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Ofcom Children's Media Lives – Year 2 Findings

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DATE

27 January 16

VERSION

Final

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1. About this report

This document provides analysis of the findings from the second year of Ofcom's Children's Media Lives study. This was begun in 2014 to provide a small-scale, rich and detailed qualitative complement to Ofcom's quantitative surveys of media literacy. The project follows 18 children, aged 8-15 at the beginning of the study, over three years, interviewing them on camera each year about their media habits and attitudes.

The study provides evidence about the motivations and the context of media use, and how media are part of daily life and domestic circumstances. It also provides rich detail on how media habits and attitudes change over time, particularly in relation to children's emotional and cognitive development.

Ofcom has a statutory duty to promote, and to carry out research into, media literacy. This report contributes to Ofcom's work in this area.

2. Executive summary

The Children's Media Lives study was set up in 2014 to provide a small-scale, rich and detailed qualitative complement to Ofcom's quantitative surveys of media literacy. It is a three-year study, tracking, as far as possible, the same 18 children, aged 8-15 in the first year. The second of three years of ethnographic research was completed in spring 2015, the first having concluded in autumn 2014.

The study provides in-depth understanding of how this illustrative sample of children are thinking about and using digital media, and how this differs and is influenced by age, life-stage, family circumstances, peers and wider society. It explores how digital media use evolves over time as children develop and in response to external changes; for instance, new schools, friendships and access to new technology.

We examined a number of core themes in this second year, including: the role of media in children's lives, TV watching behaviours, the impact of advertising, gaming behaviours, social media, media in education, and approach to handling media risk. The main findings from each chapter are set out below.

2.1 SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS BY CHAPTER

CHAPTER 5. MEDIA PURPOSE AND HABITS

Many children and parents recognise the value and benefit of digital technologies for creativity

Some of the children were being very creative in their use of digital technology, and online and offline creativity were often linked. One of the children was taking videos of her dance performances and creating an online portfolio, while others were using apps and YouTube videos to improve their drawing or to make more complicated loom band creations.

Children with active offline lives tend to use media in a purposeful manner

The children in the sample who had lots of hobbies or active social lives tended to use media to enhance their knowledge, skills or experience. Those children whose parents encouraged and facilitated their offline lives were more likely to be engaged in this more purposeful use of media.

Children without siblings and those who live away from friends are more likely to use media as a 'time filler'

The children who spent extended time at home by themselves or who lived away from friends were more likely to be reliant on media to fill their time. Many had compulsive media habits, accessing the same content or activities repeatedly even though they didn't find them particularly engaging, and lacked ideas about what else they might do.

CHAPTER 6. THE ROLE OF TV

Children have a broad concept of ‘watching TV’ that includes many types of audio-visual content, viewed across multiple platforms and devices

The children in the sample were watching a broad range of content, from multiple sources and on a number of different devices – all of which they considered ‘TV viewing’. This included YouTube content as well as VoD from services like Netflix and Amazon Prime. The frequent use of these services, as well as the popularity of YouTube, was partly shaping this broad definition of watching TV.

While content is the biggest driver for TV viewing, when children have a choice of viewing options they often opt for the biggest screen

TV-watching behaviour was driven overwhelmingly by content. The children had strong views about what they wanted to watch, and this was more important than viewing on a particular device. However, when content was available on multiple devices children often preferred to view on a large screen, generally the main TV set.

Video on demand (VoD) and catch-up dominates children’s TV viewing

The children consumed VoD and catch-up services in much greater volumes than live programming. These services were regularly accessed through the TV set, as well as through other devices. Family viewing increasingly involved VoD and catch-up.

Live broadcast TV viewing is most frequent among younger children

The younger children in our sample (8-11) generally had access to the smallest range of devices and tended to share devices with siblings. This meant that they were more likely to watch the TV set. Although much of this viewing was VoD and catch-up, the younger children were also more likely than the older children in the sample to have post-school routines around live broadcast TV, particularly if they had younger siblings.

CHAPTER 7. SEARCH BEHAVIOURS

Children’s approach to search is influenced by the type of information they are looking for, and their personal preferences

While many of the children used traditional Google search, this was not the default for all children or for all searches. Other methods included YouTube, Google image searches and Siri.

Searching for audio-visual content tended to drive children towards services like YouTube or Google image search, while searching for text tended to lead to traditional Google search or Wikipedia. Personal style and preference were also important. Some children chose visual rather than text approaches because of a preference for seeing information in this way, or because of learning difficulties or dyslexia which made reading text difficult.

Children often assume that the first unsponsored result on search engines is the best

When using search engines, children often assumed the first link on the search results would provide them with the best information, but they often couldn’t clearly articulate why. Most, although not all, recognised the ‘ad’ symbol and therefore tended to use the first unsponsored search engine result.

CHAPTER 8. FACTORS THAT SHAPE TRUST

Children have their own signifiers to identify whether websites are trustworthy

The children all said that they used a range of 'signs' that a website was trustworthy, including: sites that the children considered were well or professionally designed; sites of brands that they knew; sites that displayed advertising from brands that they knew; the kind of advertising displayed on the site (for instance, banner advertising was considered more trustworthy than pop-up advertising); and sites that they, or people they knew, had used before.

The desire for particular content often takes precedence over applying these signifiers

Despite their awareness of the importance of using trustworthy sites, in practice many of the children disregarded these strategies if the content offered by a site was sufficiently desirable.

Children struggle to identify user-generated content

Most of the children understood that not all editable or user-generated content is trustworthy. However, few of them could reliably identify user-generated content on websites other than Wikipedia and YouTube, and unless there was an obvious sign that the content could be edited, they tended to trust most sites, regardless of the source or author.

Video content is more likely than text to be considered trustworthy

YouTube was typically trusted more than Wikipedia, as some children felt that video content was more 'transparent' and self-evidently 'true' than text, although Wikipedia was still widely used.

CHAPTER 9. ADVERTISING

Children are most able to recognise advertising that disrupts their online activity

Almost all the children were able to recognise conventional TV advertising. Online, some types of advertising were easier to recognise than others. This was influenced both by the degree to which the advert interrupted their activity, and their familiarity with the type of advert. For example, YouTube adverts before or during videos were almost always recognised, whereas banner adverts on news websites rarely were.

Children do their utmost to ignore, or find ways not to engage with, adverts that interrupt their activities

The majority of advertising was considered an inevitable irritation when accessing media content, and was typically ignored as much as possible. The children had strategies for efficiently skipping adverts; for example, holding their finger in readiness over a 'skip' button that had not yet appeared.

Children have limited understanding of the relationship between advertising and content

While the children often recognised the presence of advertising, they rarely questioned its presence, or thought about who had produced the advertising, what their interests were, whether it was specifically targeted at them, or about the relationship between advertising and creation of, and access to, content.

CHAPTER 10. GAMING BEHAVIOUR

The children are more emotionally invested in PC/console games and play them for longer periods of time than mobile/tablet app-based games

Gaming was ubiquitous across the sample, but the range of gaming behaviours was very diverse. Console/PC games were typically more complex in terms of strategy and narrative, were seen as a higher investment (both financial and in terms of attention), were played over longer periods and were more likely to generate brand loyalty among the children. App-based games were typically much simpler, very absorbing for short periods of time but discarded quickly in favour of new versions.

Most of the children do not make in-game purchases, although new games, like *Clash of Clans*, heavily incentivise this kind of spending

Hardly any of the children paid for app-based games, with the result that they were playing games containing large amounts of advertising, and geared towards the promotion of in-app purchases. Most of the children did not make these kinds of purchases, preferring instead to move on to the next free game. However, some newer hybrid PC/console/app games, like *Clash of Clans*, included strong incentives for in-game purchasing, leading to one of the children, William, spending over £100 on in-app purchases.

Social interaction in games is common, but mostly with people the children know in real life

Social interaction in games was mostly between real-life friends. Children showed little interest in talking to strangers online. For those that did, the conversation was typically about the game itself. In-game etiquette discouraged conversations straying into more personal territory.

CHAPTER 11. SOCIAL MEDIA AND IDENTITY

Social media is used as an extension of offline friendships, but can distort or magnify social pressures

That vast majority of the children used some form of social media or instant messaging service. Similar kinds of conversations and interactions took place on social media as in the playground, and the children faced similar social conventions and pressures. However, some of the attributes of social media distorted or magnified the effects of these pressures.

Girls face an intensification of the ‘image-focused’ pressures that exist in the offline world

The girls in the sample were subject to intense physical and social scrutiny on social media. Getting an acceptable number of ‘likes’ and positive comments was very important and they put a lot of effort into curating how they looked online. ‘Selfies’ and other images were an important way of portraying their identity. In contrast, putting stuff on social media about their interests, hobbies or passions was less usual. There was a strong disinclination to put anything up on social media that would mark them out as different, or push the boundaries of social norms.

The pressures on boys are more about acting ‘tough’ or being ‘laddish’

While some boys did post selfies, this was less common than with girls. Boys appeared to be subject to pressures around testing boundaries, and social media seemed to provide a space

where male friendship groups might act more 'tough' and rude than they would in real life. This was enhanced by the fact that many of them participated in large group-chat functions on social media, through services like Facebook messenger and WhatsApp.

Some of the children in the sample had had indirect experience of sexting and other risky online social behaviour

Many children acknowledged the pressure in their social circles for girls to send nude or revealing pictures via social media, with several citing examples of this at their schools. Others had been bullied online, or had witnessed this among their peers.

Children often over-estimate the privacy afforded by social media.

Children tended to overestimate the privacy afforded to them through social media, especially in relation to their parents; for example, posting things to social media that they wouldn't feel comfortable showing to their parents, despite never having checked their privacy settings.

CHAPTER 12. IT IN SCHOOLS

Some of the children had been inspired by their use of IT in school

When asked about how they learned about media and IT at school, the children were most likely to describe learning how to use Microsoft programs in IT lessons. Some of the children also described other areas of IT learning that they found exciting or inspiring, including Lily, who talked eagerly about learning to code, and Josie, who was looking forward to using the 3D printer at her new secondary school.

Teachers use homework to teach children how to do digital research

Many of the children, especially the older ones, were given homework designed to teach them how to conduct online research. They were warned by their teachers about the editable nature of Wikipedia and its consequent shortcomings as a homework resource (although that did not prevent some children in the sample from using it).

CHAPTER 13. LEARNING ABOUT RISK

Parents struggle to know when the time is right to have conversations with children about complex and adult risks.

