes), the collection provides a timely discussion of the efficacy of current European policy initiatives; the evolving roles of regulators, educators, non-governmental organizations, and parents in implementing Internet safety; and the contradictions that result from efforts to make the Internet safer.

The collection’s 27 contributors are all members of the EU Kids Online network, a research network of 33 countries supported by the European Union’s Safer Internet Programme. The discussions found in the collection are largely based on data from the most current EU Kids Online Project (2009–2011), to date the largest study of its kind monitoring European parents’ and children’s experiences with Internet access, activities, and the risks they encounter online. The project’s research objective is to better inform policy decisions and the formation of future policies that address the need for a safer Internet without compromising important rights to free speech, privacy, and participation. The purpose of the collection, then, is to raise critical debate on policies intended to protect young people while promoting their best interests and empowering them to take full advantage of digital opportunities (p. 12). While the collection is European in scope, its contributions are of significant value to similar international policy debates, not only on Internet safety, but on the value of risk and on the contradictions of child safety efforts more broadly.

A central concern for any work on child safety is how to understand, measure, and communicate risk. In their chapter on awareness, Staksrud and Ólafsson remind readers that not only is the idea of risk individually and culturally influenced, the perception of risk is almost always disproportionate to the likeliness of encounters with real risk (p. 73). To complicate this idea further, exposure to risk does not necessarily result in harm. Using data from the EU Kids Online Project, D’Haenens and Tsaliki report findings that suggest young people’s responses to risk are most often proactive or neutral, resulting in no harm (p. 251). To the contrary, some risk is considered beneficial and even necessary for the child’s development (O’Neill & Laouris, p. 201). A key challenge, then, particularly for part one of the collection, is reconciling policy measures that require that risk be treated as though it were measurable and value-neutral—measures such as filtering and content classification (Chapter 1), Internet hotlines (Chapter 2), or awareness strategies (Chapter 3)—with the knowledge that “risk” in relation to children and media is always culturally and individually framed and not without normative judgments.
Part two of the collection shows that the task of using knowledge about risk toward evidence-based policy is all the more challenging given the various needs of multiple stakeholders across national governments, industry, law enforcement, children's charities, educators, and the public. When the topic is subject to both widespread public and policy debate, as is the case with child online safety, the task is especially difficult. In a retrospective chapter on the EU Kids Online Project, Sonia Livingstone does the important work of teasing out some of the tensions of engaging in evidence-based policy work. These include, for instance, the potential for reporting to be (mis)understood as biased toward one or another stakeholder, negotiating the need as researcher to both critique and inform policy as needed, and the fact that policy often requires that issues be framed as “problems” to attract funding and be seen as worthwhile investments. This latter point is perhaps the most noticeable tension for readers of this collection.

That there is, in fact, a serious problem to which a safer Internet for children is the solution is an assumption that runs throughout the chapters in this collection. While the title’s query, Towards a Better Internet for Children?, implies that safer might not always be better, a more focused effort to challenge the problem/solution frame around children and the Internet would be beneficial to readers less familiar with this debate. This would entail an interrogation of childhood itself, which, much like the concept of “risk,” is rife with normative presumptions that shape the perceived need for a safer Internet and the nature of responses from policymakers. Policy based on culturally, religiously, racially, et cetera constructed ideas about what constitutes healthy and adequate child development are bound to produce unequal experiences for the children who fall outside these normative markers. In other words, challenging the assumptions upon which “children's needs” rest seems a priority for a collection that seeks to better inform policy decisions for all children.

One way in which the knowledge in this collection is of unquestionable value to policy that seeks to better serve children is in its child-centred approach to risk, safety, and participation. First, the EU Kids Online Project, the primary data source for the collection, foregrounds children's real experiences, making it both insightful and a model for future research. Second, the collection advocates the child's rights, framed within the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. This is significant given that the most commonly cited tension identified by more than one essay in this collection is the child's right to protection versus the child's right to participate without impediment to either the child's or the adult's right to privacy or freedom of speech. This has been perhaps the most contested terrain for a growing body of literature on childhood and safety more broadly and is a clear achievement of this collection.

In sum, what the reader learns from the chapters in this edited collection is that none of the efforts to regulate a safer Internet is sufficient alone, nor can these efforts be left to parents, educators, NGOs, or industry alone, nor are any efforts to date without significant challenge to the child's rights. One obvious conclusion that contributors all seem to arrive at is that, if the Internet is to be made safer, it will require a complex, multifaceted, multi-stakeholder approach that includes children as rights-bearing participants in shaping policy. Of course, the challenge here is that it is in large part the
very multiplicity of stakeholders with various interests in either the child and/or the Internet that makes arriving at some resolution difficult in the first place and that will likely ensure this debate continues.

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