

Making sense of the social mediation of children's internet use: Perspectives for interdisciplinary and cross-cultural research¹

Veronika Kalmus

1 Introduction

Along with the rapid growth of children's internet use and rising public concern about risks and negative experiences kids may face online, there has been increasing research interest in the support provided by relevant social actors, particularly parents, to enhance children's online safety. The practices and strategies used by socialising agents to support, monitor and regulate children's online behaviour can be summarised under the term the *social mediation* of children's internet use.

The concept of social mediation originates in socialisation theory and is related to the research field of media socialisation (*Mediensozialisation*), which has received a lot of scholarly attention in the German-speaking academic community, notably in Ingrid Paus-Hasebrink's studies (e.g. Paus-Hasebrink/Bichler 2008; Paus-Hasebrink 2009). While a great deal of research on media socialisation, especially in the German tradition, has been substantially grounded in theories of communication, media and society (elaborating on the approaches by Pierre Bourdieu, Norbert Elias, Jürgen Habermas and Alfred Schütz, to name only a few), the majority of work on social mediation, as well as media literacy, available in English has been "atheoretical" (Chakroff/Nathanson 2011) or, as I would rather put it, remaining on the level of proposing typologies and/or normative statements and policy recommendations.

The aim of this chapter is to provide a swift, generalised and deliberately non-exhaustive overview of previous research on the social mediation of children's internet use, largely based on English-language literature, and to outline some conceptual and methodological considerations arising from these studies. Subsequently, the chapter sketches a few possible perspectives and suggestions for fur-

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ther research in the field of the social mediation of children's online behaviour, with a strong focus on interdisciplinarity, methodological plurality and the context of internationality.

To provide the necessary background, the chapter starts by delineating the contours of the semantic field of the concept of social mediation.

2 On the conceptual meaning of “social mediation”

In its very essence, “social mediation” is a multidimensional, higher-order construct that embraces a considerable variety of types of social interactions between children and socialising agents, as well as specific child-rearing techniques, practices and strategies employed within families (Kirwil 2009; Chakroff/Nathanson 2011). The dimensions of the construct themselves have their own, largely unresolved, conceptual issues (Nathanson 2011), which are manifested most clearly in several classifications and typologies of parental mediation. In this respect, two competing two-dimensional approaches pervade research literature: “system-based” versus “user-based” mediation (differentiating between technical solutions and parental guidance), and “restrictive mediation” or “cocooning” versus “instructive mediation” (distinguishing between parental rule-making and active efforts to interpret media content for children; cf. Kirwil/Garmendia/Garitaonandia/Martínez Fernández 2009). Furthermore, various typologies of parental strategies for mediating children's internet use have been proposed. For instance, Lwin, Stanaland and Miyazaki (2008) have proposed four parental strategies: “restrictive”, “promotive” (only instructive mediation), “selective” (both restrictive and instructive), and “laissez faire” (no mediation). Livingstone and Helsper (2008) have also described four factors of parental mediation: “active co-use” and three types of “restrictive mediation” (use of technical filtering/monitoring tools, setting rules and restrictions, and monitoring of visited websites and received/sent e-mails).

On the broadest level of generalisation, taking into account other socialising agents besides parents, I suggest that the social mediation of children's internet use can be divided into two categories: on the one hand, *social support*, i.e. help, guidance, co-use and co-interpreting, provided by any socialising agents (teachers, peers, parents or other family members and relatives) and, on the other hand, *rules and restrictions* (social as well as technical), predominantly set by teachers and parents. Also, I propose that social mediation may be seen as representing *structure* within the dual theoretical notion of structure and agency. The mediation of children's online behaviour, indeed, involves two main components of structure – *resources and rules* – that are “always both enabling and constraining,

in virtue of the inherent relation between structure and agency” (Giddens 1984: 169). Resources and rules related to the mediation of children’s internet use include technical resources (for example, a broadband connection, and the child’s own computer or portable device), the availability of parental guidance (their time and know-how), the strength and expertise level of the child’s social network, rules and restrictions set at home and at school, and so on. Agency, in this case, refers to children’s capability, freedom, motivation and desire (cf. Giddens 1984; Emirbayer/Mische 1998) to use the internet according to their own choice and to benefit from and make meaning of it.

Some further conceptual issues are elaborated in this chapter. Firstly, I suggest that the concept of social mediation has some parallels with the general notion of “mediation” in its most simple sense of “media intervening between ourselves and ‘reality’” (McQuail 2005: 83). Secondly, rootedness within socialisation theory conditions social mediation to be contextualised in relation to *socialisation cultures*, guided by mores and values (cf. Kirwil/Garmendia/Garitanoandia/Martínez Fernández 2009). Thus, the mediation of children’s internet use carries a heavy *contextual* loading, which needs to be carefully considered and interpreted.