It was difficult for the parents to know when it was appropriate to start conversations about risks that they felt were complex or adult. They were uncertain how to raise these issues without introducing ideas and issues that the children might not have encountered, and which were likely to be embarrassing and inappropriate. As a result, many of the children felt that parents and teachers initiated these discussions only reactively.

Many parents lack confidence in their ability to support their children to manage online relationships.

Many of the parents in the sample lacked the confidence to support their children in dealing with online risks. Some parents were less able to provide guidance about managing social relationships with peers offline and online, while others were skilled at helping their children navigate social relationships in the offline world, but underestimated their ability to protect their children online, possibly due to a lack of confidence in using technology and digital media.

3. Background and introduction

3.1 ABOUT THE STUDY

The Children's Media Lives study was set up in 2014 to provide a small-scale, rich and detailed qualitative complement to Ofcom's quantitative surveys of media literacy.

Ofcom conducts annual surveys among children and adults that seek to quantify, in a statistically robust way, media access, awareness, skills and understanding. Children's Media Lives aims to put a human face to the data. It complements the Adults' Media Lives study, a similar programme of qualitative research which has been running since 2005.

Children's Media Lives is a three-year study, tracking a group of young people who, at the start of the study, were aged 8-15. The second of the three years of ethnographic research was conducted in spring 2015 with 17 children, 15 of whom were the same as in the first year (completed in autumn 2014). Every effort is made, each year, to include the same sample of children, but if individuals drop out, they are replaced with new children, keeping the sample balanced according to age, gender and location. The final year's study will be conducted in spring 2016.

The longitudinal nature of the project allows the research to track changes in children's understanding over time. The sample covers children with a range of devices, family situations and locations across the UK, including Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

3.2 TOPIC AREAS

Each year, this study aims to provide an in-depth understanding of how children think about, and use, digital media, how this differs and how it is influenced by age, life-stage, family circumstances, peers and wider society. The longitudinal element of the research design also allows us to explore how children's digital media use evolves over time, as the children develop and respond to external changes (for instance new schools, friendships and access to new technology).

A wide range of topics were covered in the second year of research. This report draws these together into some key themes, set out in the following sections:

- **Section 4: Changes for the children.** The changes that researchers have seen in the children and their households since the first year of research.
- **Section 5: Media purpose and habits.** Explores how children react to boredom by developing compulsive media behaviour, and comparing this to the children who are more mature and productive in their media use (*new in Year 2*).
- **Section 6: The role of TV** within the households and for the children, exploring their use of, and attitudes towards, live broadcast and VoD services (*included in both Year 1 and Year 2*).
- **Section 7: Search behaviours.** Understanding how children look for specific information online (*included in Year 1, explored in detail in Year 2*).

- **Section 8: Factors that shape trust.** Explains how children decide which websites and sources to trust (*included in both Year 1 and Year 2*)
- **Section 9: Attitudes to advertising.** Explores children’s attitudes to advertising, methods for avoiding it and levels of understanding of how it works (*explored in detail in Year 1, included in Year 2*)
- **Section 10: Gaming behaviour.** Explores the range of game types that children like to play, and understanding the business models that drive or encourage in-app spending. (*New to Year 2*)
- **Section 11: Social media and identity.** Understanding how children engage with social media, and the impact it has on their growing sense of identity. (*Included in both Year 1 and Year 2*)
- **Section 12: Education and exploration.** Understanding in detail how children learn about the media in schools, and the impact it can have on their life and learning. (*New to Year 2*)
- **Section 13: Learning about risk.** Exploring how children learn about the risks associated with the media, and how parents and schools try to communicate these messages. (*Explored in both Year 1 and Year 2*)

3.2.1 TRACKING MEASURES

During the three years of this research, we track some core elements of the children’s lives, to understand changes over time. These core measures are focused on the children’s development and critical thinking and include:

- devices and access to technology;
- cognitive and personal development;
- understanding of advertising;
- understanding of digital organisations; and
- understanding of digital funding mechanisms.

3.3 METHODOLOGY

Between the Year 1 and Year 2 research phases, the researchers tried to keep the children engaged and positive about the research, including by sending them birthday cards and Christmas gifts. They also made contact with the parents at least once during this period to check for any update in contact details or address.

Researchers spent three to four hours with each child or young person in their home, interviewing them and understanding their behaviours, attitudes to and knowledge about digital media. The interviews on which this analysis is based were informed by a topic guide, developed jointly by ESRO and Ofcom, but the researchers allowed the child to determine the general flow of the conversation. This topic guide is included at Annex 1, which can be found on the Children’s Media Lives wave 2 homepage on the Ofcom website¹.

Stimulus material was used to prompt discussion in areas of the topic guide that were more complex for the children, such as online advertising. This stimulus material is included as

¹http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/market-data-research/other/research-publications/childrens/childrens_media_lives_year2

Annex 3 and Annex 4, which can be found on the Children’s Media Lives homepage on the Ofcom website².

The ethnographic interviews were supplemented with short interviews with parents and siblings, to better understand the household dynamics and access to digital media.

Interviews were filmed and photographs were taken. However, in order to protect the anonymity of research participants, these are used only for presentations to illustrate the findings.

As detailed above, the methodology for Year 2 of this research was broadly a repeat of Year 1, with some changes to the topic guide and data capture/stimulus materials to allow us to develop and enhance our understanding, building on knowledge gained in Year 1.

3.4 SAFEGUARDING

All the researchers involved in interviewing the children had advanced DBS clearance and adhered to the ESRO safeguarding policy, available as Annex 5 on the Children’s Media Lives wave 2 homepage on the Ofcom website³. Researchers were careful to ensure that discussions about risks and adult content were conducted in an age-appropriate manner. These discussions were child-led so that the research did not introduce new or inappropriate issues or content to the children.

3.5 SAMPLE

The number of participants in the study is relatively small, but the children were carefully chosen to reflect a broad cross-section of UK children in terms of age, location, ethnicity, social circumstances and access to technology. The main sampling characteristics focused on the following variables:

- age (8-15 at time of recruitment);
- gender;
- location, including children in urban and rural areas, and in all four nations;
- family set-up, including a mixture of sibling and parental relationships;
- access to devices (including smartphones, mobile phones, tablets, smart TVs, games consoles);
- usage levels;
- parental approaches to managing media use; and
- parental confidence with digital media.

More details of the sampling and recruitment criteria can be found in Annex 2 on the Children’s Media Lives wave 2 homepage on the Ofcom website⁴.

² See footnote 1

³ See footnote 1

⁴ See footnote 1

4. Changes for the children

4.1 HOUSEHOLD CHANGES

Year 1 interviews took place in autumn 2014, and Year 2 interviews in spring 2015. As only six months had elapsed between Year 1 and Year 2 of this research, there had not been many significant changes for most of the children or their households. There were, however, some small changes in the family and technology situations. Most of these changes were among the older cohort of children, who were gradually being allowed more freedom, both online and offline.

4.1.1 LIFESTYLE CHANGES

- Jack, 10, had moved house since the first year, to a quieter and more rural area in the same town. He still went to the same school, but no longer lived close to his friends. This meant that he was much less able to spend time with them outside school hours; he could no longer ‘play out’ with them in their local neighbourhood. While it is hard to tell whether Jack’s media use increased because of this change, it did seem that he now relied on TV and Minecraft to occupy himself more than before. He did, however, like his new bedroom and was happy to have moved.
- Brigit, 15, had her first boyfriend, whom she met through mutual friends. They were talking frequently over social media and text. She was doing her final GCSE exams and trying to decide on a college for the next year.
- Sarah’s older sister, along with her partner and newborn baby, had moved back into the parental home at the time of the fieldwork, increasing the number of people in the household from three to six. Sarah loved having her baby niece in the house, but the communal spaces in the house were often overcrowded. The family had fallen into a very regular evening TV routine to avoid having to choose between the watching preferences of so many individuals.

4.1.2 NEW TECHNOLOGY

Some households had acquired new or upgraded technology in the six months between visits:

- After being denied any access to personal devices, Sarah (11), at the time of the fieldwork, had been allowed to get an iPad Mini.
- Josie (10), Calum (13), and Eve’s (15) households all now had smart TVs, which had increased their viewing of on-demand TV. The new TV also meant that Eve had access to Freeview and catch-up services, such as iPlayer and 4OD, for the first time.
- In the run-up to starting secondary school, Josie has been bought her first mobile phone (a smartphone).

4.1. MEDIATION APPROACHES

In many cases, newly acquired technology, or changes in how technology was used in the household, was accompanied by a parental shift in attitude or approach to mediation:

- Following his strong resolve not to allow personal devices, Sarah's (11) dad had allowed her to have her own iPad. He had re-evaluated his stance on this, and decided that keeping her away from technology wasn't the best policy for keeping her safe. However, Sarah remained forbidden to take any personal technology out of the house, so that her use of the tablet could still be closely supervised, and her dad reviewed her activity on social media daily.
- Josie and Sarah (both 11) were about to start secondary school shortly after the fieldwork. In the run-up to this, Josie had been bought a new smartphone which her mum was starting to allow her to take to school. This was seen as a 'test run' for when she travelled to and from school by herself. Sarah's dad, however, still saw mobile phones as more of a risk than a benefit for children and so hadn't made this step.
- After having some work done to the home, Calum, 13, had lost his 'snug' next to the kitchen, but had gained a bigger bedroom. This meant that his Xbox had moved into his bedroom, where his mother had less direct supervision of what he was doing.

4.1.4 EMOTIONAL AND COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT

As the Year 1 report illustrated, this research project aimed to increase understanding of children's emotional and cognitive development. The developmental stages children go through underpin their understanding, behaviour and attitudes surrounding media use, and over the full term of the project we hope to explore how emotional and cognitive changes play out in the children's behaviour. While not all children exhibited observable cognitive development over the six-month period, some of the young people in the sample did seem to be 'growing up' and their social awareness and dynamics showed subtle shifts. Brigit put on make-up specifically for being filmed in her interview in Year 2 whereas she hadn't in Year 1, and Minnie seemed to be increasingly self-conscious, and embarrassed by her mum's involvement in the interview, in Year 2. In some examples these small steps in self-awareness and identity seemed to be reflected in media behaviours and attitudes:

- Since Year 1, Alice (10) had come to the conclusion that some of the dance videos she had posted on YouTube were embarrassing, and she reflected that her 'younger self' hadn't cared that her hair was frizzy in the video.
- In year 1, Jack (11) primarily played games in single-player mode on his Xbox, such as FIFA, whereas at the time of Year 2 he spent more time playing Minecraft, enjoying the competitive and social elements of the open-world game.

