

2.7

Children's safety in the new media environment

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The media environment and its changes are closely related to society and human development. The ability of society to broadly and quickly adopt to the newest media technologies depends on the economic development and wealth of the society, as well as on the characteristics of human capital – the general education level and openness to innovations. New media technologies, in turn, provide opportunities for the development of the economy and human capital, but present risks to the safety and wellbeing of people.

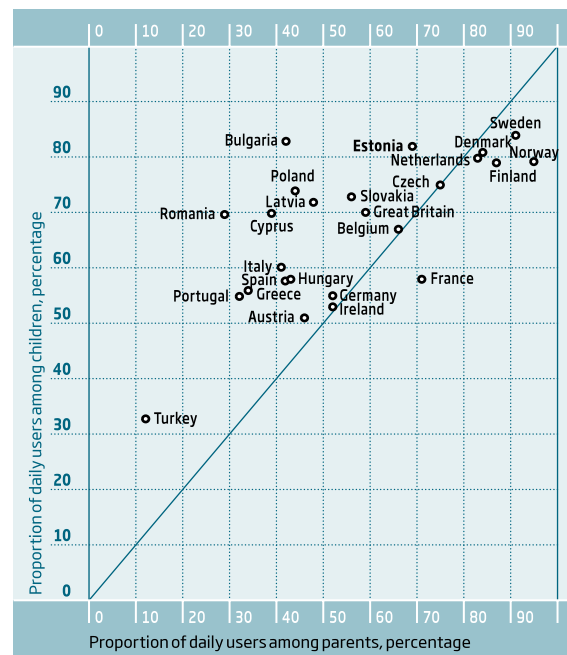
When weighing the opportunities and risks of the Internet, the policy documents and public discourses of the European Union Member States, and also of other states, focus primarily on children and young people – on a target group that eagerly uses new media technologies, but who is more vulnerable to the possible risks than adults. This sub-chapter also focuses, to a great degree, on the risk behaviour of children and young people, and the use of the opportunities provided by the new media environment, as well as on the parents concerning the ensuring of risk awareness and Internet safety. The main information comes from a representative study EU Kids Online, in the course of which, 9- to 16-year-old Internet users and one of their parents were interviewed in the autumn of 2010 in 25 European states (N=25,142) (EU Kids Online 2010). This is the largest scale and most thorough survey dealing with Internet use and online safety of European children, the data for which is freely available through the UK Data Archive. The reports that have been compiled previously based on these same interviews (Kalmus et al. 2011; Livingstone et al. 2011) show that Estonia is, simultaneously, advanced and problematic – Estonian children rank highly in Europe for making use of online opportunities, as well as for experiencing the risks. In addition to the indicators specific to this field (percentage of daily Internet users, proportion of those who have experienced online risks, the risk awareness of parents), some general indicators of development (number of expected years of education for children starting school, the Freedom of the Press Index) are also used in this sub-chapter, which enable Estonia's position in the ranking of 25 states to be interpreted and explained.

2.7.1 Intensity of online use by children and parents

The main measures of the adaptation to the new media environment, and the development of the information society, include the ratio of Internet users in the population and various groups, and the percentage of daily users among the Internet users. Based on these indicators, during the last few years, Estonian children have ranked very high among their European peers. For example, among the 25

Figure 2.7.1

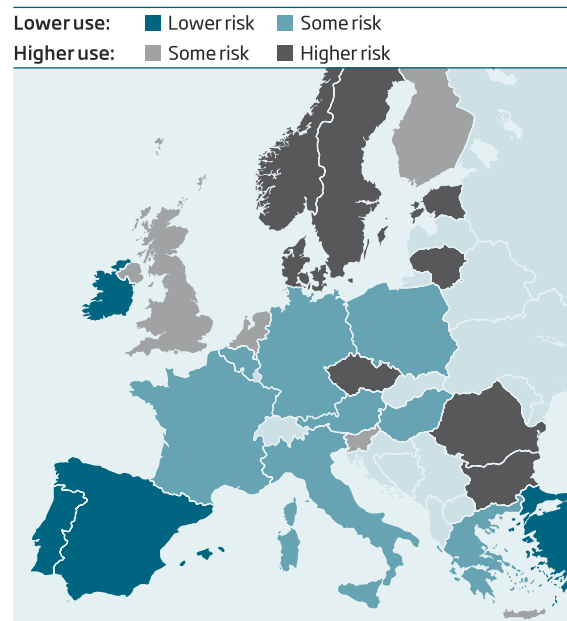
Proportion of daily users among the 9- to 16-year-old Internet users and their parents in Europe (%)



Source: EU Kids Online 2010

Figure 2.7.2

Classification of European states, based on Internet use and online risk experiences of 9- to 16-year-olds



Source: Livingstone et al. 2011: 41

states included in the EU Kids Online survey, Estonian children place third in daily online use, whereas, in 2010, 82% of Estonian children did not let a day go by without logging on at least once (Figure 2.7.1). Estonia, with the other new EU Member States, is in a group of countries in which the children are more active users of the Internet than their parents (upper triangle in Figure 2.7.1).

