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"WE HAVE TO TEACH CHILDREN ABOUT DATA PROTECTION EARLIER." AN INTERVIEW WITH SONIA LIVINGSTONE[1]

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It is about noon now. What media have you used so far?

I have done a fair bit of Twitter, I have talked to my children on WhatsApp. I have looked at my Facebook briefly. I have also used e-mail and maybe LinkedIn.

As a media expert, how do you personally navigate in the growing volume of information we face every day? Do you have some personal strategy to prevent being overwhelmed?

Yes, but I don't know whether I am very successful. I do try to keep a distinction between the apps, I don't use them all for everything. Facebook, for me, is just for friends and family. WhatsApp just for my children. And Twitter is professional. I have also curated my Twitter contacts so that they tell me what I need to know. I try not to look at my phone when there are people in the room, I try to stay in touch with the people in front of me. I try to look up at the sky sometimes. And yes, I spend lots of time staring at the screen.

CHILDREN'S DATA IS BEING MINED

At the IAMCR conference in Madrid in July 2019, you presented your latest project The Children's Data and Privacy Online. You mentioned that regarding personal data, children in your study expected companies such as Google or Amazon to act like somebody they

know, like their friend. How can we teach them that it is not the case?

Once children have first opened their eyes and seen their family and the people in their inmediate neighbourhood, they learn about interpersonal relationships. They gradually learn they're a part of a community and a part of the society. This is not something that we have ever really taught them like a lesson until they are teenagers. We suppose they will understand this gradually and they will work it out. That they will go to the doctor and then they will at some point understand that there is a health system behind them. Then they will go to school and they will eventually realise that there is a system and a bureaucracy behind it. But in relation to the online world, I think we have really treated it as if the screen was that world. And we do not teach them about the same things – the regulations, the economy, the larger organisation that runs the content of the screen, the whole digital society – or at least not until they are in their teens. But often, they engage much earlier with an app, with a system, which is sophisticated and which their parents or teachers may not understand. And by then, they are already in an ecology where Google is taking their data whether they do or do not understand. I think we have to teach some things earlier. And maybe we need to think about protecting children longer.

How long exactly?

We should probably start at minus nine months and do it until the eighteenth birthday. But protecting doesn't mean ban.

Yes, but how do you explain such an abstract thing as data mining to for example a ten-year-old?

There are various techniques. For example, one can ask a class to google their name and then look and see what they find. They may discover that there is more information or photographs than they expected. A different example: one can introduce an imaginary child to the class. They are one and a half meter high, they have black hair and blah blah blah and they are using Twitter and then you say: how do they feel? Or what did they do last week? And then the children begin to make guesses to tell the story. And then you say: hey, so this is what the Internet does. This is what the companies do, they try to make these guesses and then they store it. I think there are ways.

Is that what your toolkit www.myprivacy.uk is about?

Yes. When we made the toolkit, we found some really clever ways, some games, news stories about what may go wrong, or even some quizzes. Through these tasks, we try to teach children about the digital world, and the business world.

The children in your project said that they were unimportant in the society, that nobody was interested in their

data. How much do we actually know to the contrary?

We know that children's data has been breached multiple times. For Cambridge Analytica, we know that children are included, because children are a substantial portion of Internet users and because the companies do not discriminate. So they take all of their data. It was also mentioned here at the conference that 75% of Youtube users are teenagers or children. So all the analytics, all the nudging, all the recommendations that Youtube does, it is all mainly for children, it is on children.

What we can't say yet, I think, is how much it matters. We know that the recommendations are building on discriminatory and commercial biases, but does it mean that children see less beneficial content? Or that children are more persuaded to buy commercial products or eat unhealthy food? I think we don't really know that. Similarly, we don't really know that what we post now will still really be online in ten or twenty years. So when you apply for a job or when you go to university, what you did as a child will still be there. We kind of know that it is true, but we do not have evidence that shows that these children didn't get jobs or they weren't admitted to university.

So what exactly are the harms at stake?

One is discrimination. Another is visibility. We haven't collected evidence for it yet, but I think there are several important issues associated with this phenomenon: What does it mean that everything you do is online, is tracked, is visible? You see yourself, you see what everyone is doing, they all see you. What does it mean? What does it make you into? Does it mean that you tend to be more narcissistic? More paranoic? We don't really know yet.

In the study Children's data and privacy online: growing up in a digital age, which preceded the creation of the toolkit, you asked children what they wish, regarding data protection. What did they say?

This is what they say they want: if they want to watch Youtube when they're three, they should be able to watch Youtube when they're three. But they don't want Youtube to give their preferences to Google, Oracle or other data brokers. They don't want them to store their data. OK, so if I want to watch Peppa Pig, give me Peppa Pig, and don't offer to me some pornographic material, they say. And don't tell me in ten years that I used to like Peppa Pig. So that's what they want and there has been a lot of effort to make it like that. For example, the European Commission is now trying to issue a regulation specifically on Youtube, which would better meet in the specific needs of children.

You often use qualitative interview methods for your work and you often work especially with children. What is your strategy to gain their trust?

We play games, we bring juice and biscuits, we tell the teacher to go out of the room. We try to make it fun. We tell

them the results will be presented to the people who matter, like the regulators, which they really are. Children want the people to listen to them.