4.2 SAMPLE CHANGES & NEW CHILDREN

Despite all efforts, three of the 18 children studied in 2014 dropped out of the sample. This was due to a change in contact details in the cases of David and Neil's households, while one respondent, Ben, elected to drop out of the research (no reason specified). To re-balance the sample, two new children were recruited for Year 2; Ade, 14, and Irfan, 15, bringing the total to 17 (see table below).

4.2.1 YEAR 2 SAMPLE

The final sample for Year 2 of this research, in age order, is:

- Lily, 9, lives with her mum, dad and younger sisters in a small town in East England. She spends most of her time using her Google Nexus tablet, but is only allowed to do so in the communal spaces (e.g. lounge and dining room) where mum and dad can see.
- Ahmed, 9, lives with his mum, older brother and three younger half-brothers in London. Ahmed has ADHD and learning difficulties. He plays lots of games across multiple devices (laptop, Nintendo DS, Blackberry, PlayStation and Wii).
- Nadia, 10, lives with her parents and two sisters (one older and one younger) in a town in the North of England. She spends a lot of time in the lounge, either watching the TV set or watching YouTube videos on the desktop computer.
- Peter, 10, lives with his parents and younger sister in a rural town in the Midlands. He shares a 'playroom' with his sister, next door to the main lounge, where they play Minecraft on the Xbox 360, iPad or laptop.
- Alice, 10, lives with her parents and older brother in a small village in the South of England. Alice is very engaged with social media, in particular Instagram. She also posts homemade music and dance videos to her YouTube channel.
- Jack, 11, recently moved house with his mum and pet tortoise. An only child, Jack entertains himself with media a lot, and in particular loves playing on Minecraft and watching Minecraft tutorials on YouTube.
- Josie, 11, an only child, spends most of her time living with her mum in a small town in the West of England. She is skilled at entertaining herself, spending a lot of time outside in her garden. Josie recently got her first mobile phone in readiness to start secondary school.
- William, 12, lives with his busy parents and four siblings in a large house on the south coast. He doesn't like the same TV shows as his three younger sisters, and tends to find a space for himself in another room to play computer games or watch films.
- Sarah, 12, lives with her mum and dad and one of her two older sisters in a busy area in the North of England. Her dad is very worried and protective about her use of digital media, and enforces strict rules about what she can access. Recently, however, he has relented and allowed her to own an iPad.
- Carmen, 13, is an only child who lives with her mum, aunt and grandmother in Manchester. She is very mature for her age, and mostly uses her iPad to monitor her pocket money, do Spanish homework on a range of apps, and talk to her friends over FaceTime.
- Robert, 14, is an only child who lives with his mum in a Scottish town. He loves football and spends a lot of his time watching sports news on TV, accessing sports news on his smartphone and playing FIFA on his PlayStation. He also loves listening to podcasts and using Twitter to follow actors from his favourite films.
- Minnie, 14, has four older siblings who no longer live at home, and she lives with her mum in the East of England. She bought herself an iPad with her own money, which she uses in addition to her iPod Touch to play games, watch YouTube and watch films on Netflix and iPlayer.
- Calum, 14, lives with his older brother and parents in a large house on a suburban street in the Midlands. He's recently been allowed to move his Xbox into his bedroom, and spends most of his time playing rugby, or messaging friends on Facebook Messenger.
- Ade, 14, lives in London with his mum, dad and younger brother, Sam, 10. He goes to the local comprehensive school and has a number of friends in his local neighbourhood. Ade's hobbies include theatre and dance and he was recently accepted to a prestigious performing arts school, where he has an agent.

- Eve, 15, lives with her parents just outside London and has an older sister who is at university. She spends a lot of time watching TV and is a keen Facebook and Instagram user, frequently posting pictures of social activities with her friends.
- Irfan, 15, lives in South Wales with his mum, dad, and brother and sister. His mum is a practicing Muslim while his dad is White British. Irfan is very shy around adults, but has quite a wide friendship group at school. He is relatively academic and dedicated to revising for his GCSE exams this year.
- Brigit, 16, lives with her mum and three younger siblings, whom she helps to parent, in a small town in Northern Ireland. She's recently started seeing a boyfriend who she spends a lot of time messaging over WhatsApp. She is an avid social media user and has an account with almost all the major sites: Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Ask FM, Instagram, Snapchat and YouTube.

5. Media purposes and habits

5.1 PURPOSEFUL MEDIA BEHAVIOUR

While most of the respondents had stretches of time when they typically had to entertain themselves, this was especially true for those with single or working parents and no siblings. The 17 children in the sample seemed to split into two broad groups, based on the role that the media had in their lives, and how this fitted around their offline activities. The first group were those children who had active social lives and plenty of after-school activities: Calum, Josie, Eve, Lily, Sarah, Brigit, Minnie and Ade. The second group were those who had more solitary, home-based lives after school: Jack, Ahmed, Nadia, William and Irfan.

I do really like to read, but during the weekend, I only really do it when I'm bored. When I haven't got plans. I don't mind as much during the week because I have school during the day.

Minnie, 13

The first group of children, who had busier lives offline, with hobbies and social activities, sports or local friends, tended to be purposeful and productive in their approach to media. These children, like Robert, Alice, Josie and Carmen, often had a goal or aim in mind when they went online or engaged with media. Their online and offline lives were particularly intertwined, more so than some of the other children who were using media as 'time filling'.

I play this game about horses because I love riding. I like to think about how the stables works and looking after the horses. I also watch a lot of Horseland on Netflix because it's all about these people racing horses and looking after them at their stables.

Josie, 11

This group of children were using media in ways similar to adults – finding ways to enhance their personal interests, passions or schoolwork. Robert, 14, was a football and film enthusiast and used a range of websites and digital content to develop these interests. He followed football pundits and journalists on Twitter, listened to football and movie podcasts such as *Kermode and Mayo* on 5 Live, regularly watched the news and had a magazine subscription to *Empire* which helped him learn more. Brigit, 16, was also keen to use Pinterest and YouTube to enhance her crafting skills and knowledge. She used social media extensively to maintain and continue the strong bonds that she had developed with friends in the US, whom she had met during an exchange programme. All the websites she engaged with also had an offline purpose.

An important factor in shaping this behaviour was the attitudes and behaviours of the children's parents. The children whose parents had the greatest desire and capacity to encourage and foster their active offline lives, either through extra-curricular or social events, tended to be more productive in their use of media. This often reflected the parents' own lives and attitudes; those parents who had a range of interests and hobbies themselves were keen to foster this in their own children.

Nevertheless, these parents also sometimes relied on media and technology to entertain their children. On the whole, however, their outlook was focused around ensuring that their children had a full range of activities and interests. Consequently, they used the media less for ‘time-filling’ and had more ideas about things to look for and engage with via media activities.

I really want Josie to get out and try lots of different things while she’s young. I make sure she does different social activities and she goes to gymnastics and dance and horse-riding. I don’t want her just sat at home playing games and watching TV aimlessly.

Josie’s mum, 11

Some parents also actively taught their children how to use media productively. Robert’s (14) dad is a journalist and taught him to use Twitter to find information from lots of different sources and to triangulate the data. Eve’s (15) parents were teaching her to use the internet critically for her homework. They would often sit with her to explore the different types of information online, including social media like Twitter, news websites and academic sources.

5.2 CREATIVE MEDIA USE

The group of respondents with active and busy social lives, and more purposeful media use, tended to demonstrate more awareness of the benefits of technology and media in helping them to be creative, explore the world and strengthen their skills.

Some of the children were explicitly demonstrating ‘digital creativity’; performing digital activities (normally online, but not always) that seemed to be creative. Alice, 9, continued to use YouTube extensively to upload videos of her dancing in an effort to try to build a ‘portfolio’ for when she was older. She was quite intent on becoming famous in some way. While she had uploaded some videos to YouTube, she also had built up a catalogue on her iPad which she wasn’t quite ready to upload.

Many of the children played Minecraft (online and offline). Sarah, 10, loved to use the ‘creative mode’ of the game, which allowed her to design and construct a whole new world, however she wanted it to look, by collecting tools and products. She was keen to show her creative flair in this way rather than by playing in zombie-chasing mode.

I just like to play in the creative mode so I can build lots of new stuff and make it up as I go. I can spend hours coming up with ideas for adding or changing things.

Sarah, 10

Other children were using online resources to support and extend their offline skills and abilities. Josie (11) had been using an app, and YouTube videos by Fun2Draw, to learn to draw different fruits and animals with smiley faces. She had pages and pages in her sketchbook, where she had drawn the same fruit or animal over and over again, trying to improve each time. She had even bought a new set of colouring pens to go with it.

I got this app called Fun2Draw. It teaches you to draw different animals and fruit and things. I think I was just bored one day. I do them every day. Then the other day I found they have YouTube videos too so now I watch them too.

Josie, 11

Carmen, 12, was also using information she had found online to help develop her offline creativity. Her focus had recently shifted towards loom bands, a little after everyone else in the

sample, and she spent quite a lot of time on YouTube finding videos for more difficult designs. She felt that she had now seen most of the ones available online, and was keeping her eyes peeled for new ones every day.

5.3 TIME-FILLING MEDIA BEHAVIOUR

For the second group of children, media activities were more significant as time fillers. These children often didn't have offline interests to drive their media activity, and displayed some repetitive media habits, such as watching television episodes on repeat each day. In many cases, these children's ideas about what media activities were available to them were fairly narrow; they didn't use media with a clear aim or purpose and they tended to struggle to articulate what they *could* get out of different types of media.

I watch TV or play computer games. That's what I like to do. That's all there really is to do around here. What else would I do?

Irfan, 15

While the reasons for this behaviour were complex, family circumstances were sometimes a contributory factor. Jack, 10, was an only child who lived with his mum, Kathy, who worked part-time. His dad had died a couple of years ago and since then the family had downsized, moving to an area further from his school and friends. His mum had bought him a pet tortoise, Pearl, to keep him company while she was at work. When Kathy was at home, her focus was on making breakfast or dinner, getting Jack ready for school or bed, and doing the housework. Jack used to spend his time playing out in the roads around his home with his friends, but since moving away from them, he had had to entertain himself after school. Kathy admitted that she did rely on the computer and TV to keep him busy while she did the washing and cleaning. Jack regularly got up early to sneak repeated episodes of Dennis the Menace on CBBC catch-up on his iPad, and spent a lot of his evenings on Minecraft with the TV on in the background.

