UKCCIS — UK COUNCIL FOR **CHILD INTERNET SAFETY**

LSE Media and Communications

Digital by Default: Children's Capacity to Understand and Manage Online Data and Privacy

Aims

The aim of this study is to:

- Determine how children learn about, and understand, the privacy implications of the contemporary digital environment.
- Inform the balance between regulatory and educational policies to protect children's privacy online.

Key Findings

The children (ages 11–16) in this study:

- Conceptualise privacy in relation to interpersonal contexts, conceiving of personal information as something they have agency and control over.
- Are most familiar with the contexts where they play an active role in how their data is shared, rectified, used and removed – and they draw on this understanding to both generalise about privacy and guide their data protection tactics in other contexts.
- Expect institutional monitoring to occur within certain physical and symbolic boundaries.
- Find the commercial domain perplexing and manage to grasp only some aspects of how it operates
- Expect agency in interpersonal contexts, but their tendency to trust familiar institutions such as their schools, make for a doubly problematic orientation towards data and privacy online in commercial contexts, thereby leading to a mix of frustration, misapprehension and risk.

Policy Context

Children cannot be expected to fully comprehend and manage their data and privacy online in the current and ever-innovating digital environment. This study demonstrates the unique position of schools as institutions tasked simultaneously with educating students and managing their personal data. Legal and policy changes are hard for children to grasp, but not integrating new regulatory changes into children's formal (or informal) digital literacy education seems like a wasted opportunity, especially when they are intrigued by the topics that are affecting their daily online experiences. Further training of educators and updates to the school curriculum regarding the future of datafication – and the dangers arising from the endless surveillance possibilities of governments and corporations – is warranted.

Insofar as both children's capacities and the practice of digital literacy education face real limitations, regulatory and/or design solutions for the protection of children's privacy in relation to the digital environment will be necessary. However, since the complexity of the digital environment often challenges teachers' capacity to address children's knowledge gaps, businesses, educators, parents and the state must also exercise a shared responsibility to create a legible, transparent and privacy-respecting digital environment in which children can exercise genuine choice and agency.

Methodology

This study took a child-centered, qualitative approach to charting the nature and limits of children's understanding of privacy in digital contexts. 28 mixed-gender focus group interviews were conducted with children ages 11–16 years, from six UK secondary schools selected to represent a mix of achievement and geographical area (two in London and one each in Essex, the Midlands, Wales and Scotland). The 169 participants (85 girls and 84 boys) were selected by their own schools from among those who volunteered after receiving an information sheet about the project, on the basis of diversity in background, grades and digital skills.

Background

Children's lives are traditionally conceptualised as part of the private sphere, but they are a major source of data in a hugely profitable data marketplace. Arguably, their lives are becoming datafied—meaning that their possibilities for action, and the affordances of their lifeworld, are influenced by practices of data processing determined by commercial and political priorities far beyond the control or knowledge of a child. In wealthier countries, children's lives can now be called digital by-default: even before birth they may have a digital profile generated by their parents, a health record produced by the state, and they may have attracted the interest of commercial actors. Thereafter, much of what they do and what happens to and around them will be digitally recorded, enriching that profile and potentially shaping their life chances.

This study explores the way children's lives are framed by three social spheres in which privacy matters: interpersonal (family, peers, community); institutional (such as the school or health service); and commercial (notably purchasing, marketing and data brokering).