3 Previous research foci

Research on the social mediation of children’s internet use has stemmed from previous studies focussing on parental mediation of children’s TV viewing and video-game playing. These, in turn, have been largely driven by adults’ desire to protect children from negative influences of electronic media (cf. Chakroff/Nathanson 2011). Not surprisingly, then, there have been a fair number of studies on whether and how parents help their children to avoid or manage online risks, while relatively little research has focussed on how parents help their kids to achieve more online opportunities and benefits (cf. Livingstone 2009). We can draw the generalisation that most of the previous research on the mediation of children’s internet use has, more or less explicitly, proceeded from the protectionist paradigm that sees children as innocent and vulnerable, in need of guidance, protection and even control by adults. Moreover, according to a predominant assumption underlying this research tradition, children are granted little or no independent agency: they are implicitly treated as relatively passive recipients of adults’ help or control (cf. Buckingham 2000).

In line with the dominance of the protectionist perspective, empirical research on the social mediation of children’s internet use has, by and large, concentrated on parental intervention, mostly addressing three broad types of research

questions: (a) *prevalence* (e.g. how widespread various strategies and types of mediation are among parents); (b) *predictors* (e.g. what socio-demographic variables and internet-use characteristics of children and parents are related to the occurrence of different types of mediation), and (c) *effectiveness* (e.g. whether parental activities can influence children's experiences with online media in a desirable way).

Activities by other socialising agents besides parents have seldom been studied, much less through simultaneous measurement in the same survey. One of the very few exceptions is the EU Kids Online survey, which asked children about the mediation of internet use practised by parents, teachers and peers, as well as about a range of other sources of online safety awareness, such as the media or experts in the children's community (cf. Livingstone/Haddon/Görzig/Ólafsson 2011). Furthermore, the survey included matched questions asked of the child and the parent to allow for a comparison of their responses. It is also crucial to note that the heuristic model employed in the EU Kids Online project emphasises national context – socio-economic stratification, regulatory framework, technological infrastructure, education system and cultural values – as shaping the social mediation of children's online experiences.

4 Conceptual and methodological considerations arising from previous research

4.1 Problems with studying "effectiveness"

The effectiveness of the social mediation of children's internet use is one of the most critical questions asked about the phenomenon, not least from the policy-making perspective. Besides altruistic intentions of enhancing children's online safety, ideological interests and policy implications push this particular subject into the focal point of research agenda. Indeed, as Sonia Livingstone has put it: "The more effectively parents keep their children safe online, the less emphasis need be placed on regulating (or self-regulating) the activities of the industry and other institutions, and vice versa" (2009: 223). The underlying policy interests are tied to strong protectionist assumptions guiding research towards desperately seeking the effectiveness of intervening activities by socialising agents, mostly parents. In addition to such ideological assumptions, studying the influence of any agent of socialisation is heavily burdened by several methodological problems (cf. Kalmus 2004).

One of the complications centres on the difficulty in identifying cause and effect. As surveys measuring the mediation of children's internet use are usually

cross-sectional – conducted at one specific point in time – the statistical techniques available are largely correlational. Correlation, however, does not necessarily imply causation. While the implicit assumptions mentioned above tell that children's online behaviour is the outcome of social mediation (and children's demographic and psychological characteristics), it is impossible to demonstrate that this is indeed the case. In some instances, common sense suggests that the direction of causality is probably the reverse. For instance, an analysis by Dürager and Livingstone (2012), conducted on the EU Kids Online survey data, showed that parental monitoring and parents' active mediation of children's internet safety (guiding the child in using the internet safely and helping in case of difficulty) tends to be associated with more online risks and experiences of harm among children, suggesting that these two strategies of mediation are most likely to follow from (rather than cause) children's negative experiences. Also, as an analysis by Kalmus, von Feilitzen and Siibak (2012) of the same data demonstrated, children's experiences of online risks and harm are a little more likely to occur when there is more support by teachers and peers, again leading to the interpretation that social mediation may occur *retroactively* – after children have had a negative online experience.