Some parents used media activities as a way of filling their children's time, often as a result of their lifestyle and needs (e.g. being a single parent, long working hours, lack of income), or their own difficulty in coming up with ideas for entertainment for their children. Nadia's (9) mum, Salma, was heavily reliant on media to keep all three of the children entertained. She struggled to think of things that they could do on a low income, and the children often demanded expensive toys and products. This meant they spent a lot of time at home, where the TV and YouTube became a prominent feature.

To overcome these challenges, some parents resorted to buying more devices for their children to use. William (12) and Peter (9) both lived in households where the parents kept buying new technology. Each of the boys had their own TV set, games console, iPad and iPhone (William) and iPod Touch (Peter). Both the parents relied on the children using the devices to entertain themselves with minimal adult input while the parents worked or did housework.

They've got a TV and iPad that they share – or should I say argue over. They have a Wii but that doesn't get used much since Peter got his Xbox. They each have an iPod Touch too. So that should be enough to keep them entertained! They just play Minecraft on them all anyway!

Peter's mum

Although much of the children's media behaviour could be repetitive or focused; for instance, Peter's tendency to spend his media time on Minecraft or Minecraft-related activity, this was not necessarily unsatisfactory for the children. For most of the time the children enjoyed their chosen media content and activity, even if from an adult perspective it might appear overly repetitive or narrow. Problems arose only when children became bored or dissatisfied with that content and then lacked the resources or knowledge to seek out new content or experiences.

6. The role of TV

6.1 BUILDING ON YEAR 1 INSIGHTS

In Year 1 we explored a range of factors that shaped TV viewing behaviour among the children, and used those insights as a foundation to develop our understanding in Year 2.

In Year 1 we established that the TV set played an important role in family viewing; watching TV was a valued way for the children to spend time with their parents in some households. However, the TV set could also be a source of conflict between siblings, who would argue about what to watch. Both of these dynamics meant that children often watched TV content that wasn't their personal choice – exposing them to a wider range of content.

Traditional live viewing did not seem to be the children's preferred means of accessing content. Their personal viewing was often through short-form, YouTube-style video clips and on-demand viewing, where they were able to watch the same episodes repeatedly or 'binge' on a whole series of episodes, at a time of their choice.

The children sought out content related to their current interests and preoccupations, whether that was loom bands, Tracy Beaker or Minecraft. They would use the device most suitable for accessing that content and which was most likely to be available to them. This might be the TV set but might also be the tablet, smartphone, games console or laptop.

In Year 2 we wanted to explore the role of TV in the children's lives in more detail, specifically around content choice and the role of different devices.

6.2 CONTENT-DRIVEN CHOICES

For the children in this sample, the notion of 'TV' related to the TV shows they wanted to watch, rather than the physical set. Their interaction with TV was driven almost exclusively by content choices; they were actively searching for specific shows they liked and wanted to watch, on whatever device it proved easiest to access them.

Children usually discovered TV shows that they liked through watching broadcast TV, after suggestions from friends, and from recommendations on video-on-demand (VoD) services and YouTube. Among the younger children, (e.g. Lily, Alice) programmes like *Tracy Beaker*, *Victorious* and *Dennis the Menace* were popular, while the older children (e.g. William, Brigit, Robert), liked *Hollyoaks*, *Gossip Girl*, *Police Interceptors* and chat shows such as *Alan Carr*.

Ade, 14, was drawn in by Japanese anime, and if he wanted to watch programmes, he would sit in front of the family's desktop computer, in the corner of the dark living room, to watch the shows he could find on YouTube. His younger brother, Sam, had much more contact with the TV set, often taking it over to play on the Wii.

Normally, after school I'll watch an hour or so, so like 2 or 3 episodes. But on Sundays I can get a bit carried away and sit here for hours. I think the most I've watched in one go is about 10 episodes"

Ade, 14

Device choices were often secondary to content decisions; many of the children watched their favourite programmes on a range of devices. *Britain's Got Talent (BGT)* was a show that the majority of the sample were watching during the fieldwork period, and it demonstrated how content and device decisions were interwoven. For some children, like Lily, 8, *BGT* was a weekly routine in the household: the whole family got together to watch it when it was broadcast.

We love Britain's Got Talent. We all sit and watch it together. On the Saturday night we'll watch it and mum and dad will let us stay up and have treats!

Lily, 8

This style of viewing was not, however, very common across the sample for this particular TV show. More children followed Ahmed's (8) approach, and tended to record *Britain's Got Talent* on the family's Sky box and watch it the next day, or later in the week. There was a lot of demand for the family TV set in the lounge from Ahmed's three brothers and parents, so he didn't often feel able to demand to watch what he wanted; he preferred to record the show so that he could fit it in around his family viewing schedule.

Eve, 15, always watched *Britains Got's Talent* on ITV Player, which she accessed through the TV set, at some point during the week. She wasn't worried about watching it straight away, but when people at school started talking about it she usually felt inspired to catch up. Josie, 11, didn't feel particularly strongly about watching the whole programme, so she just searched for and watched the good bits on YouTube.

I just want to see the good people so I just search for it on YouTube. I don't need to see it all.

Josie, 11

This range of attitudes towards a specific programme is not in itself new. But in the past children would have fewer viewing options, and their viewing habits would have been more uniform. The increase in viewing options has meant that children are able to choose the type of viewing that best reflects both their viewing preferences, and the extent to which they like, and want to prioritise, the programme, illustrating how varied viewing habits can now be.

Children did make some choices about the best device for their favourite TV programmes, which often depended on how they *expected* to find it (e.g. online vs. live broadcast), availability in the household and the size of the screen. If they had the choice of watching a programme on any device, more often than not children would use the largest, which would typically be the family TV set. Eve, 15, and Josie, 11, both had access to iPads and TVs with internet access. If they wanted to watch something on demand, they preferred the TV for its larger screen, unless someone else was watching it, or they were in bed.

6.2.1 WHAT COUNTS AS 'TV'?

The concept of 'watching TV' had, for most of the children, become more closely connected with the programmes than with the activity of sitting in front of the set. This often seemed to be a result of the increasing choice and availability of the platforms, devices and audio-visual content style to which they had access. VoD was popular as it includes a wide range of programmes on services like Netflix and Amazon Prime not available on traditional broadcast TV services, and because it can be watched on a range of devices. When they thought about what they liked to watch, children of all ages tended to think of YouTube videos (which may be short clips, or by vloggers) in a similar bracket to mainstream TV shows. They often

struggled to differentiate TV programmes from other types of video content that they saw online; broadcast TV felt less recognisably different.

I watch TV shows when I record them on the Sky box and lots of YouTube.

William, 12

6.3 VIDEO ON DEMAND

One of the most important types of content, for the majority of the children, was catch-up and VoD services, available online and through their TV sets.

The children had become accustomed to watching the programmes they wanted, when they wanted. The most popular platforms among the sample were Netflix, Amazon Prime, iPlayer, 4OD, ITV Player and YouTube (in no particular order). The majority of the children also had TVs with Sky or Virgin Media, and a few had Freeview. They watched programmes on these platforms across a wide range of devices, including tablets, desktops and TV sets.

I mainly watch things on Netflix. It's on my TV so it's really easy to get. I like to look through and find something I want to watch.

Josie, 11

Almost all the children lived in households where the TV sets were connected to the internet. The exceptions were Sarah, 11 and Lily, 8. This had changed since the first year of fieldwork: a couple of households had upgraded their TV sets in the time between the two waves of fieldwork (Calum's and Josie's). Eve's (15) parents had recently bought a smart TV with Freeview and access to catch-up services such as iPlayer and 4OD. In Year 1, among the older children, Eve had watched the most broadcast TV, but in Year 2 she had quickly become familiar with the possibilities of VoD services. During the most recent fieldwork, she rarely watched live broadcast TV at all any more, apart from with her parents. Instead, she regularly browsed 4OD and found comedy TV shows to watch, like *The Goldbergs*.

*I've got really into this show *The Goldbergs*. One of my friends recommended it and then I had a quick look through 4OD now we have it and they have all these old episodes. So I've mainly been sat here and watching that now.*

Eve, 15

Family routines of watching TV had also started to include VoD and catch-up services. Eve and her mum continued to spend time together watching documentaries and *Downton Abbey*, but, more often than last year, these were watched on iPlayer and ITV Player. Eve and her mum liked being able to access a much wider range of content and watch it freely within their own routine.

Calum and his family had also recently upgraded their TV set to a smart TV, and now had access to Netflix through the TV set. They had borrowed the log-in details of Calum's brother's friend to see what was on Netflix, a few months ago, and they were increasingly using this borrowed log-in to watch shows and films. The family regularly watched TV together on Saturday nights - normally US dramas on Sky Atlantic such as *Prison Break*. But in the 'off season' for American TV, they had been watching a lot more on Netflix, as well as recording programmes on, while the parents were at work.

We watch lots of shows on Sky Atlantic, like Prison Break. Or now we'll watch a film or something on Netflix or something we've recorded on the Sky Box. That would probably be from Sky Atlantic too, but from during the week.

Calum, 13

All of the children who had the ability to record TV programmes had done so at some point. This behaviour was normally shaped by the fact that the TV sets with Sky or Virgin were devices shared by the whole family. The competition for an allocated time to watch favourite programmes had therefore driven children towards recording. Ahmed, 9, had competition from his three younger siblings and both his parents. His three siblings were all much younger than him, the next oldest being 5, and were quite loud and demanding. As a result he was often overruled. So he made sure that he recorded his favourite wrestling shows to watch at a time when his younger brothers had gone to bed and his parents weren't quite ready to sit down for the evening.

6.4 LIVE BROADCAST TV

There was a small overall reduction in the extent to which the children seemed to be watching live broadcast TV shows, on the TV set, compared to Year 1, and this largely appeared to be due to the increased use of VoD services. Some households, like Calum and Eve's family, did sometimes still watch TV programmes as a family, but only occasionally were these shows watched live at the time of broadcast.

The exceptions to this overarching rule were generally the younger children, and particularly those with younger siblings, like Lily, 8, and Nadia, 9. They both had regular routines of watching live broadcast TV with their siblings, in the lounge, when they returned from school. Lily and her younger sister, Rose, 5, would watch pretty much anything that was shown on Disney channels or Nickelodeon. Their favourite shows were *Jessie*, shown on the Disney Channel and *Sofia the First*, on Disney Junior. They watched these every day after school, and at around 6:30pm they would go upstairs and watch the last half hour of CBBC before going to bed.

