

## Impact case study (REF3)

<b>Institution:</b> London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE)		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> 34 – Communication, Cultural and Media Studies, Library and Information Management		
<b>Title of case study:</b> Realising children's rights in a digital world		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> Revising and reframing EU Kids Online research 2006–14; this case study is grounded in Global Kids Online research 2015–20		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b>	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b>	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b>
Sonia Livingstone Mariya Stoilova	Professor of Social Psychology Research Officer	1990 to present 2015 to present
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> 2014–20		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> No		
<b>1. Summary of the impact</b> (indicative maximum 100 words)		
<p>Sonia Livingstone initiated Global Kids Online (GKO), a joint LSE/UNICEF project that adopted a child rights framing to conduct comparative research into how children benefit from the internet and associated technologies and how to protect them from risks. GKO's findings impacted national digital policies and grassroots initiatives (confirmed by independent assessment) and key international organisations responsible for initiating relevant regulation, policy and guidance, including the European Commission (EC), Council of Europe (CoE), International Telecommunication Union (ITU), UNESCO and the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. These impacts helped transform society's conceptualisation, priorities and steps taken to realise children's rights in a digital world.</p>		
<b>2. Underpinning research</b> (indicative maximum 500 words)		
<p>Children all over the world now use digital technology, but their experiences are often very different. Global Kids Online (GKO) grew out of EU Kids Online (EUKO), an EC-funded project that coordinated research on how children were using the internet, with a particular focus on opportunities, risks and safety. Livingstone was Principal Investigator (PI) for this 33-country project. Her research expanded to address all continents, especially in the Global South, when UNICEF commissioned her to write an agenda-setting report on children's rights and digital technologies in 2013: 'Recommendations for developing UNICEF's global research strategy in a digital age' [1].</p> <p>At that time, the global evidence base was small and fragmented [1] [2] [6]. Livingstone collaborated with UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti (Kardefelt-Winther, Byrne, Hussein et al.) and LSE colleagues (primarily Stoilova, with Helsper and Banaji advising) to launch GKO in 2015. She obtained funding from WePROTECT, a global alliance supported by over 84 countries, 24 technology companies and 20 civil society organisations to stop online child sexual abuse and exploitation.</p> <p>Led by PIs Livingstone and Kardefelt-Winther, GKO's design and intellectual framework [3] re-contextualised EUKO by drawing on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). This encompasses not only the rights to privacy and to protection from harm, but also civil rights and freedoms to participate, and the rights to play, education, health and family life in a digital world [3] [7]. The team produced new conceptual analyses and the first reliable and directly comparable findings in middle- and high-income countries about children's digital lives, and the opportunities and risks they encounter.</p> <p>To facilitate this, GKO produced a free toolkit [4] [7] including expert guidance, survey questionnaire tools and qualitative resources to help country partners plan, conduct and monitor the research impact. These were thoroughly updated in 2020, learning from country experiences (see <a href="http://www.globalkidsonline.net">www.globalkidsonline.net</a>).</p> <p>So far, GKO has surveyed over 25,000 children and their parents or carers in 15 countries (Albania, Argentina, Brazil, Bulgaria, Canada, Chile, China, Costa Rica, Ghana, Montenegro, New Zealand, the Philippines, Serbia, South Africa and Uruguay). Research is underway in China, the</p>		

Dominican Republic, India, Jamaica and Peru, and new countries continue to join. After a pilot comparative report (2016), an 11-country full report published in 2019 [5] found that:

- Digital technology enhances children’s ability to participate in the world, but it also poses particular risks to their safety. These opportunities and risks are shaped by age, gender, the country where they live and other inequalities. The policy implication is that states should improve access and address inequality (the rights to participation and non-discrimination).
- Contrary to popular assumption, parental mediation (such as limiting ‘screen time’) only partially protects children from harm. Strategies that enable children to use the internet rather than restrict their access, enhance their rights to education and the provision of age-appropriate digital resources [6]. The policy implications are that governments should improve children’s digital literacy, offer parents support and consider platform regulation.
- GKO proposed a standardised typology of the main risks that children face online, highlighting exposure to pornography, self-harm, hate content, cyberbullying, contact with strangers met online and sexual exploitation. The empirical survey research then established the incidence of these harms and the risks and protective factors associated with them. These include the child’s vulnerability, risk-taking, digital skills, breadth of digital activity and offline risk exposure. This analysis of online risk has guided governments and NGOs as they plan, budget for and target their child protection policies and interventions.
- Children’s experiences and risks are shown to vary systematically by country. GKO’s detailed findings [5], encompassing the range of their rights, enable governments to prioritise different policy actions as needed and provide a benchmark for future research and evaluations.