A strategy for testing that hypothesis is to ask children directly what they do after they have experienced online harm. This measure was also used in the EU Kids Online survey, which showed that 33–50% of the children who had been bothered by an online experience turned to a friend to discuss it, while 25–40% talked to a parent and 2–7% turned to a teacher (cf. Hasebrink/Görzig/Haddon/ Kalmus/Livingstone 2011). Another typical methodological problem related to measuring the effectiveness of social mediation is the omitted variable bias, which occurs when a model incorrectly leaves out one or more important causal factors. For instance, when we find a significant correlation between, say, parental mediation and children's digital skills, the positive effect may actually be caused by other agents in children's social network, such as teachers or peers.

The necessity of mitigating such methodological problems leads us to look for different perspectives for further research. Some possible solutions offered by the EU Kids Online network include (a) abandoning the long-held assumptions about the direction of causality and the effectiveness of intervening activities by parents, or (b) asking children in a more detailed way about all other socialising agents and the latter's interactions with children. In addition, employing a richer variety of methods, such as experimental or quasi-experimental studies, to establish causality on a firmer basis, or qualitative research to gather children's own narratives and interpretations, as well as multi-method designs and triangulation (cf. Paus-Hasebrink 2010), would be useful.

4.2 *Children's perspective and their active role*

Closely related to the assumptions underlying researchers' attempts at measuring the effectiveness of mediating activities by socialising agents is the question of children's role in the process. Notwithstanding the protectionist paradigm that sees children as passive recipients of adults' help or control, there is a growing body of evidence showing kids to be knowledgeable and resourceful actors. For instance, the UK Children Go Online survey found that 63% of 12–19-year-old home users had taken some action to hide their online activities from their parents, and 69% of 9–17-year-old daily and weekly users said they would mind their parents restricting or monitoring their internet use (Livingstone 2009: 222). According to the EU Kids Online survey, 56% of 9–16-year-olds think parental mediation does not limit what they can do online, and 36% say they ignore what their parents tell them when they use the internet (cf. Livingstone/Haddon/Görzig/Ólafsson 2011). Still, 70% of European children say parental mediation helps a lot or a little to make their internet experience better. More than one-third of children (35%) have themselves provided advice on safe internet use to their friends (ibid.). Thus, we can see that children mediate each other, and initiate, evaluate, ignore, evade and resist parental mediation. This conclusion is well in line with modern socialisation theories elaborated within developmental psychology, which perceive children as agents of influence in their own right, capable of developing active strategies to induce parents to drop or modify their demands (cf. Kuczynski/Kochanska/Radke-Yarrow/Girnius-Brown 1987).

In further studies, obviously, children's active role in social mediation cannot be ignored; furthermore, their perspective, interpretations and deliberations need to be studied more carefully. This, again, calls for qualitative and multi-method designs for communication research to be able to understand the meaning that the new media and social mediation have for children (cf. Paus-Hasebrink 2010) and to describe the related psychological aspects of individual sense-making (cf. Paus-Hasebrink/Ponte/Dürager/Bauwens 2012).

4.3 *Drawing distinctions between the roles of mediating agents*

The existing studies on social mediation either focus on one socialising agent at a time or, in following Bronfenbrenner's (1979) model of concentric systems influencing human development, implicitly place parents, teachers and peers as agents of social mediation at the same structural level. In drawing parallels between social mediation and the general notion of "mediation", looking at socialising agents as the "media" through which, with the help of which, and sometimes despite which children make contact with the online world, some specific "mediation roles" (McQuail 2005) potentially performed by these agents are discernible.

First and foremost, social mediators may play the role of *gatekeeper* (or *filter*), selecting parts of online experiences for children and closing off other activities, platforms and topics, whether deliberately or not. The analysis by Dürager and Livingstone (2012), conducted on the EU Kids Online survey data, showed that parental restrictions and active mediation of children's internet use are negatively correlated with the level of risks and harm children experience online; however, restrictive parental mediation is also negatively associated with the scope of children's online opportunities and the level of their digital skills. Thus, either more or less consciously obeying the dominant public rhetoric that expects parents to "provide the backstop or final safety net for children" (Livingstone 2009: 220), parents, indeed, fulfil the role of *gatekeepers* or *filters*.

Mediating agents may also act as *guides* or *interpreters* (or *signposts*), pointing the way through the internet "jungle" and helping to make sense of what is puzzling or difficult to cope with. The analysis by Kalmus, von Feilitzen and Siibak (2012) of the EU Kids Online data demonstrated that teachers' mediation is positively correlated with children's digital and safety skills, thus suggesting that it is teachers who perform the role of *guides* or *coaches*. This pattern, though, is not discernible in all of the surveyed 25 countries, indicating that the coaching role of teachers is still emerging.