Nadia and her younger sister, Alisha, 6, also watched a lot of TV in their lounge. However, increasingly they would split, with one watching the TV in the lounge and the other watching repeats of old TV episodes, like Barbie, on YouTube on the PC (with headphones, as the PC was also in the lounge).

7. Search behaviour

7.1 ONLINE SEARCH BEHAVIOUR

During the fieldwork, we set a number of online search tasks to better understand how the children discovered and understood the information presented to them. Children were asked how they would go about finding a specific piece of information or the answer to a question, for example: “What is the best recipe for chocolate chip cookies?”, “What is the best mobile phone available at the moment?”, “How do you make a loom band bracelet?”. The questions were designed so that the answers might include a range of types of information, e.g. opinion, instruction etc, and so that the information might be available in a range of media, e.g. text or video.. The questions were also applicable across the different age ranges. Generally, we chose questions with answers that might be contestable (e.g. based on opinion) to help us understand *how* the children found the information and which information they trusted⁵.

Online search was a universal activity across the sample. All the children used the internet to find the information, activities or content they wanted or needed, and the researchers took the opportunity to ask about, and observe, search behaviour at various points throughout fieldwork. For example, Robert frequently used the internet to keep up with football scores, and typically used Twitter as a shortcut to find the most up-to-date information posted by users he followed. Jack, 10, used Google when his mum asked him to find out what ‘subscribing’ on YouTube meant, before she would let him use her Google account to subscribe to a vlogger. Ade, 14, searched Google for strategies to scare away a pigeon that was sitting on his bedroom windowsill. Other children searched Google, YouTube or (rarely) Bing, when they wanted to watch a specific TV programme or clip.

The children in our sample used a variety of methods to search for information online. While Google text-based search was a staple tool for many children, other methods were also used, including voice-based and image-based methods.

- Ade, 15 and Eve, 14, tended to use **Google search** to look through links and find the necessary information, as they felt it was the easiest and quickest way of accessing and consuming content.
- Ahmed, 8, generally went to **Google image search**, as he found text-based information difficult to process.
- Josie, 11, used **Siri** to conduct searches and then chose from the resulting links, in part because her dyslexia made it difficult to type questions correctly.
- Jack, 10, did much of his searching on **YouTube** as he liked receiving instructions in the form of videos.
- Robert, 14, used social media, specifically **Twitter**, to get live information and facts from particular users whom he judged would be the most accurate and up-to-date sources.

⁵ More details of this can be found in the appendix.

- Sarah, 11, used **Wikipedia** to find information, as this was one of the few websites her dad allowed her free access to.

At some point during all the discussions, we asked the children to open a search engine, like Google or Bing, to find some information. What was common among all of them, across the different ages, was their tendency to click on the first link and assume it was the most appropriate for their needs. For most children, this meant the first non-sponsored link, as they identified the ‘ad’ symbol and knew this wasn’t a standard Google entry.

I’d just click the top one because that’s the best. It gives me what I want so why do I need to look at the others?

Josie, 11

These search behaviours and platform choices appeared to be influenced by three key factors:

- The **content or information** the children were looking for shaped how, and where, they expected to find it. When Brigit was looking for make-up or fashion tips, ideas or inspirations, she looked at social media, where she was following the right people, who posted the type of information she wanted.
- The **medium** that children expected their desired content to be in also informed their search behaviour. If they expected videos to be the most useful format for the information they wanted, they would search YouTube, and if they expected to learn about a subject from text they would search on a mainstream search engine.
- **Personal preference** was also important; the format that children preferred to learn from influenced what they expected to find. Lily, 8, Ahmed, 8, and Peter, 9, preferred images to text and found them easier to compare and contrast. This meant they regularly used Google image search. Conversely, Eve, 15, preferred to read about a subject in order to learn about it, so would tend to search on Google, Wikipedia or BBC Bitesize.
- **Educational challenges**, or the abilities of the children, could make search more difficult. Josie’s (11) dyslexia often meant she struggled with spelling and typing sentences, so she preferred to use Siri to search for information.

Children tended to search only for specific information or content. ‘Browsing’ was hardly ever an activity in its own right; it was rather a means to an end.

In the few cases where the children were actively looking for something new to do, watch or read, they still seemed to have a clear idea of what they wanted to find. Nadia, 9, had recently started learning to play the piano, and wanted a new game that was linked to her hobby. She searched Google for “piano games for girls” and started playing the first link.

“I wanted a piano game, and I’m a girl. So that’s how I got what I wanted”

Nadia, 10

These approaches demonstrated a tendency for children to use the internet as a tool for efficiently accessing desired content, rather than for wider exploration. But this was not always due to a lack of curiosity. Eve, 15 deliberately listened to the radio in order to expose herself to music that she wouldn’t ordinarily come across. She felt it was the best way of doing so, and wasn’t keen on using online platforms like Spotify as an alternative.

“I got a radio for Christmas too. I like putting it on in the morning before I go to school because they play all this stuff I couldn’t think of to search for myself. It’s a good way of finding new things I like. I don’t know how else I could come across it”

Eve, 15

8. Factors that shape trust

8.1 BUILDING ON YEAR 1 INSIGHTS

In year 1 we began to explore how children understand issues around content trustworthiness, and the markers that indicate a trusted piece of content. We found that the messages from school about the use of Wikipedia drew some of the children's attention to issues around content creation, and had implications for what content they trusted. Teachers had stressed that Wikipedia should not be trusted for homework because anyone can edit its content. This message had increased awareness among the children that content can be created by anyone. Many of the children believed that Wikipedia content was less trustworthy than that created by large organisations or individuals who were accredited or trained in some way.

This distinction was predominantly used to assess content that the children used for homework, and did not mean that they saw user-generated content more widely as untrustworthy. They placed considerable trust in the vloggers they followed, and in the user-generated content that they used to find information on games and hobbies.

In Year 2 we sought to explore in more detail the children's understanding of content creation and the markers of trustworthiness.

8.2 UNDERSTANDING CONTENT CREATION

During the research we asked the children about whether they felt the content and information they encountered online was trustworthy. This was not an issue that tended to be particularly top of mind for the children during their day-to-day online activity. In most cases the children assumed that the content and information they used was reliable.

The exception to this was if content was obviously editable. Recognising that content could be edited was strongly connected with the concept that 'just about anyone' could do so, and therefore the information could easily be wrong. The children had been told at school and by their parents that this kind of content might be less trustworthy, and used phrases and language that seemed to have filtered down to them from the adults in their lives.

"You shouldn't use Wikipedia because anyone can edit it. It's not trustworthy. You get told that at school"

Calum, 14

However, the children's ability to recognise edited or user-generated content was patchy and unless there was an obvious sign that the content could be edited, they tended to trust the content on most sites, regardless of the source or author. This was particularly true for younger users. The children who were older and closer to A-levels, especially if they had high educational abilities, were starting to be taught in school about sources and bias.

Well, if I'm in school and I use a source or something that I find online, I'd say "this source says this..." so that it was clear it was their specific opinion.

Ade, 15

Wikipedia and YouTube were the only websites that all the children understood to be editable, due to messages from school and clear evidence that ‘normal people’ had uploaded content to the sites. However, some children saw YouTube as more reliable than Wikipedia because they felt video content to be more ‘transparent’ and self-evident than text, possibly underestimating or unaware of the extent to which video could be edited.

“Wikipedia could be made up, because people can do it themselves. But on YouTube you can actually see the thing. You can watch them actually doing it so you can see that it’s true”

Carmen, 13

Researcher: *“Do you trust YouTube or Wikipedia more?”*

Peter: *“YouTube, because you can’t really change it”*

Peter, 10

“If it’s got a whole website dedicated to it, I’d use that one. Because if it’s on Wikipedia, anyone can change it”

Minnie, 13

Other markers that content was editable, or generated by users, were often missed. Ade, 14, frequently referred to IMDB (Internet Movie Database) film lists without realising they were user-generated. They were hosted on what he saw to be an ‘official’ website, so he believed them to be expert or objective.

8.3 MARKERS OF TRUSTWORTHINESS

There were a number of rules and markers that the children often used to distinguish trustworthiness; most children across the sample demonstrated most of these heuristics, although this did vary across the sample, and in some cases by age. These rules appeared to be largely self-generated, and had developed over time through experiences of using different websites. They included:

- **Branding** – big brands, ones they knew and their perceptions of how ‘good’ they are (both the brand of the website itself, and to some extent the brands advertising on the website).
- **Design** – their own personal perspectives and opinions on the quality of the website design, colours used, layout and font.
- **Advertising type** – types of ‘accepted’ and known advertising, such as banner advertisements, were seen as signals of a more trustworthy website than pop-ups which were more associated with ‘scams’.
- **Previous use** – by themselves or people they knew.

“You can tell, like if it’s set out nicely. If it’s got like pictures. If it’s an actual website all about that thing”

Minnie, 13

However, the children frequently disregarded these markers if the website delivered what they were looking for, prioritising their needs over their knowledge of ‘untrustworthy’ websites. Carmen, 12, had a strong sense that she should only use trustworthy ‘official’ websites, and recognised ‘scammy’ pop-up advertising as a marker of a less legitimate website. That said, she frequently used illegal streaming websites (like Putlocker), which had frequent pop-up advertising, to stream her favourite TV shows.

"It does have a lot of ads on it, but you just have to ignore them. Then it's got like Shaun the Sheep and all of the films, then you just have to ignore those bits because they might be viruses"

Carmen, 13

A minority of the children did have a more sophisticated understanding of how to trust different types of media. Irfan, 15, had applied what he knew from history lessons at school about sources, and therefore had a clear sense that information might be biased depending on the source. Irfan's cousin regularly watched Al Jazeera for news updates, while his dad watched Fox News. Irfan recognised that each of these was likely to be biased on certain issues, and trusted the BBC to be more impartial, which he preferred.

"[BBC Wales] gives you more of the full story, compared with Fox that only gives you a tiny bit and you don't know if it's true or not"

Irfan, 15

9. Advertising

9.1 BUILDING ON YEAR 1 INSIGHTS

In Year 1 we began to explore children's understanding of advertising, partly by doing a task which showed children various examples of advertising and tested whether they recognised and understood them. The stimuli included a broad range of advertising, both overt and subtle, including TV adverts, YouTube banners, website banners and product placement/endorsements in tweets or vlogger videos.