Although the generational gap in Estonia is not large, it differs significantly from all of the Nordic countries, where parents are more active Internet users than their children. This creates better preconditions in those states for the parents to be aware of the online risks, and to be able to guide their children's Internet use. However, it is still important to state that the generational gap in Estonia has decreased: if in 2005, 90% of 6- to 17-year-olds, and 83% of their parents, used the Internet (Special Eurobarometer 250); in 2008, the respective indicators were 93% and 92% (Flash Eurobarometer 248).

2.7.2 Children's online risk behaviour

In international comparisons, Estonian children stand out for extremely risky online use. Based on the data of the EU Kids Online survey (Kalmus et al. 2011), Estonia leads the European ranking in young online bullies and excessive Internet users. Our children are the keenest to meet face-to-face with new acquaintances from cyberspace. In Estonia, there are more children whose personal information, which they have revealed online, has been misused. A quarter of our children have been bothered or upset by online experiences – in this regard, we lag only behind young Danes.

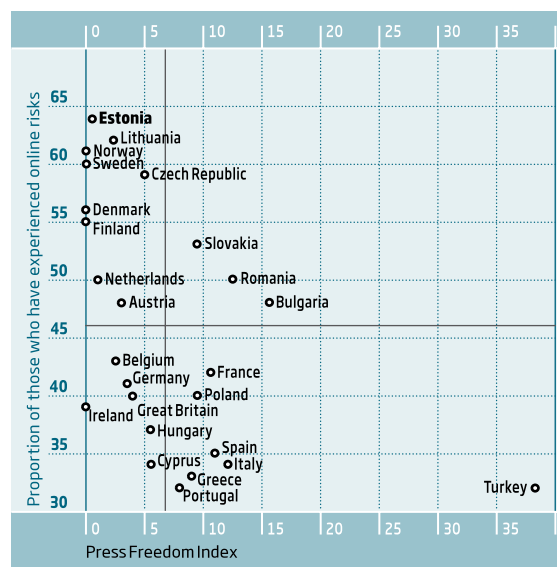
The EU Kids Online report (Livingstone et al. 2011) classifies European states, based on the indicators of children's online use and risk experiences, into four groups (Figure 2.7.2). Estonia, along with three Scandinavian countries and four new EU Member States, belongs to the category of *higher use, higher risk*. What development indicators at the macro level help to explain this grouping of states?

The multi-dimensional regression analysis used in the EU Kids Online report (Lobe et al. 2011) shows that the development of the state's IT infrastructure does not influence the intensity of children's online use, but, to a significant degree, is related to online risks. The level of children's risk experiences tends to be higher in the countries where the percentage of broadband connections is larger, and where the Internet has expanded faster.¹ This trend indicates that, in several European states (primarily Estonia, Norway, Sweden and Denmark), the development of the IT infrastructure and the intensity of children's online use have outstripped the development of online safety.

Of the indicators of development at the macro level, an important role is played by the press freedom index² (Figure 2.7.3). Estonia, along with the Nordic countries, Lithuania and the Czech Republic, belongs to the group of states, where the liberalism of the information environment is accompanied by a high level of online risk experiences.

Figure 2.7.3

Proportion (%) of 9- to 16-year-olds in Europe who have experienced online risks by the Press Freedom Index, by country



Sources: EU Kids Online 2010; Reporters Without Borders 2009

Figure 2.7.3 shows that there are also states where a high indicator of freedom of information does not preclude safe Internet use by children. Great Britain deserves special attention – their press freedom index, development of the IT infrastructure and children's intensity of Internet use considerably exceed the European average, but the rate of online risk experiences is lower than the average. An important role in this phenomenon is probably played by the fact that the relevant information has been distributed more extensively and longer and this has increased the awareness of online risks, and the skills to cope with them, among both children and parents.

2.7.3 Risk awareness of parents

In the European context, Estonian parents stand out for their comparatively untroubled attitude toward the possibility of problems, including online risks, related to their children (Figure 2.7.4). Almost half (47%) of Estonian parents are not worried about any of the problems suggested by the aforementioned European survey; in Europe as a whole, only a quarter of the parents are unconcerned. In regard to such online threats as seeing inappropriate online content, and communicating with strangers, the percentage of risk-aware parents in Estonia is only about half of the European average.