Social mediators can also function as *windows*, which extend children's vision and knowledge of the new media world and their scope of online opportunities. As shown by Kalmus, von Feilitzen and Siibak (2012), peer mediation is positively correlated with children's online opportunities in all 25 countries, indicative of peers' universal role in helping children to discover new sights in cyberspace.

Finally, the above-mentioned hypothesis of *retroactive mediation*, based on positive associations between social mediation and children's experiences of online risks and harm, suggests that peers, parents and, more seldom, teachers may also play the specific roles of *consolers* and *trustees* to whom children turn after having experienced something negative online.

Testing and improving these emerging conceptualisations about the specific roles social mediators play in children's new media use, helping kids to cope with "developmental tasks and challenges of life" (cf. Paus-Hasebrink 2010), can be seen as one area for further, more detailed research.

4.4 *Parental mediation as a set of practices embedded in the context of family relationships and social structures*

Parental mediation of children's internet use is a new phenomenon, and the current generation of parents is the first to face this challenge (Kalmus/Roosalu 2012). We may assume that in their attempts to cope with this novel task and the relat-

ed expectations, parents have to rely on their experiences and habits of child-rearing practised in other everyday contexts. So far, however, only a few studies have connected general parenting styles, identified in developmental psychology (Baumrind 1991), with mediation strategies. These sporadic studies, indeed, have found significant correlations between parenting styles and techniques of social mediation. For instance, Eastin, Greenberg and Hofschire (2006) demonstrated that authoritative parents (high on responsiveness and demandingness) use instructive and restrictive strategies and technological blocking more than authoritarian (low on responsiveness, high on demandingness) and uninvolved (low on both scales) parents. Also, Rosen, Cheever and Carrier (2008) found that authoritative parents are more likely to mediate their children's MySpace use; moreover, their study demonstrated that the authoritative parenting style is related to fewer high-risk online activities on the part of adolescents, for example, low rates of disclosure of personal information.

In taking a wider interdisciplinary perspective involving economics, sociology, educational sciences and psychology, Malamud and Pop-Eleches (2011) showed in a quasi-experimental study conducted in Romania that the presence of parental rules regarding children's school-work helped to mitigate some of the negative effects of home computer use on educational outcomes among children from low-income families. These results may lead one to argue that a supportive and healthy atmosphere in the family (cf. Xiuqin/Huimin/Mengchen/Jinan/Ying/Ran 2010) or any form of parent-child communication regarding media use (cf. Chakroff/Nathanson 2011) will limit negative media effects on children. Chakroff and Nathanson have even suggested that parental mediation might be seen as a "surrogate measure for the quality of the parent-child relationship" (2011: 557), highlighting Ron Warren's (2001) recommendation that future research on social mediation should also study parental involvement with children in general.

It is evident that parents are not equally capable of committing themselves to child-rearing tasks and activities in the rapidly changing social and technological environment. Previous studies on the mediation of children's internet use have described several socio-structural differences between parents based on their gender, education and internet use, as well as on the child's gender and age (e.g. Kirwil/Garmendia/Garitaonandia/Martínez Fernández 2009). Thus, I suggest that the parental mediation of children's internet use needs to be seen as a set of embedded practices, influenced, among many other factors, by parents' cognitive and time resources (cf. Kalmus/Roosalu 2012) or (inter)acting capabilities (Paus-Hasebrink/Bichler 2008), their socio-demographic characteristics, parenting styles, etc. This suggestion entails a call for further research to take a multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary approach (cf. Paus-Hasebrink 2010), combining

theoretical insights, concepts and comprehensive measurement techniques from developmental psychology, sociology, educational sciences, and media and communication studies.

4.5 *Studying social mediation in a cross-national perspective*

So far, only a few studies have examined the social mediation of children's internet use from a comparative perspective, focussing on parental strategies (Kirwil 2009; Kirwil/Garmendia/Garitaonandia/Martínez Fernández 2009; Lobe/Segers/Tsaliki 2009; Kalmus/Roosalu 2012) or mediation by teachers and peers (Kalmus/von Feilitzen/Siibak 2012). With regard to parental mediation, these studies have found systematic cross-national variation, which has been explained by taking into account cross-cultural differences in parents' preference for teaching individualistic or collectivistic values to kids at home (Kirwil 2009; Kirwil/Garmendia/Garitaonandia/Martínez Fernández 2009). This approach is in line with a long tradition of research within social and developmental psychology on techniques and practices of child-rearing guided by parental values and attitudes, which, in turn, are influenced by broader cultural ideologies (see Tulviste/Mizera/De Geer/Tryggvason 2007 for an overview).