GKO’s research findings provide a strong alternative to the moral panic and overly restrictive policies – enacted both by parents and states – that typically frame how children use the internet in the Global South. The findings have been widely disseminated in ways that make them clearly relevant to and readily usable by states and organisations concerned with children’s needs and rights in a digital world.

### 3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

[1] Livingstone, S. & Bulger, M. (2014). A global research agenda for children’s rights in the digital age. *Journal of Children and Media*, 8(4), 317–335. doi:10.1080/17482798.2014.961496. [Published version of the original UNICEF report available at <http://alturl.com/qjosr>]

[2] Livingstone, S., Mascheroni, G. & Staksrud, E. (2018). European research on children’s internet use: Assessing the past, anticipating the future. *New Media & Society*, 20(3), 1103–1122. doi:10.1177/1461444816685930. [Explains how GKO expanded the EUKO research.]

[3] Livingstone, S. (2016). *A framework for researching Global Kids Online: Understanding children’s well-being and rights in the digital age*. Global Kids Online. Available at: <http://globalkidsonline.net/framework>

[4] Livingstone, S., Stoilova, M., Yu, S., Byrne, J. & Kardefelt-Winther, D. (2018). *Using mixed methods to research children’s online opportunities and risks in a global context: Global Kids Online*. In SAGE Methods Cases Part 2. doi:10.4135/9781526450197. Available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/84711/>

[5] Livingstone, S., Kardefelt Winther, D. & Hussein, M. (2019). *Global Kids Online comparative report*. UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti. Available at: <http://alturl.com/qzsta>

[6] Livingstone, S., Carr, J. & Byrne, J. (2015). *One in three: The task for global internet governance in addressing children’s rights*. Global Commission on Internet Governance. CIGI and Chatham House. [Republished by UNICEF (2016) at <https://bit.ly/2G6l5ou> and widely cited in UN and NGO reports.]

[7] Stoilova, M., Livingstone, S. & Kardefelt-Winther, D. (2016). Global Kids Online: Researching children’s rights in a global digital age. *Global Studies of Childhood*, 6(4), 455–466. doi:10.1177/2043610616676035.

All outputs were peer-reviewed by the academic journals, UNICEF (following formal rules), or the Global Commission on Internet Governance (Chair: Swedish ex-Prime Minister Carl Bildt).

**4. Details of the impact** (indicative maximum 750 words)

The impact was twofold. The first impact was on UNICEF itself, with consequent improvements in thinking, policy and practice in a range of countries. The second impact was on high-level international policy organisations such as the CoE, EC and other UN bodies. Livingstone worked intensively with multiple international stakeholder bodies to facilitate these, giving plenary presentations, drafting papers and advising influential policymakers. From 2014 to 2020, she gave 200 academic/stakeholder presentations and gained 270 media mentions. The GKO website had 60,712 unique users from 203 countries from 2016–20.

**Impact on UNICEF (headquarters and country offices)**

UNICEF regularly draws on GKO research in international policy, agenda-setting speeches and reports – notably its flagship *State of the world's children* report in 2017 [A], the first of these annual reports to prioritise children's wellbeing in the digital environment. In addition to the 20 countries already partnered with GKO, many of UNICEF's 192 country offices use the research to advocate for children's rights in relation to national digital policies and interventions.

UNICEF's work was extended by the Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children Fund (UNICEF, INTERPOL and ECPAT [End Child Prostitution and Trafficking]). Livingstone was PI for LSE's contribution, applying GKO to survey design from 2019 to 2020 in 14 middle- and low-income countries in Africa and South East Asia (see [www.end-violence.org/disrupting-harm](http://www.end-violence.org/disrupting-harm)).