We found that the most easily recognisable type of advertising was traditional TV commercials. Many of the children could also recognise online adverts that were like TV adverts, such as the short video adverts at the start of a YouTube video. Most of the older children were also aware of adverts that pop up on websites, or are embedded in the website content.

In contrast, few children recognised advertising in the form of endorsements or product placement. There was also very little understanding of personalised advertising; most children did not know that advertising could be specifically targeted at, or personalised to different demographics or individuals.

In Year 2 we sought to extend our insights into childrens' knowledge of advertising, specifically, which factors made adverts more or less likely to be recognised, and children's attitudes to these factors.

9.2 RECOGNITION AND ATTITUDES TO ADVERTISING

In Year 2, we repeated the test of advertising recognition used in Year 1 (see above) and tried to look more deeply at the children's opinions and attitudes to the different forms of advert. We also took other opportunities throughout the interviews to explore understanding of advertising, when it came up naturally; for example, when adverts appeared while children demonstrated a game or other media activity to the researcher. This allowed us to gain insight into the children's behaviour when they were confronted with different forms of advertising - whether they engaged with them, ignored or skipped them, whether they found them interesting or annoying, etc.

As in Year 1, children's recognition of advertising varied significantly, based on age and the type of advertising. Some types were easier to recognise than others. For example, while all children recognised TV advertising, only the older ones tended to pick up on website banners.

Adverts that posed significant interruptions to media consumption were the most widely recognised, simply because they were much harder to ignore. For example, TV advertising was universally familiar and recognisable to children, as it was unavoidably present in so much of the TV content consumed by the children (although it was often skipped). Similarly, pop-up ads on both websites and games were recognised as such by the majority of children, because they posed an additional step or barrier to getting to desired content.

Children found it easier to spot advertising when they were familiar with the layout or format of the medium in which it was embedded. For example, banner adverts appearing on YouTube were immediately noticed. Banner advertising on the homepage of a newspaper, however, or a magazine website, was much harder to see, as the children were less used to seeing this type of content.

“There always seems to be adverts on this side on Facebook. I always see betting website adverts”

Robert, 14

Whether recognised or not, children ignored the majority of advertising as far as possible, or skipped it as quickly as they could. Many developed strategies or habits for skipping adverts as efficiently as possible, feeling that they were a waste of time and not something worth expending their attention on.

Several of the children anticipated when pop-up adverts would appear during app-based games and had their finger poised over the exit button ready to skip an advert before it appeared. Brigit, 16, used an app game on her phone that involved playing piano tunes. In order to unlock new song options, Brigit was required to watch adverts. She usually put her phone on mute or left it while she went to make a cup of tea, in order to get through the advert. She saw this as a necessary inconvenience in order to get what she wanted, but she never questioned its presence or felt that it was an unreasonable hardship.

“I don’t really mind. I mean the adverts are repetitive, they’re always the same. I usually just turn the sound off and let it play”

Brigit, 16

While children often noticed advertising, they didn’t tend to understand the broader implications. They focused on the media content they were interested in and, unsurprisingly, rarely questioned why the advertising they encountered was there, whether it was targeted towards them specifically, or who might be paying for it.

While all the children could easily recognise TV advertising, many were unaware that it varied across TV channels or at different broadcast times. For example, many were unaware that advertising varied when programming was targeted at children as opposed to adults, or that BBC channels did not broadcast commercial advertising.

10. Gaming behaviour

10.1 RANGE OF BEHAVIOURS

All the children in our sample engaged in some level of gaming, although the nature of their game-playing behaviour, and the games they played, varied hugely across the sample. There were some significant differences between most console or PC games and their tablet or phone app-based counterparts. The most obvious were the levels of immersion, complexity and stimulation that were required from console or PC games. While all of the children in the sample were playing at least some of the app-based category of game, very few of the girls showed any interest in the console/PC-based games.

Console/PC games typically require a much greater level of mental capacity, and often include significantly more strategy in order to win or do well. Games played on these platforms also often involve more narrative and an over-arching ambition, and typically offer a much more sophisticated audio-visual experience. Tablet or smartphone app-based games are often much less immersive in their play. They are typically based on a much simpler 'arcade-style' format, e.g. reaction or puzzle games.

These game types varied in the ways they were picked up, and dropped, by the children. Console/PC games tended to involve more planning, especially when the children needed to save up enough money or wait for a birthday, or when they had to wait for the game to be released. Often this build-up for new games included a social element, with the children discussing their anticipation and plans with friends. At the time of the research, Irfan, 15, was eagerly awaiting the release of the next Batman PS4 game. He and his friend had played all the previous ones, and were eagerly anticipating the new release.

"The new Batman game comes out in June. Me and my friend have played all of them... we can't wait, apparently this is going to be the best one yet"

Irfan, 15

App-based tablet or phone games, in contrast, tended to have minimal or no up-front cost and were chosen and downloaded much less selectively. Many children would download several at a time to try out, with games being picked up and dropped at a much more frequent rate, and children becoming bored by them after a relatively short, but intensive, period (often a matter of days or weeks). While the children often described these games as 'addictive', and played them intensively for a short time before becoming bored, they rarely expressed any loyalty or commitment to a game beyond this 'phase'.

Several children recognised that games varied in the quality of their playing experience, admitting that they didn't play app-based games out of enjoyment, but because they were addictive. Some even had deliberately abandoned games of this type for that reason. Irfan deliberately deleted all the app games from his phone when he was revising for GCSE exams as a strategy for wasting less time. Others chose games specifically for their experience rather than out of habit.

“I much prefer playing a game that’s kind of thrilling, that I can work out a strategy for and actually enjoy the playing itself, rather than just the winning. The play is more important than the win”

Ade, 14

Many of the console games played by children had the option to be played in several different ways – in different modes or in different player styles. This seemed to allow children to play games in a way that most suited their needs or desires from the game; for example, the level of competition, skill or immersion they wanted.

Possibly the best example of flexibility in games is Minecraft. Seven of the children in the sample were playing Minecraft at the time of the study, and three of them had picked it up in the interim between Years 1 and 2 (Lily, 9, Ahmed, 9 and Sarah, 11). The game appealed to a broad range of ages, and both boys and girls. Its five game modes (Survival, Creative, Adventure, Spectator and Hardcore) seemed to offer the greatest degree of flexibility, and it demonstrated the greatest variability in playing styles between children.

SARAH, 11	JACK, 10
<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Preferred to play in ‘creative mode’■ Spent time building houses and structures■ No interaction with other players■ No competition with others■ Needs: creativity, relaxation, safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Preferred to play in ‘survival mode’■ Spent time building structures to protect his character from zombies■ Liked competition with other players■ Needs: Action, competition, socialising

There were other examples of this flexibility within games. Robert, 14, preferred to play FIFA in ‘career mode’, which he felt to be a more realistic and authentic experience of managing a football team, whereas his friends tended to just play matches. Similarly, many ‘first person shooter’ games, like Call of Duty, can be played in a number of modes – Calum, 13, preferred to play the single-player Zombie mode, while some of his friends tended to play multiplayer versions.

Robert also played a game called Watch Dogs, which he described as an open-world game, with no specific overall aim. In the game the player has the opportunity to explore a city, and can manipulate the environment. Robert enjoyed the freedom afforded by the game, and liked being able to choose how to ‘play the character’ on any given day. He had free rein to make a large number of decisions, which influenced what happened within the game.

“Sometimes I might shut off a bank’s security and steal some money, but other times I can intercept the police radio and prevent a crime. I like that you can make him do good things too.”

Robert, 14

10.2 BUSINESS MODELS

The games played by the children in our sample demonstrated a range of business models associated with different kinds of gaming experience.

The traditional business model for games often involves a relatively substantial up-front cost, which buys ownership of the entire game, which the player is then free to play: **‘pay to play’**.

In contrast, newer app-based games often have a minimal or low up-front cost, and operate on a different business model. In these cases, the children usually downloaded the games free of charge, so did not pay to play, but were instead offered the opportunity to **pay to win** through buying coins, skills or levels which offered progression or advancement in the game. This was generally accompanied by **in-game advertising**, which served as an indirect form of pay to play, where payment took the form of the children's attention.

Increasingly, some games that might previously have fitted into the traditional pay-to-play category now involve elements of the pay-to-win model; for example, those children in the sample playing FIFA, such as Robert and Calum, noticed that they could purchase coins online that would give them access to better players.

Many children were playing app-based games that strongly incentivised them to make in-app purchases that would enable them to unlock levels, skip levels, buy clues, coins or hints, etc. Carmen, Ahmed, Josie, Lily and Brigit were among those frequently playing simple games of this type. However, only one child in the sample (see below) had spent money on in-app purchases.

"You can watch the adverts to get coins. Or you can subscribe, and get 822 coins, but then you have to pay for those"

Brigit, 16

For most of the children, spending in this way would have been difficult. They did not usually have their own bank card, or a parent's bank account linked to the game, and some families had rules (which the children adhered to) against clicking in-app purchase links.

In addition, while some of the children had felt the urge to make a purchase to advance in a game, most of the children had a sense that it wasn't 'right' or worthwhile to do so. Although they found the games enjoyable (or addictive), many of them recognised that they weren't a worthwhile use of time, and the idea of spending money on them would have felt wasteful and potentially embarrassing in front of their parents or peers.

Even the children who played games with a higher mental investment, such as Robert and Calum with FIFA, hadn't made in-app purchases when faced with the opportunity. Both enjoyed the play of the game more than the competitive element. Winning wasn't the motivating factor, so in-app purchases were of little interest.

The exception to this was William, who regularly played the app-based game Clash of Clans. Clash of Clans involves players building up resources and defences for their 'clan' and has a design that strongly lends itself to encouraging in-app spending. Success in the game broadly relies on investment of either time or money, with very little left to skill or ability. No matter how much practice a player puts in, their progress can be destroyed by an opponent who has built up a stronger clan, and the quickest way to do this is through in-app purchases.

William had spent over £100 on in-app purchases, which meant he was able to progress in the game instantaneously rather than investing time. Several of William's siblings and his father all played Clash of Clans – his father had spent over £300 on the game himself.

Whether children make in-app purchases or not, the business model underlying these games changes the way in which the game-playing experience is designed. For the more traditional pay-to-play games, the playing experience itself has to be made enjoyable or thrilling enough to warrant the up-front cost. But when games are paid for by advertisers, or through in-app purchases, their design is driven by the players playing, regardless of the experience. Children

might often play because the game is addictive or compulsive, regardless of their level of enjoyment.