Recent theoretical debates in sociology between cultural determinists and institutionalists, such as Detlev Lück and Seymour Spilerman, have raised the question of the role culture plays in the way societies are organised. Lück (2006) has argued that the cultural background of societies has shaped their institutional arrangements, but cultural mores and religious belief systems continue to assert a direct effect on individual-level values and practices. Spilerman (2009), being critical of the fact that studies of values tend to be oblivious to the literature of institutional effects, suggests that the impact of value structures on individual-level practices is filtered through institutions. Inspired by this debate, Kalmus and Roosalu (2012) hypothesised that the factors behind cross-national differences in parental mediation strategies are probably multilateral: cultural as well as institutional. Using the data from Flash Eurobarometer No. 248, conducted in 2008 among parents of 6–17-year-old children in 27 EU member states, they confirmed that parental mediation of children's internet use varies between the countries with individualistic versus collectivistic orientation in child-rearing. Also, the analysis showed that systematic correlation patterns exist between the types of welfare arrangement (and underlying gender regimes) and predominant parental styles of mediating children's internet use, leading to the conclusion that welfare state institutions, through regulating female labour force participation and the availability of public childcare, have some bearing on the strategies parents are able to employ in their child-rearing tasks. Some particular cross-national differences,

however, seemed to suggest that additional cultural and institutional indicators, among them religious background and the duration and intensity of awareness-raising activities, need to be included in future analyses. This suggestion, again, involves the above-mentioned call for further research to take a multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary approach to enable researchers to consider a more comprehensive range of explanatory factors. Also, we may add that a richer set of analytical techniques, including multi-level modelling or qualitative comparative analysis (QCA), is needed in future cross-national studies on social mediation.

4.6 *Dynamic perspective on social mediation*

The concept of social mediation, originating in socialisation theory, implicitly involves a *dynamic* aspect by referring to the relationship between the child and his or her parents, teachers or peers as a developmental process (cf. Kirwil/Garmendia/Garitaonandia/Martínez Fernández 2009). Empirical studies, however, rather than using longitudinal research designs, tend to measure mediation of children's internet use at one specific point in time. It is evident from cross-sectional studies that parents reduce their mediation – especially restrictions – as children get older (cf. Livingstone/Helsper 2008; Dürager/Livingstone 2012), and the importance of social support from teachers and friends in increasing children's digital skills and the range of their online activities decreases for older children (cf. Kalmus/von Feilitzen/Siibak 2012). We know little, however, about how exactly children develop their agency, or what specific mediation roles are performed by parents, teachers and peers at different stages of the developmental process. Thus, similarly to the overall field of media and communication research, we need more panel studies and qualitative longitudinal studies (cf. Paus-Hasebrink 2010) for future research to consider how children's development by age interacts with the dynamics of social mediation and the general process of socialisation (cf. Paus-Hasebrink/Ponte/Dürager/Bauwens 2012).

5 **Summary: Perspectives and suggestions for further research**

Arising from the conceptual and methodological considerations sketched in this chapter, four main approaches to further research on the social mediation of children's internet use can be suggested.

A more elaborate conceptualisation of the very construct of “social mediation”, its dimensions, dynamics and the specific roles played by socialising agents is one approach, drawing upon more detailed and multifaceted empirical studies. This suggestion entails taking into account children's agency, knowledgeable ac-

tion and subjective sense-making (cf. Paus-Hasebrink/Ponte/Dürager/Bauwens 2012) in the process of social mediation.

Secondly, social mediation has to be studied in the holistic context of several levels – as a set of embedded practices influenced by social relationships and communication patterns in the family, peer groups and school on the micro level, socio-structural characteristics on the meso level, and institutional and socio-cultural factors on the macro level. The latter aspect entails a call for further cross-national studies on social mediation to make it possible to analyse macro-level determinants in comparative perspective.

The third perspective springs from the second one: to consider a more comprehensive range of contextual factors, research on social mediation has to combine theoretical insights, concepts and measurement techniques from developmental psychology, educational sciences, media and communication studies, and sociology. Thus, adopting the philosophy of crossing boundaries and employing a multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary perspective (cf. Paus-Hasebrink 2010) is envisioned for future studies.

The fourth set of suggestions is directly related to the three approaches mentioned above: to study social mediation from a more detailed, multifaceted, dynamic, contextualised and interdisciplinary perspective, a richer variety of methods and analytical techniques (such as quasi-experiments, panel studies, qualitative longitudinal studies, multi-level modelling and qualitative comparative analysis), as well as multi-method designs and triangulation, are recommended (cf. Paus-Hasebrink 2010).

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