

Sonia Livingstone katedraduna
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Doctora Honoris Causa
por la Universidad del País Vasco de la
catedrática Sonia Livingstone

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Dear Basque Minister of Education, Chancellor of the University of the Basque Country, Dean of the Faculty of Social and Communication Sciences, graduates and ladies and gentlemen....

I am delighted today to be receiving an honorary doctorate during the graduation ceremony the students in Journalism, Audiovisual Communication and Advertising, Political Sciences and Sociology.

My relationship with the University of the Basque Country started as long ago as 1995, with the project "TV and The Child" which continued the research work of the late professor Hilde Himmelweit, also from the London School of Economics and Political Science. And it continues still, in 2017, with the "EU Kids Online" project – a network involving researchers in over 30 countries who seek to understand how children are engaging with the internet in all its guises, hoping to work out whether this is a benefit or a harm, and which circumstances make the difference.

Twenty years ago, when we began our work on children and the so-called "new media", I recall asking a little girl if she had heard of the internet. With a puzzled frown she asked in turn, "is it something you plug into the back of the television?" Those were the days when the internet was barely imaginable – thought to be a way of making friends around the globe and being able to search for convenient information at your fingertips.

Little did we know that, pretty soon, the internet would be feared as a means of potentially-abusive strangers targeting our children. Or that the convenient information would be micro-targeted to match our interests, including so much fake news that we wouldn't know good from bad. And while I had laughed at the little girl who thought the internet would be plugged into the TV, it turns out that she was right all along. Indeed, the internet is now being "plugged into" everything we have in our homes, from children's teddy bears and rucksacks to the fridge and the car.

How can researchers keep up with these rapid changes? In my work I hang out with kids whenever I can, talking with them about how they use the media, what they do on Facebook or why their parents worry about their computer gaming. Working with colleagues in different countries, we compare the insights from children living in diverse contexts to figure out – what is similar or different, what is changing or stable, what is problematic or full of potential for improvement?

And then I discuss these findings with government, industry and child welfare organisations to see what challenges they are facing, what knowledge is useful to them, and what would make children's lives better. It's not easy for policy makers, because we find that the risks and opportunities tend to go hand in hand – the more children use the internet, the more skilled they get, but also the more risk they face. It's like learning to ride a bicycle – we want them to be free and independent, but we worry about where they go and who they'll meet.

So we have to find ways to make them more skilled and more resilient, on the one hand, while introducing some kinds of regulation against the major risks, on the other. There's no turning the internet off, and there's no wrapping children in cotton wool to keep them safe from the world. After all, the internet is no longer an optional extra in our lives, something to occupy our leisure time alone. It's how we work, learn, communicate and participate in society. We're not just engaging with the internet, we're engaging with the whole world through the internet.

As you can see, my work focuses on the experiences, capacities and potential of ordinary people living in extraordinary times. I try to enter their everyday realities, exploring what's meaningful to them, what concerns them, and how they imagine the future. Working with adults – often parents and teachers – is always interesting, because they have some (though limited) power to bring about changes meaningful to them. Working with children is even better, because they have the imagination to think how things could be otherwise, and to express for themselves – and perhaps also for the rest of us – what should be done differently and why.

It's also interesting to work with children because (1) they are always "in learning mode", keen to experiment with ways to manage their experiences, (2) being born into the digital environment, they find synergies between how they think, explore and network, and the nature of the digital environment itself – with its networked

possibilities, just-in-time information, and continual reinvention of itself. But they are also vulnerable to levels of adversity that they cannot yet manage, and then society bears a responsibility for harming them.

Present changes make us think differently about the past and the future. I know many adults are worried that today's children don't have childhoods just like we did, that they are not growing up to be like us either. But some of them do, and some of them are, and in any case, we've made a lot of mistakes in the world we've created for them.

Looking back, I am struck that for most of human history, people's lives have gone largely unnoticed except by a few, their conversations and actions being little observed, local in scope and transitory in nature. Now the very infrastructure of our lives is changing, shifting onto proprietary platforms that own, track, retain and monetise our every interest, comment, action and relationship.

Today's children are the first generation for whom this change is palpable, the first who will not remember anything different, the canaries in the coal mine of our huge social experiment with the digital. Sadly, we can't (1) assign people to digital and non-digital lives, to compare the differences, (2) wait twenty years to see how people grow up in the digital age and then go back and change things.

So we need to start paying serious attention to what this means, whose interests are being served, what whether things could be otherwise, for all our sakes. That's my future research agenda. I hope I have convinced you that it is interesting and worthwhile. And I thank you warmly for the enormous honour you have paid to me today.