“Once you lose, you just really want to do it again. They’re hard so you want to try again”

Alice, 10

10.3 SOCIAL GAMING

In Year 1 we explored the blurring of boundaries between social media and gaming. Many of the games played by the children included social elements. For example, Calum would communicate with his friends via a headset while playing FIFA. However, communicating with strangers online was rarer, and less appealing for the children. In Year 2 we sought to extend our understanding of the prevalence and appeal of communicating with strangers in games, and the perception of any associated risks.

In Year 2, many of the games children played had functionality for engaging with strangers, but in some cases, children chose to play in modes that restricted this function. Sarah, 11, played Minecraft in the creative non-interactive mode. Of those who did choose to play in open contact mode, most were relatively indifferent to the option of interacting with strangers in games, preferring to focus on the game, or interact only with friends they knew in real life. Similar to their attitude towards talking to strangers in real life, many children didn’t see the appeal of engaging with strangers in games, and if they did talk it was primarily about the game itself rather than anything more personal.

This seemed to reflect a broader etiquette for online interaction between strangers: discussion of game play was seen as acceptable, but rarely strayed into personal territory. When Peter, 10, was approached by someone online who asked him questions about who he was, where he lived, and other personal details, Peter felt uncomfortable and closed down the conversation.

“I’m glad he told us about it, when that person talked to him. Peters was really embarrassed because it made him feel a bit stupid, but he didn’t do anything wrong”

Peter’s mum

Overall there was a much greater volume of interaction between friends in games than between children and strangers, and children typically wanted it to stay that way.

11. Social media and identity

11.1 THE DIGITAL PLAYGROUND

The vast majority of children in the study were using at least one form of social media – Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook or Twitter, and were often also using messaging services such as WhatsApp, ooVoo and Kik.

Social media was typically used as a tool for conducting friendships in a way that differed relatively little from real life; similar kinds of conversations and interactions took place online as in the playground. Especially at the point at which children started taking their devices to school, the line between their social lives online and the real world blurred.

What do we talk about? The same stuff we'd talk about at school really

Eve, 16

We use the Facebook to see who's free to meet at the park

Jack, 10

Children tended to face similar social conventions and pressures online as they did in real life, although some of the attributes of social media acted to distort or magnify their effects.

The girls in our sample (ranging from Lily, 8, to Brigit, 15) were facing typical 'image-focused' pressures online as they might have done in real life, but the 'selfie' culture of social media seemed to ramp up the effect of these pressures. The ease and normality of posting pictures of themselves, together with the habit of social groups commenting on each other's pictures, meant that several of the girls felt under close physical scrutiny and were self-conscious about the kinds of photos posted of them.

Several of the girls in our sample posted selfies frequently (several times a week). Getting an acceptable number of 'likes' and positive comments seemed to be their key motivation for doing this, although the amount deemed 'acceptable' varied from one child to another, and seemed to reflect how many friends and connections they had on social media in the first place. Eve and Brigit had photos on Instagram with 60+ likes, whereas Alice tended to have 10-20.

Selfies are when you take a picture of yourself and it's not just a picture of yourself next to a famous painting or something when it's an actual picture. You're just taking it to show your face off"

Minnie, 13

Particularly for girls, the primary use of social media was as a means to portray themselves and their identity to social circles, with many making great efforts to carefully curate their peer-facing online appearance. Social media was rarely used to demonstrate personality or interests in much depth; children preferred to conform and avoid the risk of appearing too 'different'. Several of the children had wide-ranging interests and hobbies but these rarely formed a part of their carefully-curated online identity; anything that might be less than the social norm was

omitted. Eve, 15, had recently bought a record player and had started collecting vinyl records, but this wasn't something she could post online, as she was unsure what impression this would give people. One of Eve's friends had started a book review channel on YouTube, and while Eve respected her for doing it, and actually found the book recommendations useful, she knew that people at school found it 'weird'.

"A girl in my year has her own book channel. Thing is, I respect her for doing it, but at the same time everyone just think it's so weird. You can't really be your true self"

Eve, 15

In situations where children did use the internet and social media to explore and express their hobbies, they were often subject to similar social pressures. Alice, 9, was a keen gymnast and dancer, and sometimes made dance videos which she posted to YouTube. She felt conflicting social pressures about these videos; on the one hand she was embarrassed about some of her earlier videos posted a year before, but she also felt that she needed to build up an acceptable number of videos on her channel, in order to be taken seriously as a YouTuber - she felt pressure not to take them down, so as to keep up her numbers.

"I thought they were good at the time. I've made others now. I'm not dancing round with like messy hair anymore, doing weird dancing. I don't know what I was thinking"

Alice, 10

Both boys and girls used social media to curate and develop their social identity in a range of ways, beyond the pictures they posted. For example, 'profile' or 'bio' information often provided a space for the children to express current trends or shifting friendships.

Carmen would frequently update her Instagram profile, listing current best friends, holidays or social events, and Alice had her crush's name in hearts in her profile – much like children might write on their school books or pencil cases.

"It's my bio. It's just like quotes and stuff. And my best friends. And Ben is the boy I fancy, who likes me back"

Alice, 10

For boys, the pressures inherent in social media tended to manifest themselves in different ways. While some boys did post occasional selfies, this was much rarer than with girls, and their behaviour online tended to edge towards being boisterous or daring. The boys in our sample talked about their friends, talking in large group-chat functions on social media (e.g. Facebook messenger, WhatsApp), which seemed to encourage some of them to 'act tough' – using language and attitudes that they were less likely to use in real-life social situations. It seemed that, while not technically anonymous, the more removed nature of online chat gave boys more confidence to test boundaries and 'show off' among their friends.

Some of the teenage boys in our sample were relatively awkward in real-life social situations, and social media seemed to allow some of them to overcome this and develop a more assertive character.

An example of this was Ade's friendship group, who would build up long-running jokes around various supply teachers they had at school, teasing them and sending pictures via WhatsApp. Irfan said that some of his friends, who were shy and very un-confrontational in real life, sometimes posted rude comments or sent insults to each other on social media that

they never would have been brave enough to do in real life. The children's feelings around this varied; Ade recognised that it was unkind and felt an element of guilt, but loved to laugh along, whereas Irfan was determined to rise above it, and avoided joining in.

"My friends sometimes get annoying on chat, like... I know they wouldn't say that to my face at school"

Irfan, 15

11.2 SOCIAL PRESSURE AND RISK

Social media was used primarily as an extension of the normal social lives of the young people in the sample. However, because it tended to exaggerate some aspects of social life, such as physical scrutiny, gossip and the testing of social boundaries, it could result in elevated risk in some areas.

Social media could provide a fertile ground for insults and bullying among young people. Several children reported seeing insulting comments posted on social media (aimed at themselves or others), or witnessing unpleasant gossip.

While, naturally, very few children openly admitted to this kind of behaviour themselves, several children reported having been on the receiving end of it. Alice, 9, had received rude or insulting comments about selfies she had posted in the past. Irfan had received anonymous racist comments posted to his profile on social media site Kiwi. While the young people in our sample recognised that these comments were unpleasant, they insisted they didn't take them seriously and weren't upset by them.

"They're just stupid, so I ignore them"

Alice, 10

The pressure to create and share selfies was sometimes associated with risks. A few children knew of situations where girls had sent nude or revealing photos of themselves to others at school. Irfan had female friends at school who had sent nude photos of themselves to a boyfriend, which had then been shared more widely across social media. Irfan found it surprising that girls he knew would send photos like that, and he struggled to understand the social pressures that had led to it. Similarly, at Ade's school, a boy he knew shared a naked photo of his girlfriend, which was quickly seen by the entire school, resulting in the boy being expelled.

A lot of the risks around social media seemed to stem from over-confidence in the anonymity and privacy that it provides. In general, the more anonymity offered by a social media platform, the more likely children felt bullying would be (e.g. Kiwi or Ask FM).

"They act differently... at school they act really nice and really friendly. But then on the internet they might act really bad and rude"

Nadia, 10

Children in the sample also tended to overestimate the privacy afforded to them on social media. In general, the young people in our sample often felt that their online worlds, and the devices they used, were private zones. This was especially true with regard to their parents, but also when publishing or posting materials to the internet. Even though Calum was happy to post material to his social media page without knowing his privacy settings, he was reluctant to show the researcher his phone, feeling it was personally revealing. Brigit was friends with her parents on Facebook but not on Instagram, and felt that Instagram was a more private space for this reason, even though she knew her parents could check her Instagram any time they chose to.

12. Media at school

12.1 INTRODUCTION

Alongside learning about the children's use of media within the home, in Year 2 the researchers began to explore how they used media platforms at school - one of the children's most important environments outside the home. The research was aimed to understand how children learn about media, their views and experiences of it, the rules around media in school and how it is being used to enhance learning about other subjects.

The following insights are developed from how the children discussed and described their learning in schools. This may not be a completely accurate representation of what teachers are doing, and trying to achieve – rather, it reflects the children's perceptions and what they were able to articulate to the researchers.

12.2 LEARNING ABOUT MEDIA

Many of the children described how they had specific IT lessons that taught them how to use different platforms and programmes on the computer. This was especially true (or perhaps simply more distinctive as a separate class) for the children who attended secondary school. During these lessons, most of the children would learn about programmes such as MS Office, being set tasks and homework on MS Word, PowerPoint and Excel. Minnie (13) and Alice (9) both spoke about having to design and deliver presentations on MS PowerPoint during their classes. Others, like Calum (13) were asked to type up their homework in MS Word. Some of the younger children who were still attending primary school were also using these programmes. Peter and Alice (both 9), were being taught to do simple maths in Excel and encouraged to create graphs to show the results. All of the children who spoke about this felt certain that these were skills they would need in the future, when they left school.

We were learning how to make graphs in Excel. They gave us a maths puzzle and we had to find the results and make it into a bar chart.

Peter, 9

Based on what the children told researchers, most of their internet or IT-related learning happened within specific IT lessons, rather than being integrated throughout their classes⁶. They did occasionally use their IT rooms for other lessons, and a few, like Calum (13), had access to some devices, like laptops, in their classrooms.

⁶ This was based purely on how the children described their schooling around IT. The research team recognise that this may be factually incorrect and that media are being used and supported in other ways that are less distinguishable for the children.

Researcher: What computers and devices do you have at school?

Eve: We have a couple of big computer rooms filled with computers. We have our IT lessons in there.

Researcher: Do you have or use any other technology in class?

Eve: Not really.