In 2018, UNICEF commissioned an independent evaluation of GKO's research impacts from Matter of Focus. The evaluation found that GKO research directly informed national-level policy reforms, improvements to educational practice and the creation of digital resources to help children protect themselves online and to support parents engaged in raising awareness of internet security issues [B]. Individual research impacts, all of which are detailed in [B], include:

**Policy**

- Children's needs were included in Brazil's National Broadband Plan and Digital Strategy, following data provided by GKO research.
- In Ghana, the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection used the research to justify including child online protection in the revision of the Children's Act.
- In Albania, a bylaw addressing 'measures to protect children from harmful and illegal materials online' was approved by the Council of Ministers.
- UNICEF Argentina drew on the research to advocate for children's rights in the new Convergent Communications Law; this now includes the promotion of digital and media literacy as a key principle.
- In the Philippines, the Department of Education used GKO research findings to justify the integration of digital skills and digital wellness into the curriculum for younger children.
- The Bulgarian Ministry of Education and Science changed its discourse from 'technical skills' to 'media literacy'. Its Strategy for Child Protection 2019–30 drew on GKO findings in emphasising internet and media literacy and protection from cyberviolence, resulting in a draft strategy for online child safety, media literacy being introduced into the school curriculum and a refocusing of the 'Cyberscouts' programme to train 10- to 12-year-olds to help their peers learn about online engagement.

**Interventions for professionals**

- In Montenegro, teachers' digital literacy was assessed, using the GKO survey, in order to design how they can support parents around children's risks and opportunities online.
- Philippine NGOs used GKO's risk and parenting findings to raise awareness of online child protection, including creating a YouTube video, which has had more than 1,000 views.
- Ghana added a Child Online Protection module to the community engagement toolkit used to train thousands of education professionals, reaching 895 schools and 166 communities.
- Training was introduced for teachers, child protection and justice officers through the digital coexistence programme in Argentina.

**Interventions for children and young people**

- An internet safety game for 9- to 11-year-olds in Montenegro. This has had more than 1,000 downloads and is planned to become part of regular IT classes.
- Digital co-existence training for young adolescents in Argentina. This led to a government-resourced collaboration among the Ministries of Childhood, Education and Justice.
- The National Cybersecurity Centre in Ghana has begun to enable children to report if they feel unsafe online through its app, and a work priority that focuses on children has been added to its framework, with new staff recruited.
- The introduction of e-safety training for children and educators in South Africa. The internet regulator in South Africa reduced data costs after GKO results showed that they were a barrier to poorer children's access and participation.

**Interventions for parents**

- A programme of interventions co-developed by the government, UNICEF and civil society in Uruguay engages parents, teachers and children in child online empowerment, including an internet security awareness and support programme developed with parents and children.

**High-level international policy organisations****Council of Europe (CoE)**

The research informed the CoE's *Recommendation CM/Rec(2018)7 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on guidelines to respect, protect and fulfil the rights of the child in the digital environment* [C]. This is the first international legal standard to set out national obligations, and corporate responsibilities, towards children online regarding their rights in the digital environment. Livingstone presented her research at the launch of the *Council of Europe Strategy on the Rights of the Child 2016–21*, wrote the confidential research background paper (2016) for the *Guidelines*, and then drafted the *Guidelines* for the CoE. The CoE's 2020 impact evaluation found that '34 member states have changed legislation or policy to protect children in the digital environment' [D, para. 100]. To extend these impacts, Livingstone was appointed lead author of the CoE's *Handbook for policy makers on the rights of the child in the digital environment* (2020) for its 47 member states (population 820 million) [E].

**UN Committee on the Rights of the Child**

As with other treaty bodies, the Committee directs state parties to implement Convention rights in specific areas through a General Comment. After her keynote research presentation at the UN Day of General Discussion in 2014 [F], Livingstone was commissioned by the Children's Commissioner for England to write *The case for a General Comment on children's rights and digital media* (2017) [G]. This case was successful, and the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child appointed Livingstone in 2019 as the consultant to lead the drafting, with 5Rights Foundation, of General Comment 25 on children's rights in relation to the digital environment. While General Comment 25, formally adopted in February 2021, will bring future benefits, the years of work to persuade the Committee to create a General Comment in itself ensures the continued relevance of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), representing an impact on the Committee and the many states, NGOs and experts that participated in the 2020 global public consultation, transforming the global discourse to recognise children's rights in a digital world, and encouraging multiple steps towards the realisation of those rights.