"DELETE" DOES NOT REALLY MEAN "DELETE"

Children in your studies also keep saying that they are asked online to give up private information in order to participate in society. This is not a dilemma for children only. Where, in your opinion, should we draw the line? Which personal data is it ok to give online, and which should users keep for themselves? Is there any personal data at all which one should feel comfortable giving?

The purpose of the GDPR is to give more power to the users so that they can make their own decision. And that is an important principle. It includes the principle of consent and the right to be informed. But the problem is that nobody is informed, really. If Google takes your data and then you don't like it, what are you going to do? How are you going to write to Google? The GDPR might take years to result in implementations, there may be legal actions and maybe things will change.

Is there any non-sensitive personal data at all?

The definition of personal data is anything that identifies you particularly. So it is all really sensitive, for children. The problem is, without giving some of it, you may be excluded from even such

things as education. In Great Britain, many schools are now deciding whether they want to be "a Google school", or "a Microsoft school". Whether each child is going to have a Chrome book or a Microsoft device, and also which system they are going to use for e-learning and teacher-child-parent communication. And for learning analytics. With each individual child, when they log in, the system will know: this is what you are up to in your life. What you struggle with in your French. Of course we wanted it to be that not everyone has to learn the same thing at the same time. But now, with personalised learning, somebody is watching. But then, why does a school want to record all of this? So that they can make special provisions and that they can argue to the government that they need extra resources, and also when they talk to the parents. They have good reasons to have the data, we can imagine some benefits to the child. There are many harms that are promised, but they are not reality yet. Yet, all of this makes many people say: I want none of this. I want to be invisible.

But can anyone who is not a super skilled programmer really do it?

Well, in Europe now, we have the right to be forgotten. We can go to all of the different data brokers and say I'll take all of my data. People are trying it. They are suing the companies. We don't really know yet if it's going to work. Maybe in ten years, the companies will be gone.

Well, maybe it draws us back to the question of what one gets for it. What is the user willing to give up for being able to talk for "free" to their friends or share pictures with them.

Yes, and it also opens a very interesting question about the social nature of privacy. Because when I send you a WhatsApp message, WhatsApp knows about me as well as about you. If I say to WhatsApp that they can have everything, then they have you. What we all do has implications for others. Our data is social and our privacy is social. So it is not quite about what I am willing to give up or what you are willing to give up, but we are all going to give up a lot and the person willing to give up the most makes the decision for everybody. And that's where I think there's going to have to be some political intervention. We can't just say everybody is going to make their own choice. We must say it is in the public interest and in the children's interest that there is regulation. The GDPR is the first step, now there is the EU privacy directive coming. And there will be more.

At the conference, you have mentioned that we are using confusing terminology – delete does not really mean delete, we must give consent. Do you have a suggestion about what better terms might be?

I haven't thought enough about what the terms would be, but I think it is worth thinking about. Perhaps we need to use more technical terms because it is a technical world. A really simple example: upload and download. These are technical terms, but they are everyday now. So it doesn't have to be complex. But they are specific to the system. So maybe we need something of that nature. Not like "consent", which is used in so many contexts. Privacy is all about the audience, so the terms should consider it and say who the audience is. It is not that you "delete" or don't "delete", but you "delete it for your friends" or you "delete it for the Instagram". Do you "delete" it, so that your friends can't see it, or do you "delete" it so that Instagram can't see it?

Maybe instead of keeping the terms short and simple, we need to make them more complicated.

Exactly. So that people understand a little bit more. The companies always want that everything is seamless, with no delays. But learning always comes about with a little delay, with some time for thinking before making a decision.

CITIZENS IN WAITING

In your book chapter Interactivity and Participation on the Internet , you remind the readers that according to the UN, children have the right to participate actively as citizens. The chapter suggests that the youth is interested in participating in society, but we do not let them do it enough. If they are only "citizens in waiting", you wrote, they might use their time differently. Now, the book is 12 years old. Is the youth these days still "citizens in waiting", or have we done

more to give them the opportunity to participate publically?

I think the rise of social media has made children feel that their voice is more out there, more visible. And they are all over social media. They can't possibly imagine anymore that they are completely silent or invisible. But I think it is worse in terms of whether they feel heard and act on in terms of what they have to say. They are frustrated about a number of decisions that they can see happening. Climate change is a great example. Greta Thunberg is an excellent advocate, but I think a lot of young people feel about climate change that they have been talking about this for a long time and nobody has been listening. In Britain, the same is true about the Brexit. Most young people voted to remain. They can see more what they have to say but they can also see that they are being ignored.

One of the ways to promote the ability to make one heard is the citizenship model of media education, promoted for example by Renee Hobbs. It suggests combining media education with political participation enhancement. Do you think this is a good way for the media education to go?

Yes, it is an important way. But I also think that media literacy education can go in lots of directions. It can also enable the young people to be for example more creative, to play with different aesthetics. Or to conduct different kinds of performance. So not all of media literacy education is about political

participation, but I think it is one of its really important goals.

The palette of your project is very wide and colourful, from EU Kids Online, Global Kids Online, or The Class. What is next?

In my next immediate project, I am going to be working with the UNICEF on online harm, researching how we understand the boundary between everyday life and distinct risks such as cyberbullying, hate speech, reputation attacks. How do we understand the relationship between what is still normal, and what already is trouble and what are the factors that make some children more vulnerable.