In addition to this, technology and media played a significant role in homework; most of the children had been asked to do online research on a range of topics. Dependent on the age and school level of the child, this normally involved searching for particular information, either to answer a specific set of questions or to develop their own opinions.

The only time I really use the desktop is when I've got to do some research for my homework. It's easier to do it on there.

Calum, 13

Some of the younger children were also introduced to games and websites that enabled them to learn about different subjects, away from the school. Children including Nadia, 9, were using websites such as www.coolmath-games.com/ as part of their maths work at school.

Alongside lessons, children were also increasingly being provided with school email addresses to send 'post' to each other and to speak to teachers. Lily, 8, had been set up with a 'mailbox' by her school. She had been told she could use it to send messages to other students and her teachers, but in reality used it very little. Some of the older children, including Ade and Eve, did use their school email a little more, to interact with teachers – such as submitting work and asking questions.

A few of the children were exposed to some of the more innovative elements of IT education and technology within their schools. Lily (8) had recently started to learn basic coding at school – or, as she called it “codering”. Her face lit up with excitement when she spoke about doing it – she found it fun, engaging and interesting to learn. Josie (11) was about to move to secondary school where they had a 3D printer. She had been shown it during her introduction evening to the school and was excited to see if she could use it.

They've got a 3D printer! It's so cool! I bet everyone wants to use it though. I don't know if I'll be allowed to.

Josie, 11

12.3 RULES ABOUT MEDIA

The schools that these children went to (based on what they have said during the interviews) had a small number of clear, shared rules about technology and devices within the school. Almost every child in the sample spoke about mobile phones, smartphones and tablets not being allowed in classes. There was a little variation on this theme; some children were allowed them between classes while others weren't at all during the school day. Quite a few of the children seemed to be intent on breaking these rules to some degree. Ade, 14, had had his phone confiscated many times over the previous few weeks because he was using it during lessons. He described how within his loud, bustling, comprehensive school there were a lot of Snapchat conversations that happened during classes.

Oh it's happened a few times. Everyone always does it so it's just about whether or not you get caught with it.

Ade, 14

Most schools appeared to have filters that prevented the children accessing inappropriate content during the school day. There seemed to be some tension within these schools between teaching children to use technology to their advantage, and preventing them being distracted by it during their lessons.

There were also rules about homework: teachers had warned children not to trust Wikipedia for their homework because it was editable, as mentioned earlier.

13. Learning about risk

13.1 BUILDING ON YEAR 1 INSIGHTS

In Year 1 we explored children's understanding and perceptions of risk in the media world. We found that while most children could recall messages from parents and school about online and media-related risks, they did not always understand the reasoning behind these messages. This was in part due to the fact that parents deemed some of the reasons too adult for children of their age. For instance, to explain fully why children should take care about privacy settings requires adults to explain concepts like grooming and paedophilia, which are difficult conversations to have in an age-appropriate way.

This was exacerbated by the fact that until the children fully understand the potential agency and motivations of others, it is difficult for them to comprehend the nature of risks and danger. Many of the children had therefore learned the 'what' but had filled in the 'why' for themselves.

In Year 2 we sought to extend this area of insight by understanding how parents helped their children navigate online and media-related risks.

13.2 APPROACHES TO RISK MITIGATION

Based on the accounts of the children in our study, it appeared that both parents and schools tended to be more reactive than proactive when teaching about risk. Several parents were putting off conversations with their children about difficult subjects, and in situations where they had stepped in, it was at the point when the potential risk had presented itself, rather than before the event. Schools were also perceived as tending to take action and discuss difficult topics only after a risk had presented itself within the school⁷.

When a boy at Ade's school had shared naked photos of a girl, the head teacher got involved and held an assembly on the risks of sexting, by which point the boy had been excluded from school.

Alice's mum reviewed her YouTube videos and made her take down a couple that showed 'too much skin' after Alice had already posted them. Even though posting the videos didn't necessarily pose a direct risk in itself, Alice's mum struggled to explain to her why it might be a bad idea to post revealing videos on the internet, and Alice's understanding of why it might become risky was therefore limited.

⁷ The researchers recognise that it is possible that children remembered this message only after they had been through the experience themselves, although the message had in fact been shared at least once before.

Alice: When I was younger there have been times I did things I wasn't meant to do, so now my parents always check, like show body bits...

Researcher: What was it about them you weren't meant to do?

Alice: They were inappropriate and all of that... can't remember, I just remember they were inappropriate

In an effort to protect their children from risk while not exposing them unnecessarily to adult ideas, some parents in the sample tended to focus on risks that, while probably being much less of an immediate threat, were easier for a child to understand, such as 'kidnapping'.

Parents also tended towards setting rules and boundaries that might protect children around technology use:

- Sarah's dad banned her from using specific social media platforms (e.g. Snapchat) and reviewed all of her online activities regularly.
- Lily was only allowed to use devices use in communal spaces of the house so her mum could keep an eye on her.
- Other parents, such as Ade's and Lily's, put filters and parental controls on devices to restrict their access.
- Calum's mum banned him from using his phone in bed before going to sleep so she knew he wasn't staying up late on his phone.

In some cases these measure were a substitute for focusing on improving the child's knowledge and understanding of the risks themselves. Explaining complex and adult issues to children was something a lot of the parents in the sample struggled with, or avoided altogether. This was true for a range of subjects, both relating to online safety and to other areas. Many parents weren't sure when was an appropriate age to talk about issues such as sexting, or the dangers posed by cyber-bullying or strangers online. Parents were anxious not to expose their children to adult information before it was necessary, but realised that not doing so could potentially leave their children unprepared for dealing with risks when they did appear.

While in many ways Peter's (9) mum felt quite confident in handling his online activities, she didn't know how, or when, to talk to him about the dangers of online strangers. Even though she knew he used games and platforms that might allow strangers to interact with him, she felt he was quite young to be hearing messages about these risks, and struggled to find a way around this - to help protect him without having to explain the details.

Nadia's (10) mum felt that her daughter was naïve and young for her age, and therefore she should protect her from 'adult' information and content. This ranged from not letting her watch any TV that showed people kissing, to asking her GP not to tell Nadia about periods until she was older.

She's so young for her age, I don't want her knowing about those things now.

Nadia's mum

On the other hand, Eve's parents didn't have any specific rules about the internet, but did actively teach Eve how to behave in the online world. By giving Eve the tools to navigate this medium on her own, they trusted that she didn't need restrictions to keep her safe.

As in Year 1, most of the children in the sample could readily recite advice and messages they'd been given, such as "don't talk to strangers online", "don't give away personal details online", "don't post mean things online", etc.

You must never give away your personal information on the internet. We get taught that at school, and my mum always says it

Peter, 9

However, this was not necessarily backed up by a more nuanced understanding of the nature of the risks behind these messages. It seemed that some of the children in the sample had a very simplistic idea of what risky situations might look like, and therefore might not recognise such a situation if presented with it in real life. This was especially the case when the model or example situation shown to children was unfamiliar to them; for example, showing a social network they didn't use. Not having a full understanding of online risks left a lot of children 'back-filling' the reasoning behind the messages, and in some cases led to misunderstandings or misattributions around risk

For example, Nadia's mental image of online risk was based entirely on a simple video she had been shown at school about a child being approached and asked for personal details in a chat room. She had very little sense of what the motives were behind such an approach, or what people might do with personal details, beyond kidnapping. Nadia didn't use social networking sites or chat rooms herself, so she didn't understand the pressures or motivations for giving out personal information in the first place.

13.3 MANAGING AND UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

Most of the parents in the sample felt some lack of confidence in managing their children's activities online. By focusing on their understanding of the devices and platforms, they struggled to appreciate that a lot of online risk can be mitigated by helping children manage social relationships.

A recurring theme was that parents overestimated the difference between risks online and in real life. While a few of the children in the sample had been bullied or treated badly online, and many gave examples of this happening to their peers, learning how to interact with other people, both strangers and friends, wasn't something most parents associated with online risk mitigation.

Some parents were better than others at helping their children learn to manage social relationships. Eve's parents, for example, actively taught her about treating people kindly and respectfully in real life, and this seemed to be reflected in her management of online friendships.

Conversely, some parents were less able to help their children manage these kinds of social interactions. For example, when a girl at Carmen's school posted on Facebook, saying "describe me in one word", Carmen wanted to say she was bossy, and asked her mum for advice on what she should put – who advised she write 'controlling' instead of 'bossy'. In this case, Carmen's mum's advice may have inadvertently led to Carmen insulting a girl at school through social media. This demonstrates that if a parent is not skilled at helping their child navigate social relationships in general, the impact can have adverse effects in the online world.

13.4 OFFLINE MEDIA RISKS

While many of the risks associated with media tend to be associated with the internet, there were other elements of children's media use that parents were being faced with managing.

Some parents were concerned about potentially violent or adult content in games, but age ratings for games typically concerned them less than those for films. The age ratings of the games played by children varied: several of the children were playing 15 or 18 rated games. Peter (age 9) played a range of 15-rated racing games, but his mum didn't allow him to watch 12-rated films. Adult content in games seemed less problematic or risky for parents than when similar content was presented in films.

Some parents, although concerned about content, felt comfortable allowing their children to play more adult games if there was a degree of supervision. Calum's mum allowed him to play Call of Duty if it was in the living room, so she could check on him and hear if the game contained anything she deemed too inappropriate. During the interview, Calum demonstrated the game to the researcher, at which point his mother overheard some adult language. Calum usually played the game with the sound muted to avoid arousing her suspicions.

14. Next steps

Children's Media Lives is a three-year project and fieldwork for Year 3 of the research will be conducted in spring 2016.

As far as possible the final year will consist of interviews with the same 17 children featured in this report. It will explore what has changed in the lives of these children, and whether and how this has changed their media use and attitudes. The impact of any changes in their family circumstances, their friendships, interests and hobbies will all be explored. The research will also identify whether the children are using their existing devices, services and content more or less than in years 1 and 2, whether any new devices or services have been acquired by the child or their family, and how this has influenced patterns of use.

The research will continue to monitor children's knowledge and understanding of content creation and funding, advertising, and the risks of being online. While there will inevitably be a small research effect associated with asking the children questions about these issues, we also hope to identify whether, and how, their knowledge expands with age and experience.

Year 3 will also explore in more depth some of the areas touched on in years 1 and 2, and build on new areas of interest as they emerge.

A report setting out the findings from Year 3 of Children's Media Lives will be published on the Ofcom website in due course.

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