**European Commission (EC)**

Appointed #SaferInternet4EU Ambassador, Livingstone spoke several times between 2014 and 2019 at the EC and European Parliament, among other regulatory fora. Her report on child online protection [H] commissioned by the European Parliament informed the 2018 revision of the Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD), reinforcing media literacy improvements as a member state obligation and extending national content regulation requirements to video-sharing platforms [I].



**Other organisations impacted by the research**

The ITU (the UN specialised agency for information and communication technologies) updated its international Child Online Protection (COP) guidelines for policymakers, industry, parents, educators and children worldwide in 2020 [K], drawing heavily on GKO's rights framing and findings for its evidence (especially [5]). Other organisations include UNESCO (for its internet universality indicators) [J], the OECD and Child Helpline International (CHI) (in updating their risk classifications and, for CHI, their staff training for child online protection). The UN Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice proposal to the UN General Assembly to counter child sexual exploitation online notes only two research efforts, 'WePROTECT Global Alliance and Global Kids Online' [L].

It is hard to count the number of children ultimately benefited by the research impacts on the above child rights organisations. Focusing just on national policies [B] puts it at 71 million.

**5. Sources to corroborate the impact** (indicative maximum of 10 references)

[A] UNICEF (2017). *State of the world's children: Children in a digital world*. New York: UNICEF. Available at: [www.unicef.org/reports/state-worlds-children-2017](http://www.unicef.org/reports/state-worlds-children-2017) [Cites GKO heavily.]

[B] Morton, S., Grant, A., Cook, A., Berry, H., McMellon, C., Robbin, M. & Ipince, A. (2019). *Children's experiences online: Building global understanding and action*. Matter of Focus, for UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2GJZKRy>

[C] CoE (Council of Europe) (2018). *Recommendation CM/Rec(2018)7 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on guidelines to respect, protect and fulfil the rights of the child in the digital environment*. Available at: <http://alturl.com/ke26n>

[D] CoE (Council of Europe) (2020) *Second report on the implementation of the Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child*. Available at: <http://alturl.com/62wfo>

[E] Livingstone, S., Lievens, E. & Carr, J. (2020). *Handbook for policy makers on the rights of the child in the digital environment to support the implementation of Recommendation CM/Rec(2018)7*. Council of Europe. Available at: <http://alturl.com/2f7we>

[F] Keynote speaker and expert resource person, *Report of the 2014 Day of General Discussion*. UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, Geneva, September 2014. Available at: [www.ohchr.org/documents/hrbodies/crc/discussions/2014/dgd\\_report.pdf](http://www.ohchr.org/documents/hrbodies/crc/discussions/2014/dgd_report.pdf)

[G] Livingstone, S., Lansdown, G. & Third, A. (2017). *The case for a UNCRC General Comment on children's rights and digital media*. Children's Commissioner for England. Available at: <http://alturl.com/c9byb>

[H] Livingstone, S., Tambini, D., & Belakova, N. (2018). *Recommendations for EU policy developments on protection of minors in the digital age*. European Parliament's Committee on Culture and Education. Available at: <http://alturl.com/uck4j> [Cited in the Report of the Secretary-General to the UN General Assembly (2018). *Protecting children from bullying*. Available at: <https://undocs.org/A/73/265>]

[I] European Commission (2015). *Survey and data gathering to support the impact assessment of a possible new legislative proposal concerning directive 2010/13/EU(AVMSD) and in particular the provisions on the protection of minors*. Available at: <http://alturl.com/tbrqk> [Cites EUKO.] See also European Commission (2016). *COM(2016) 288 final: Online platforms and the digital single market opportunities and challenges for Europe*. Available at: <http://alturl.com/msyxx> [Cites EUKO and Reference [6].]

[J] UNESCO (2018). *UNESCO's Internet universality indicators: A framework for assessing internet development*. Available at: <http://alturl.com/jasiq> [Cites GKO.]

[K] ITU (International Telecommunication Union) (2020) *Child Online Protection guidance*. Available at: [www.itu-cop-guidelines.com](http://www.itu-cop-guidelines.com) [Cites GKO heavily; translated into all UN languages; launched globally and regionally during 2020.]

[L] UN Social and Economic Council (2019). *Draft resolution on countering child sexual exploitation and sexual abuse online* [for adoption by the UN General Assembly]. Available at: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3828536?ln=en> [Cites GKO.]