Parents' participation and the active mediation of their children's Internet use are extremely important, and reduce the probability that children will experience some online risk (Dürager & Livingstone 2012). Against the background

1 Measured in years that have passed since the moment when 50% of households had access to the Internet at home. The speed of Internet expansion, as well as the percentage of broadband connections, explain 6.2% of the variability in children's online risk experiences at the state level (Lobe et al. 2011: 62–63).

2 The freedom of the press index explains 4.4% of the variability in children's online risk experiences at the state level (Lobe et al. 2011: 60).

of the other states, Estonian parents are comparatively passive – similarly to several Eastern European states (for example Lithuania and Slovenia), both the supervision, and the setting of restrictions by parents is below the average for Europe. The passivity of Estonian parents is probably explainable by a low awareness of the risks and a generally liberal attitude toward their (children’s) information environment. Apparently, a role is also played by the aforementioned generational difference in the intensity of Internet use, which may promote the impression that the “digital natives” do not even need the help of the older generation.

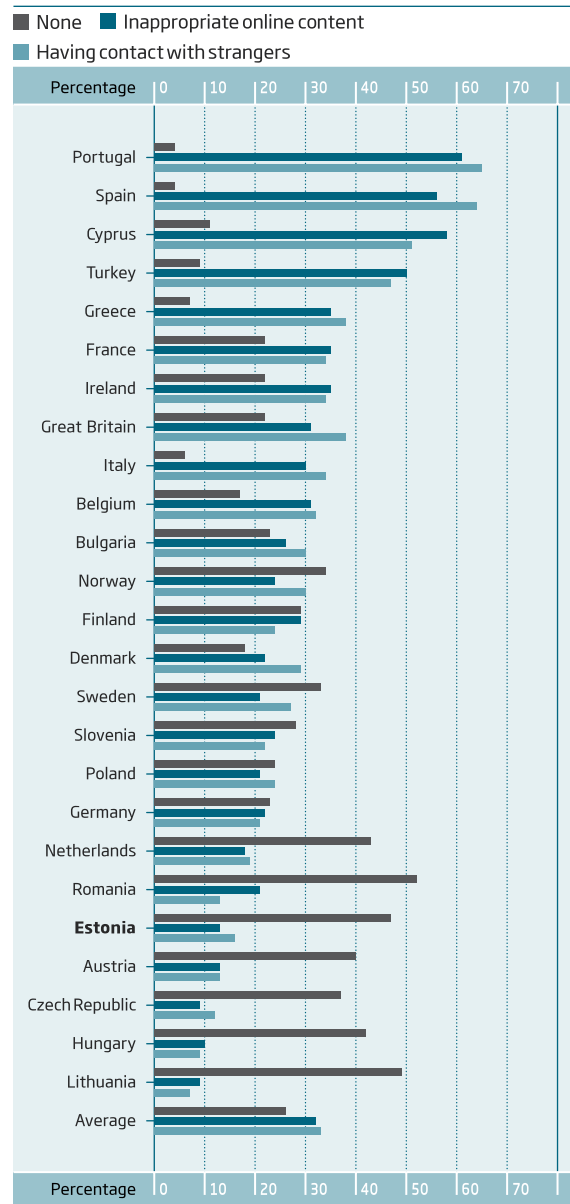
2.7.4 Summary

Estonia, along with Norway, Sweden, Denmark and several new EU Member States, belongs to the group of European states, where the development of the IT infrastructure and the intensity of children’s Internet use has outstripped the development of and policies to promote safe online behaviour. If, in the Scandinavian countries, the reason seems to be hidden in the states’ liberal information environment, which apparently also reflects the domestic childrearing values and practices, in Estonia, and in the countries with cultures closer to ours in Eastern Europe (primarily Lithuania and the Czech Republic), other possible factors are the generational gap in Internet use and the low risk awareness of the parents. At a more general level, we can interpret the situation in Estonia and the other transition states as being a conflict between the super fast development of technology and the media environment, and the ability of people to adapt and learn. The tensions and risks resulting from the different tempos of eco-technological and social transformation can be alleviated by political measures. It would be worthwhile for Estonia to observe the developments in Great Britain and Finland, as possible models, where, despite a high intensity of Internet use, and the existence of a liberal information environment, fewer children experience online risks than is the European average, or is lower than in the other Nordic countries, respectively. In the case of both states, a role is probably played by long-term and extensive publicity concerning this issue, and the importance of media education in school curricula. ○

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Figure 2.7.4

Parents of 9- to 16-year old children in Europe (%), who are concerned about the online risks related to their children (as a reference, the percentage of parents who are not worried about any problems)



Source: EU Kids Online 2010

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